

Self, Soul, and Spiritual Liberation: Yogic Influences in Walt Whitman's Literary Imagination

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Abstract:

Walt Whitman, a prominent literary figure in American poetry, is widely acknowledged for his intense influence on English literature. His innovative approach in style of writing, advocacy of democracy and individualism and realistic views make his poetry an epitome of American transcendentalism. The spiritual voyage, Whitman showcased in his poetry is similar to the mysticism of Hinduism particularly his ideas regarding self, soul and liberation. The transcendental movement of America celebrated the conscious union of self and the soul, which is reflected in the poetry of Walt Whitman in the form of democracy, individuality and self-reflectivity. These themes in Whitman's poetry resonate with the Eastern spiritual traditions, particularly those of yogic tradition and Vedanta. This paper aims to examine yogic influences of the Gita which shaped Whitman's views on self, soul, and spiritual liberation and analyses how these concepts are demonstrated in his literary imagination. Further the paper will analyse Whitman's works in the light of yogic principles of the Gita, which showcase his spiritual quest for liberation. Several Western literary personalities like Emerson, Eliot, Thoreau got interacted with Eastern philosophy and have infused the concepts in their works as well. Whitman is also one of them who portrayed the cosmic influence in his poetry. Several instances from his poems will be elaborated here to examine his transcendental ideas of self, soul and liberation in moulding his literary career to the path of a revolution and free thinking.

Keywords: Walt Whitman, Yoga, Self, Soul, Liberation, Spiritualism, the Gita.

Introduction:

Whitman's spirituality and advocacy of human voice made him one of the most influential poets of America. His crystal clear concepts, American values, Democracy and deep philosophy of life can be perceived in *Leaves of Grass*. Herold Bloom, a literary critic wrote in the introduction of *Leaves of Grass*, "If you are American, then Walt Whitman is your imaginative father and mother, even if, like myself, you have never composed a line of verse." (Wikipedia)

His works are often celebrated through the lens of Transcendentalism. This particular movement has great similarity with eastern philosophy. Emerson, the leader of Transcendentalism, is called the *Sage of Concord* for his deeper spirituality and connectivity with the nature which he developed while living in Concord. Whitman was also a key figure in this movement. Emerson's philosophy and love for nature inspired Whitman to celebrate self-identity and connectivity with nature. Emerson says,

I owed-my friend and I owed-a magnificent day to the Bhagavat-Gita. It was the first of the books; it was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small unworthy, but large, serene, constant, the voice of the old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us. (Rathore, 82)

The key concepts of Emerson's philosophy like Oversoul, Self-reliance and Nature are found in Whitman's works with a recreation. Emerson's deep knowledge of Indian scriptures inspired Whitman to search the answers of the suffering questions and spiritual quest. His poems like *One's Self I Sing*, *Song of Myself*, *Passage to Indian* and many more resemble to the philosophy of the Gita which the paper will further explore. Emerson's ruminating notions on Maya, rebirth, Brahma etc. had a profound impact on the literary genius of Whitman. As an inheritor, Whitman performed his duty to be the representative poet of America by showing his dexterity in democratic ideas, pioneering free verse and focussing on the individual and the collective both.

Whitman's Interaction with Yogic Philosophy: The Gita:

Walt Whitman had no direct interaction with the Yogic philosophy of India but his approach to his poetry, showcases his intellectuality and interest in Indianness. Indian readers recognize the sublime and serene utterances of the Gita and Upanishads in his poetry. Whitman seems indebted to Indian scriptures for the philosophy in his poetry. The philosophy of Yoga, the key concept of Vedas, Upanishads and the Gita had a wide range of admirers in Europe since 19th century. Scriptures were translated into different languages and inspired the writers and philosophers across Europe and America. India, the land of sages, monks, scriptures, myths and fables has been spreading the radiance of spirituality since the birth of civilization. Sages and Monks from India visited America and preached the concepts and motivated Americans to take refuge under the umbrella of spirituality. The poet-prophet, a Metaphysician in nature, Whitman's essential aim in writing was to discover his 'own self'. His quest of reality found a hold in oriental philosophy.

Whitman's reputation in India has been due mainly to the affinities that Indian readers have felt between his ideas and the Hindu philosophical teachings. He has been admired for his bold, prophetic voice, for his all-embracing sympathies, and above all for his ecstatic celebration of the Self, in which Indian readers could readily recognize resemblances to the sublime utterances of the Gita and the Upanishads. (Chari)

Although Whitman has no direct connection with India and its scriptures yet some of the poems from *Leaves of Grass* bear a close resemblance with the philosophy expounded in the Gita. In *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman expresses his disillusionment with the society caused by the Civil War and Industrialization. The poem points out the degenerated and dried culture of prevailing materialistic society. Whitman wishes to inspire modern society through ideal literature. The reconstruction and the regeneration of modern age is possible only through spiritualism and democratic ideals. The core principle of yogic philosophy is reflected where Whitman advocated the union of the philosophies of the east and west through science and democracy.

Yoga is derived from the Sanskrit word *yuj* which means to unite. So according to ancient Indian philosophy, Yoga is a spiritual practice which aims to unite the self (atman) to the supreme soul (Brahma), leading to the path of liberation (moksha). Modernism considers yoga as physical postures or Asanas but the deep-rooted meaning of yoga is associated with meditation (dhyana) and discipline (sadhana). The ultimate goal of yoga is to transcend the ego of human body, detachment to sensory organs and purification of self from the worldly illusions. In his poem *I Sing the Body Electric* Whitman celebrates the existence

of human body. For him body is like a vessel for yogic practices and works as a powerful medium for spiritual awakening. He concludes the poem by the interconnectedness of body with soul. He writes,

*O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul,
O I say now these are the soul! (I Sing the Body Electric)*

The Nature of the Self in Whitman's Poetry:

Whitman's poetry celebrates the entity of the self which transcendence individualism. His vision of the self goes very close the philosophy of the Gita. Whitman considers *self* as a cosmic and divine entity which merges in the universe. In poems such as *Song of Myself* Whitman portrays the nature of the self which is divine, unique and represents the whole humanity. This conception of self is seen in the Gita which considers self as *atman* or the individual soul which is interconnected with the divine soul. When the veil of maya is lifted, this individual soul rises up to meet the universal soul, *Brahma*. The Gita quotes,

*yoga-sthah kuru karmāṇi saṅgam tyaktvā dhanañjaya
siddhy-asiddhyoḥ samo bhūtvā samatvaṁ yoga uchyate. (2.48)*

(Be steadfast in the performance of your duty, O Arjun, abandoning attachment to success and failure. Such equanimity is called Yog). (Mukundananda)

Here Lord Krishna Asked Arjuna to perform his duty prescribed to him. Detachment with action and fruits both lead a human to be in a state of yoga in attaining equanimity or evenness of mind. Similarly, Whitman promotes self-discovery and freedom from all shackles only then one can attain self-realisation. Whitman urges the humanity to understand the unity and interconnectedness of all creatures of earth which emerge from the single entity, *Brahma* who is the cause of this universe. Whitman writes,

*I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (Song of Myself)*

The Gita delineates the path of yoga for understanding one's true nature. Yoga encompasses various paths like Karma Yoga (the path of action), Jnana Yoga (the path of Knowledge), Bhakti Yoga (the path of devotion). Lord Krishna tells Arjuna that the universe is the manifestation of his energy. He is the creator and destroyer of the universe both. All entities of nature whether air, water, grass or human body contain the same divinity which closely resonate the concept of the Gita which asserts that individual is an illusion or maya of God. Only the path of Yoga can dissolve the boundaries between the self and the soul.

In *Song of myself* Whitman portrays soul's journey to eternity from bodily experience to eternal consciousness. He writes,

*I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul, (Song of Myself)*

This integration of body presented in the poem resonates the sloka of the Gita 2.20 which advocates that the soul is eternal and immortal while the body is transient in nature and caught in the cycle of life and death. Soul neither takes birth nor dies. It only changes body as human body changes cloths. No weapon can harm or kill it neither the fire can burn nor the air have the ability to dry it. It is everlasting, unalterable and primeval. In the poem *A Clear Midnight* Whitman asks his soul to shake off the worldly bondages and leave to eternity. He mentions 'the art', 'books' to leave behind because these are only the worldly possessions to enhance the art of living life on this earth. Now it is the high time to be free from clutches of life as his aim of worldly life has been fulfilled. The theme of the poem resembles the concept of four Ashrama of Hinduism. Man is advised to follow the prescribes principles of the particular Ashrama

according to the age. As the age advances one must quit the possessions of that Ashrama and move forward to the next. He quotes,

This is thy hour O Soul, thy free flight into the wordless,

Away from books, away from art, the day erased, the lesson done, (A Clear Midnight)

The poem *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* meditates on the theme of fragility of life, solace in nature and endless strength of love which seems an adaptation from the Gita,

śhreyān swa-dharmo viguṇaḥ para-dharmāt sv-anuṣṭhitāt

swa-dharme nidhanam śhreyaḥ para-dharmo bhayāvahah (3.35)

(It is far better to perform one's natural prescribed duty, though tinged with faults, than to perform another's prescribed duty, though perfectly. In fact, it is preferable to die in the discharge of one's duty, then to follow the path of another, which is fraught with danger.) (Mukundananda)

Lord Krishna preaches that doing one's duty being true to themselves brings success in life. Even if our actions have flaws it reassures of getting purpose if it is for the welfare of whole mankind. The death of the she-bird and mourning of the he-bird creates the deeper understanding of fragility of life and shows the constant nature of soul.

Spiritual liberation in Whitman's Literary Imagination:

Whitman's literary imagination represents a yearning for spiritual liberation. In the philosophy of yoga liberation denote freedom from the cycle of birth and death. Human soul attains salvation (Mukti) and reunites with the supreme soul. The various paths of yoga guide the soul to achieve that ultimate goal of life. Different attachments of materialistic world like raga, krodha, bhaya etc. create obstacles in the path of liberation which can be won by following the path of yoga. Whitman's vision of liberation is not just for a single entity but collectively for the whole humanity. In the poem *One's-Self I Sing* he writes,

Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,

Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws divine,

The Modern Man I sing. (One's Self I Sing)

In the poem *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* Whitman celebrates the eternal connection between humanity and worldly objects. The transient nature of life and uncertainty of time is reflected in the poem. The barrier of limitation and distance cannot separate humanity. No one is ever alone. The unity and interconnectedness among humanity, nature and universe can't be ignored as everything emerges and dissolves in the supreme soul. The imagery of flowing water in the poem suggests the advice from the Gita to forsake ego and merge in the divine entity.

In *Passage to India* Whitman sketches soul's journey towards enlightenment. Its voyage to infinite regions shows detachment for liberation. The advancement in science, the celebration of achievements must lead to liberation if journeyed on the right path. According to Sri Aurobindo,

A day may come, must surely come, we will say, when humanity will be ready spiritually, morally, socially for the reign of universal peace; meanwhile the aspect of battle and the nature and function of man as a fighter have to be accepted and accounted for by any practical philosophy and religion.
(12)

Conclusion:

In a nutshell it can be recapitulated that the yogic influence of the Gita pertains as the gist of most of the poems of Whitman. Inspiration from Emerson and his personal quest for reality since childhood of this

materialistic world took him to take shelter under the rock of the Gita similarly the way Lord Krishna saved humanity from heavy rains by lifting up Govardhan mountain. Mrs. Pinki advocates,

Whitman has used the Hindu karmic theory in a wider perspective. He too feels that man is responsible for all deeds, good or bad.....God is just dispenser of justice where good is rewarded with good, evil with evil. (890)

The world is like a battle field. The closest way to save humanity is following the path of Yoga mentioned in the Gita. The truth of life lies in aiming salvation. For the modern humanity, engulfed in the clutches of luxury and lust, needs a democratic functioning. The freedom in all walks of life without any evil intention can cure the disease of modernism as expressed by Whitman in his poetry. Although he never mentioned the Gita in his works, his poems show the deep-rooted philosophy of the Gita which marks the era of revolution in America. He was called 'Sanyasi of America' by Swami Vivekanand and he was the best in representing Oriental spirit of mysticism for R. N. Tagore.

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