CHAPTER FOUR

MYSTICAL ELEMENTS IN THE ODYSSEY

Peter Bien in his essay “Zorba the Greek, Nietzsche, and the Perennial Greek Predicament” writes about the age-old Greek dilemma: “The Greek predicament—at least for modern Greek authors—is a perennial one, and this is why these authors are able to draw their inspiration from the past and yet speak strongly and relevant to the present” (147). Kazantzakis, a proud son of Greece, has taken up this theme from Homer and has used it in his monumental work The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel brilliantly to convey his message which is relevant and meaningful to the modern world.

The poem begins and ends with the Sun standing as the image and symbol of the entire narrative. Odysseus subdues a revolt in Ithaca, leaves it for Sparta, abducts Helen and arrives in Crete and conspires and destroys Knossos. Defeated, he flees from Egypt, reaches the source of the Nile through Africa, communes with God and builds the ideal city. After the destruction of the city by a natural calamity, he becomes an ascetic, discourses with the prince, the prostitute, the impractical idealist, the hedonist, the primitive man and the gentle Negro fisher-lad, sails towards the South Pole, blesses life and bids farewell and accepts death.

Relying to a scholar, Kazantzakis wrote: “Odysseus is . . . a general sketch of the newer man who longs for a new and superior form of life . . . [who] chooses and lives the solution which seems to him the most true; he does not seek to prune his life, he denies nothing, he seeks the synthesis” (The Odyssey xviii). Kazantzakis’ personal remark on this work is worth noting:
For me the *Odyssey* is a new epical-dramatic attempt of the modern man to find deliverance by passing through all the stages of contemporary anxieties and by pursuing the most daring hopes. . . . This, I am certain, is the anguished struggle, whether conscious or subconscious, of the true modern man. . . Odysseus struggles by looking ahead unceasingly, his neck stretched forward like the leader of birds migrating. (xii)

Kazantzakis is considered a mystic by some scholars. His is a quest which transcends the boundaries of traditional religions. Nietzsche and Bergson had urged him to take up such a bold search. The whole of his life was a constant search for God and Odysseus is his double and goes through almost the same path that he had trodden. His wife Helen writes about him: “Nikos let himself slip in to the bottomless pit, the unfathomable gulf of the human soul” (*Nikos Kazantzakis: A Biography Based on His Letters* 245).

**Mystical Quest**

Awakening of the self is the first step in any mystical quest. Odysseus, the protagonist of this epic poem, experiences this great pull in his innermost heart right from the beginning of the poem. Overcoming a lot of troubles and tribulations, he reaches his homeland Ithaca only to find that his palace was filled with lustful suitors. An enraged Odysseus slaughters all of them with the help of Telemachus, his son, regains his kingdom from all opportunists and joins with his chaste wife Penelope. He then briefly describes his adventures. He spends just one night in his palace and the very next day receives a revelation: “and suddenly
shook with fear, and sighed, for now he knew / that even his native land was a
sweet mask of Death” (45). This is the point of departure for Odysseus.

Odysseus is no more satisfied with domestic pleasures; he aspires for
something higher and this thirst leads him once again out of his country.
Comparing the quest of Kazantzakis’ Odysseus with that of Homer’s hero Pandelis
Prevelakis remarks: “Just as the Odysseus of Homer went in search of his native
land, the Odysseus of Kazantzakis went in search of God. . . . The first found his
Ithaca, the second became the slayer of gods, searching for the true God” (qtd. in
The Saviors of God 18). When his companions complained to Kazantzakis’
Odysseus about their starving situation, he replied: “I’ve never promised you wine,
women, lard, or bread / but only Hunger, Thirst, and God—these three great joys!”
(291).

Building a small ship, Odysseus begins yet another voyage with some of
his friends who preferred the adventurous sea to the monotonous land. Captain
Clam, an old sea-wolf; Hardihood, the bronzesmith; Kentaur, a glutton and great
drinker; Orpheus, a poetaster and piper; and Granite, a brooding young man of
noble bearing, are his companions. Later on, Rocky, another young man, joins
them. Before leaving Ithaca, Odysseus instructs his companions: “Before day
breaks, let’s place our ship on rollers, lads, / uproot our country from our hearts,
and say farewell” and “at dawn we sail for the last voyage of no return” (68).

Two points are to be noted here: They have to uproot their country from
their hearts so that they can be totally free from the native land which normally
binds people. Secondly, they have no aim of returning and hence it is their final
journey. These two principles are mandatory for all true travellers who search for
something substantial. Kimon Friar, the translator of the poem, observes that “as Crete disappears and Odysseus bids Greece farewell forever, he rejoices to leave behind all sureties and to sail toward unknown creations and freedom” (The Odyssey 788).

The second element in the mystical quest is the adventures and journeys undertaken by the mystics with the sole intention of finding the Absolute. In a letter to his wife from Vienna, Kazantzakis wrote about his book:

I am writing Spiritual Exercises, a mystical book wherein I trace a method by which the spirit may rise from cycle to cycle until it reaches the supreme Contact. There are five cycles, Ego, Humanity, Earth, the Universe, God. I describe how we ascend all these steps, and when we reach the highest how we live simultaneously all the previous cycles. (qtd. in The Saviors of God 12)

Odysseus goes through these five cycles in order to reach God. Kazantzakis writes in the introduction to his autobiographical novel Report to Greco: “During my entire life one word always tormented and scourged me, the word ascent. . . . I should like to represent this ascent, together with the red footprints I left as I mounted” (15). The journeys Odysseus has to undertake are marked with his life-blood.

In Report to Greco, Kazantzakis talks of three kinds of souls and three different prayers which each soul utters: “One: I am a bow in your hands, Lord. Draw me lest I rot. Two: Do not overdraw me, Lord. I shall break. Three: Overdraw me, and who cares if I break!” (511) Both Kazantzakis and Odysseus
possess the third type of soul where they do not care what happens to them even if the Lord overdraws them.

In *The Odyssey*, according to Friar, the poet deals with the theme “of adventurous and dangerous exploration of both physical and spiritual worlds; a heroic, serious, yet ironic and playful braggadocio in the face of annihilation . . .” (778). Odysseus here searches for the Absolute but the first part of his quest is dominated by physical travels. After suppressing a revolt in Ithaca, he leaves it for ever and reaches Sparta. There he abducts Helen and arrives in Crete and conspires to destroy Knossos. Then he travels further to Egypt and schemes a rebellion but is defeated and flees out of Egypt. After that he and companions try to find out the source of the Nile through the dark Africa. In short, he is thirsting for more and more adventures and after each expedition, as Friar mentions, he “dashes to his feet, eager to follow his heart at once to further and higher adventure” (*The Odyssey* 788).

Thirteen out of twenty-four books of *The Odyssey* describe his physical journeys and the experiences he had in different places. In the remaining books, as Stanford denotes, Odysseus “seeks self-knowledge and self-improvement in asceticism and in the exploration of personal relationships with people who are also seekers after the inner secret of being and non-being” (qtd. in *The Odyssey* xxii). However, a passion for the really Real is always present in him and constantly urges him for further wanderings. The following lines highlight how thirst and urgency lead him in his search for God:

> Just as at night we search the yard when vipers fall,
> and all our fingers flame and burn to find a knife,
so do I also grope in darkness to find my God.

For God is not a phantom formed by fear or hope

but the heart’s only child, born of despair and courage. (250)

This confirms that the mystic’s quest for God is not a time-killing or a leisurely affair. It is an urgent task, for one is conscious of the presence of vipers in his room by night and searches for a knife to pin them down at the earliest.

Reaching Sparta, Odysseus meets with king Menelaus, his co-battler at Troy, who now leads a comfortable life with Helen. Menelaus believes that a man has only to follow whatever fate has ordained for him but Odysseus disagrees with him and declares that “it is man’s duty to fight his fate, surpass his doom, and even his god” (The Odyssey 782). He tries to convince Menelaus: “I think man’s greatest duty on earth is to fight his fate, / to give no quarter and blot out his written doom. / This is how mortal man may even surpass his god!” (114).

Odysseus cannot accept the tiny and powerless gods of the common man. For him, a true warrior is one who fights on his own without depending on any support from gods. Observing this nature of Odysseus, Orpheus, his friend, remarks: “You’re always sprouting new arms like an octopus, / your destiny’s accursed, for the whole world can’t hold you” (316).

Again, Odysseus is not satisfied with the gods of consolation and calm. He thinks of a fierce and violent God. He tells his companions that all adventures and experiences lead to further revelations of God who grows as man grows and changes with man’s environment and culture, for it is man who feeds him. His concept of God varies considerably from the traditional notions of God.
According to Odysseus, God “needs us, not out of love, but because we are the flesh through which he lives and grows” (*The Odyssey* 793). This idea is taken from the vitalistic mystic tradition initiated by Heracleitus in 5th century BCE and supported by the modern thinkers like Nietzsche and Bergson. Kazantzakis, highly influenced by these masters, uses his protagonist to proclaim this vision. In *The Saviors of God* he writes: “Open your eyes,’ God shouts; ‘I want to see! Prick up your ears, I want to hear! March in the front ranks: you are my head!” (121). Later, when Odysseus leads a multitude of slaves and the poor out of Egypt and while reaching the border, he asks them to choose between the poor comforts of their slavish existence and this new God who offers only thirst, hunger and freedom. He makes it clear that he wants only the restless and the unappeased to go with him.

Book Fourteen describes Odysseus’ meeting with God for seven days. It also shows how his concept of God changes gradually. On the first day (vs.1-84), he climbs the mountain all day in order to converse with God and by night he finds a cave. He decides to sleep there because he finds it safe for neither ghosts nor demons dare attack him there. He dedicates the second day (vs. 85-161) “to song and joyful embracement of life, then daydreams of his most secret wish, the possibility of deathlessness, but a small worm climbs up his chest to remind him of his mortality” (*The Odyssey* 795). On the third day (vs. 162-443) he recalls that “at the age of two he had pelted the sea with stones and yelled: ‘O God, make me a God!’” (795). He is then visited by two of his ancestors Tantalus and Heracles who encourage him in his endeavour to meet with God.
On the fourth Day (vs. 444-736) he realizes that he is a bridge between the past and the future, holding within him the dead, the living and the unborn. He frees himself from his ego and race and identifies himself with humanity. Another ancestor, Prometheus, visits him and urges him to continue the present task with more courage and commitment. He welcomes the birds, insects and animals until his identification with all living beings is complete on the fifth day (vs. 737-950).

On the sixth day (vs. 951-1246) he realizes that it is God who is eternally crying out in man for liberation. Friar writes: “This insistent struggle toward purer and purer refinement some call Love, some God, some Death, and some an Outcry” (The Odyssey 797).

On the seventh day (vs. 1247-1410) he comes to know that “the world was made when two antithetical forces clashed, one male and the other female, in the arenas of phenomena and the mind” (797). At this point he realizes in tune with the traditional mystical view of the world that the world is the manifestation of the eternal He and She. Aswapati in Savitri also realizes this and Sri Aurobindo writes: “The Two who are one are the secret of all power, / The Two who are one are the might and right in things” (63).

As they travel, Odysseus and his crew reach a certain shore and stay in the house of an old man where they hear two of his daughters singing about love, home and children. Suddenly all of them experience a strong pull towards hearth and home. Realizing the snares of the tempter, they all reject it instantly and continue their journey because their main concern is to follow their insatiable hearts. Leaving behind the old man and his daughters, Odysseus bids them farewell:
But we must leave you now, for we have far to go,

and a home’s honeyed bliss destroys a man’s intent;

comfort and pleasure do not match with our dark god.

He spoke and rose, and all his comrades rose to leave. (276)

Yet another time when they were sailing with a treasure unearthed from the tomb of an Egyptian King and Queen, their hearts were troubled, for they longed to settle down in comfort and pleasure. But their leader quickly gauges the situation and grasps fistfuls of the treasure and flings it overboard. All follow the captain and throw away everything and ultimately sail with a free heart. Possessions of any sort are obstacles to the mystical quest. Friar remarks that Odysseus has now “passed beyond arrogance and pride, the drunken rage of plundering and possession and guilt, until he who had striven to be the savior of the world finds that he is saved even from the need of salvation” (*The Odyssey* 801).

True mystics not only have to abandon worldly possessions but should also empty their mind of all ideologies and religious principles. *The Odyssey* also deals with the theme of obtaining freedom from all theories and ideologies. Friar writes: “Concomitant and contrapuntal themes are also announced . . . the freedom from all shackles which prudence and the comfortable virtues dictate, from all philosophical, ethical, and racial ties; the certainty that for each individual the phenomena of the universe are but the mind’s creations” (778). Odysseus asks: “What freedom? To stare in the black eyes of the abyss / with gallantry and joy as on one’s native land!” (588). For him, true freedom is the state of staring at the abyss with the familiarity and love with which one looks at his native land.
Odysseus mocks at the average man’s soul that is driven by either fear or hope and asks him to imitate him:

O wretched soul of man, you can’t stand free on earth
or walk upright unless you walk with fear or hope!
Ah, when will comrade souls like mine come down to earth?
The double-willed man’s heart then cracked and broke in two,
but mended in a lightning-flash again, and the wound closed. (659)

Kazantzakis declared that Odysseus was “the man who has freed himself from everything—religions, philosophies, political systems—one who has cut away all the strings” (The Odyssey xi). By the end of the poem, Odysseus proclaims, “I’m the great savior of the world where no salvation lies” (592). Furthermore, one has to free himself from the hope in an anthropomorphemic God. That is what his favourite ancestor, told him:

[Hearacles] looks upon Odysseus as his heir, begs him to purify his mind of gods, demons, virtues, sorrows, joys, and the final and greatest foe, Hope, until there remains only the essence of flame, scornful and superhuman, a fire no thorns can feed. Odysseus realizes that he has now unbound himself from the final chain, that of Hope in an anthropomorphemic God no matter how purified, and in complete freedom realizes that all phenomena, as an individual sees them, are the creations of each particular mind. (The Odyssey 800-01)

Joseph C. Flay in “The Erotic Stoicism of Nikos Kazantzakis” thinks in a similar fashion while writing about the ultimate objective of Kazantzakis’ spiritual
exercises. According to him, Kazantzakis’ journeys “end with the transcendence of certainty and the embracing of uncertainty” (298). Hence, Odysseus is one of the rare heroes on earth who transcends hope, certainty and salvation. Friar remarks, “This insistent struggle toward purer and purer refinement some call Love, some God, some Death, and some an Outcry” (The Odyssey 797).

Purification of the self and the senses lead the quester to a state of introversion. Before meeting God, Odysseus reaches this state of mind: “As the archer climbed, and the arena of his eyes spread wide, / solitude struck him like a sea and cooled his mind: / ‘A thousand welcomes, Solitude, O large-eyed mother’” (418). Enjoying the blessings of solitude, he says: “What joy to climb the mountain’s holy solitude / alone, in its clear air, a bay leaf in your teeth” (419).

Dissolution of the ego is the next stage in the quest. It takes place in Odysseus on the fourth day of his meeting with God. Friar writes, “The realization that he carries infinite depths within himself frees Odysseus from a concern with his own Ego so that he knows now that he must go beyond the I to his own racial ancestors” (The Odyssey 796).

After the disintegration of the ego, the quester experiences a gradual transformation of consciousness. For dissolving the ego, one has to plunge into his own deep self until he discovers that it is the spirit of God that is locked within each man and is crying out for liberation. Odysseus goes through this stage and eventually transcends his ego. In the second phase, he moves beyond his ego and finds his racial origins. He traverses through the third step where his own particular race is abandoned and he identifies himself with the entire humankind and partakes in their agony of liberating God from within themselves. Again leaving out the
humankind, he, in the fourth and ultimate phase becomes one with the entire universe, with both animate and inanimate matter, with the earth, sea, plants, animals, insects, birds, stones and with the vital impulse of creation in all phenomena.

The author describes in the following lines the transformation that takes place in Odysseus when he becomes an ascetic:

The contours of his brain glittered like mountain peaks

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his eyes sank inward, his white head swayed sluggishly,

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The inner rose burst into bloom and sucked his heart,

his mind grew light, and the starved flesh turned into spirit

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for his whole body in the dewdrops swam and glowed. (496)

Flesh turning to spirit is one of the favourite themes of Kazantzakis. In the Prologue to Saint Francis, he writes: “For me Saint Francis is . . . the man who by means of ceaseless, supremely cruel struggle succeeds in fulfilling our highest obligation, something higher even than morality or truth or beauty: the obligation to transubstantiate the matter which God entrusted to us, and turn it into spirit” (7). He uses the term “transubstantiation” from Christian Eucharistic theology to refer to this change. Transubstantiation denotes the change taking place in the substance of a thing but without changing its accidents. In the Eucharistic theology, the bread and wine during the Holy Mass become Christ’s Holy Body and Blood through the change in the substance even while retaining the accidents of the bread and wine.
Kazantzakis argues that body can be transubstantiated to spirit and holds that this is the sole duty of every human being.

**Mystical Attainment**

The gradual transformation of consciousness eventually leads one to mystical attainment. The quester receives frequently visions from above and this is one of the features of mystical attainment. Odysseus receives many such visions of God. The author describes one such vision in the following lines:

> Odysseus leapt up on his toes, yelled open-eyed,
> and the whole beast—wings, light, and flame—rose with him there.
> Rushing to touch it, the archer groaned, ‘it’s my true God!’
> but the bright vision quivered, then burst in desert air. (272)

On another occasion, Odysseus, singing with joy has a vision of God that undergoes many changes. He sees God in the form of his favourite ancestors—Tantalus, Heracles and Prometheus. In his vision, God acquires the form of charging armies that symbolize the military fervour of the human spirit and finally God is seen as an old vagabond. Once again he sees “a vision of God as Commander in Chief, of all men as co-workers in the great battle where man must learn both to obey and to command” *(The Odyssey* 798). He also has a brief vision of his death amid icebound seas. Some time later a voice within urges him to use all the powers of his mind and imagination.

A mystic is blessed with a universal consciousness. He takes part in the joys and sufferings of the whole universe. In one instance, Odysseus shares in the grief of a slave mother whose baby dies of starvation. Friar writes that “only Odysseus hears her scream, and feels that he is responsible for all the pain on earth,
as if he were earth’s only savior. Gradually in Odysseus an almost Christian consciousness of the world’s suffering is being awakened, and a sense of responsibility toward pain and oppression” (*The Odyssey* 785). Thinking over the fate of countless slaves, he is compassionate towards them and experiences oneness with all:

An unexpected love, huge, harsh, now crushed his breast:

he pitied all men, foe and friend embraced within him,

and now, for the first time, he felt he loved all men

loved the whole wretched earth and all its precious cargo,

his eyes and brain filled up and brimmed with all mankind. (103)

After becoming an ascetic, Odysseus’ feeling of oneness with all is deepened. He enters into a mystic communion with insects, fruits and all growing things, and with streams and stones. The author remarks: “Odysseus brimmed with waters, trees, fruit, beasts, and snakes / and all trees, waters, beasts and fruit brimmed with Odysseus” (498).

Every mystic will have to pass through the dark night of the soul where various kinds of temptations await him/her in order to pull him/her back from his/her spiritual heights. Odysseus too meets with the same fate. In *The Odyssey*, the tempter acquires the form of a snake-like Negro boy. One day he approaches Odysseus and mocks him saying that he has now become decrepit because of the disintegration of his mind. He again accuses him for being filled with the pride and
wrath of his ego. But Odysseus identifies the tempter and ignores the charges levelled against him. The Negro boy appears again to tempt him saying that he bears all the thirtytwo signs of a perfect man and that he has therefore attained his salvation. A cautious Odysseus retaliates that he is the saviour himself and does not hope for any other salvation in the world and subsequently escapes from the tempter.

The last phase in the mystical journey is total self-surrender to and union with the Absolute. According to Odysseus, it is very difficult for man to surrender completely before God. In order to illustrate this, he tells his companions a fable which deals with the creation of all living beings, including man. God asks all of them to come forward and bow before him. All obeyed but the human heart refused to bow or surrender its freedom. Since then, Odysseus points out, a war has been raging between God and the rebellious human heart.

Later, a gentle fisher-lad (who represents Christ) appears and tells him the story of a king who achieves total self-surrender:

They say that once when a great king gave up his ghost
and his soul rose, he knocked on the Immortal’s door.
‘who pounds my door?’ God shouted, ‘I’, the king replied.
‘There is no room in Paradise for two,’ God growled.

He plunged to earth once more; strove for ten thousand years,
moaned ‘Ah!’ and ‘Ah!’ for the hard stone to blossom too,
then once again the old king took the sky’s blue slope,
stood quivering by the sacred door, and softly knocked,
'Who knocks?' 'Father, it’s You who knock on your own door.'

At once God’s door gaped wide and the two merged in One! (676)

Although Odysseus hesitates for a moment he at last submits himself totally to the Absolute. The author presents it symbolically: “the last command leapt mutely on the empty stone / to the archer’s joy, as though he’d shot his soul into the sun” (478).

**Mystic Way**

The third phase in the mystical journey is the blissful experience of the fruits of the mystic way of life. A mystic is one who experiences, among other features, the disappearance of dualities. All elements of contradictions and opposing categories fade away from his/her life. Odysseus is blessed to have attained this state of mind in the middle of his pilgrimage. When he set out on his voyage his son found him to be a bundle of contradictions, dualities and conflicts. Later a transmutation takes place in him and he discovers that life and death are not contrary:

> Calmly his brains began to shape, to unshape the world:
> he felt that life and death were two milk-laden dugs
> and that sometimes we glued our hungry lips to one,
> and clung to the other at times until we fell asleep. (264)

He comes to terms with the joyful as well as terrible rhythms of life gradually where life and death become one. Towards the end of the epic, writes Friar, “Now on the rim of the abyss, Odysseus dances ecstatically in affirmation of life with all its antinomies” (*The Odyssey* 801).
At last he is able to reconcile his own mind and heart which were at war from his childhood. While his mind always wanted to build an ivory tower of retreat, his heart longed to go to every door to share in every suffering. But after his enlightenment he prevents them from attacking each other by making them co-workers in his endeavours. Later he realizes that “salvation and destruction are one for only by the dissolution of what has been accomplished can man enlarge his spirit and reach his only salvation” (The Odyssey 793). With this kind of an understanding he bends down with humility and kisses Mother Earth and accepts the universe in all its aspects, both evil and good.

He also wants to bring together the East and the West, the Oriental and Occidental visions of life and God. He synthesizes these two world-views. The following lines depict how he reconciles the god and beast in him:

Thus had these two great foes within him, beast and god,

fought fiercely in his bosom, head and loins until

high in his mind they turned to friends from so much strife,

and forefather Beast thus met with grandson God within him.

‘May you be blessed, entangled ghosts, for now I know

who cried within me and what my ultimate destination!’

Thus did the archer murmur, and his soul grew light. (271)

A mystic is blessed with endless knowledge and an enhanced vision of everything. During his voyage, Odysseus meets the Lord of the Tower and stays in his palace for a few days. The Lord of the Tower arranges a cockfight in order to entertain his guest Odysseus. When the fight is on, the Lord of the Tower marvels that Odysseus, unlike his other guests, gazes at the cockfight with neither pleasure
nor disgust. When asked about it, he replies that he “gazes on all things with an inner, a Third Eye, which remains serenely unmoved. The Lord of the Tower replies that best is the unconcerned mind which gleans its honey from every flower of experience but is never itself involved” (The Odyssey 807).

This is an enhanced vision of life where one watches over everything without getting involved in it in anyway. Odysseus has reached that state of mind in his mystic life. The detached vision of the third eye is illustrated below:

Between the two eyes in my brow a third eye looms
that grinds together castles, mortals, gods, and birds.
When I watched your fierce cocks, my lord, I watched all men,
I watched both Life and Death in a grim strife on earth,
and my third eye remained unmoved . . . (627)

In the mystic way of life, one gains a deeper knowledge of everything. Odysseus’ image of God changes from a timid god to a god of fight. Furthermore, realizing that it is God, and not he, who needs assistance, he decides to save Him. He also feels that “God is now working out his liberation through the medium of these oppressed bodies, and that this is the next step toward the purification of spirit in an endless strife to the world’s end” (The Odyssey 787). He urges all men to work as if the salvation of the entire world depended on them. At the same time, he also instructs them that it did not matter whether they won or lost, for all that mattered was the fight itself.

At this stage Odysseus is endowed with a higher vision of life. He tells his companions that he “derives his strength and courage from the knowledge that all life is a brief dream, a toy, and when Granite replies that it would be best then to
commit suicide, Odysseus retorts that he is the creator of his own dreams, that he both serves and drinks his own blood, that he accepts necessity with joy” (*The Odyssey* 788).

In order to illustrate this vision, Kazantzakis has introduced a play within the poem. Odysseus has a magic flute made out of a dead man’s bone and when he plays it a group of characters—an old king, the prince, his faithful slave, a fierce warrior-king and a maiden—come alive and live out their roles. When he stops playing, they freeze. A drama unfolds depicting the eternal passions of life: love, lust, jealousy, war, betrayal and the survival of the strongest. And Odysseus is able to comprehend that “All things on earth, disease and joys, are the mind’s fancies: / it blows, they take on flesh; it blows again, they vanish” (402). He realizes that life is but a dream or a play.

In their visions mystics are able to regain the pristine purity of a child’s perception and look at everything as if they were looking at it for the first time. Odysseus begins his last long farewell to the world rejoicing in life as though he were looking at all things for the first time. Kazantzakis writes: “For the first time the wanderer felt the world his home, / as though he smelled grass or saw trees for the first time” (550).

Overcoming bodily travails and death is the next important feature of the mystical way of life. Kazantzakis was influenced by Bergson concerning his view on death. Friar remarks: “Finally, what appears but darkly, hesitatingly, tentatively in Kazantzakis . . . is enunciated clearly by Bergson: the final hope that life in its struggle with matter might in time learn how to elude mortality” (*The Odyssey*
Odysseus is confident that he can beat down every resistance and clear even the most formidable obstacles including death.

According to Odysseus, death is transcended by facing it boldly. He narrates a story in which a grandfather, his son and grandson row all their lives to find the still unknown source of the Nile. They believe that by drinking from that source they will gain immortality. Even though all three died on the way, their perseverance and boldness in their struggle against death are praiseworthy. After narrating the story, Odysseus declares to his crew that “the hidden deathless sources may be found in Death only” (The Odyssey 788). A. Owen Aldridge in “The Modern Spirit: Kazantzakis and some of His Contemporaries” remarks: “Odysseus, obsessed with the cosmic notion of death, considers life as an incessant quest which reaches fulfillment in a final sublime encounter. He conquers death by seeking it” (305).

The human aspiration to overcome death is found in the account of Laertes’ death, the father of Odysseus also. Friar comments: “Soon after, his father, Laertes, feeling the approach of death, crawls with his old nurse at daybreak to his orchard, bids his trees, his birds and beasts farewell, sows grain, then falls to earth himself like seed, and dies” (The Odyssey 780). Falling down like a seed in the farm and dying while sowing is a symbol of sprouting leaves and coming back to life. The poet declares in the Prologue itself that “for by our Lady Moon and our Lord Sun, I swear / old age is a false dream and Death but fantasy” (2). And when a slave mother’s baby dies, the poet expresses the hope of its return as a butterfly defeating death:

The mother unbare her head and looked at her young son
wrapped tightly in his swaddling clothes like a cocoon,
and her heart, choked by death, now dreamt of sprouting wings.

One day a large all-golden butterfly would spring
from earth and slowly flutter on the spring time grass,
and as the mother passed through flowering fields, her son
would know her, and for a moment flit on her grey hair. (183)

Kazantzakis believes in the principle of love conquering death. As they row
and sail, Orpheus, one of Odysseus’ crew, tells the story of a male and female
worm, representatives of man’s stubborn spirit. In the story they find ways of
overcoming God’s attempts to kill them with fire, hunger, flood and death. But
death is conquered by the intimate and passionate love between the husband and
the wife:

and when night fell at length and they lay down to sleep
the worm crawled slowly, careful not to waken Death,
and in darkness hugged his mate in tight embrace.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

the male worm then took heart and in his wife’s ear whispered:

‘With one sweet kiss, dear wife, we’ve conquered conquering Death!’ (74)

The poet remarks that the woman was strong enough to defeat Death. He writes:
“Death holds the keys, but woman holds the counter-keys, / and all take lover’s
lane, descend to the womb’s pit / where soul is deathless nor dissolves in the cold
ground” (186).

Death becomes Odysseus’ constant companion. There is a scene in The
Odyssey where Death and Odysseus sleep together in a comradely embrace and for
a brief moment Death dreams of life. Odysseus even commands Death: “‘Keep seven steps behind me, Death; I’ll call at need.’ / Death stopped and paced back seven paces, stepping slow” (588). On another occasion when they meet again they look at each other like identical twins. At the end of the poem, Odysseus welcomes Death as a long expected guest. As he feels the five elements of his body disjoining, he summons Tantalus and tells him that like him he too has spent everything and has not left anything for death.

The poet writes: “The Archer has fooled you, Death, he’s squandered all your goods, / melted down all the rusts and rots of his foul flesh / till they escaped you in pure spirit, and when you come, / you’ll find but trampled fires, embers, ash, and fleshly dross” (714-15). Friar expresses this in detail:

He wants to try all the forms of life, freely, beyond plans and systems, keeping the thought of death before him as a stimulant, not to make every pleasure more acrid or every ephemeral moment more sharply enjoyable in its brevity, but to whet his appetites in life, to make them more capable of embracing and of exhausting all things so that, when death finally came, it would find nothing to take from him, for it would find an entirely squandered Odysseus.

(The Odyssey xi)

The ultimate stage in the mystical way of life is apotheosis or deification. In Kazantzakian terminology, it is the transubstantiation of matter into spirit. Friar writes: “If we are to set a Purpose, it is this: to transubstantiate matter and to turn it into spirit” (The Saviors of God 21). The poet talks about it in his Odyssey: “With steady, stiff-necked virtue, with firm stubborn hope / the flesh distills into the
Kazantzakis too had reached similar heights. Prevelakis in *Nikos Kazantzakis and His Odyssey* remarks: “Kazantzakis had grown beyond materiality. . . . He had become like Prospero: a good, holy spirit. An odor of sanctity issued from him” (167). Comparing the deaths of Odysseus and Kazantzakis, Prevelakis comments: “Odysseus had known deifying death on the snows of the Antarctic, at the South Pole. . . . Kazantzakis and Odysseus set out toward Immortality from the poles. Both had desired to exhaust this world, and to look down on it from the highest watchtowers” (169).

**Expression of Mystical Elements through Images and Symbols**

Kazantzakis has taken many incidents and symbols from Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* and has used them in this poem. The characters’ symbolism has to be given prominence. Odysseus is one of the most recurrent characters in Western culture. He is the protagonist of *The Odyssey* and meets various representative types of humankind, namely, Prince Motherth (Buddha), Margaro (the Courtesan), the Hermit (Faust), Captain Sole (Don Quixote), the Lord of the Tower (the Hedonist) and the Negro Fisher-lad (Christ).

In *The Odyssey*, it is the character of Odysseus which catches the attention of the reader. While writing to a young scholar, the author declares in *The Odyssey*:

Odysseus is not only a general sketch of the newer man who longs for a new and superior form of life, but he is also, in particular, the Greek who has to solve a most fundamental dilemma of his destiny;
Odysseus chooses and lives the solution which seems to him the most true; he does not seek to prune his life, he denies nothing, he seeks the synthesis. (xviii)

Synthesizing different elements is the foremost aim of Odysseus and it is conducive to his mystical character. Adèle Bloch in “The Dual Masks of Nikos Kazantzakis” writes: “His last hero and double, Odysseus, decides to carve some masks of God for himself. . . . Later on, in a strange, deserted, and senseless world, free Odysseus decides to recreate a world of his own, to play with it . . . thus donning the mask of God . . . and ultimately uniting all opposites” (198). In one of the letters written by Kazantzakis to Helen in his last days, he declares, “my whole life may become what the Byzantine mystics call ‘a rich unity’. No illusions, no cowardice, staring chaos straight in the eyes without a tremor. I desire nothing more” (Nikos Kazantzakis: A Biography Based on His Letters 166).

Friar is of the opinion that much of the ambivalence in the character of Odysseus, the autobiographical hero of Kazantzakis, might have stemmed from the latter’s endeavour to harmonize the dualities in himself, in his action and his work. He states further that all these antinomies disappear when they are fused “in the fire of a mystical vision” (The Odyssey xxv). Like Odysseus at the last stage of his life, Kazantzakis too experiences a serene state and writes to Helen: “Thus liberated of hope and fear, free of all ambition, serene and feeling very profound emotion, I wander around greeting the world and taking leave of it” (138).

Odysseus strove ceaselessly to welcome and embrace change in his life. During one of his journeys, he looked into the yellow eyes of his leopard-cub and saw himself as humankind’s prototype, a cave man. But later he tried to become
the divine by transforming his matter into spirit. While he was in his cradle he was
blessed by three ancestors of his race: “Tantalus who bequeathed him his own
forever unsatisfied heart, Prometheus who gave him the mind’s blazing brilliance,
and Heracles who bathed him in the fire of the spirit’s laborious struggle toward
purification” (The Odyssey 779). Kazantzakis was interested in Nietzsche’s
superman and tried to depict Odysseus as a superior kind of hero who will take
humankind towards spiritual fulfillment.

Odysseus is a hero with a thousand faces. Furthermore, he is cunning with
an evasive nature. All through the poem the poet has used many adjectives to
describe him. In Report to Greco, Kazantzakis writes about some of the titles given
to Odysseus which hints at the different roles assumed by him:

What names did I not set as traps to catch you! I addressed you as
God-swindler, God-battler, God-abolisher, God-deceiver, seven
lives, multiple mind, subterfuge mind, fox mind, crossroad mind,
mind of many summits, right-left mind, heart-deceiver, heart-
battler, heart-knower, house-closer, soul-abductor, soul guide,
acrite, world traveler, world-harvester, bow mind, fortress-builder,
fortress-abolisher, sea-fighter, ocean breast, dolphin, man of five
minds, double-triple will, leader, solitary, fowler, majestic three-
masted schooner of hope! (473)

As in Savitri, Death is a major character in The Odyssey too. Odysseus feels
the presence of Death throughout his journeys: “for by his side he felt his final, old
friend, Death, / whistling and walking there with his cool hands out-stretched”
(223). He takes Death as his companion. He chats and discusses with him. By the
end of the poem, when he comes to take away Odysseus away and waits for him under the shadow of a fig tree, the latter notices him but begs him to wait a bit more until they reach the sea.

And when Odysseus continues his journey, Death follows him at a proper distance. He bids the world farewell in a mystic trance where all opposites are joined together in love. Again Death approaches him but he “begs him to follow seven paces behind him until he can reach the edge of the continent and there build himself a skiff in the shape of a coffin, that he may return once more to the sea as to the womb” (The Odyssey 804).

Prince Motherth is yet another notable character in The Odyssey. He is the representative of Buddha. He roams the world in anguish seeking to find answers to evil, death and decay. Having found nihilism as the answer to his questions, he negates the world and rejects it totally as an illusion. Katerina Angelaki-Rooke in “Kazantzakis’s Buddha: Phantasmagoria and Struggle” remarks that his Odysseus “fights against the out-side enemy: injustice, evil, corruption, slavery; his Buddha against desire and all the inner calamities of man” (70). But Motherth fails to convince Odysseus and the latter rejects the former’s views as being escapist. He tells Motherth that instead of rejecting life, a strong man should “affirm life fully and raise the structure of his life on the rim of chaos, giving it himself meaning, beauty, worth, value, even though he knows that this is only an illusion” (The Odyssey 804). Although Motherth ignores the heroic affirmation of Odysseus, he still accompanies him on his journey south hoping to find a more palatable answer to his despair.
Christ comes forward as the last person to meet Odysseus but in the form of a gentle Negro fisher-lad. Richard W. Chilson in “The Christ of Nikos Kazantzakis” writes: “The last person Odysseus speaks with before launching his boat to encounter his death is Jesus, in the form of a gentle Negro fisher lad” (80). Chilson explains the encounter between the two:

After a long discussion Odysseus calls the body a flask of sweat and the youth counters that ‘worms, when they love the rose, change into butterflies’. They part in what appears a stalemate and Odysseus gives the lad a parting gift: ‘That man is free who strives on earth with not one hope!’ The lad replies that ‘God is compassionate and great, and he can save at the last hour that soul that does not want salvation.’ The scene is of immense power: Odysseus wishes to believe the lad, but is prevented by his experience. (80)

With regard to nature imagery, light/darkness imagery is prominent in this epic. As in all mystical poetry, here too light represents God. Friar writes that for both Bergson and Kazantzakis “God is not omnipotent, but infinite; he is not omniscient, but struggles and stumbles, impeded by matter, toward more and more consciousness, toward light” (The Odyssey xvii). He adds, that “the poem begins and ends with the sun, itself a long metaphor of the transmutation of all matter into flame, into light, into spirit” (813).

According to Kazantzakis, the human soul contains fierce rays of light. In a letter to Edvige on 6th November 1932 he wrote: “From my own personal life, I know this well: There is something awesome in the human soul, a spear of fire and
light, piercing the enormous weight of substance and shadows” (Nikos Kazantzakis: A Biography Based on His Letters 257). In order to portray the spiritual Odysseus, the poet seeks the help of light imagery: “His mystic and invisible body, azure-hued, / flickered about his flesh and cast ray-tentacles” (586).

Darkness, in its turn, denotes negative forces. Odysseus realizes that the beast and god have always warred in man. The spirit caged in him has always sought to evolve into light through dark atavistic paths of the evolutionary ladder.

On 4th January 1952 in a letter to Helen, Kazantzakis wrote:

The major and almost the only theme of all my work is the struggle of man with ‘God’: the unyielding, inextinguishable struggle of the naked worm called ‘man’ against the terrifying power and darkness of the forces within him and around him. The stubbornness of the struggle, the tenacity of the little spark in its fight to penetrate the age-old, boundless night and conquer it. The anguished battle to transmute darkness into light, slavery into freedom. (507)

In Savitri too the protagonist’s aim is to conquer the eternal night and bring forth a glorious dawn.

The imagery of the five elements in The Odyssey is striking. Before his death, Odysseus blesses the five fundamental elements of his body, namely, Earth, Wind, Water, Fire and Air. He believes that one day “stones, water, fire, and earth shall be transformed to spirit” (1).

Mountain imagery recurs in mystical poetry. It is usually a symbol of spiritual ascent and meeting place for man and God. For instance, when Odysseus wants to converse with God he climbs up a mountain saying: “But I shall climb
alone to this high mountain’s peak / for I have much to say to my old lion-heart” (418). Water imagery dominates the whole of *The Odyssey*. Most of the journeys of Odysseus and his company take place on the oceans. And oceans indicate the vastness, uncertainty and unending nature of the mystical quest. But in one instance Odysseus compares death to immortal water: “O soul, you stretch your bottomless, your unslaked palms / to quench your endless thirst with that immortal water, Death!” (713).

Kazantzakis is fond of fire imagery. He uses it frequently to depict God. Friar observes, “Fire is the first and ultimate mask of God. One day it will vanish into the deepest and most distilled essence of the spirit, that of silence, where all contraries at last will be resolved” (*The Odyssey* xiv). Odysseus talks about “the hungry flame” as the image of his God: “by that inhuman flame which burns in our black bowels. / I like to name that flame which burns within me God!” (344). When Odysseus is asked by Death as to what he did on earth, he replies: “I’ve always fought to purify wild flame to light, / and kindly whatever light I found to burst in flame” (329). And the result is foretold in the Prologue itself: “and the mud-winged and heavy soul, freed of its flesh, / shall like a flame serene ascend and fade in sun” (1). In this context sun represents God and the flame, the human soul. A similar image is used by Kazantzakis to describe Odysseus’ death. His spirit, his consciousness, leapt like a flame and for a moment glowed disembodied in the air before vanishing forever. Odysseus experiences freedom like a cooling flame: “The cooling flame of freedom wrapped him like a cloak” (562).

In describing Odysseus’ mystical experiences, Kazantzakis uses a lot of botanical imagery. In 1924, he wrote a letter to Elsa: “I feel God leaping and
growing inside me - like those cucumbers in the Cretan gardens” (Helen 113). This captures the gradual development of God-awareness in a mystic. A similar statement is found in the *Holy Bible*: “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nets in its branches” (Matt. 13: 31-32). Here too Jesus talks about spiritual growth in terms of botanical imagery.

In Book XV, Odysseus finds a wild pear tree which had split in two but had still bloomed. He looks at it as a gnarled symbol of the spirit’s vitality. It teaches him that accepting the given conditions in life whatsoever one must finally produce good results. Odysseus remarks, “life and death sweetly merged as though he gently held / jasmine and April roses till their fragrance mingled” (562). Through this imagery he wants to convey the idea that life and death are merely different aspects of the same phenomenon.

Zoological imagery too is found in *The Odyssey*. Kazantzakis is interested in bird imagery and uses it to depict the spirit. In the autumn of 1924, he wrote to Helen: “Once again, I am dominated by the bloodthirsty, rapacious bird - the spirit” (117). Writing about Odysseus’ soul the poet remarks: “He spoke, then closed his eyes, folded his soul like wings, / opened his arms to the low stars, and sank in tranquil sleep” (562). Once a Cretan sees Odysseus with wings:

The apprentice watched the old man, fondled his skilled hands, and longed to stoop and kiss those bulging shoulder blades where curly though unseen wings sprouted, drenched in blood; O might he have such eagle root and high descent! (219)
Odysseus is like a powerful eagle which roams around the whole sky not frightened of anything.

Kazantzakis employs bird imagery to denote man’s heart and soul. He writes: “I am that bird who sings within a cage of flames!” / “but I’m that still uncaught and burning bird, your heart” (486). Bird imagery is again used to depict man’s soul: “and when my soul had from my hands wholly emerged / it raised its eyes to the sky and soared like a giddy bird! (219). Odysseus compares Death to a rooster: “And I’m but air, mist, dream, and the black sun shall come / and that black rooster, Death, shall crow, and I shall vanish too” (324).

In terms of inanimate imagery, the most significant one in The Odyssey is that of an ivory god. When Odysseus reaches Crete a peddler sells him an ivory god with seven vertical heads. The first is bestial, the second is savagely martial, the third voluptuous, the fourth represents the flowering mind, the fifth tragic sorrow, the sixth a serenity beyond joy and sorrow and the seventh the ethereal soul. For the first time, writes Friar, “Odysseus is deeply moved by the prescience of the gradual purification his vision of God must undergo, from the pure beast to the pure spirit” (The Odyssey 783). Seeing the peddler’s ivory god with seven vertical heads, he aspires for an ascent:

The final head shone, crystal-clear, translucent, light,

and had no ears or eyes, no nostrils, mouth, or brow,

for all its flesh had turned to soul, and soul to air!

.................................

Ah, my dear God, if only my dark soul could mount

the seven stories step by step and fade in flame,
but I’m devoured by beasts and filled with mud and brain! (151)

Cosmic imagery is also used in this poem frequently. Among them the sun gets prominence. The poem both opens and closes with an invocation to the sun. In the Prologue, Kazantzakis writes: “O Sun, great Oriental, my proud mind’s golden cap, / I love to wear you cocked askew, to play and burst / in song throughout our lives, and so rejoice our hearts” (1). The Epilogue also depicts the sun as a great Eastern prince who sinks in the West by evening lamenting the death of Odysseus. Commenting on sun symbolism, Friar remarks that it “symbolizes godhead, the ultimate purified spirit, for the central theme is the unceasing struggle which rages in animate and inanimate matter to burn away and cast off more and more of its dross until the rarefied spirit is gradually liberated and ascends toward its symbolical goal” (The Odyssey 777-78).

A good number of images of journeys, quests and destinations are found in this epic. There are many lines dealing with sails illustrating the quest for God. More than the external ones, mystics journey through the labyrinths of their inner selves. Even their external travels are to be taken as the expression of their internal quests which leave them restless.

Mystical writings normally contain architecture imagery. They include descriptions of castles, mansions, doors and so on. In Interior Castle, Saint Teresa of Avila describes the seven mansions, seven spiral stages in the man-god relationship. In The Odyssey, a whole Book (XV) is dedicated to the building of an “ideal city” which symbolizes an ideal place on earth. In it, the people are categorized into three groups of ascending rank: the craftsmen, the warriors and the intellectuals. A socialist state is created synthesizing various elements from Plato’s
Republic, St. Augustine’s *The City of God* and More’s *Utopia*. But this ideal city is destroyed in a volcanic explosion. The destruction of the ideal city should also be taken as symbolic because it underlines that no human construction on earth can be flawless.

Mystical poetry consists of allegories too. *The Odyssey* contains allegorical references especially from the Old Testament. J. Moatti-Fine in an article titled “Odysseus-Moses, or God’s Presence in History” writes:

> The starvation-ridden Egypt which Odysseus and his companions discover resembles the Pharaonic Egypt described at the end of Genesis and in those first gripping pages of Exodus . . . Gradually the hero metamorphoses into a composite biblical image before taking the more precise form of Moses. Eventually Odysseus’ journey becomes step-for-step that of the story of Exodus: the victory won over Pharaoh through fear; the liberation of the people in bondage; the departure from Egypt for the promised land. (73)

Odysseus is again allegorically compared to Moses who climbs Mount Zion to receive the Ten Commandments from God. Friar writes: “Odysseus directs his troops to erect temporary shelters on the shore while he climbs the adjacent mountain to commune for seven days and nights with God in order that he may thus formulate the new laws and plans for the ideal city” (*The Odyssey* 794). Just as in the Bible, Odysseus carves the Ten Commandments on stone.

In the Old Testament, Satan approaches Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden in the form of snake. Likewise, the tempter in *The Odyssey* approaches Odysseus in the form of snake like Negro boy: “One day at dawn a naked Negro
boy crawled close: / his teeth gleamed by the cliff, his palms emitted musk, / he
slid like a snake on his black belly and hissed on stones” (506).

Christ too appears in The Odyssey. One day amid some fishermen
Odysseus hears a young Negro fisher-lad speak of One Eternal Father who is full
of Love. He says softly that if someone were to strike him on one cheek he would
turn the other. Odysseus, in order to test the boy, hits him hard thinking that the
boy would defend himself. But to his surprise he gently turns his other cheek to
him. At this he shakes with terror and tells the boy: “Forgive me, friend, I longed
to measure your strange mind, / to cast my plumb line and find out what depths
you sail. / The seas you sail are fathomless! O pilot, hail!” (675). Christ is the
reference point here. By the end of the poem as Odysseus prepares to die, two men
arrive from Greece, for they have heard of the great Oriental sage and have come
to learn from him. This again is a Biblical allegory for nearing death Jesus was
visited by some Greeks and this has been recorded in the Gospel according to
St. John (12: 20-26).

Concerning life, Kazantzakis once wrote to Helen: “How much life is left
for us? Instead of burning it stingily and miserable, let’s burn it at both ends”
(159). Odysseus burns it “at both ends”. He hardly rests and is always engaged in
transubstantiating his flesh into spirit. And finally when Death comes to take him
away he is ashamed because he gets nothing from Odysseus. According to Friar,
Odysseus is “best represented by a hungry flame, an arrow constantly mounting
upward” (The Odyssey 791).

This chapter has highlighted the mystical elements in The Odyssey under
three headings, namely, Mystical Quest, Mystical Attainment and Mystic Way. It
has also highlighted the use of images and symbols in order to illustrate the unique spiritual experiences of a mystic. The following chapter undertakes a comparative study of the mystical elements in *Savitri* and *The Odyssey*. 