Walt Whitman: His Concept of Religion

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Abstract- A perusal of Walt Whitman's poems reveals that Whitman is a poet of religion. Different religious philosophies viz: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity etc. pervade his poetry. We find, Whitman's Poetry, an amalgam of various religious elements, mainly mysticism, illusion or Maya, self-realization, existence of God, faith, dignity, equality, fraternity and over and above Divinity of the Soul. These elements correspond to various religions such as - Hindu, Budha, Jain, Christian etc.

Whitman has been acclaimed as the poet of democracy and the poet of science but, above all he is the poet of religion i.e. democratic religion and it is this religiosity which underlies the Leaves of Grass and imparts to the work a curious unity in diversity. Whitman attempted to mirror his faith in this world which motivated his claim to be a poet of religion.

The present paper aims at analysing various religious elements in the poetry of Walt Whitman not only in the light of Hinduism but also in the light of Buddhism, Jainism and Christianity. The religious elements of Whitman's poetry as interpreted in terms of these religions would unravel the true nature of the self and explore all the facts regarding spiritual world leading to the spiritual quest. Once the self-realization takes place the spiritual quest is over and the person attains the Vision of Brahamana.

Many striking parallels are found between Leaves of Grass consisting of Whitman's poetry and different Holy Scriptures. All religions preach different ways to attain salvation or enlightenment, for which Whitman undertook spiritual voyage as delineated in his poetry. We find following religious elements pervaded in Whitman's poetry:

* Hindu Mysticism
* Hindu concept of Illusion or Maya, Self Realization and Karma Yoga.
* Buddha and Jain concept of God, Law of Karma and Salvation.
* Faith dignity, equality, fraternity and Divinity of the soul - the Christian tenents

India - the land of Rishis, Vedas and scriptures is a spiritual fountain from which spring 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 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 illusioriness is its reality, it is what it seems to be and what it seems to be is it. It is through the illusiory 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 wondrous 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, 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 deliverer 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, (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)

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 it 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 characterize the sansara. Considering this viewpoint the Upanishadicsages 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. ParabdhSamskaras 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. GatiSamskaras 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)
Whitmansque 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 instils 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.13
p.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.

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.

Whitman’s philosophy of God justifies both-Buddhism and Jainism. As Buddhist believe in divine power, the vicious circle of birth, sufferings and death. Illusion or Avidya attracts the soul towards the body & the Sansara. To get rid of this vicious circle a man has to get ‘Nirvan’ that is communion of the soul with the Divine Soul, which can be attained by the law of Karma and the knowledge of four noble truths-existence of sorrow, cause of sorrow, cessation of sorrow and the way which leads to the cessation of sorrow.

Jainism denies the existence of a first cause. They do not believe in the divinity of the soul. As per them every perfected soul is God. They consider that the best way to worship ‘God’ is to become themselves, sons of God. We observe many parallels of Buddhism and Jainism interspersed in Whitman’s poetry. For example in Song of Myself Whitman claims himself to be the poet of both-body and the soul:

>I am, the poet of the Body and I am the poet of
the soul (Sec. 21, L. 1.)

In this first line of Sec. 21 of Song of Myself Whitman values both-the Body and the Soul equally. ‘Body’ the Man God (Jainism concept) and the ‘Soul’ a part of the ‘Divine Soul’ (Buddhism Concept). According to Jainism, the sage who follows the right path ultimately becomes liberated from the cycle of birth and death that is, he gets Moksa.

Whitman after his spiritual quest achieves the highest goal of self realization - a state which is near to Nirvana in Buddhism, Turiya in Upanishads and Kevala or Moksa in Jainism. Thus we find an unavoidable presence of God in Whitman’s poetry.

Whitman was greatly influenced by the Bible. The trace of both-the Old and New Testaments are found in the Leaves of Grass. Whitman lived in a great Evangelism and Oratory, and as a boy he was frequently exposed to both-these influences,
leading him to realize the importance of faith, equality, fraternity and Divinity. He acquired these traits from his father’s radical democratic views.

The preachings of the Christ are the striking parallels pervaded in the *Leaves of Grass*. His poetry celebrates common humanity and gives the word ‘en masse’. His sense of identity with the humanity at large is complete in *Song of Myself*,

> I celebrate myself, and sing myself, for every atom belonging to me, As good belongs to you. (Sec. 1, L. 1-3.)

Whitman burns with great sympathy and brotherhood for all, high and low, rich and poor, noble and vile, thief, drunkard and prostitute. He chants of evil and good alike or rather acknowledges them alike, feeling that everything which has the vitality to exist; he can not indeed bring himself to allow that there is any real evil:

> And I say there is in fact no evil: (Or if there is, I say it is just as important to you, to the land, or to me, as anything else). (21, L. 5-6).

Whitman’s sense of equality is obvious in his poem *One’s-Self I Sing*,

> I say the form complete is worthier far,
> The female equally with the Male I sing. (L. 5-6.)

Thus the present paper presents the religious elements in Whitman’s poetry with special emphasis on *Leaves of Grass* by reflecting upon its mystical aspect. The ideas of my present paper have originated from a comparative analysis of Whitman’s ideas in his poetry with the philosophy of various religions and establishing its universality. Walt Whitman spent his entire life to compose the *Leaves of Grass*. It is regarded as a heroic or racial epic in which the poet reflects the common aspirations and the faith of people.

All these aspects have led me to call *Leaves of Grass* as the scripture of the world, a holy way to spiritual destination, the epic wherein lies the message of Universal peace, brotherhood and love for the languishing mankind living in this strife-torn world. *Leaves of Grass* can be said a religious book i.e. Democratic Religion, similar to the religion propounded by an Indian king-Akbar the great, which he called, Deen-Aye-Illahi - an assimilation of various religions like Hindu, Moslem, Christian, Persian etc.

**REFERENCES**


