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## Spiritualism in the Poetry of Walt Whitman

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**Abstract:** The fact is that spirituality is a mixed bag for the great American poet, Walt Whitman and he takes a great deal of poetic material from Christianity. Moreover, his conception of religion is much more complicated than the beliefs of one or two faiths mixed together. He exactly seems to draw from the many roots of belief to form his own religion, putting himself at the center. These and similar references run throughout his poetic work 'Leaves of Grass', but his intent also seems rather ambiguous. Actually, he is drawing from America's religious background to create poetry that will unify the nation. However, his conception of these religious roots seems twisted in positive manner which is changed from the original conception of right and wrong, heaven and hell, good and bad. His poem 'Song of Myself' is also the national epic of the US. A number of influences operated upon him and went into the making of his genius. A faith in the dignity of the individual and inequality and fraternity are the very life blood of his poetry. He was possibly the first known American poet who read the Hindu scripture and philosophies very keenly. In the poetry of Walt Whitman, death remains a primary concern. He has a very deep and penetrating understanding of death. The present research paper makes a review of the spirituality in his poetic work which is based on some extracts from his poems. Basically, this research paper is based on the poem 'Leaves of Grass' and also based on secondary sources of data collection.

**Keywords:** Religion, Belief, Heaven, Right and Wrong, Death, Hindu Scriptures and Philosophy.

**Introduction:** The fact is that Walt Whitman's career, from his early writing apprenticeship as journalist, printer, and teacher in the 1830s and 1840s through the succeeding editions of 'Leaves of Grass', beginning in 1855 which was a time of religious and intellectual ferment and political turmoil in America. Developments in science were undermining settled Christian

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orthodoxies, the anti-slavery movement was giving rise to debates over the meaning of democracy, and new religious movements, such as Mormonism, Spiritualism, and Theosophy were changing the spiritual landscape of antebellum America. Consequently, Walt Whitman witnesses the philosophy of spirituality very similar to Hindu religion and philosophy based on Vedas and Gita.

Actually, religion becomes a poetic device, subject to Walt Whitman's artistic hand. Therefore, of course, he also seems to stand apart from the grime, putting himself in the position of the observer. Moreover, he becomes a creator, almost a god himself, as he speaks America into existence validating every element of the American experience. He truly describes everything in his poetic works and brings philosophical significance to the most simple objects and actions, reminding America that every sight, sound, taste, and smell can take on a spiritual importance to the fully aware and healthy individual. Walt Whitman in the first cantos of his poem 'Song of Myself' says: "I loafe and invite my soul," creating a dualism between matter and spirit. He constantly uses the images of body and spirit together and makes a sense of unification with his true conception of spirituality.

It was very crucial period of history when Walt Whitman lived and created some of his finest poetic works. His country, like him, was endeavoring to find its identity. There was a kind of relations between them that makes the poem 'Song of Myself the National Epic of the United States'. He was influenced by many things and environment of that period in poetic world. A number of influences operated upon him and went into the making of his genius which gave a shape and direction to his poetic world. First of all he was influenced by his parents. His mother was from a family of Quakers whose main teaching is that in each person has an inner light which is his duty to heed. Likewise, his father was a revolutionary thinker and he had many radical democratic ideas. Therefore, his future life was molded by radical democratic convictions and mother's Quakerism. Therefore, a true faith in the dignity of the individual and inequality and fraternity is the very life blood of his poetic works.

He was also influenced by Emerson. Most of the scholars agree with the fact that, it would be a greatest tribute to Emerson to consider him as the Spiritual Guide or Guru to Walt Whitman. There is no doubt Emerson led Walt Whitman to the oriental world for high spiritual quest. Therefore, the term 'spiritual quest' implies for the search for divine knowledge which is possible only through religion. It is a well-known fact that each religion has its own way to lead the same eternal destination union of one's own individual soul with the divine. According to Vedas—"spiritual quest pertains to the realization to the individual's soul identity with the 'Brahm'." This realization is only possible through the conquest of senses that is physical appetites. Every spiritual person makes a struggle to calm this physical appetite with attaining the path of spirituality. Perhaps Walt Whitman the first known American writer who read the Hindu scriptures and philosophies very keenly and inspired by them. Therefore, in the intellectual world it is assumed that Emerson and Hinduism exerted a profound influence on Walt Whitman. In this perspective it can be said that the Hindu doctrines of Maya, Karma and the immortality of the soul are frequently alluded to in Emerson's writings and furthermore have been contributed to Walt Whitman's spirituality.

When Walt Whitman's poetic work is compared to Hindu religion poetry, it comes to conclude that the word 'Maya' denotes a kind of magical power and is initially used in the '*Rigveda*'. Today, it is widespread belief in India, the god of rain and head of all the demi gods, assumed different forms through the help of Maya. According to 'Vedantists', Maya is the inexplicable power of the supreme Lord or 'Paramsakti' (Almighty God) by which is produced the illusion of the creation, presentation and dissolution of the universe. But there is no Maya from the stand point of Brahman which is all light and knowledge. One identified with Brahman does not see even a trace of Maya. Like the Hindu mystics Walt Whitman felt that the external appearance of objects is not reality. The reality is the essential soul the Brahman that only matters. Walt Whitman asks: "Where is lie that fears off the husks for you and for me? Where is he that undoes stratagems and envelops for you and me?"

Furthermore, it has been traced out that through the tears, sorrows and sufferings of man's creations, God's great grief is expressed in this self-separation. This creation is Maya and like veil, it comes in between the created man and the creator God which obstructs the spotless radiance of God from the eyes of man. Infinite like a circle God is mysterious and his seat is behind the veil of creation. The multi-colored creation this pageant of various forms conceals the divine, the maker from the eyes of man. Man has searched for God through countless ages and sought for reunion. Ages pass, days come and goes on Man's search for the infinite and this erasing for union with him are never ending.

Moreover, due to impact of Hindu religion, throughout the poetic work of Walt Whitman, death remains a primary concern of all human beings to achieve the goal of 'Moksha'. Here it is noteworthy to say that Walt Whitman has a very deep and penetrating understanding of death. He was haunted by the mystery of death even as a boy and always looked forward to solve the mystery of death. According to him life and death are like the day and night. The cycle of life and death is a perpetual as that of Day and Night. It is like a cradle rocking to and fro, similar to the waves of the sea which represent the eternal phenomena of life and death. For Whitman death is continuity and a gateway to eternal life. It is believed that after death the soul enters into the realm of immortal beauty. The Gita also emphasizes this view that life and death are intimately related. If there is life there is death and vice-versa. Death as a 'dark mother' and a 'strong deliverer' signifies rebirth and renewal and freedom into spirituality. Moreover, everything was regarded beautiful including death by Walt Whitman. According to him, death is not the end of life but a renewal of it. Human soul is eternal and immortal. Human body can easily be broken as it is like a glass vessel God fills the vessel which is in the form of human body again and human life is constantly renewed. After death man takes birth in another form.

It is true that death leads to the mystic union with the believed God. In the end he will reach his spiritual destination which the divine home of God and sweet music will welcome him there. This will be his homecoming and reunion with his master, God. In Whitman's poems, we see the reflections of Hindu theory of 'Karma'. According to the philosophy of Karma, the

previous life actions or Karma of mortals bear an imprint on their characters and then their destiny is governed in their successive births. The theory of Karma revolves the concept we reap what we sow. After death a good man enjoys the bliss of heaven and gets the fruit for his humanity and good deeds. But if a man has bad deeds in his account he will be doomed to the hell and will be given bitter rotten fruits for his deeds. Every action has its impact on the character. One must try to get rid of these Karmas and attain 'Moksha' so that one can break the cycle of life and death which is foundation of Hindu philosophy. Therefore, the Hindu Karmic theory has been used in a wider perspective by Whitman. He feels that all human beings are responsible for their deeds whether good or bad. And one day these deeds return to them. Even if a bad man does something good one day surely that good deed will repay him. God is the dispenser of justice and in his court good is rewarded with good and evil with evil. Every man is different if we talk of 'sanskaras' but still there pervades unity all through. All souls are divine and march to the higher destination before arriving to the destination. Therefore we should follow the path of Karma, because the Gita's theory of Karma accepts it. Lord Krishna has delivered a universal message in the teachings of Karma Yoga.

Moreover, Walt Whitman realizes that love is a main uniting force among all the creations of the universe. The entire universe now is in his embrace and all souls are equal whether low or high, poor or rich men and Women of various walk and are produced from the one and the same matter. He remarks: "And I know that the hand of god is the promise of my own. And I know that the spirit of God is the eldest Father of my own. And that all men ever born are also my brother and the women also my sisters and lover and that a Kelson of the creation is love. Bhakti Yoga preaches 'all-embracing love' for maintained for 'Love is God and God is Love.'" When Whitman attained Para-Bhakti all separate identities appear to coverage into and become part of his transcendent self. In a variety of human relations, the state of absorption of the soul in God is described by Walt Whitman.

The strongest of humanities between Man and God, in which God is the beloved and in which all the elements of love — admiration, service, comradeship, communion are present. As

soon as Walt Whitman realizes his own self, he achieves this state where Walt Whitman identifies his own self with other selves. Whitman as the result of this Yogic experience celebrates the awakening of the 'Self' and because in all men and women there is the same self, he celebrates all mankind. In the following lines Walt Whitman's optimism is reflected. He says: "It is not chaos or death it is a union plan, it is eternal life' it is happiness." "God is in the heaven. All is right with the world." However he has united with divine, but he is no longer afraid of death. The poet invites the reader to join him to derive wisdom out of his mystic insight in the sections 51 and 52 of 'Song of Myself' that God is omnipotent. The idea of 'Bhagvadgita' is emphasized by Whitman: "I see thee of boundless form on every side with manifest arms, stomachs mouth and eyes, neither the end nor the middle nor also the beginning of thee I do see O Lord of the Universe, O Universal from". For attainment of divinity, self- purification is essential. Like Whitman few other also express their faith in the divine order. Therefore, Walt Whitman the great American mystic after his spiritual quest undergoes a mystic trance-realization of his self with the communication of his own individual self with the cosmic self. He has now gained the wisdom and vision of Brahman.

**A Critical Appraisal:**Most of the scholars agree with the fact that, despite the lack of any religious institutionalization of Walt Whitman's gospel, Robertson finds plenty of anecdotal evidence in contemporary America that Whitman continues to serve as a spiritual guide and that 'Leaves of Grass' is often a touchstone in many people's eclectic spiritual seeking. A self-described public historian, Gould traces Whitman's links to sailors, gays, and Quakers as the foundation for a provocative reading of the spirituality of 'Leaves of Grass'. Recently, far from cosmopolitan Washington, Robertson also discovered an annual May 31 birthday celebration of Whitman in Conroe, Texas, where a dozen or so people gather not for aesthetic pleasure – or not only for that – but for the chance to testify to this poetry's meaning in their own lives. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the fact that Walt Whitman's poetry has a sense of spirituality based on Hindu philosophy.

Thus, we can point out that Walt Whitman is a mystic, spiritualist, romanticist, transcendentalist, existentialist, humanist, socialist and democrat poet of America. His poetry is a remarkable complex employment-intuitive or strategic- of a wide range of poetic and rhetorical devices such as paradox, ambiguity, abstraction, oxymoron, anaphora etc. makes his poems universal and open to a number of interpretations. Some may find in him a romantic with utopian sevens; some may find in him a transcendentalist having risen above the trivialities of human world; some may find a metaphysical quested trying to get at the meaning of life and existence; some any find in him a mystic searching for his spiritual moorings and eternal truth of human effort; some may find in him a socialist talking about an ideal egalitarian social setup; some may find in him a democrat advocating the worth of each individual in a nation; while others may find in him a racist concerned with his nation or community only; and yet others may find in him an ordinary confused man striving on the horns of dilemma, trying to resolve the tangles of his ironic realism. But above all he is a spiritual poet of the US and he is respected and admired by all who believe in God and philosophy of 'Karma' in Hindu religion.

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