

Mysticism and Cosmic Consciousness in Walt Whitman's Poems: A Study of *Leaves of Grass*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to highlight Walt Whitman's mystic experience coupled with cosmic consciousness and his anticipation of the modern stream-of-consciousness. It also aims to project him as the representative of universal outlook, a transcendental symbolist and the poet of both personal and universal self. Moreover, he is unique in his style of presenting and handling of themes like birth, growth, maturity. Besides being a lover of liberty, he is said to have had political consciousness and universal mystic consciousness.

Keywords: Philosophy, Political consciousness, human values, universalism, spiritualism.

Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is characterised by universal outlook, intensity of feelings. His poems carry his unique stamp. In his effective dramatisation of consciousness, Whitman anticipates the modern stream of consciousness method of inner revelation with its broken sequences. Whitman is also both a human and transcendental symbolist. As a magnificent landscape poet, he is in perfect communion with everything, animate and inanimate, good and evil the grand and the mean. Like Emerson and Thoreau, 'Whitman is remembered as a transcendental philosopher, mystic and Vedantist and this is the reason why his poetry has survived diverse currents of interpretations and has remained as an inexhaustible study and investigation.

The poem "Song of Myself" is the longest and most important literary piece in the *Leaves of Grass*. Being a new and unique kind of poem, it is nothing but the epitome of *Leaves of Grass*, projecting Whitman as the poet of both the personal self and universal Self and also the epic bard of America. The formative influences like his vedantic philosophy and aestheticism, which exerted a profound impact on him, made him a superbly gifted creationist and a significantly representative poet of America. He was essentially a regionalist whose regionalism provided him the strength to become a universalist and a Nationalist. The growth of Whitman's poetic genius can be traced from his artistic adolescence to his mature growth and consummate poetic skill. No doubt, he was well versed in the Vedas for he was almost a Vedantin and the "Song of Myself" has established his foregrounding in the *Vedas*.

Universally recognised as one of the great American poets and one of the original and stimulating poets of the world, and as a spokesman of American culture, Whitman captures not only the Geography, History and Culture of America, but also makes America come alive on the pages as if it were in flesh and blood. It is interesting to note that Whitman measures himself up to the definition of an American poet, which runs thus:

"The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people. To him, the other continents arrive as contributions...he gives them reception for their sake and his own sake. His spirit responds to his country's spirit.... He incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes..." (Preface 7).

As it is generally held, without Whitman, there is no American literature, for Whitman and American literature are convertible terms. Casting a spell across the Atlantic, he is termed as the genius of the United States. It is evident from the following lines:

The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs Him as affectionately as he has absorbed it ... (Preface to 1855, 731)

Whitman gives extensions received concepts and his posture is the stance of the Advaitin. Yet again his poetry performs the three major functions, namely emotive function, cognitive function and phatic function. So before considering Whitman's poetic achievement, one should know of the factors that moulded him into a great poet. Therefore, one takes into account the sociological background of Whitman and the several things which influenced his mind and art. Edgar Lee Masters asserts:

No poet was ever born into an environment better adapted to the nourishment and development of his genius than was Whitman.... (P 5).

Whitman admired his grandmother Hannah Brush Whitman. She had been a school teacher and a good story teller. She is said to have imbibed in him the sense of patriotism, honour and dignity through the stories that she narrated to him. He belonged to the fourth generation of the Whitman settlers. His mother Louisa Van Velsor had the Dutch strain predominating in her build and temperament. Louis was very affectionate to her children and she was closer to her son, Walt Whitman. The poet makes a veiled reference to his mother in the following lines which serves as the greater tribute that the poet could pay to his mother:

The mother at home quietly placing the dishes on the supper table /
The mother with mild words, clean her cap and gown, a wholesome
odour falling off her person and clothes as she walks by (364).

Just as Dante loved his mother, Whitman adored his mother:

She was a good cook, an industrious house keeper, and the peace
maker of the family (Allen 15)

Louise was the mother of eight children. The love for music, the need to realise the responsibilities, the understanding of Biblical truth – all these were inherited by Whitman from his mother. The mother and the son loved each other and they both

were bound by a magnetic power. Edgar Lee Master comments on the mother-son relationship thus:

Whitman's love for her and her love for him filled him with magnetic power (P 8).

and then says how it shaped the poet's mind:

Nothing better can happen to a creative mind than this envelopment of material love, when it is so understandingly reciprocated ... (8).

It was his mother who let the poet to reading of *The Bible*. By reading *The Bible*, Whitman understood that Jesus Christ had played different roles namely the role of a good shepherd, leader, a sharer of spiritual knowledge, a giver of comforts, a nurse, a healer and above all, a compassionating soul. Christ highlighted the value of faith. He proclaimed to his disciples that where there is faith, nothing is impossible. Therefore, Whitman as the poet priest embraced the role of Christ not to compete with him but to carry on forward the good works from where Christ left them. His mother, trained his ear to the *Old Testament Rhythms*. In *Leaves of Grass*, one could witness the *Old Testament Rhythms*, the parallel structure and ideas as evidenced in the very first section of "Song of Myself". These opening lines of "Songs of Myself" bear a close resemblance to the opening verse in *Genesis*. The lines make interesting reading:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself.
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me
as good belongs to you....." (P 4).

It was through his father that Whitman came under the influence of rationalism and liberal political thought. It was he who made the budding poet admire manliness. Walt Whitman's interest in Quakerism, his taste for speculations and his ability to be undemonstrative on all situations have been due to the influence of his father. If his father was a business speculator, Whitman was a speculative thinker. Brooklyn, the place where Whitman spent the major part of his life, was the next influence.

Whitman got a thorough knowledge about the common people in Brooklyn, their thoughts, ideas, attitudes, emotions, feelings, language, customs, fashions and food habits. He was influenced by the simple ways and means of the “uneducated herdsman, farmers, pilots, fisherman” (Allen 17). Brooklyn had a profound influence in shaping him into a great poet. Being a rich landscape artist, he was drawn towards Nature because of the place where he lived. Brooklyn was a place where Nature appeared prodigal with so many riches to offer him. He declared in the preface that if Nature had one great admirer, it is the post Walt Whitman. The following passage is worth quoting here:

The known universe has one complete lover and that is the poet... what balks or breaks others is fuel for his burning progress to contact and amorous joy ... nothing can jar him... suffering and darkness cannot death and fear cannot. To him complaint and jealousy and envy are corpses buried and rotten in the earth – he saw them buried. The sea is not surer of the share or the shore of the sea that he is of the fruition of his love and of all perfection and beauty” (Leaves of Grass 717).

From a very tender age, he used to travel from Brooklyn to New York and thus he knew its topography. He walked and observed the colourful clouds. There is a fusion of city-orientation and country-orientation in his poetry because he was familiar with the rural atmosphere and the country atmosphere. He observed the people of New York at home, in the playground, in the market place, in the Gymnasium and almost in all places and later expressed his views on them in his poems. The geographical, biographical, sociological, economical, technical and cultural patterns of America are expressed by him with fondness and pride. But it must be recorded that his regionalism gave place to Nationalism and that gave place to Universalism and Spiritualism. The influence of the Age and race was so great that Whitman became a unionist, constructionist and Nationalist. Being a lover of liberty, he was conscious of the political cross-currents that were taking place in

his time. The American war of Independence fought between 1771 to 1775 had a profound influence on Whitman.

Whitman's idea about the American poet is similar to that of Emerson's idea. To Whitman, "of all mankind the poet is the equable man" (P 714). Emerson was the lover not so much of the universe as of the hidden soul of the universe, whereas Whitman not only felt but also thought sensuously. Whitman himself acknowledged his indebtedness to Emerson:

"I was simmering, simmering, simmering"

He declared later.

"Emerson brought to a boil "...." (Parkes 31). Whitman might have derived his 'organic theory' of art also from Emerson and Coleridge and there can be little doubt that *Leaves of Grass* wears an organic structure. Many poems in *Leaves of Grass* have a symphonic structure:

"Whitman's musical inspiration probably occurred in the years roughly from the late 1840 to 1855 of his attendance at the opera – house in Astor place and Castle Garden, during which period he is supposed to have discovered his technique ..." (242)

He acknowledges his gratitude to the Italian operatic singers who helped him to structure his poems on the operatic techniques in *Leaves of Grass*. As books had great influence on Whitman, he was found to be a voracious reader. He had great fondness for Walter Scott that one finds teachings of Walter Scott at the roots of *Leaves of Grass*. *The Bible* had been a conspicuous book on the personality of Whitman. *The Bible*, philosophy of Rousseau, the works of Shakespeare, the novels of Walter Scott, the poems of Milton and the translations of the Orientals are the books which influenced Whitman to a great extent. Though there is no direct evidence of his access to Hindu scriptures, it is guessed that he must have gone through the translation of *The Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*. Egyptology taught him to value the cultural pattern and the Egyptian Symbolisation. He

wrote an article about the museum in a magazine called *Life Illustrated*. The echoes, allusions and references to Egyptology in *Leaves of Grass* are so numerous that one must conclude that Whitman read the books closely and took notes on them. Astronomy, one of the branches of science that Whitman knew best and most accurately was the next influence. He sprinkled his writings, poetry and prose with references to and observations of the planets, stars and constellations recorded with surprising accuracy. As Whitman was endowed with poetic capacity, he put to effective poetic use his knowledge of Egyptology, astronomy and music and his experience as teacher, editor and journalist. He learnt many things from the life of the people.

“This study of life is said to have provided a Better education for the future poet than the schools could possibly have done” (P 28).

Because of all these influences, his mind became as:

“...saturated solution very rich in elements borrowed from life and books; childhood dreams, adolescent disturbances, ecstasies, memories of long island, scenes of Brooklyn and New York, unsettling impressions of New Orleans, recollections of Carlyle, Emerson and George Sand. All this was probably full of eddies, but it remained amorphous until a sudden crystallisation occurred and that is *Leaves of Grass*”.

(Asselineau 61).

While Basil de Selincourt and Emory Holloway give the ‘biographical’ connotation to his evolution as a poet, Maurice Bucke gives a “mystic hypothesis”. Bucke explains the mystery by comparing the case of Whitman to those of Buddha, St. Paul and Mohammed. Like them, he had a mystical vision. He had the revelation of the presence of God in the world, of the immortality of the soul, of the continuity of creation, and of the universal brotherhood of all living things. This and “facility” which Bucke calls “cosmic consciousness” is more commonly designated as mysticism. The evolution of the *Leaves of Grass*

shows continuous growth and development. There are nine editions, of which the first edition (1855) was a tall, thin quarto of ninety five broad pages with 12 poems without titles and the second edition had thirty two poems in 385 pages. The most important and revealing edition of *Leaves of Grass* was the 1860 edition which contained only fifty four poems where his poetry achieved its most powerful and perfect form. Then the other editions were produced in 1860, 1872, 1881 and 1888. While Whitman changed titles, he revised words, phrases, sentences and whole sections. Thus revisionary skill is one of the most characteristic features of Whitman which Poe in his "The philosophy of Composition" has stressed as:

"Most writers – poets in especial – prefer having it.
Understood that they compose by a species of fine
frenzy – an ecstatic intuition and would
positively shudder at letting the public take
a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and
vacillating crudities of thought – at the true
purposes seized only at the last moment..."

(William 228)

So, *Leaves of Grass* was not written overnight. The germs of the book lay in Whitman's mind for a long time and the book grew little by little until Whitman gave expression to his feelings and thoughts in verses in the final edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. *Leaves of Grass* is the fruition of forty years of assiduous experimentation", revision and addition. Whitman sings about himself and identifies himself with this book:

"Comrade, this is no book, who touches this touches a man"

(Fisher 282).

His *magnum opus* "Song of Myself" is a major composition which deals with the theme of self, in which he recreates his mystic experience. In section V of "Song of Myself", he recreates his mystic experiences:

“Swiftly across and spread around me the peace
and knowledge that pass the arguments of the earth,
And I know that the hand of God is the promise
of any own ...”
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of
my own”

(Song of Myself – Sec.V. 52).

James E. Miller asserts that such a mystical experience is dramatically represented in the sense that the poet portrays” his preparation for and his entry into a state of mystical consciousness (sections 1-5), his progressively significant and meaningful experience while in this state (Sections 6-49) and finally his emergence from the mystical state (sections 50-52)”. Evelyn Underhill who has made a valuable study on mysticism, analysed the poem “Song of Myself” under five phases of mystical life:

“(i)the awakening the self; (2) the purification of self (3) illuminations; (4)the dark night of the soul (5)union” (P 205).

“Song of Myself”, the longest poem in Walt Whitman’s collection of poems in *Leaves of Grass* presents any reader with a considerable challenge. The poem in a way deals with the problem of life and death. In the words of Carl F. Stranch, the poem gets divided into a five – part organisation:

“Part-I deals with self in the sense of physical self of Whitman, the empirical self around him, the spiritual self of Whitman and other spiritual and physical selves; and Part-II deals with religion. The fusion of the best of all faiths is the religion Of Whitman. In Part-III, Whitman underscores Faith and in Part-IV, Whitman defines God in “Song of Myself” and in Part V, Whitman shares His insight into death with readers...” (607).

According to Henry W. Wells, just as things lay Scattered in the universe, the ideas lie scattered in this poem. Therefore, in a way, the poem is a microcosm of the macrocosm which is the universe. In the poem, what one considers significant is its symbolic expression of feelings and thoughts. It can also be

considered as an autobiography, a Sermon, a Bible of Democracy, a long lyric and a sociological tract. The safest thing to say is that the poem is a mixture of all these and the motif of the poem is the 'journey motif' which epitomises all that is said in *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's definition of a great poem is found in the "Preface to 1885" of *Leaves of Grass* wherein he says:

"A great poem is no finish to a man or woman but rather a beginning" (24)

In the opinion of Malcolm Cowley:

"Song of myself" should be judged as one of the great inspired prophetic works that have appeared at intervals in the western world" (P 913).

But the system of doctrine propounded by the poem "Song of Myself" is more Eastern than Western, because it includes notions like metempsychosis and karma. Like the 'cosmic form' described in the *Gita* and the dynamic self of the *Upanishads*, Whitman's "self" sweeps through the cosmos and embraces it. The poem presents Whitman's drama of identity, more fully and more coherently than any other poem or section in the book *Leaves of Grass*. Moreover, this poem is a key to Whitman's art and thought and the greatness of "Song of Myself" marks Whitman as a great literary achiever.

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