

The Self in Whitman and Iqbal: A Comparison

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Abstract:

The problem of self is very important for both philosophy and religion. Man has always found himself inexplicable about the definition of his own self. In fact it is very difficult to formulate a precise definition which can satisfy us. Although the East and the West have their distinct forms of mysticism, yet history has provided them many chances of interaction. Whitman and Iqbal are undoubtedly the two great poets belonging to two different cultures, yet one finds striking similarities, thematic and structural, in their poetry. Both were remarkably brilliant poets and chose poetry as the medium for expressing their ideas. Both expound a dynamic interpretation of the concept of self. In their own manner and style they base their views on individualism that emphasizes self- realization. This paper proposes to analyze both Whitman and Iqbal together and also bring out similarities and dissimilarities in their philosophies of the self.

Key Words: Transcendentalism, Sufism, Self, Love, Soul, body, God.

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Walt Whitman and Iqbal are two great poets belonging to two different cultures. Whitman inherited western culture and Iqbal inherited eastern culture. Both of them were well-versed in their respective religious classics. Both were exceptionally brilliant poet-philosophers. Whitman's narrative poem "Song of Myself" in his *Leaves of Grass* offers a peculiar blend of the oriental mystical trends with the American democratic idealism of his times. In their development as poets, Whitman and Iqbal converge and diverge at many levels. However, the most common motif which informs their poetry is the validity of the existence of an entity called 'self'.

Both Whitman and Iqbal present the self moving back and forth, between the conscious and the unconscious, between the real and the ideal, life and death in spiritual rebirth, between itself and its immortal source; the Over-soul or the Higher Self. The self that is eminent in their poems is a representative universal one. This imaginative, creative and universal self provides the key to most of the fundamental affinities.

One of the similarities that one can notice in these poets is that both of them were in favor of science and the scientific revolution that the world was going through during their times. To Whitman science brings us closer to God. It is truth that science is looking for. He points out that the discovery of the truth by scientists is a kind of revelation. He accepts the reality of scientist's world because it represents the truth of his cosmic consciousness:

Gentlemen, to you first honors always!

Your facts are useful, and yet they are not my dwelling,

I but enter by them to an area of my dwelling. (47; sec23)

Whitman anticipated a poetry that would be a companion of science. His appreciation of science has been summed up Nelen Venler in these words:

He beholds no vision of visible things in heaven or hell unseen to other men. He rather sees with extraordinary precision the realities of our earth. Whitman had no fear of science, science was revelation, and supported the view that he who is at the peak of the present... as an American from his very pastlessness tended to be... is the first into the future.(5)

Iqbal also defines the scientific endeavor as God- seeking, God-appreciating and God-finding activity. He believed that the physical sciences provide a sort of spiritual meaning to men who contemplate and ponder over God's wisdom behind His creation. In other words, nature which reflects God's wisdom is the portrayal of His existence. Therefore, he suggests an educational system in which religion and science may discover hitherto unknown mutual harmonies and are no longer antagonistic. For him science combined with religion is a kind of mysticism which is most suitable to the present generation.

Science is an instrument for the preservation of Life,

Science is a means of establishing the self, (20)

But he proclaims emphatically that science divorced from religion is nothing but blindness and woefully laments that science and technology presently in vogue in our educational system adopts a forgetful attitude towards God. Therefore he raises a call for waging war against Godless science which has polluted the minds of the present generation. And he encourages the Muslims to create a new world by integrating science with religion in their educational system so that it gives "a spiritual interpretation of the universe" which is one of the basic motifs of his poetry.

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). He, like a true sufi, rejoices and celebrates with wild abandon his mystical merger with the cosmic self. His concept of the 'Self' directly corresponds to the sufic concept of the real, which stands in contrast to the phenomenal self. In a typically sufic manner, he is firmly established in 'cosmic consciousness'.

Iqbal's treatment of sufism is two-fold. He believes that mystic experience is a source of knowledge and a useful way of approaching the real. For him Islam is a unifying force between the spiritual and temporal or material world, because his concept of Islam was not of monastic order. So, the passive attitude towards life is not accepted by him, especially in the Islamic framework as he believed in action. Though we find him criticizing certain attitudes and activities of mystics, yet there is a sense of appreciation and gratitude towards sufism even in his criticism. To Iqbal, a sufi is a creative and active agent of the divine will. He criticizes those who favor passivity and create inactiveness among the Muslims. He was inspired by Rumi, and upholds that of all the creatures only man is endowed with freedom and choice. It is only this endowment which makes him the crown of creation. He has paid tribute to Rumi in almost all his books. There are many indirect pointers about his acceptance of Rumi as guide. In the Prologue of *The Secrets of the Self* Iqbal "relates how Jalaludin Rumi, who is to him as Virgil was to Dante, appeared in vision and bade him arise and sing" (xiv).

The sense of unity in Whitman pervades everything that exists in this universe. For him, nothing exists in isolation. The 'I' used by him includes all that is unique along with everything that is transcendental. And like Blake he includes even animals in his omniscience. He beholds the divine in every aspect of creation as expressed lucidly and convincingly in section 48 of "Song of Myself":

And I say to mankind, be not curious about God,

For I who am curious about each am not curious about God....

I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least,

I see something of God each hour of the twenty four,

And each moment... (79- 80)

Whitman places immense faith in the immanence of God manifesting Himself in the universe and in all objects that adorn and glorify it. He identifies with everything that exists in it. And this sense of 'oneness of all' makes his democracy universal and pantheistic. He walks in the midst of herds of cattle and gives us this lesson of unity, integrity, contentedness and happiness. He is an intimate companion of nature. He desires for a noble race of human beings, energetic, living their perfect lives pleasantly, in sympathy with nature, in an idyllic world. The appeal and strength of his nature poetry can be traced to his inborn, personal experience. He believed that nature alone remains enduring to man, and ultimate tranquility and happiness of mankind depends upon awakening "from their torpid recesses the affinities of a man or woman with the open air, the trees, fields, and changes of seasons, the sun by day and stars of heaven by night" (Fisher 356). He is a glowing and full-blooded lover of nature who learns her very affectionately. According to his own description, he is 'a kosmos'. His study of nature has been passionate: "A morning glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of the books" (49; sec24).

As a lover of nature, he looks at all natural things. The secret of true personality for Whitman is the identification of the microcosm with all things natural and external. He is the pantheist of all pantheists. He believes that God is immanent, as he realizes and encompasses the whole universe he finds God in everything. While referring to his pantheistic aspect D Mirsky writes:

In his pantheism, he is not highly original, nor does he stand alone among democratic (and pseudo- democratic) ideologists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Optimistic in outlook this pantheism is sharply inimical to the old dogmatic religions; but it is nonetheless definitely religious in mental attitude and definitely mystical in world- view; in substance, it is above all a popularization of the philosophy of bourgeois democracy. (239-40)

According to Iqbal, “the universe does not confront the Absolute Self in the same way as it confronts the human self” (*Reconstruction*12). “It is a structure of events, a systematic mode of behavior, and as such organic to the Ultimate Self. Nature is to the divine Self as character is to the human self” (52). Iqbal supports Einstein’s view that the universe is finite but boundless. He believes that nature has no limits, but the only limit it has is the Immanent self which creates and maintains the whole world. As nature is organically connected to the creative self, it can grow and is infinite in the sense that none of its limits is final. His pantheistic ideas derive from Plato’s idea of God as eternal beauty which is evident in all things. However, he soon outgrew his pantheism. His old teacher at Cambridge, McTaggart wrote to him on reading *The Secrets of the Self*:

Have you not changed your position very much? Surely, in the days when we used to talk philosophy together, you were much more of a pantheist and mystic. (qtd in *Thoughts and Reflections*118)

This is an enlightening remark. He believed that pantheistic doctrine was substituted for a personal transcendent God of Islam, as it sapped the energies of the people spurring a life of activity and exertion. For him the relation of the finite and infinite ego is one in which the “true infinite does not exclude the finite,” but “embraces the finite without effacing its finitude and explains and justifies its being” (Iqbal, *Reconstruction* 29).

The theme of love is dominant in the poetry of both the poets. Both believed that the self is strengthened by the power of love. It is an urge to know and recognize the deep hidden mysteries of life, in order to arrive at the “Ostensible realities”, providing an insight into the meaning and purpose of life. Iqbal has used the word ‘Love’ in a very wide sense. Love is a powerful weapon which can transform both the individual and humanity. He lays a great stress on the value of love for strengthening the self. In fact he says that the strength and potency of our faith depends on the degree and depth of love. To him love is the rejuvenating spirit that develops the desire to shape and reshape the environment. He says in *The Secrets of the Self*:

The luminous point whose name is the self

Is the life- spark beneath our dust.

By Love it is made more lasting,

More living, more burning, more glowing. (26)

To Whitman love is that forceful emotion of the mystic dedication where the rhythm of 'I' and 'thou' flows on in countless channels of meters. Love provides him an insight into the abysses and recesses of mind and soul. For him love enhances and intensifies one's vision of that synthesis of truth and beauty which is the highest and deepest reality. He arrives at oneness as an effect of the summit of love.

Both Whitman and Iqbal reject the Cartesian divergence between mind and body which cannot account for the interaction of the spiritual with material being. Iqbal does not believe in the duality of body and spirit. They are one as become visible in action. If body and mind are fundamentally different, as Descartes assumed, then:

The changes of both run on exactly parallel lines, owing to some kind of pre-established harmony, as Leibniz thought. This reduces the soul to a merely passive spectator of the happenings of the body. (Iqbal, *Reconstruction* 105)

For Iqbal then, body and mind are not two antithetical entities. He considers matter not as something dead but as a sub-ego. Hence matter is itself resolved to spirit and will. The relation between the body and the soul is the same as the relation between the Universe and God. The Universe is the objectification of God, and the body is the objectification of the soul. Both have their significance when they are related to each other. He states:

The body is not a thing situated in an absolute void; it is a system of events or acts. This does not obliterate the distinction of soul and body; it only brings them closer together. The characteristic of the ego is spontaneity; the acts composing the body repeat themselves. The body is accumulated action or habit of the soul; and as such undetachable from it. It is a permanent element of consciousness which, in view of this permanent element, appears from the outside as something stable. (Iqbal, *Reconstruction* 105)

Similarly, Whitman always gives equal importance to matter as well as spirit. He does not reject the physical aspect of the self, for it is only through the physical that one can have an insight of the spiritual, and it is only through the physical that his vision can be conveyed. He realizes the importance of both, and stresses that neither of the two can be disregarded before the other. Thus he appears as a poet of both body and soul.

Iqbal in his theory of personality explained the two aspects of the ego which are appreciative and efficient. These are not like the three warring components that are found in Freud. The efficient self is what psychology concerns itself with:

...the practical self of daily life in its dealing with the external order of things which determine our passing states of consciousness and stamp on these states their own spatial feature of mutual isolation. (Iqbal, *Reconstruction* 47)

The efficient self is that which is concerned with the physical world. He relates it to Kant's transcendental unity of apperception which "according to the determinations of our state, is, with all our internal perceptions, empirical only" (Kant 88). The appreciative aspect of self stays connected with the originator from where it has originated. It is creative. It does not find things, it makes them. One becomes aware of it, "only in the moments of profound meditation, when the efficient self is in abeyance" (Iqbal, *Reconstruction* 48-49). The unity of the appreciative self is such that in it each experience permeates the whole. The multiplicity of its elements is, unlike that of the efficient self, wholly qualitative.

Whitman does not fully abandon religion. His approach to religion is fairly radical, and recognizes it in the context of time in which it is developed, but discards the same for any other times if it loses its relevance. He does not sing to any specific God. He is a universalist, not in its creedal sense, but in the implication of the term. He realizes God everywhere, and rejects the bonds of all orthodox faiths and desires to liberate himself from every thwarting practice. In the 1855 Preface he wrote:

There will soon be no more priests. Their work is done... A new order shall arise and they shall be the priests of man, and everyman shall be his own priest. (qtd in Murphy 695)

His humanistic approach makes us believe that God is to be found not in temples and mosques but in humanity itself. That 'plain public road' each man must travel for himself. He presents his notion of humanistic God where God is most dearly felt in human beings. His religion does not comprise of dogmas, churches and creeds. They have least consequences to him, but his habitual state of feelings regards everything around him filled with divine grace of God:

I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least,

Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself. (80; sec 48)

To Iqbal the function of the religion is to get a direct contact with reality and the method of attaining it with the 'Most Real' or Ultimate Reality is meditation and above all prayers; which he called higher stage of reflection. He propounds his philosophy giving references from the Quran. In *The Mysteries of Selflessness* he has developed the theory of Islamic society its basis, aims and ideals. He wrote extensively on matters which he thought to be of greater importance to Muslims. All through his life he was a consistent reformer who called the Ummah to live under the guiding principles of the Quran. His religious aspirations are evident in almost all of his works.

Iqbal views man as the image of God and a link to unite God with the universe. He believes man as the main objective behind creation of the entire universe, because he only possesses

the requisite qualities to reflect the truly divine characteristics than other creation. He considers the Prophet (P. B.U.H) as the Perfect Man, and states that anyone who will follow his path will surely achieve the highest ideal in life. Although his Perfect Man is deeply compassionate, yet like Nietzsche's Superman, he too is tough, vital and fervent. One of the basic differences between Nietzsche's Superman and Iqbal's Perfect Man is that the former believes himself to be above law and the latter discovers the sources of law within himself. Iqbal has maintained that his concept of Perfect Man is Islamic, not Nietzschean. However as Professor Schimmel points out, "Nietzsche's Superman may still have acted as ferment in the formation of Iqbal's ideals" (323). Like Iqbal, Ibn Arabi states that divine consciousness reaches its culmination in the Perfect Man. It is through the Perfect Man that the unknowable becomes knowable.

Although Whitman spoke fervently about the importance of the individual, he did not give excessive importance to him. The idea of superman or Perfect individual was never in his agenda. To him all individuals are equally holy and divine. He considers every individual to be an exceptional creation of God. No human being is rejected in his cosmic plan.

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