



Hindu Mysticism in the Poetry of Walt Whitman

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Abstract

All religions preach different ways to attain salvation or enlightenment, for which Whitman undertook spiritual voyage as delineated in his poetry. A vein of Hindu mysticism runs through the poetry of Whitman, like a mystic he believes in the existence of the soul, God, Divine spirit, in the immortality of the human soul and in the capacity of human being to establish a communication between his spirit and the Divine Spirit.

Keywords:

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Whitman's quest for spiritual realities brought him to the oriental world particularly to India- A land of great sages and scriptures, a land of myths and fables, A land where the sun of divinity has spread its radiance of wisdom and spiritualism on the world since the time immemorial. Hinduism exerted a profound influence on Whitman. Hindu religious ideals were greatly in vogue in America during the early days of Whitman. The great American transcendentalist's were tremendously fascinated by the oriental mysticism. The Hindu teaching coloured the views of Emerson. Emerson's Transcendentalism and his concept Oversoul influenced the ideas of Whitman greatly. His views of Maya, Soul and Rebirth had a profound impact upon Whitman's poetry.

Emerson's dream that some future poet should embody America's life and spirit was fulfilled by Walt Whitman who became the representative poet of America. His great work *Leaves of Grass* became the epic of America as it portrays its complete Life and

Spirit. It is not yet clearly known how Whitman came in contact with the Hindu thought but some poems in *Leaves of Grass* bear a striking resemblance of Whitman's philosophy to the mystical philosophies as expounded in Bhagavad Gita, Vedas, Puranas and Upanishads.

India - the land of Rishis, Vedas and scriptures is a spiritual fountain from which spring Lip the blissful showers providing attainment of peace and spiritual happiness. India like an elder brother gives companionship and love to those who come to it. The poet says, the soul like a younger brother seeks solace in the arms of the elder brother God.

*As fill'd with friendship love complete, the
Elder brother found,
The Younger melts in fondness in his
arms. (Passage to India, Sec. 8, p.327)*

The Soul is now on its voyage to seek communion with the divine transcending time, space and Death. The soul according to the poet is reckless, boundless and immortal. He says, he and the soul would search out in the waters of the seas where no mariner had set sail. He wants the soul to find out the passage to reach other countries and learn many things. But it is the soul only which is able to go on a spiritual journey to locate God. The soul is beyond all pain, trouble, time, space.

*Reckless O soul, exploring I with thee
and thou with me
For we are bound where mariner has not
yet dared to go,
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and
all, (Passage to India, Sec. 8, p.328)*



The Hindu doctrine of illusion or Maya also gets its due in the poetry of Whitman like the Hindu mystics he came to feel that the external appearance of objects is not the reality, the reality is the essential soul, the Brahman, that only matters. Whitman asks,

Where is he who fears off the husks for you and me?

Where is he that undoes stratagems and envelops for you and me? (Song of Open Road sec.6, p.122)

Only a true mystic who is in search of the ultimate reality, can rend the veil of Maya. The veteran Indian poet and mystic Rabindranath Tagore harmonises, the opposition between illusion and truth. The world may be Maya but it is also essential for without appearance reality cannot exist and without illusion, truth will be empty. Truth derives its significance from the existence of illusion appearance or Maya. World may be Maya but its illuoriness is its reality, it is what it seems to be and what it seems to be it is. It is through the illuoriy world that the Supreme expresses itself and it is by reaching Forward to the Absolute that illusion justifies its existence. Life manifests through the dance of is and is not of reality and illusion and the synthesis of the two is achieved through the rhythm of this dance. God is one and inseparable but he manifests himself in the myraid forms of nature and in man.

Thou settest a barrier in the own being then callest thy severed self in myriad notes (Rabindernanth Tagore,p.47)

God severes a part of Himself and makes man out of it. This man Himself casts coloured shadows on the white radiance of eternity.

That I should make much of myself and turn it on all sides thus casting coloured shadows on thy radiance-such is thy Maya. (Tagore,p.47)

Tagore's view comes close to the following sloka:

Though I am unborn of changeless nature and lor (I of being self subjugating my Prakrti: I come into being by being) own Maya. (Swami Swarvipananda,p.99)

His great grief in this self-separation is expressed through the tears, sorrows and suffering of his creation.

The poignant song is echoed through all the sky in many coloured fears and smiles alarma and hopes. (Tagore, 48)

This creation is Maya or illusion. It is like a veil which comes in between the created man and the creator God. It obscures the spotless radiance of God from the eyes of Man. God is mysterious, Infinite like a circle he has his seat behind the veil of creation.

This screen that thou hast raised is painted with the brush of the night and the day. Behind its seal is woven in wonderous mysteries casting of curves, away all barren lines of straightness. . (Tagore, 48)

The multi-coloured creation, this pageant of various forms conceals the divine, the maker from the eyes of man.

Through countless ages man has searched for God and sought for re-union. Days come and go, ages pass but this game of hide and seek goes on. Man's search for the Infinite and his desire of union with him is never ending.

The great pageant of thee and me has overspread the sky

With the tune of thee and me all the air is vibrant, and all ages

pass with the hiding and seeking of thee and me. (Tagore, 48)

The great Vedantic exponent Gaudapada while advocating the philosophy of non-dualism rejected the notion of the absolute reality of creation. According to him the



universe is not a reality but something superimposed upon the Atman.

Death remains a primary concern in the poetry of Whitman. Whitman has a very deep and penetrating understanding of death. Even as a boy he was haunted by the mystery of death and he always looked forward to solve the mystery of death.

*Day come white or night come black.
(Tagore, 48)*

In the same poem Whitman traces the moment of his birth as a poet to his mystic communion with the sea who whispered in his ear-the low and delicious word death.

*Lisp'd to me the low and delicious word
death and again death, death, death,
death, hissing melodious, neither like the
bird, nor like my arous'd child's heart.*

*But edging near as privately for me,
rustling at my feet,*

*Creeping thence steadily up to my ears
and loving me softly all over,*

*Death, death, death, death, death,
Which I do not forget.*

(Out of Cardle, p.199)

Whitman's fascination for death is reflected in *Leaves of Grass* and serves as a parallel to the Hindu Doctrine of Transmigration.

Death according to Whitman is continuity and a gateway to eternal life. After death the soul enters into the realm of immortal beauty. Whitman expresses this idea as enunciated in Gita.

Emphasizing on the immortal nature of the soul Gita emphasizes the view that life and death are intimately related. If there is life, there is death and vice-versa.

*Of that which is born, death is certain,
Of that which is dead, birth is certain.*

*Over the unavoidable therefore, thou
oughtest not to grieve*

.(Swami Swarvipananda,p.99)

The poet describes death as a dark mother and a strong deliveress signifying rebirth and renewal and freedom into spirituality. Death is no longer seen as only a cruel depriver of life, it is also a deliverer into spiritual life.

Defining his vision of death, Whitman says death is the only and ultimate reality behind the many forms and manifestations of the external and sensuous world. For Whitman death is not a biological fact but rather a passage or a way towards re-union with the cosmic energy.

*Yet you are beautiful to me, you faint
tinged roots,*

you make me think of death,

Death is beautiful from you,

*(What indeed is finally beautiful except
death and love?)*

*O I think it is not for life I am chanting
here*

*my chant of lovers, I think it must be for
death,*

*Death or life I am then indifferent my
soul declines to prefer.(Scented Heerbage
of my Breast)*

It is through death that Whitman can have a penetrating insight into the heart of creation where of course life also is, at the heart of the universe love and death lie down together. Whitman regarded everything beautiful including death. Eulogizing death Tagore says,

*Death is a gateway to the eternal life.
Death is not the end of life but a renewal
of it. Human soul is eternal and immortal.
(Tagore,p.1)*

*Human body is like a weak vessel
which can easily be broken. God fills the
body again and again and human life is
constantly renewed. Man dies and is born
again in another shape.(Tagore,p.62)*

*Thou hast made me endless, such is thy
pleasure*



This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again and fillest it over with fresh life (Tagore, p.62)

Death leads to the mystic union with the beloved God. Though the path towards communion is beset with many difficulties but the poet feels confident that he will overcome all dangers and difficulties fearlessly. At the end of his journey he will reach to his spiritual destination, where he will meet his beloved bride - God and at the gates of her divine home, he will be welcomed with Sweet music. In this way he will be reunited with his king Lord and master, God.

The poet therefore goes to meet death with wedding garlands round his neck, as a bridegroom goes to meet his bride.

I shall put on my wedding garland.

Mine is not the red-brown dress of the traveler

and though there are dangers on the way I have no fear in my mind.

The evening star will come out when my voyage is done and the plaintive notes of the twilight melodies be struck up from the king's gateway. (Sault on Monde, sec. 13 p.1-5)

Both Tagore and Whitman conceived death as a beginning and renewal of life and an essential way towards mystic communion-union of atma (individual soul) with that of paramatman (Divine soul).

The reflections of Hindu Theory of Karma are found in Whitman's poems. It is based on the Upanishadic teaching that after death the soul assumes a new body and that this rebirth is governed by the law of karma which says.

The actions or karmas of mortals in previous life bear an imprint on their characters and govern the fate or destiny in their successive births.

The theory of karma implies-we reap what we sow. A man of good deeds becomes good and a man of evil deeds becomes evil. If at death a man's karma is good he enjoys the bliss of heaven where he gets the fruits of his good deeds. If at death the quality of his karma is evil he goes to the region of the wicked and is doomed to eat the bitter fruits of his deeds.

Every action good or bad, big or little has its impact on character. But the final aim of man is to attain riddance from the bondage of karma so that one can strive for moksha and get rid of the cycle of birth, death and rebirth that characterise the sansara. Considering this viewpoint the Upanishadic sages classified human samskaras in three groups-Sanchit, Parabdh and Gatisanchit. Samskaras refer to the consequences of our deeds we have done in the previous lives. Parabdh Samskaras refer to the actions which spark off reactions in this life and whose results are here and now, that is, these actions, do not pass on to the next birth. Gati Samskaras refer to the things that we are piling up for future births.

Whitman has used the Hindu karmic theory in a wider perspective. He too feels that man is responsible for all deeds, good or bad. Even good deeds done by a bad man return to him. God is a just dispenser of justice where good is rewarded with good, evil with evil. Whatever a man does must return to him. Each man may be different in terms of samskaras but amidst differences unity pervades all through. All selves are potentially divine and march towards the noble destination therefore arriving:

To know the universe itself as a road, as many roads

as roads for the travelling souls,

All parts away for the progress of souls.

All religion, all solid things, arts, governments

all that was or is apparent upon this



*globe or any globe, falls into niches
and corners before the procession of
souls,
along the grand roads of the universe.
(Song of the Open Road, sec.13p.117-
118)*

Whitman's dispensation and Hindu karmic doctrine run parallel as both advocate equality. The future is in our power and we can work with hope and confidence. Karma instills hope for the future and reconciliation for the past. It makes man feel that the dignity of his self will remain unaffected, by its fortunes and failures. The question of absolute superiority and abject inferiority never arises.

Whitman has referred this Hindu belief in much broader perspective when he says,

*You Hottentot with clicking palate ! You
Woolly-hair'd hordes
You own'd persons dropping sweat drops
or blood-drops
I do not say one word against you
away back there where you stand
(you will come forward in due time
to my side.*

*(Song of the Open Road,
sec.13p.117-118)*

Walt Whitman, thus, has imparted social and moral relevance to the karmic theory of the Hindus. Human soul yearns for union with Eternal but such union is made possible only when the soul is purified of all such unholy desires- the presence of which put out the lamp of reason and wisdom. If one gives up pride, lust, anger and fear such a man attains the wisdom of Brahmana. Such a man attains eternal peace and inexplicable bliss.

*Than man who lives devoid of
longing, abandoning all desires
without the sense of "I" "and "mine"
he attains peace. (Swami
Swarvipananda, p.134-35)*

Gita enunciates four types of yoga viz Karma Yoga (selfless action), Raja Yoga (meditation and Japa), Jyana yoga (discrimination and dispassion) and Bhakti yoga (devotion to the chosen ideal).

The real aim of Karma Yoga is the union of one's self with God through action. Gita emphasizes that we must all work incessantly. Every work may necessarily be a mixture of good and evil. Good and evil both have their results; will produce their karma. But good and bad are both bondages of the soul. The solution offered by Gita in regard to this bondage producing work is that we must work without attachment.

*Endued with this evenness of mind one
frees himself in this life,
alike front vice and virtue, Devote thyself
therefore to this yoga.
Yoga is the very dexterity of work.*

(Swami Swarvipananda,p.59)

Liberation of the soul is the goal of all yoga. Liberation means entire freedom, freedom from the bondage of evil. The following sloka says,

*The wise, possessed of this evenness of
mind abandoning the fruits of their
actions, freed for ever from the fetter of
birth, go to that state which is beyond all
evi. (Swami Swarvipananda,p.62)*

and to carry ahead his mission leaving the result to God.

The end I know not, it is all in thee.
bearing close proximity to the following sloka :

*Thy right is to work only: but never to the
fruits there of.
Be thou not the producer of the fruits of
(thy) actions;
neither let thy attachment be towards
inaction.(Swami Swarvipananda, p57)*

In the, battlefield of Kurukshetra Sri Krishna exhorts Arjun to conquer his enemies and regain his kingdom. This is the dominant theme of Gita to perform one's



duties on the battlefield of world free from attachment to the fruits to attain the highest goal of life. Allegorically Kurukshetra represents the battle field of mind where passions must be conquered to attain selfhood i.e. (kingdom). The teaching of Karma-yoga is a universal message delivered by Lord Krishna. In concurrence to the philosophy of Gita Tagore writes:

Leave all thy burdens on his hands, who can bear all, and never look behind in regret. (Tagore, p.6)

He works best who works without any motive neither for money, nor for fame, nor for anything else and when a man can do that, he will be a Buddha and out of him will

come the power to work in such a manner as will transform the world. Such a man represents the highest ideal of karma yoga.

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