

## Leaves of Divinity: A Select Thematic Study of Walt Whitman and Kabir

**Dr. Shruti Srivastava**

Associate Professor  
D.A-V. College, Kanpur ,UP

**Srishti**

Research Scholar  
D.A-V. College, Kanpur ,UP

### Abstract

Walt Whitman and Kabir are the prominent American and Indian poets respectively. Whitman was a 19<sup>th</sup> century poet whereas Kabir was a 15<sup>th</sup> century poet. Despite the difference in the era, both the poets have taken up different themes which were not only prevalent in their respective times but also at present. Some common themes taken up by both these writers include God, speech, conduct, life and death, immortality, realization, divine joy and many others. This research paper explores the different themes and the respective perspectives of the writers on the same. It also sheds light on the role played by the works of Whitman and Kabir to bring about a positive change on the human psyche and eventually on the fabric of the society. The commendable efforts of both the writers have left the footprints both at the national and international level.

**Keywords:** Speech, Conduct, Deeds, Life and Death, Realization, Consciousness, Peace and Bliss

## Introduction

In this paper, we have tried to compare and contrast the aspects of divine realization as perceived by us in the poetry of Walt Whitman and Kabir. Walt Whitman, the renowned American poet; while Kabir, a spiritually dynamic Indian poet and singer have dealt with different themes such as speech; inequality and discrimination; life and death and many others which are still prevalent in the contemporary society and are universally acceptable. This paper argues that Kabir and Whitman, through their emphasis on speech, conduct, devotion, affirmation and the meaning of life and death, offer a timeless framework for introspection. Despite being from different centuries respectively, both the eminent writers have played a vital role in being an inspiration and guiding light for the past and the generations coming up.

This paper also explores how the works of Kabir and Whitman have attempted to uplift and save the soul of today's lost generation-which is of utmost importance. Lost generation mainly refers to the individuals who are trapped in the materialistic network of life. In this competitive world each one of us has a quest to attain the best of all that the life can offer. In the process to achieve it, our mental peace is sometimes at risk. Therefore, individually it could be a kind of self-enrichment on one hand and social awakening on the other. It highlights the different themes and norms taken up by both the writers which aimed at restructuring of society by healing the depressed mind and psyche of the contemporary world. This deliberation will inculcate in them the desired goal of human birth i.e. self-enrichment or self-realisation. If we examine the literature of the world, we come across literary pieces that elevate us from the mundane existence. It help us realize that the leaves of divinity or the divine particle can be seen everywhere in the universe.

### Formative years of Kabir

Kabir was one of the prominent Indian poet and singer of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Since childhood he had an inbuilt ability to compose and sing hymns and songs to praise God and highlight the societal evils practiced during that particular era. He has questioned and made a commendable effort to eradicate the social evil prevalent in the society through his verses, hymns and songs. Kabir's literacy remains a subject of debate, yet his lack of formal education did not hinder his impact on the people. He travelled in different places and saw the real condition of the society. He acted as an exemplary figure by imparting his words of wisdom to the society in the forms of different hymns and songs. His perspective of the world and the direct and straight-forward approach to address them has been crucial in enlightening the society.

*"I didn't touch ink or paper, this hand never grasped a pen.*

*The greatness of four ages, Kabir tells with his mouth alone." (The Bijak of Kabir 3)*

He addressed the condition of the rotten society to the people in different dialects such as Braj, Bhojpuri, Khadi Boli and Awadhi. His hymns and songs were jotted down by his followers. Kabir's verses instructed the society in raw and direct words which were thought-provoking enough to awaken and enrich the society. He has questioned many ill-societal norms such as idolatry, *sati pratha*; discrimination on the basis of religion, caste, creed or colour and many more. He had a critical approach towards many of the practices of both Hinduism and Islam. Through his insightful thinking he has questioned some of the fallacies of both the religions. Still people of both the religion hold him in high spirits and pay great respect to him.

### Major themes of Kabir and Whitman

Different themes addressed by Kabir include God, soul, compassion, love, deeds, truth, humility, salvation, illusion, consciousness and many more which were not only relevant in that era but are still prevalent in today's scenario and brought out a revolutionary or a spiritual approach towards it. His teachings have helped in reforming every individual and society in a better version of itself. Kabir's legacy is still present in the world in the form of *Kabir Panth*. It can be called as a community which propagates spiritual philosophy based on the teachings of Kabir. The teachings focus on the importance of truth, love, formless God, devotion, compassion and spirituality. The followers of this community are known as *Kabir Panthis*.

### **Eternal connection between God and Soul**

Kabir belongs to the times of the Bhakti movement. This movement centred on the key aspects such as devotion and love for God. The love and devotion towards God was mainly propagated to the world by saints and devotional poets in different vernacular languages and dialects for better understanding and wider reach among the society and the world. The Bhakti saints of this movement include Kabir, Mira Bai, Guru Nanak, Tulsi Das and others. Some Bhakti saints also stepped up for social reforms and advocated for equality in the society. Religion has played a crucial role even in those times and at present time also in defining a person's beliefs. Every nation has people who practice and preach a particular religion and its teachings. It can be called as a medium which helps one to connect with God. Each religion has a set of rules and practices that its followers carry out. Some people try looking for God through idol worship while some have their own ways and means to connect with the Almighty. We make unnumbered attempts to reach to God by performing many rituals and practices. One also tries to think about the right time of worshipping God or the right place to connect to him in various religious places such as temples, mosques, churches

and so on. Each religion has its own customs, beliefs and teachings which its followers abide by. Kabir on this stance has made attempts to make us realize about the very fact that the God is omnipresent. According to him, God is present within us. He has attempted to preach that one can meet God when one meets with the *swaroop* i.e. real version of oneself. Rabindranath Tagore in his translations of the works of Kabir has highlights on the same teaching and quotes:

*“If you want the truth, I will tell you the truth:*

*Friend, listen: the God whom I love is inside.” (Ecstatic Poems of Kabir: Ecstatic Poems)*

Whereas, Whitman who belonged to the 19<sup>th</sup> century has his own way to connect to God. According to him, connection to God was not confined to any religion but was rather one's personal and divine connection to the Almighty. He has reflected on the idea of presence of God to the world by stating that he believes in the omnipresence and omniscience of the Almighty but his quest to understand God remains incomplete as most of the people in the world who continue to look for God in different religious places and different forms. In the entire process most of us not realize that one's own soul or self-realization is one of the best ways to reach God. It is our consciousness, which acts as one of the most important pathways to connect to Him.

*“I hear and behold God in every object,*

*Yet understand God in the least,*

*Nor do I understand who there can be*

*More wonderful than myself.” (Songs of Myself 48)*

Whitman also expresses his own thoughts about God through these verses that as each one of us continue to seek God in every corner, he hears and God in every object. He believes in the

omnipresence of God. According to these verses, Whitman believes that God is present even the tiniest particle of the earth.

Both poets articulate a vision of spiritual unity that transcends divisive construct. Kabir's monistic vision can be seen in these lines:

*"The river and its waves are surf: Where is the difference between them?"*  
(Songs of Kabir 45)

### Relevance of Speech

Along with the importance of religion, expressed by both the writers, speech is also one of the themes talked about by them. The speech or tone used in the works of Kabir and Whitman also emphasize on the usage of a simple language. Whitman propagated his words of wisdom in free verse. His works are not limited to any poetic licence and are free from literary techniques and barriers. While, Kabir also imparted his messages verbally in different dialects and languages to the people. They were jotted down by his disciples and followers. He addressed his people in a direct and straight-forward tone which was appealing for his disciples and other listeners back then and even at present. He has very well emphasized the importance of speech in our life. It is an important introduction of one's personality. It is one's speech which may make a situation favourable or worse for a person. It may also make one's friend an enemy or an enemy one's friend. The words spoken by us are a representation of one's soul. One might fool the society but he is never able to betray one's soul as the soul knows it all. For this instance Kabir has very well quoted:

*"Speech is priceless if you speak without knowledge*

*Weigh it in the heart's balance before it comes from the mouth" (The Bijak of Kabir 25)*

Kabir states that one's speech should be void of arrogance, egotism, conceit or any other negative emotions. A speech should be free of such negative emotions. It should not only

please the listeners but also gives peace and contention to the speaker as well. One must always remember that one's speech may hurt a person more than a weapon. Words once spoken cannot be taken back. Therefore, we must choose all the words wisely and properly analyse everything from our heart before speaking. By expressing ourselves with the right words we are not only able to complete the process of communication effectively by leaving a great impact on the listener but also tend to feel contented when the purpose of our words is served. It may sometimes also give a deep sense of gratitude when one is heard with all the attentiveness, enthusiasm and positivity during the presentation. Whenever we speak with a pure heart with the people and share our thoughts with our family and friends, it reflects the importance which they have in our lives as we share the important aspects of our life with them. The usage of words also represents our sincerity towards a situation and is also a reflection of our real self.

### **Emphasis on Equality**

Apart from highlighting the relevance of speech in our life, both the prominent writers have also stressed on the element of equality in our life. Since both the writers have worked on different themes of universal appeal, they address them to all the individuals and hold no place of discrimination or partiality among the individuals all around the globe.

*"It is for the wicked just the same as the righteous,*

*I make appointments with all,*

*I will not have a single person slighted or left away,*

*There shall be no difference between them and the rest." (Songs of Myself 81)*

In these verses Whitman has exclaimed on the importance of equality in our life. The verses express how his works have addressed to the different age-groups of the world, different

nationalities, different professionals and their respective occupations. His works clearly demonstrate that he gave voice to diverse people worldwide, presenting various aspects of their lives through powerful, thought-provoking verses. The way Whitman holds no discrimination in addressing the different people around the globe irrespective of his gender, caste, creed, colour, nationality, profession and other aspects, Kabir also holds the same stance for every individual present on the earth and has been very well proven through his verse.

Therefore, it can be sighted that visionary writers wish for everyone's well-being in the world. Even in the times at present, where different people face discrimination, inequality and other such situations in their daily lives, the theme of discrimination and inequality addressed by both the writers can be a guiding light for the society. As their verses can have a huge impact on the mind of the readers to bring about a positive change in the society. They attempt to visualise the world in harmony where peace exists and there is no room for hatred in the psyche of the mankind.

### **Meaning of Life and Death:**

Equality is a fundamental right for every individual and it has been well expressed and advocated by both the writers. Both the writers hold equality as an important factor in everyone's life and step against discrimination in the same manner life and death are one of the important aspects which hold no discrimination and are universally relevant. Hence, addressing the relevance of life and death is another important aspect which has been taken up by Whitman and Kabir. Both the writers hold life and death equally in high spirits and proclaim through their words that death liberates us and make us spiritually free from all the chains of mortal life and warn us about the uncertainty of life on which we have no control or authority. Death may come uninvited, at any time and at any place.



*“Death spreads like a karmic net*

*Like a fisherman snaring fish.” (The Bijak of Kabir 61)*

Kabir states that death is a reflection of one's life which one has lived since his birth and the sum total of all his deeds, conduct, values, virtues, mistakes and lessons learnt during the different phases of life. While death on the other hand is the test which all of us take to justify our decisions made. According to the verses, Kabir reflects on the idea that the world is tangled into materialistic possessions which traps us in a Karmic net. Our Karma defines our actions and deeds. It is through our Karma that we are governed and our soul's purity is fathomed. Kabir believes that one can transcend the cycle of Karmic net through his deeds and his connection with God by detaching oneself from worldly pleasures and desires and attaining spiritual awakening.

Kabir in these verses represents a situation which is faced by almost every human being on the earth. After passing the different stages of life such as infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age when one is on the verge to die he is scared enough for the outcomes in the afterlife. These verses also highlight the idea that life passes quickly and during the old age one fears about death and parting from his loved ones. We also tremble due to fear of facing the divine. We recall the different phases of life we spent and the positive and negative emotions we dealt during the entire journey. It is then that we realize that life was a test and the time has finally come to approach to the supreme Teacher for the final result. No one can escape from that test and has to appear in it. Apart from warning us about our karma and the certainty of death Kabir also preaches that there is no difference between life and death.

*Look upon life and death; there is no separation between them,*

*The right hand and left hand are one and the same.” (Songs of Kabir17)*

Kabir in these verses imparts about the similarity between life and death. The verses reflect on the idea that life and death are representatives of cyclical nature of our existence. He emphasised on the idea that even though the body perishes after death but the soul is eternal.

Kabir believes that life and death are inseparable, interconnected and complementary.

Walt Whitman has also expressed the same idea that life and death is a part of a natural cycle and are interwoven in his verses. He attempts to emphasize on the idea that death does not separate a person from life. As even though the body perishes after death but our soul remains eternal. In one of his verses Whitman exclaims:

*“Sure as life holds all parts together, death holds all parts together;*

*Sure as the stars return again and they merge on the light,*

*Death is as great as life.” (Great Are the Myths; Leaves of Grass)*

*Your birth is guttering out in greed,*

*Old age and death crowd close.*

*World tied up in confusion,*

*Everything comes and goes.” (The Bijak of Kabir 82)*

Kabir has thrown some light to enlighten the mankind. A popular saying of Kabir quotes that the people in this world are trapped in the materialistic things of life such as acquiring property, wealth and other amenities to attain a luxurious and lavish lifestyle which is full of comforts but in the end we realise that as the time passes by, all the things that we achieved turn out to be futile when death turns up to engulf us. All the preparations or protective measures turn out to be fruitless; the moment death decides to take over our life.

It is a human tendency to be fearful about death. But both the writers Whitman and Kabir have focussed on the idea of death as an illusion. According to them, death does not refer to an end but it is rather a universal part of our continuous flow of life. Their verses attempt to

make us aware that death is not an end but is a return to our true and eternal state of being. Both the poets are not fearful of death and believe that death comes as a messenger to take us to the eternity. One who remains in the close company of God becomes free from the illusions of death.

### **A perspective of Divine joy**

The different themes of Whitman and Kabir help us to find the traces of divine and transcendental joy. Whitman proclaims:

*“Divine I am inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch’d from,”*

*(Songs of Myself 8)*

These verses reflect the idea of finding joy in the ordinary, small things of life that we tend to overlook for the sake of achieving the best. These verses shed importance on the fact that divine joy can be attained if we change our outlook towards life and change it towards positivity. According to Whitman’s verses, it is we who can find the sublime and divine joy which lies within oneself. Whitman has very well expressed about the soul’s preparation to reach its divine centre. He quotes:

*“We fathom you not- we love you- there is perfection in you also,*

*You furnish your parts towards eternity,*

*Greater or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul” (Whitman 165)*

*“O the joy of that vast elemental sympathy which only the human soul is capable of generating and emitting in steady and limitless floods” (Whitman 177)*

Similarly, Kabir’s also states the different elements such as simplicity over ritual; detachment and oneness; the bliss of Union and the inner experience of divinity to be the road to attain sublime and divine joy. Kabir has emphasized on the fact that divine joy is a state which can be attained by truth, self-realization, devotion, which is attained through intense religious

practices but through our true connection with God. According to Kabir, it is futile to seek God in religious places when one can find God within oneself. This state of self-realization is attained only when we are finally able to get rid of various negative emotions which continue to rule us and realize the sole purpose of our birth. This state according to Kabir is a state of our true connection with God which exists in our soul and it transcends us on the path of sublime and divine joy. One who is intoxicated with the divine elixir is able to reflect this in life.

*“The ocean has merged into the drop*

*Now how can the ocean be found.” (Kabir: The Weaver of God’s Name 727)*

### **Inner conflict and mental peace**

Kabir has explored the theme of war and peace. The war in case of Kabir doesn’t signify the military conflict but the inner conflict of the self. Witnessing today’s scenario there is a dire need to have spiritual and mental peace. If we discuss about the relevance of peace in connection with war, Kabir has used the metaphors of war just to describe the internal and external conflict. It mainly reflects on the idea that our mind itself is a battlefield. This upheaval and chaos in the mind needs to be settled. Whitman on the other hand has witnessed the brutality of the Civil War and its aftermath. He advocates for universal brotherhood over division. His poetry is grounded in lived experience. He reconciles between the personal and collective life, suggesting any kind of adverse situation a step for spiritual awakening. War results in a spiritual transformation of the individual and the masses.

**Conclusion** - It can be thereby deciphered and concluded that the works of Whitman and Kabir would help one in addressing to the problems of the material world. It can act as one of the effective source of self-help for the individuals in handling the different facets of their life. It can be an elementary source to improve and enhance one’s decision making ability by

helping one to attain spiritual realization. In today's era of globalisation where the world is on the run to achieve the best, we must remember that success could only be short-lived if our mental peace and well-being is at stake. One needs to embark on the path of self-realization and enlightenment as one should realize that inner joy and peace of mind should be the highest goal of our lives. This should be the base of leading a balanced life as it would provide inner peace to the human psyche which would eventually evolve into individual harmony and global peace which is the need of the hour. Whitman and Kabir have brought their visionary approach in the forms of their works as a solution to bring about a change in the fabric of the society. This kind of academic research is meant for each and every individual sitting across the globe. The verses of Kabir and Whitman have been handed over to us in the form of leaves of divinity which will remain with us as a literary and spiritual legacy making our foundation stronger for our future lives.

### **Works Cited**

1. Bly, Robert. Kabir: Ecstatic Poems, Beacon Press, 2004.
2. Burroughs, John. Walt Whitman: A Study, ASMR Press, 1969.
3. Carpenter, Edward. Days with Walt Whitman, The Macmillan Company, 1986.
4. Das, G.N. Love Songs of Kabir, Abhinav Publications, 2003.
5. Dharwadekar, Vinay. Trans. Kabir, The Weaver's Songs, Penguin Books India, 2003.
6. Kabir. The Bijak of Kabir. Translated by Linda Hess and Shukdeo Singh, Oxford UP, 2002.
7. Prasoon, Shrikant. Knowing Sant Kabir, Hindology Books, 2012.
8. Tagore, Rabindranath. Songs of Kabir, Macmillan, 1915.
9. Whitman Walt. The Complete Poems, Penguin Books, 2004.