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Sufic Interpretations of “Song of Myself”

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Abstract

Being a transcendentalist Whitman emerges as a believer in the interrelation of God, man and nature. He had ecstatic experiences in which he received revelations and was subject to recurrences of an extreme state of mystical consciousness. He was a visionary. His moods of ecstasy and understanding are a result of his contemplation of nature. The secret is that man and the world are good, pious and holy, and are to be accepted with joy and trustfully. He was indebted to the sufi tradition as he used the sufi themes and symbols. He is concerned with the relationship between God and man, and more like sufis, his treatment goes beyond the abstract essence of the human intellect and spirit and includes the physical aspect in his vision of human divinity.

Keywords

Sufism; God; Mysticism; Body; Mind; Soul; Transcendentalism.

Walt Whitman born on May 31, 1819, in West Hills, long Island is the second son of an Englishman, Walter Whitman, Sr. who was first a farmer and then became a carpenter. His father was a liberal thinker believing in the religious principles of Quakerism. His mother, Louisa Van Velsor, and his father Walter were semi-literate. They had nine children out of which nine were mentally unfit. The mother was closer to Whitman than his father. A number of influences operated upon Whitman from childhood onwards, which went into the making of his genius, and which gave to it a particular shape and direction. And first and foremost among these influences were the influence of his parents. A faith in the dignity of the individual and in equality and fraternity is the very life-blood of his poetry. He started working at the age of twelve, and began his career as a printer's apprentice. He worked at a variety of jobs: an office- boy, as a printer, as a rural school teacher in order to provide financial support to his family. Walt Whitman's poetic career began in 1885, with the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In 1862, his brother George was wounded in battle, and Whitman went to Washington to nurse him, but continued as a hospital volunteer throughout the war.

Walt Whitman is one of the most gifted American writers, having an exclusive, innovative style and a deep, mystical world-view. His biographer Gay Wilson Allen states that in order to understand the breadth and depth of Whitman and his work, one needs to delve through "philosophy, comparative religion, mysticism, prosody, aesthetics, mythology, history, comparative literature and other fields" (ix). His refined poetic excellence was cherished by Swinburne, Buchan, W.B. Bell, W.M. Rossetti, Symonds, and by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thoreau in America, Professor Dowden, etc. in England. The evolution of his ideas, the growth of his mind and the development of his art and philosophy of life have been derived from his personal experience and are of great interest to anyone who makes a serious study of his personality. Trent observes, "He was a man and a writer who could be hated as an imposter or

adored as a messiah but who was in any case a challenge to discussion” (258). He is the most innovative poet of the nineteenth century. He recreates poetry with the elements always at hand on a range of subjects. He utilizes them in such a scrupulous way that they turn out to be very rich and varied.

Whitman endorses change, innovation, change and growth through his poetry. He liberate the spirit of American poetry from ancient shackles of convention and tradition, assimilates a wide range of things and subjects and reverses them equally, the cosmic and the commonplace. Louis Untermeyer sums up his poetic excellence thus: “in almost everything he wrote there is a great urgency, an onward-going movement, the tempo and forward thrust of a half-idealistic, half-materialistic, sometimes corrupt, but ever-expanding America” (Undermeyer 575).

In shaping Whitman as a poet and as a man, Transcendentalism, Quakerism, Emersonian philosophy and the orient have played a significant role. The marvelous impact of Transcendentalism reveals that he was a humanist child of Transcendentalism. Whitman was much enthralled by the ancient texts of Hinduism. He combined ancient Classical Humanism with Oriental Metaphysics and presented his own version of down-to-earth Humanism in *Leaves of Grass*.

Whitman, during his life, was known more for his influence as a prophet of democracy and ‘an enthusiast of the common man’. There are numerous illustrations in his poems which clearly evince the influences of Hinduism. His firm belief in ‘Nothing is more divine than humankind’ and ‘Entire universe is divine’ must have been drawn from vedantic scriptures. When he talks about, “for many years or stretching cycles of years” (*Leaves of Grass* 364) in “Starting from Paumanok” which refers to more than one lives.

“Song of Myself” sets both the poet and the reader free from the restraints of convention by warily exploring and emphasizing transcendentalist beliefs of a common soul. The self-celebrated here is not an ordinary,

phenomenal self of Whitman but the transcendental 'I' consciousness, the mystical self, the cosmic mind. From the beginning of the "Song of Myself" he celebrated himself as the centre of the universe and of all things, as he has experienced the truth of this wisdom: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself,/And what I assume you shall assume,/For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (25; sec1). Every person has his own identity and own idea of self; however, the poet also maintains the idea of a unified, universal self, in which everything is interchangeable and interrelated.

We are led to believe that some significant personal revelation accounted for the transformation in Walt Whitman's outlook which supported and justified him at the deepest levels of his being. And "Song of Myself" would certainly be a song of everyone's self. Sometimes he appears to pass beyond himself and the actualities of life to a state of ecstatic contemplation. And it is the state of awakened consciousness that he addresses his soul:

I believe in you, my soul....

Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat...

I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning...

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that
pass all the argument of the earth... (28-29; sec 5)

Whitman was a pantheist and places immense faith in the immanence of God manifesting Himself in the universe. The whole universe is apparently revealed to his eyes under a new splendid aspect, in the light of which he seems to live and act. That he must be considered as a mystic becomes immediately apparent when we examine the writings of mystics-oriental or occidental, medieval or modern. His mysticism is nowhere seen more vigorously expressed than in the following lines: "Divine am I inside and out,/and I make holy/Whatever I touch or am touched from" (48; sec 24).

Whitman upheld that God is to found in human beings. However, he supported science and scientific revolution and considered the scientific

investigation as a God-finding activity. Sufi poets played an important role in determining the course of Whitman's poetics, from its philosophy to its techniques. His use of common diction connects him to sufis. He is concerned with the relationship between God and man, and more like sufis, he goes beyond looking into his own mind. He goes beyond the human intellect and spirit and includes the physical aspect as well. He, like sufis, used earthly terms to convey his transcendental philosophy. The body is the medium through which people connect and learn about anything that is not of them. Since the body is able to learn and interrelate with the divinity of nature, it must be having its own divine properties by virtue of these abilities. It is highly possible that he gained a sense of courage to write about subjects considered mundane, taboo, or even both common and taboo, through his reading of sufi poetry. As pointed out by LeMaster and Jahan, Whitman and Rumi "express their religious sentiments through shockingly secular language and imagery," including "frequent use of explicit sexual images," which "often poses problems for readers whose notion of religion and attitudes regarding religious fervor are more conventional" (44). His concept of the 'Self' directly corresponds to the sufi concept of the real, which stands in contrast to the phenomenal self. In a typically sufi manner, he is firmly established in 'cosmic consciousness'.

Like a true sufi, Whitman rejoices and celebrates with wild abandon his mystical union with the cosmic self and the divine essence (perceived as the beloved/ God in sufism). The poet simultaneously experiences *wasl* (a state of union with the divine), *tawhid* (unitive vision), *hal* (the state of rapture) and *muqam* (state of ecstasy) as he sings ecstatically of his self. His concept of self directly matches up to the sufi concept of real, which stands in contrast to the unusual self. Tagore says, "No American has caught the Oriental spirit of mysticism so well as [Whitman]" (qtd. in Holloway 126). He sings ecstatically in a spiritually exalted state, which is similar to intensely rapturous states of *fana* (annihilation) and *baqa* (permanency), as the one who is deeply embedded in

sama (listening) experiencing supreme bliss along with *haira*, which stands for a exciting sense of amazement. Section 5 of the poem is stuffed with sufi motifs. For example, he recognizes the importance of both the body and the soul. Like a true sufi, he realizes that neither of the two can be abased or disregarded before the other. He rejects the Cartesian bifurcation between mind and matter which cannot account for the interaction of the spiritual with material being. He always gives equal preference to matter as well as spirit. He was well aware of the *Hereditary Decent* (a book first published in 1843 by the well-known phrenologist, Orson S Fowler) which suggests that the mind is equivalent to the body. But Whitman took it a step further and equated body with soul and the spiritual with the material. For him the body is necessary for our development, and similarly the self that attaches to it and identifies with it. He does not reject the physical, for it is only through the physical that one can have an insight of the spiritual. His equal preference for the body and the soul overlaps Rumi's belief that the body should not be dishonored. LeMaster and Jahan note that Whitman and Rumi "express their religious sentiments through shockingly secular language and imagery," including "frequent use of explicit sexual images, which often poses problems for readers whose notion of religion and attitudes regarding religious fervor are more conventional" (44).

Whitman in a typically sufi manner is firmly grounded in 'cosmic consciousness'. The universe, according to him, could be micro-reduced to 'you', 'I' or even an atom. Therefore, a 'simple separate person' becomes the embodiment of the masses, humanity at large. Viewed in sufi terms, the mystical play between the states of 'intoxication' (*sukr*) and 'sobriety' (*sahw*) goes on eternally.

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