CHAPTER TWO

MYSTICISM

The focus of this thesis is to examine the mystical elements in Savitri and The Odyssey. Against this backdrop, it is necessary to give a detailed account of mysticism. The term mysticism derives from mystikon, a Greek word to denote a secret religious knowledge reserved to those who undergo a special kind of initiation and are believed to have received the vision of God and a new and higher life.

Underhill in her Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness writes: “Mysticism, in its pure form, is the science of ultimates, the science of union with the Absolute, and nothing else, and that the mystic is the person who attains to this union, not the person who talks about it. Not to know about, but to Be, is the mark of the real initiate” (72). Hence, the actual union with the ultimate principle, and not the knowledge about the same, is the focus of the mystics.

‘Mystic’ and ‘Mysticism’ are words that appear recurrently in most religious texts and in other writings too occasionally. At the same time, these two words have been used ambiguously. Underhill in her Mystics of the Church points to some of the misleading usages: “Any vague sense of spiritual things, any sort of symbolism, any hazily allegorical painting, any poetry which deals with the soul—worse than that, all sorts of superstitions and magical practices—may be, and often are, described as ‘mystical’” (9). Therefore, it is necessary to arrive at some definite and comprehensive understanding of mysticism.
Scholars differ on the definitions of mysticism although the central points are stressed by all. Jacob Kattackal, one of the Eastern scholars, describes the mystical state and experience in his *Mysticism: East and West* as follows:

The mystic ecstasy is a deifying (not merely divinizing) experience or Apotheosis; in ecstasy, the mystic gets the awareness of being in direct contact with the Holy or ‘Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans’; it is a state of ineffable Peace and Bliss; it is a paradoxical, baffling experience which transcends ego-consciousness and world-consciousness; it is an experience that challenges human language and logic; it is a state of unconsciousness but at the same time, a most vivid consciousness; it is a vacuum-plenum, śūnyatā-pūrṇatā; and the mystic enjoys absolute certainty about the truth of his/her experience. (10)

Most scholars agree on these common characteristics of mysticism though they express it in different styles.

Mysticism is a bold step to negate the mind. One of the basic steps taken by a mystic is to cancel the mind. Paranjape in his *Mysticism in Indian English Poetry* remarks, “During self-realization the old, conflict prone, confused, ambitious, self-promoting, cruel, sense-shackled mind is destroyed completely” (2). However, this does not mean that the mystic has now become a totally mindless person. Rather, the destruction of the ordinary mind “gives rise to a new mind, a different mode of being, a consciousness that is capable of living harmoniously with itself and the world, without conflict and sorrow, and in complete intelligence” (*Mysticism in Indian English Poetry* 2). So a mystic’s mind is in a fluid state. Hence, in all the
mystic traditions the cancellation of the mind is the prime step taken by the initiators.

In order to describe mysticism further, it is better to approach William James, a psychologist-turned-philosopher, who has dealt with this theme in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James proposes a “four marks” theory of mysticism and brings forth the following characteristics: Ineffability, Noetic quality, Transiency and Passivity.

By ineffability, James implies that “it defies expression that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words” (380). Hence, any mystical occurrence should be experienced personally and directly for its essence cannot be adequately conveyed to others in full measure. According to him, a mystic is likely to be misunderstood as “weak-minded or absurd” by one who has never had a mystical experience, just as a lover by one who had never been in love. Noetic quality helps the mystic to be present simultaneously “to states of feeling” and “to states of knowledge” (380).

James is sure about these two qualities; but the next two qualities have been given less importance. Transiency, the third quality, denotes the non-sustainability of this experience. He remarks that except on rare occasions, half an hour, or at most an hour or two seems to be the limit beyond which mystics stop receiving these experiences. At the same time, these experiences recur and there is a steady development in inner richness.

The fourth and last quality is passivity. It means that although some preliminary preparations like “fixing the attention, or going through certain bodily performances; or in other ways which manuals of mysticism prescribe” are needed
for the bestowal of this experience, once it has set in “the mystic feels as if his own
will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a
superior power” (The Varieties of Religious Experience 381). This possession
gives rise to some other “secondary or alternative personality, such as prophetic
speech, automatic writing, or the mediumistic trance” (381). But these normally do
not affect the inner life of the mystic. People with these four marks, constitute for
James the mystical group.

James’ celebrated “four marks” have been criticized by Underhill in
Mysticism as unsatisfactory and she proposes four other rules or notes, which she
claims, can test any given case of mysticism:

1. True mysticism is active and practical, not passive and
theoretical. It is an organic life-process, a something which the
whole self does: not something as to which its intellect holds an
opinion.

2. Its aims are wholly transcendental and spiritual. It is in no way
concerned with adding to, exploring, re-arranging, or improving
anything in the visible universe. . . . Though he does not, as his
enemies declare, neglect his duty to the many, his heart is
always set upon the changeless One.

3. This One is for the mystic, not merely the Reality of all that is,
but also a living and personal object of Love; never an object of
exploration . . .

4. Living union with this One—which is the term of his
adventure—is a definite state or form of enhanced life. . . . It is
arrived at by an arduous psychological and spiritual process—the so-called Mystic Way—entailing the complete remaking of character and the liberation of a new, or rather latent, form of consciousness; which imposes on the self the condition which is sometimes inaccurately called ‘ecstasy’ but is better named the Unitive State. (81)

Underhill declares that mysticism is not ‘an opinion,’ or ‘a philosophy,’ or ‘a pursuit of occult knowledge,’ or ‘a religious queerness’. Positively, it stands for that “organic process which involves the perfect consummation of the Love of God: the achievement here and now of the immortal heritage of man. . . . it is the art of establishing his conscious relation with the Absolute” (Mysticism 81).

Along with these four marks, Underhill likes to add a fifth one, namely, “true mysticism is never self-seeking” (Mysticism 92). Supernatural joys or the personal realization of great ambitions do not lead a mystic towards the Absolute. Furthermore, “the mystic does not enter on his quest because he desires the happiness of the Beatific Vision, the ecstasy of union with the Absolute, or any other personal reward” (92). Such ones, according to St. John of the Cross, are “spiritual gluttons” (qtd. in Mysticism 92).

A Historical Survey of Mysticism

Tracing the history of mysticism, S. Abhayananda in his History of Mysticism writes that “the experience of unity is as old as man himself, and occurred to a few searching souls even in the most primitive of times” (6). In his opinion, “the experience of unity” is free from the advancements and sophistications of science and technology since such an experience happens in a
drastically “interiorized state of mind, undistracted by external stimulii” (6). Unfortunately, because of the absence of written testimonies in ancient times, humanity has lost these mystic-sages for ever.

Although early civilizations existed in the Nile, Mesopotamian and Indus Valleys and a mystical philosophy gradually emerged in ancient Egypt, Sumeria, and other Middle Eastern regions, according to Abhayananda, it is in India that one finds the earliest development of an advanced mystical philosophy stemming from two distinct traditions. He writes: “For the Dravidian population, the Absolute Being came eventually to be known as Shiva, and His world-manifesting Power was called Shakti; while the Aryan tradition eventually adopted the name, Brahman for the Absolute principle, and Maya for its world-manifesting Energy” (22). It is in the Vedas that one finds the earliest written records on mysticism which date back to BCE 2000-1500.

Kurian Perumpallikunnel in “Mysticism: The Matrix to Transcend ‘Brain, Mind, and Soul’” states that “when humanity attained the ability to reflect upon itself, the fundamental question surfaced is ‘Who am I? and it is resonated in ‘Who are you?’” (59). The Vedas answered: “‘I am God’ (Aham Brahmasmi) and there was the echo, ‘You are that’ (Tat tvam asi)” (59). True to Rg Veda’s prediction (ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti: the reality is one, the learned speak of it differently, RV 1. 164. 46), experts soon began expressing their conflicting views regarding the nature of ‘reality’ and this continues even to this day. Perumpallikunnel argues that fortunately there has always been “a certain kind of ‘eccentric’ people who refuse to divide and subdivide reality into bits and pieces” (59) and these were the mystics.
The orthodox religious persons, writes Perumpallikunnel, try to shun the mystics because “they are dangerous and unpredictable” (60) and philosophers and scientists mock them since “they are illogical and do not fit into their mathematical calculations and measurements (These ‘eccentrics’ find no problem in saying, for example, that one is equal to many and many are equal to one!)” (60). These people also “seem to possess a ‘heart’ that has got reasons which ‘heads’ of the religious hierarchy, philosophers and scientists fail to comprehend” (60). According to Perumpallikunnel, this strange group of people is called mystics and their wisdom is collectively known as mysticism.

Coming over to the next phase of mysticism, one reaches the world of Upaniṣads (mostly written between 1200 - 400 BCE). Vedānta provides nine important Upaniṣadic themes that are connected with mysticism and the knowledge about Brahman, the Absolute, the Real. Among them, the last three deserve a special consideration: “Brahman is the locus of value, and awareness of Brahman is the ‘supreme personal good’ (parama-puruṣārtha) and ‘liberation’ (mukti) from fear and evil,” and “Brahman is mystically discoverable,” and Brahman is beyond the power of thought uninformed by mystical awareness” (Classical Indian Metaphysics: Refutations of Realism and the Emergence of “New Logic” 9). Brahadāranyaka Upaniṣad too highlights this idea. It declares, “‘na iha nānā asti kiṃcana’, ‘There is here no diversity whatsoever’” (10).

According to Abhayananda, Upaniṣads “have reduced all existence to One, the final number beyond which there is no more reduction” (44). “Whatever came after the Upanishads, in the way of spiritual knowledge,” he continues, “is only the
echoing cries of those who have rediscovered the same Truth, by the same path, and have raised their voices to sing the same joyous song” (44).

The Yoga system has always been considered a pre-requisite for mysticism since the former helps one to a great extent with its meditation and ascetic practices. Stephen H. Phillips states, “Yoga is tied to the mysticism of the Upaniṣads; several passages say that yoga is the means to a mystical awareness of Brahman” (11). Kathopaniṣad gives an account of the function of Yoga: “When the five instruments of knowledge stand still, together with the mind, and the intellect itself does not stir - that, they say, is the highest state. This they consider to be Yoga, this steady control of the senses” (qtd. in The Foundation of Eastern Thought 221). Phillips adds, “The power to maintain a mystic trance, yoga-samādhi, is commonly held, in agreement with Vedānta and Yoga, to be the ‘supreme good’” (13).

Meanwhile, in China, a mystical movement known as Taoism (c. 3000 BCE) had sprouted. But the earliest record of it comes from the famous short book written by Lao Tze (born in 601 BCE), titled Tao Teh Ching and full of maxims. The word Tao (pronounced as Dow) in the title refers to “the Eternal aspect of reality – what we have already spoken as Brahman, or Purusha. Teh is Its power of manifestation, identical with Maya or Prakriti. And the word, Ching, simply means ‘book’” (Abhayananda 63). So, it can be called “The Book of The Eternal and Its Power of Manifestation” (63). Abhayananda presents the main teachings of Taoism:

The mind, one discovers, creates thoughts and ideas in a way similar to the creation of waves on an ocean; they consist of
contrary motions . . . For example, if we love, in that very motion is contained its opposite, hatred. . . . Every movement of the mind contains its opposite, just as does the movement of a pendulum . . .

It is only when this alteration, this dual motion of the mind, is stilled that we can experience that pure Consciousness which is the source of all thought. (67-68)

Arthur C. Danto in his *Mysticism and Morality* holds the view that “Taoism, like the Karma-Yoga of the *Gita*, is a teaching that aims at the stunning of the will, and . . . generally the mechanism of the will is considered the enemy of ultimate happiness throughout the East” (118).

Another system which has mystical strands is found is Buddhism (c. 500 BCE). The Sanskrit word *buddha* literally means “awakened”. The Buddha declared “the supreme goal of life to be *nirvāṇa*, an ‘extinction’ or ‘blowing out’ of suffering and desire and an awakening to what is most real” (Phillips 13). Although there are disputes concerning his original teachings, Phillips writes “that a mystical enlightenment or awakening is possible, and is the one possibility in life that should be sought, is a thesis on which all Buddhists agree” (13).

Another core teaching connected to this is the doctrine of “‘no soul’ (*anātman*)—in which false identification with the body and the mind is considered an impediment to enlightenment” (13). Most mystics are of the opinion that personal enlightenment or self-realization is the ultimate goal in life. They also argue that it cannot be attained by learning, alms-giving and observance of rituals but by the pursuit of “devotion to and contemplation of one’s own essential Being” (Abhayananda 77).
After studying Buddhism closely, Danto brings forth a convergence between hedonism and asceticism. In his view, “The Buddha is a self-proclaimed advocate of the Middle Path, midway between the extremes of hedonism . . . and asceticism” (66). For him, it is a path which leads to “the end sought by hedonists, who mean to drown out pain by unremitting pleasure, and by ascetics, who mean to escape pain by sinking into a state of apathy and slipping from the opposites of pain-and-pleasure through their programs of discipline” (66).

There are a number of mystics in the Indian tradition and it is not possible to discuss all of them here. Shankara (born around 686 CE), being one of the greatest and most influential seers, cannot be left out. Like the Buddha, writes Abhayananda, “Shankara states that the realization of the self reveals the illusory nature of the individualized soul, just as the perception of a snake disappears when it is realized to be, in fact, a rope” (191). He also discusses the method suggested by Shankara to attain this realization: “Instead of taking the position of a soul worshipping God as though there were really two . . . one should take non-dualism as the starting point, and refuse to identify with the body, mind, intellect, etc. By this practice . . . the illusion of the false ego will be dispelled” (194).

In the Western mystical tradition, Egypt had developed its own mystical system by this time. According to Abhayananda, despite the “apparent polytheism, the cornerstone of the religious consciousness of ancient Egypt was the recognition of an absolute Unity which was called Neter, in which all gods (neteru), men, and creatures were included” (28-29). Some compelling evidence of their mystical thoughts can be traced to The Egyptian Book of the Dead called ‘The Papyrus of Ani’ which contains materials dating back to thirtieth century BCE:
God is One and alone, and none other exists with Him; God is the One who has made all things.

He is eternal and infinite; . . . He has endured for countless ages, and He shall endure to all eternity.

God is a spirit, a hidden spirit, the Spirit of spirits, the Divine Spirit. (qtd. in Abhayananda 30)

Mysticism of the Greco-Roman era seems to start with Pythagoras (570-490 BCE), a philosopher hailing from the Greek island of Samos. He is the one who is supposed to have introduced a truly monistic philosophy in the Western tradition. Abhayananda is of the opinion that Socrates (469-399 BCE), who followed Pythagoras, had mystical awareness. But his successors, though they were great philosophers, “thought much” and so “never came to know” (107).

Thinking has no place in mysticism. The first step in mysticism is to discard the mind or the thinking-self. Hence, the great Greek philosophers, though they were masters of thought, could not enter the shrine of mysticism. Abhayananda continues, “It has often been said that the narrow mountain path of the mystic’s ascent begins where the philosopher’s broad highway leaves off” (107).

There is a special kind of Western mysticism which had its influence felt all throughout the occidental culture and was known as vitalistic mysticism. It is radically distinct from other forms of mysticism since it gives prominence to action in the world. This system had its origin in the thoughts of the mystic philosopher Heracleitus of the fifth-century BC. Underhill states that according to Heracleitus “‘All things . . . are in a state of flux’. ‘Everything happens through strife.’ ‘Reality
is a condition of unrest” (28). Nietzsche, Bergson, Eucken and Alexander were the exponents of this theory in the modern world. Kazantzakis who was fond of Nietzsche and was an ardent disciple of Bergson was interested in this kind of mysticism.

Underhill explains vitalism as follows:

Vitalism would identify itself with the mystic philosopher, Heracleitus, who . . . introduced its central idea to the European world: for his ‘Logos’ or Energizing Fire is but another symbol for that free and living Spirit of Becoming, that indwelling creative power, which Vitalism acknowledges as the very soul or immanent reality of things. (28)

She adds, “The primary difference between Vitalism and the classic philosophic schools is this. Its focal point is not Being but Becoming” (28). Mystics who practise vitalism are trying their best to become or reach the impossible. Hence, they are active and experience a great push from within to march forward ceaselessly.

Passing over to Jewish mysticism, one comes across the Kabbalah system. According to Perumpallikunnel, the soul in this system occupies a prominent position. Here the “centre of gravity is the close kinship between the human and the Divine; and the only avenue through which this kinship can become real to us is the soul” (62). The most important work of Kabbalah or Jewish mysticism is Zohar (Hebrew word meaning splendour or radiance). Perumpallikunnel writes, “It contains a mystical discussion of the nature of God, the origin and structure of the universe, the nature of soul, sin, redemption, good and evil, and the relationship
between God and man. The Zohar is not one book, but a group of books” (62). According to him, Zohar claims that there was originally one ‘Universal Soul,’ which broke itself up and encased itself in individual bodies. All individual souls are, hence, fragments of the ‘Universal Soul’ so that although they are distinct from one another they are, in reality, all one.

Christian mysticism starts with Jesus of Nazareth by the beginning of the first century CE. According to Abhayananda, Jesus had his first transcendental experience while listening to John the Baptist. He writes: “Jesus felt such a thrill of joy, such an opening of his consciousness that it seemed the very heavens had opened up to reveal the living presence of God” (116). This experience was later perfected by a silent prayer during one star-filled night. He had entered what he was later to call “the Kingdom of God”. He talked about his union with God the Father to his disciples. When Philip told him to show them the Father, he replied: “He who has seen me has seen the Father. . . . Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?” (Jn.14: 8-10).

Underhill remarks that a “balanced life of loving communion with God and active charity to men” (The Mystics of the Church 29) is the crux of Christian mysticism. She also writes about the “psycho-physical peculiarities which often appear in connection with Christian mysticism—ecstasy, visions, the hearing of supernatural voices, the performance under interior compulsion of bizarre symbolic acts . . .” (31). Starting with St. Paul, she gives a long list of Christian mystics and the prominent among them are St. Augustine, Dionysius the Areopagite, St. Bernard, St. Francis of Assisi, Meister Eckhart, St. Catherine of
Siena, St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, St. Chantal and Jacob Boehme (known as the cobbler mystic).

St. Teresa’s *Interior Castle* speaks about the seven habitations of the soul. She writes: “If as David says, one becomes holy with the holy, who can doubt that this soul, who is now become one thing with the Mighty God by this high union of spirit with Spirit, shares His strength?” (qtd. in *The Mystics of the Church* 181) According to her this gives courage to the saints to endure suffering and martyrdom.

Turning our attention to Islam, we come across *Tasawwuf*, namely, Islamic mysticism. Najib Ullah writes: “Mysticism has its beginning in Arabic literature during the Umayyad Dynasty and developed during the later centuries, playing an important role in Arabic as well as Islamic literature” (qtd. in Rastogi 1). Though the Muslim orthodoxy wanted to prohibit this kind of a lifestyle, some earnest souls such as Habib Hjami (8th century), Ibrahim Adham (9th century), Fazail (9th century); mystics such as Ghazzali (12th century), Sheikh Abdullah Ansari of heart (11th century), Jalaluddin Rumi (13th century), Fariduddin in-Attar (12th century), Sadi (13th century), Nurid-din-Jami (15th century), Faiz (14th century) and Abdul Latif of Sindh pursued it.

The main strand in Islamic mysticism is Sufism. Rastogi in *Islamic Mysticism: Sufism*, analyses the term ‘sufi’ and states that it must have derived either from the “Hebrew expression ‘en sof’, meaning endless and infinite” or “the Greek word ‘Sophia’ meaning wisdom” (3). He also deals with some less important orders of Islamic mysticism such as the *Suhrawardi*, the *Qadiri* and the *Naqshbandi* mysticisms. He summarizes Sufism in the following manner: “The
mystic feels himself identified with the being, goodness, wisdom, and enjoyment that are God’s or rather that are God. Although we are not God, neither are we other than God. ‘Love is the mood of the Sufi, gnosis his aim, ecstasy his supreme experience’” (111). In other words, a Sufi is one who lives in love with the aim of attaining wisdom and has the supreme experience of ecstasy.

The above discussions on the various traditions of mysticisms in the major religions and civilizations show that there is an underlying principle uniting them. Inge in Freedom, Love, and Truth testifies to this fact:

Mysticism is singularly uniform in all times and places. The communion of the soul with God has found much the same expression whether the mystic is a Neo-platonic philosopher like Plotinus, a Mohammadan Sufi, a Catholic monk or a Quaker. (qtd. in Radhakrishnan 64)

Most of the scholars are of the opinion that there is a radical difference between the orthodox religions and their mystical offshoots. S. Radhakrishnan in Eastern Religions and Western Thought remarks that mysticism has been misunderstood and is an ill-favoured word for the rationalist and the dogmatic theologian because they consider it “as a tendency to see things cloudily, in a golden or sentimental haze, to justify the habit of the human mind to entertain contradictory beliefs at the same time, to exalt confusion of thought” (61). He states further that “Mysticism is opposed to the naturalism which categorically denies the existence of God and the dogmatism which talks as if it knew all about Him” (62). He continues:
Mysticism, which lays stress on the personal experience of God, direct contact with the creative spirit, is what Bergson calls ‘open religion’. The closed religions are the creedal, ritualistic ones which give a sense of security to frightened children. Only an open religion which requires us to enter the spiritual stream where our spirit can refresh and restore itself can save humanity, which is half crushed by the weight of its own progress. (63)

Kinds of Mysticism

After analyzing Eastern and Western mysticism, Perumpallikunnel classifies them into two categories, namely, mysticism through identification and mysticism through relationship. For him, “Hinduism and Buddhism could be acknowledged as examples for the identification mysticism where one identifies or becomes one with Brahman (aham brahmasmi, ‘I am God’) or nirvāna/sūnyata (nothingness)” (70). On the other hand, one finds the relationship mysticism in all three Semitic religions: in Kabbalah, in Sufism and also in Christian mysticism. These three, writes Perumpallikunnel, are “stamped by the fact that the mystics look for a relationship with God or with the God-image hidden within themselves” (70). Here, complete identification with the Divine does not occur as in the case of the Eastern tradition. God and the individual soul are distinct entities though there is a perfect communion between them.

Paranjape too proposes the possibility of having different kinds of mysticisms. He brings forth certain aspects which are normally overlooked by people while discussing mysticism. In his view, “To the religious minded, it [mysticism] is the search for God; to the lover, it is the quest for the beloved; to the
man of action it is the search for the secret of perfect action; to the artist it is the quest for beauty; to the scholar it is the search for truth” (1). This is only the beginning stage. “At its highest,” mysticism implies “the attainment of complete self-mastery and self-realization. It is the death of the ego and the end of all suffering, whether physical or mental. It is the end of illusion, of all duality. It is complete freedom. It is bliss transcendent. It is the overcoming of death” (1). But in all these, according to Paranjape, there is the “tremendous commitment to self-realization” (222).

William J. Wainright in “Mysticism and Sense Perception” states that there are two kinds of mysticism: “The extrovertive or nature mystic (in some sense) identifies himself with a world which is both transfigured and one” (qtd. in Cahn 123). On the other hand, “The introvertive mystic withdraws from the world and, after stripping the mind of concepts and images, experiences union with something which (in some respects at least) can be described as an undifferentiated unity” (123).

M. Venkatalakshmi, in “Epistemology of Mysticism”, proposes two traditions: Perennialism and Constructivism. Perennialists like James, Underhill, Marechal, Jonston, Pratt, Eliade and Stace maintain that “mystical experiences represent an immediate direct contact with an absolute principle” (439). On the other hand, according to “the constructivists’ paradigm, all experiences, whether religious, artistic, or mystical, are in fact shaped and mediated by the terms, categories, beliefs, and language” (440). This category has been influenced by Kant’s epistemology where Kant argues that “no mystic experience or metaphysical insight can have any justification since man is not equipped with
higher faculties of knowledge. Mystic-claims can never be accepted as a genuine part of human knowledge” (qtd. in Venkatalakshmi 440). This is an age-old controversy and no one can convey his/her personal experience fully to one who has never been in such a situation.

A Few Misconceptions

R. C. Zaehner in his Mysticism: Sacred and Profane has analysed Huxley’s The Doors of Perception (1954) which had created some confusion concerning mystical experiences. There had always been some understanding that “certain drugs,—and among them one may include alcohol,—modify the normal human consciousness and produce what can literally be called ec-static states,—states in which the human ego has the impression that it escapes from itself and ‘stands outside’ itself” (Zaehner 1). Indian hemp and hashish were said to be in use in the Eastern countries to gain such results. Huxley experimented with mescaline (a kind of drug) because “it equals or excels the most potent of the oriental drugs and has the additional advantage of having no disagreeable aftermath” (3). Furthermore, it is said that unlike tobacco, opium and hashish, it does not develop in the user a craving for it.

Huxley, an hour after taking mescaline, looked at the glass vase containing three flowers, namely, rose, iris and carnation. Though earlier he had been struck by the dissonance of the colours, when someone asked him if it was agreeable he replied “‘Neither agreeable nor disagreeable’ . . . ‘it just is’” (qtd. in Zaehner 4). He also claims: “The Beatific Vision, Sat Chit Ananda, Being-Awareness-Bliss— for the first time I understood, not on the verbal level, not by inchoate hints or at a
distance, but precisely and completely what those prodigious syllables referred to” (qtd. in Zaehner 5).

Huxley also highlights some of the characteristics of those who have taken mescaline under supervision: “Visual impressions are greatly intensified and the eye recovers some of the perceptual innocence of childhood, when the sensum was not immediately and automatically subordinated to the concept. Interest in space is diminished and interest in time falls almost to zero” (Zaehner 11-12)

Zaehner agrees with Huxley concerning the experiences shared by mescaline takers and the mystics. However, he categorically disagrees with Huxley and attacks him saying that it was only an artificially created experience by intoxicating the brain and when he comes out of the drugs’ hang-over he would surely be entering the old world of worries, discomfort and divisions. On the contrary, a mystic gets the Sat Chit Ananda experience spontaneously and his blissful state is in a sense permanent.

There is yet another kind of mysticism which is connected with the beauty of nature. Zaehner notes, “It is true that music or painting or poetry may induce a natural mystical experience” (36). But he argues that strictly speaking nature mysticism would not be eligible to be counted as mysticism proper. He writes:

The wild discrepancies that exist between ‘natural’ and ‘diabolical’ mystical experiences, between . . . the manic-depressive psychosis, between the glory and the terror experienced by Huxley under the influence of mescaline, are not explicable in terms of union with the Deity or unity in the Absolute or even of union with Nature. (44)
Ineffability of Mysticism

A mystical experience is ineffable. Lao Tze, the Chinese mystic (6th century BCE), has said:

One who knows does not talk.

One who talks does not know.

Therefore the sage keeps his mouth shut and his sense-gates closed . . .

The holy man abides by non-assertion in his affairs and conveys by silence his instruction . . .

To be taciturn is the natural way. (qtd. in Hocking 440)

Richard M. Gale puts forward a similar argument in his article “Mysticism and Philosophy”: “The mystic is afraid that the concepts by which he describes his experience will become surrogates for the experience itself . . . it is the direct experience itself which counts and that language is a very poor substitute” (Contemporary Philosophy of Religion 116). Gale adds, “My concept of a loud, deafening noise is not itself a loud, deafening noise” (116). However, most of the mystics have tried to express their experiences in various forms of writing. In some cases their disciples have recorded them from their memory for posterity. Hocking adds, “Mystics frequently abound in the language of symbol or allegory to express what cannot be defined in strict conceptual form” (440-441).

Ron Leonard, in The Transcendental Philosophy of Franklin Merrell-Wolff, holds a different view concerning the ineffability of mysticism. He writes, “Not only are we obliged to show that it is possible to say something intelligible concerning mystical awareness, but that what mystics say is generally intelligible”
(107). He continues, “This involves a study of the strategies employed to express
and communicate these experiences, as well as an analysis and evaluation of the
language used to accomplish it” (107). It is here that one finds a close relationship
between mysticism and literature. According to Richard Hubert Jones there are
four ways of expressing mysticism: “silence, negation, paradox, and positive
formulation” (qtd. in Leonard 120).

Wittgenstein remarked towards the end of the Tractatus: “What we cannot
speak about we must pass over in silence” (74). The second strategy of via
negativa is intended to avoid any misconceptions that might come up while
attempting a positive depiction of some sort. This method is followed by at least
three traditions: Advaita Vedānta, Theravāda Buddhism and Neoplatonism. Kabir
describes God-experience as the experience of sweetness enjoyed by a mute
person. It cannot be communicated; it is inexpressible and indescribable. Hence he
called it Nirguna, “in the sense that He was free from the three Gunas (Sattva-
Raja-Tama) and their derivatives - ego, vanity, attachment, jealousy, anger, senses etc.” (qtd. in Gupta 229).

Many mystics employ paradoxical expressions (the third way) to give an
account of their mystical experiences. Gale gives an example from the Isa
Upaniṣad: “It (the self) stirs and it stirs not,’ we cannot say that such a proposition
is a self-contradiction because the mystic can never tell us whether it stirs and also
stirs not at one and the same moment of time” (qtd. in Cahn 117).

Most mystics resort to symbolism to talk about their ineffable experiences.
Underhill has devoted a whole chapter in her Mysticism to deal with mysticism and
symbolism. She remarks that there are three groups of symbols: 1. Divine
Transcendence and the idea of pilgrimage where Bunyan, the Sufi pilgrims, the Seven Valleys of ’Attar and Dante are dealt with; 2. Mutual Desire and symbols of love dealing with ‘The Hymn of Jesus,’ ‘The Hound of Heaven,’ ‘Spiritual Marriage’ and ‘St. Victor’s Four Degrees of Ardent Love’; and 3. Symbols of Transmutation dealing with the Spiritual Alchemists, the Philosopher’s Stone, ‘Salt, Sulphur, and Mercury,’ ‘Hunting the Greene Lyon’ and the red Dragon (125-148).

**Mysticism and Literature**

Wolfgang Riehle, in *The Middle English Mystics* talks about the language of mystical literature. According to him, the most important model in the development of a mystical metaphorical language is the language of the Bible and for *Song of Songs* according to him, is “a text which has been taken to refer to the mystical love of the soul for God. The soul is not simply compared to a bride but actually *is* the divine bride and as such experiences God in a ‘spiritualized sensuality’” (3).

The anonymous texts of the ‘Cloud Group’ (*The Cloud of Unknowing, The Book of Privy Counselling* and *Pistle of Preier*), writes Riehle, suggest that “the man who wishes to be united with God must enter into the cloud of unknowing” (8). For Julian of Norwich, a female mystic from England and Margery Kempe (a friend of Julian) the knowledge of God is unthinkable without love and they use love poems to talk about it.

In English literature, the mystical strand is found from the seventeenth century onwards. According to Sheila Kannath, poets starting with Donne (1572-1631), Herbert (1593-1633), Crashaw (1612-1649), Vaughan (1622-1695), Blake
(1757-1827), Wordsworth (1770-1850), Browning (1812-1889), Newman (1801-1890), Hopkins (1844-1889) and Thompson (1859-1907) have written with a mystical lineage (*A Journey into Mysticism* 32-50). Even though Thompson regards himself as a poor sort of mystic, Underhill calls him “the greatest mystical poet of our modern times” (*Mysticism* 135).

According to Gupta, the poetry of the East when compared to that of the West is replete with mystic expressions. Christopher Dawson in his *Religion and World History* has rightly observed:

> In the West, apart from a few outstanding exceptions, mysticism and literature have followed separate paths, and the man of letters often knows nothing of works which from the religious point of view are spiritual classics. In the East, however, this is not so. *Mysticism* and letters go hand in hand in all the Moslem countries—among the Persians, above all, but also among the Arabs and Turks. The greatest poets have devoted themselves to give literary expression to spiritual experiences and to fuse poetical and mystical ecstasy in a single flame. (qtd. in *The Foundation of Eastern Thought* 231-32).

**Expression of Mysticism through Images and Symbols**

Some poets are blessed with ennobling visions which they try to express through their poems. Against this backdrop, Raymond Frank Piper remarked on *Savitri*: “We know that we must resort to the art of poetry for expressing, to the fullest possible artistic limits, the yearnings and battles of mankind for eternal life” (qtd. in *Perspectives of Savitri Vol. I* xlvii).
But, then, it is not easy for ordinary readers to plunge into this kind of poetry and they often experience difficulty in understanding and enjoying these poems. Iyengar writes: “Sri Aurobindo’s words may leave us cold because we haven’t seen what he has seen, we haven’t the beatific certitudes that had come to him as the crown of his Yoga” (Sri Aurobindo: a biography and a history 683). However, it is the duty of the poets to express their visions faithfully through their writings.

Most mystic poets are aware of the gap in communicating their unique experiences and try their best to convert them into words as far as possible. Sri Aurobindo was very much aware of this fact and hence wrote in a letter that the mystical poet “can only describe what he has felt, seen in himself or others or in the world . . . and leave it to the general reader to understand or not understand or misunderstand according to his capacity. A new kind of poetry demands a new mentality in the recipient as well as in the writer” (Savitri 739).

Mystical experiences are elusive by nature and it is difficult to comprehend them. One of the major traits of mysticism is its ineffability. And those poets who want to express their mystical visions will have to depend heavily on images and symbols. Nandakumar writes: “In an attempt to convey these visions to the common reader, the poets have to come down to the normal mental level and talk in terms of images, symbols and metaphors. These are seminal to the understanding of the poet’s vision” (Dante and Sri Aurobindo: A Comparative Study of The Divine Comedy and Savitri ii).

Most mystics have tried to express their inner experiences as far as possible through writings. Paranjape observes that a detailed study of the imagery of the
mystics “might show how drishti becomes srishti or how vision becomes creation
in these writers” (Mysticism in Indian English Poetry 215). For him, the imagery of
the mystics and poets is found in three broad categories. They are images from
nature, images from human activities and abstract imagery. The first two are
perceptible to the senses while the last caters to the intellect.

Images from nature are again subdivided into light imagery, natural
elements imagery, botanical, zoological, inanimate and cosmic imagery. Light
imagery consists of light and darkness, and day and night. Many expressions of the
mystical experience such as enlightenment, illumination, awakening, etc. are
derived from traditional symbolism. One significant example in Sri Aurobindo’s
Savitri is “the heroine’s victory over Death” which is “depicted as the devouring of
Death’s dark form by Light” (Savitri 667).

The imagery of elements, namely, earth, wind, fire, water and air has been
used extensively in mystical writings. To describe mystical ecstasy, Christian
mystics “employ the analogy of the red-hot iron that is hardly distinguishable from
fire” or “the analogy of a drop of pure water that is poured into an ocean of pure
water which becomes one with that ocean” (Kattackal 10). While St. Teresa of
Avila provides “the simile of two candle-flames joined together to express the
mystic union or ecstasy,” the Upaniṣads compare “God-experience to a river
flowing into the ocean and finally getting merged into it” (Kattackal 10).

Paranjape writes, “One of the favourite traditional images for self-
realization is the crossing of the sea of samsara or the world to reach
enlightenment” (216). All these suggest the loss of a separate identity and the
acquisition of a universal consciousness. Fire is used as a symbol of the purifying
power of the mystical experience. The imagery of the earth is associated mostly
with the depiction of valleys and mountains. For Paranjape, “the mountain top,
grand, aloof, inaccessible, and beautiful, is a symbol of self-realization; the valley,
accessible, habitable, and populated, is the world of ordinary people” (216).

Botanical imagery consisting of trees, plants, vegetation, leaves, flowers,
petals, honey, etc. abound in the works of the mystics. In Sri Aurobindo, in
addition to the typical Indian symbol of the lotus, the Western rose also comes to
symbolize the Divine. In Gitanjali, Tagore compares himself to a flower and
writes: “Pluck this little flower and take it” (Gitanjali: Song Offering VI, 4).

Among zoological images, birds, animals and insects are commonly used.
The swan symbolizes discrimination. The chatrik which eagerly waits for rain-
water symbolizes the devotee’s longing for God. Sri Aurobindo and Krishnamurti
use bird imagery to illustrate the freedom, beauty and grandeur of self-realization.
“Among insects the bee is traditionally a symbol for the restless soul which is
satisfied (it stops droning) only when it sips the nectar of self-realization”
(Paranjape 217).

In the realm of inanimate imagery, precious stones are popular symbols of
self-realization. Puran Singh, a mystic poet, “often compares the transforming
power of the mystical experience to the philosopher’s stone which transmutes base
metals to gold” (qtd. in Paranjape 217-18). Jesus declared:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a
man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that
he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a
merchant in search of fine pearls; who, on finding one pearl of great
value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Matt.13: 44-46)

Images from human activities include those of travel, professions,
architecture, the human body and the psyche. Images of quests, journeys,
destinations, paths, arrivals, departures and modes of transportation are included in
the imagery of travel. Quest is central to Savitri and The Odyssey. The journey
motif is brilliantly used by Tagore when he writes, “I came out on the chariot of
the first gleam of light, and pursued my voyage through the wilderness of worlds
leaving my track on many a star and planet” (Gitanjali XII, 7).

The imagery of professions includes the singer, the wandering minstrel, the
priest, the poet, the potter, the king and so on. Paramahamsa Yogananda considers
himself “God’s boatman ferrying mortals to the shores of enlightenment”
(Paranjape 219). Images of dwelling, building, doors, windows, etc. are often used
to illustrate a variety of issues related to mystical experience in terms of
architectural imagery. St. Teresa of Avila’s “The Interior Castle” is a classical
example.

The imagery of the body includes images of health and sickness, of
growing old, of dying and rebirth. Most mystics testify to the fact that “sight,
sound, smell, taste, and touch are all suffused with delight or ananda during or
after the mystical experience” (Paranjape 219). Psychological imagery consists of
the human psyche, of the internal nerve centres, of the brain and the mind. A
common traditional image explaining the process of self-realization “is the rising
of the Kundalini or serpent power, purifying the various nerve centres from the
base of the spine to the brain in its uprise” (Paranjape 220).
Abstract imagery uses personification and allegory or simply the figurative use of ideas and states of mind. Traditionally, the mystic considers the Absolute as his/her Beloved and establishes a personal relationship with his/her Ideal, whether it is God, Truth, Love, Beauty, Knowledge or Life.

Each mystic is unique in his/her search and hence his/her expression of his/her quest differs from his/her fellow pilgrims’ expressions although all human beings are searching for the same Absolute principle. Sri Ananda Acharya underscores Nirvana and disregards everything else while Krishnamurti speaks about the benediction of his union with the Beloved and exhorts his readers not to search for the Eternal and Infinite in the transient and the limited. Sri Aurobindo records his view of the various levels of consciousness in his spiritual ascent and urges the reader to strive for Life Divine.

Since each writer speaks of mystical realization in the light of his/her own experience, no limitation may be placed on a mystic. Paranjape writes: “Mysticism, unlike theology, is democratic, lending itself to various approaches and ways of expression. No single interpretation may be imposed upon it. In it no single authority tyrannizes” (221). Hence one must be careful while approaching mystical literature. Concerning the methods of procedure to be adopted in pursuing mystical studies, Underhill writes:

It will be our business to strip off as far as may be the symbolic wrapping, and attempt a synthesis of these doctrines; to resolve the apparent contradictions of objective and subjective revelations, of the ways of negation and affirmation, emanation and immanence, surrender and deification, the Divine Dark and the Inward Light;
and finally to exhibit, if we can, the essential unity of that experience in which the human soul enters consciously into the Presence of God. (94)

Paranjape is of the opinion that the method of a mystic is “more radical and revolutionary than the deconstruction of texts. The mystic deconstructs the mind that deconstructs the texts. Or, to put it differently, the mystic deconstructs the world itself by calling into question our self-assured means of perceiving it” (iii). He/She frees himself totally from the entire textual universe and resides in an empty sphere where he/she has affinity to none.

Paranjape points out that mysticism dismantles “apparent dualities such as materialism vs. idealism, the one vs. the many, the inner vs. the outer, the male vs. the female, the individual vs. society, oppressor vs. oppressed, good vs. evil, life vs. death etc.” (iii). This is achieved by neutralizing the faculty of mind which creates such differences and contradictions. Mysticism does not abandon this binary, dialectical or discursive faculty of the mind, otherwise known as Logos in Western philosophical traditions. But, according to Paranjape, it radically “unseats it—puts it in its place so to say, where it cannot fabricate for itself comforting delusions of power . . . it regards itself as suggestive not authoritative, mysticism saves itself from the need to be deconstructed” (iii).

The present researcher classifies mystical strands and elements into three categories: Mystical Quest, Mystical Attainment and Mystic Way. The Mystical Quest consists of the following phases, namely, Awakening of the Self / Point of Departure, Adventures / Journeys / Spiral Ascent / Passion for the Absolute, Purgation of the Senses and Self / Drastic Self-discipline / Introversion / Freedom
from all Ideologies and Moral Codes, Dissolution and Disintegration of the Ego or the limited Self and Gradual Transformation of Consciousness.

Mystical Attainment includes the following experiences such as Enlightenment / Voices and Visions / Glimpses of Truth, Feeling of Perfection and Self-realization, Formation of Universal Consciousness / Feeling of Oneness, The Dark Night of the Soul / Psychic Upheavals and Dreadful Moments of the Spiritual Adolescence and Complete Self Surrender to and Union with the Absolute.

The present study analyses *Savitri* and *The Odyssey* on the basis of the above mentioned elements. Another major thrust of the thesis is to examine mystical expressions in these two epics through the study of images and symbols.

This chapter came up with definitions of mysticism and traced its presence in all world religions, civilizations and cultures. Then it dealt with different kinds of mysticism. This chapter also underlined the ineffability of mysticism and highlighted the relationship between mysticism and literature and the expression of mysticism through images and symbols. The following chapter examines the mystical elements in *Savitri*.