

Transcending Temporality: Indian Philosophic Vision in Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass

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Abstract

The poetry of Walt Whitman occupies a distinctive place in American literature for its profound exploration of universal and spiritual themes. Among the poets of his age, Whitman stands out for his ability to articulate the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of human existence. His celebrated work *Leaves of Grass* particularly reflects a deep engagement with Indian philosophical thought, revealing striking parallels with the spiritual traditions of India. Whitman's poetry presents two significant aspects of human life: the visionary mystic and the political reformer. Through his strong poetic voice, Whitman not only expresses a profound spiritual consciousness but also advocates democratic ideals and social transformation. His poetic vision thus merges mystical insight with a strong commitment to humanity and social progress. This paper attempts to examine *Leaves of Grass* in the light of the philosophical principles found in the *Bhagavad Gita*, especially the metaphysical concepts associated with Advaita Vedanta. The *Bhagavad Gita* presents different dimensions of knowledge that illuminate the nature of human life and spiritual development. It distinguishes between two forms of knowledge: *Aparavidya*, the knowledge obtained through the senses and worldly experience, and *Paravidya*, the higher spiritual knowledge that transcends sensory perception. Similarly, Whitman's poetry reflects the spirit of Nishkama Karma, the doctrine of selfless action without attachment to its fruits. Through his poetic expressions, Whitman portrays the stages of spiritual awareness and the evolution of human consciousness, suggesting a journey from material existence to higher spiritual realization.

Keywords: Indian Philosophy, Vedas, Gita, Cause and effect, Spiritual consciousness mysticism etc.

As one of the greatest poets of America, Walt Whitman excels other poets of his time for revealing the universal elements in his poetry. The specific norms of spirituality inherent in his poetic bulk and more specially in *Leaves of Grass*, make Whitman's poetry overloaded with Indian thoughts and Indian philosophy. The publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 accomplishes him as the representative of such poetic emotions and the poetic excellences which make the universalization of moral height and at the same time the revelation of human values. The publication of *Leaves of Grass*, his definitive cartes-de-visite to the coming generation; it has brought the essentials of Whitman's philosophy on the one hand and the working out the higher literary principles and the high norms of life itself-the norms that earmark a deeper yet the distinctive outfit for displaying causative facts of Indian philosophy.

There are some definitive characteristics of Indian philosophic system such as *Shadangani* (Six branches) of the vedas. The philosophic contents of *Sadangani* can be

revealed through *Saddarshanani* (six views) and they can also be interpreted in the philosophic manner as *Shadupangani* (six subsidiary limbs). All these different mode of ancient Indian philosophy lead to realize the highest wisdom which lies in the existence of One the Supreme and Indivisible. The texts of *Mandukopnishad*, *Srimad Bhagavadgita* and *Ramacharaitmanas* make the division of the knowledge into two forms : para and *aparavidya* (the knowledge of Brahmin and the lower knowledge respectively). The *sutras* (the threads) as the oral and the written texts bring the manifestation of the highest into being. However the efficiency of the transmission of these philosophical *angas* (parts) lies in the oral pattern of the text. The *shad-angani* or six limbs of Indian philosophy such as *Shiksha* (method of study) *Kalpah* (method of ritual or sutras), *Vyakarnam* (grammar) *Niruktam* (philology/etymology), *Chhandah* (metre with the sauce of prosody) and the contents of astronomy and astrology create the sense of literariness of literature in the text. But it will rather be not possible and feasible to make an application to these various *angas* (parts) of Indian philosophy in the text of *Leaves of Grass*. The lack of space and the constraints of time do not allow such workability of these philosophic principles Therefore, the paper is restricted to the analysis of the text of *Leaves of Grass* with reference to the philosophic principles of the *Bhagavad Gita* and more especially the principles and the philosophic theory of the *Advaita Vedanta*.

The Advaita Vedanta is summed up in the word : *tattvamasi* (thou art that) Brahman is Nirguna, without attributes, and is real; all else is unreal; *Jivatma* and *Paramatma* are the same and there lies no difference. The idea of difference arises from *Avidya*, (nescience), it knows its own nature and is free. The universe springs from Brahman, as hairs from man's head; it is the work of Maya. Cause and effect are one and the same (*Karyakaranbheda*), not two different things, as an aggregate of threads is cloth, and there is no cloth apart from the threads that run lengthways and crossways.

There are two kinds of knowledge: *apara vidya* (the knowledge of the phenomenal world) and *paravidya* (the knowledge of the Nou-menon). The *aparavidya* denotes the acquisition of knowledge through senses and the *paravidya* or noumenon leads one to the knowledge beyond senses.

The various threads of the knowledge reveal different attributes of human life in the *Bhagavadgita*. The *Aparavidya* or the knowledge of phenomenal being confines man to various physical karmas with cause and effect theories while *paravidya* relieves one from the theoretic norms of cause and effect. It denotes the sense and sensibility of *niskama Karma* or the disinterestedness in performing various actions of the physical life. The theory of Vedanta, as one experiences in life readings of the *Bhagavedgita*, reveals the cause of nescience and thereby the suffering of man in this world. The *Bhagavadgita* brings the fact into being that a knowledgeable man knows the mysticism of Karma theory and at the same he transcends the bounds of Karma theory.

सक्ताः कर्मणि अविहासः यथा कुर्वन्त, भारत ।
कुर्यात्, विद्वान तथा असक्तः चिकीर्षुः लोक संडग्रहम् ॥

(As ignorant men act with attachment to action, O,
Bharata (Arjuna), so should the wise act without
attachment, thus wishing the welfare of the world)

The expression in the sloka "Lok Sangraham cikirsuh" (wishing the welfare of the world) can be associated with the expression "Loksangraham evapi sampasyam", of sloka 20 of the *Gita* showing an inner view for the welfare of the masses. Here an elaboration of various *varnas* (words) of the sloka should be made in order to bring its interior motifs for denoting the spiritual and democratic concepts of Whitman. Here two main words : one is simple and another is with compound linguistic properties : "Loka"

and "lok sangraha". The former reveals the human word, the creator of the world and all the scriptures except Vedas; while the latter means the suggestion for persuading people to turn to the real and for dissuading them from the unreal of this world. Perhaps the concept of democracy in Whitman's poetry is not an ordinary concept; but it is a concept which brings the theory of *Lokhitaya* (welfare to all) on the basis of performing the righteous action for the well being of all.

Whitman's concept of democracy and the sensibility for Americanness lay in the spiritual and physical development of common man. The broad spectrum of his democracy fully comes to the concept of knowledge of the welfare of common man. Apparently the theoretic norms analysed so far reveal the impact of Vedanta theory in the poetry of Whitman. The theory of Vedanta means the closing chapters of the Vedas and the beginning of the knowledge of the *Upanishads* and the *Gita*.

The poetry of Walt Whitman discloses two important dimensions of human life: a visionary mystic and the political reformer. The leitmotif of this paper lies in showing the impact of *Bhagavadgita* on Whitman's poetry and more especially in the text of *Leaves of Grass*. Emerson's well-known remarks that the text of *Leaves of Grass* is remarkable mixture of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the New York Herald did not refer merely to style but also to the subject matter, the point of view in his poetry. In the hands of Whitman, poetry becomes symbolization of philosophic purview and objectivisation of human emotions. Whitman carries the philosophy of Vedanta into operation. Whitman hardly shows the magical strategies, he follows the Indian method of philosophical system- a system that deals with dualistic and non-dualistic principles of life.

"*The Song of Myself*" brings into being the recurrent referents of Vedantin philosophy such as *Atman*, *Brahma* and these philosophic expressions have been borrowed from the *Bhagavadgita*. In addition to the philosophical referents of the *Gita*, he has used the buddhistic, upanishadic and vedic allusions and signifiers. The metaphysics underlying "Song of Myself" is very close to the teachings of the *Gita*, where God remains as the supreme unmanifest being and the supreme unmanifest spirit of self. Both the material world and the individual-spiritual monads or selves, whether in a state of eternal rest or in their phenomenal existence, inhabit the body of the Lord. God, according to the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* is the Creator, Preserver and Destroyer. The *Gita* describes the Genesis in the passionate terms: The Lord consorts with the unmanifest Nature (*Prakriti*) and deposits seeds of the spiritual monads or selves, into its womb. As a result nature at once becomes manifest, giving rise to its three constituents- goodness, passion and darkness (*Sat*, *Rajas*, *Tamas*).

Whitman deals in his famous poem *Leaves of Grass* with two selves: the individual self and the collected self. To him, the individual self represents psychometric organism which consists of the senses, mind and soul. Whitman remarks:

What do you suppose creation is?.....

What do you suppose I would intimate
you in a hundred ways,

But that man or woman is as good as God?

And that there is no God any more divine than yourself? (*Leaves of Grass* p. 75)

In the series of two selves, the collected self stands for the cosmic form (*virat*) of the unmanifest being. The soul is in the confinement to the passion of low-mimetic zone of human life; the liberation of the soul is possible only through the constant efforts of *buddhi* (intellect). Here once again Whitman comes near to the philosophy of the *Bhagavadgita* wherein one is told about the liberation of soul in Chapter V:

Those whose mind and intellect are wholly absorbed in God, who remain constantly identified with him and having been wiped out wisdom, they reach a

state from which there is no return. (V. Solka 17)

At the instance of the *Bhagavadgita*, Whitman thinks of man and God together in the following lines:

In the face of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass. I find letters from God dropt in the strict and every one ne is signed by god's name. (*Leaves of Grass*, P. 65).

Lord Krishna stresses in the *Bhagavad Gita* about the cyclicity of time - linearity (life and death) but a God realized soul hardly keeps aware of the time linearity and always thinks of living God in animate and inanimate objects of life. The truth of evolution of *Jivatma* from ignorance to wisdom from feebleness to power is mystically revealed in *Shrutis* for they remind one about the power of knowledge and it lies shaping and re-shaping of life or rather one can say the process of becoming of the being. Whitman follows this instance of *gyanmarg* of vedantin philosophy in the following lines:

Believing I shall come again upon the earth after five thousand years
 Waiting responses from Oracles, honoring the gods, saluting the sun,
 Making a fetch of the first rock Powwowing with sticks in the circle of obsesses.
 Helping the Lama or Brahmin as
 He truns the lamps of the idols
 Dancing yet through the streets in a
 Phallic procession.....
 Drinking mead from the skull cup, to
 Sastras and Vedas admirant,
 Minding the Koran. (*Leaves of Grass*, P. 189)

The signs used through various images and metaphoric expressions such as "The earth after five years", the myth of Lama and Brahman, the lamps of the idols, the phallic procession, the skull cup filled with mead, and the referents from sastras, Vedas and Koran bring yet some parallels in the text of the *Gita*, for, in the text of the *Gita*, one hardly finds even the single mention of any personal or subjective god; it, on the other hands reveals how to make the gradual development for attaining the supernatural, the moral height of being in order to become a superhuman the narration of journey from manas to the over soul of the being or adhyatmic height of attainments. Once again Whitman uses such metaphoric expressions which stamp the influence of the *Bhagavadgita*, on him:

And as to your life I reekon you are the leavings of many deaths. (No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before) I hear you whispering there O stars of Heaven, O suns, O grass of graves, O perpetual transfers and promotions. (*Leaves of Grass*-59).

The symbolic and suggestive expressions such "leavings of many deaths", the confession of his own re-birth after ten thousand births, the fossilized image of the grass on the grave and the perpetual transfers and promotions exhibit the textual probing for Whitman's ideas about life, death and the linear configurations are concerned.

In his essay, "Over Soul" Emerson develops the concept of transcendental self. The resemblance between the transcendental self and the upanishadic concept of Atman Brahman is unmistakable, but Whitman is conscious of the two and he uses the dualistic approach to his expressibility "my soul and I" This means as a *bhakta* he feels at a distance from *Bhagavan* and he calls it as "the mystical identity, the real We or you", the discrimination and the causes of association of the total selves or advaitya becomes the

starting as well as the end of all knowledge. Whitman composes so many passages in the text of *Leaves of Grass* by which he shaves the experiences of a non-attached being and stands as a mere spectator who remains quietistic amidst all actions emerging from the theory of causative world. Like a Rishi he closely watches the playfulness of life in the following lines:

The sickness of one of my folks or of myself or ill doing or loss or
 lack of money or depressions or exaltations/Battles, the horrors of
 fratricidal was/the fever of doubtful news the/fitful events
 These come to me days and, nights and go from me again But
 they are not the Me myself
 Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
 Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary
 Looks down, is erect, or bends an ram on an impalpable
 certain rest. (*Song of myself* 71-79).

The upanishadic story of the two birds with specific bent of mind (one tastes the delicious fruit while other looks at them indifferently) can be made applicable to the poetic bulk of Whitman. He sits and looks out on the world of misery, evil and suffering with complete indifference and detachment. To monogenesis chart of "I" and "you" the poetry of Whitman becomes emblematic of two things: real and unreal, illusion and reality and vidya and andya. To Whitman or to the teachings of the *Bhagavadgita*, the all pervading self as the root becomes the self of all (virat form of God). Hence the line of the text "Celebrate myself and sing myself" becomes the adhyatmic credo of Walt Whitman. Whitman's self hardly pinpoints the Germanic dialectics of the self. It does not reflect the Hegelian dialectics of plurality a oneness of thyself. It brings an identical approach to the transcendence of human relationship. He remarks in "*Song of myself*":

To these profound laws of the air, the water and ground, proving
 my interior soul impregnable, and nothing exterior shall ever
 take command of me. (*Leaves of Grass*, 84-85)

The analysis for the interior attributes of adhyatma is not be sought out of the inner beings of man, but it is the part of the humanist self that is to be realized by austerities. The world is governed by the laws of compensation while the soul is independent of such laws, and subsists in its own right; it hardly yields to the external conditioning of the will. The self as the supreme existence is neither the pursuit of the existentialists nor is to be rationalized by the physical conditions. The zone of soul does not pertain to the laws of self negation but it stands of positivity and self certainty, realizable only by its laws. Whitman analyses the creative faculty of the universe. The "opposite equals" of Whitman's poetry are *Gita's* atman and Brahman. The essence of atman finally merges in the singularity of Brahman and becomes the whole of the wholeness. The self (atman) with its capital "S" is bound by the action of physical laws in human body and thrown into good or evil wombs in the transmigratory process. The expression of Whitman..... "I have died myself ten thousand times before" materializes the cyclicity of creation alongwith the theory of time and space.

The philosophic system propounded by the thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, Kant, Sankara Ramanuja and others provides us the opportunities of philosophical hermeneutics. The philosophy of the *Gita* and the Upanishads stresses on the gradual evolution of man. According to their principles, Jivatma manifests the three aspects of the self realization: gyana (knowledge), Ichcha (desire) and Kriya (activity). The being gradually witness an elongation of "I" from its opposing force "Not I"; and gradually Jivatma overpowers the lower particles of the the physical world and triumphs over the

forces of desire and ego-centric level of life. According to Indian philosophy when a term of the earth life is lower, the jivatma withdraws from the physical body and finally merges into invisible worlds. At the instance of Indian philosophy the two fold perception can be seen in the text of "Song of myself: the sensuous egocentric level and the level of the self. The Gita posits four levels of consciousness: the sense, the mind, the the self. The twenty verse in canto 13 of the *Bhagavadgita* reflects these levels of consciousness:

Upadrastanumanta ca bharta bhokta
mahesvarah/paramatmeti capyukto dehesminpurusah parah.

The soul (purusa) having been vested with in the body is called a witness, because he gives consent, he is called a permitter as he experiences pleasure and pain, he is called experiences being the master of the body he is great Lord (Maheswara). Really speaking, this Purusa by his own nature is the supreme should. In spite of His residence in the body, he is untrained and unattached. (Canto 13, Verse. 22.)

Whitman is fully aware of the secrets of *Atma and Jivatma*; and he therefore remarks and about the metaphysics of human soul thus :

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. And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own his funeral drest in his shroud And I say to any man or woman. Let your soul stand cool and composed before million Universes (*Leaves of Grass*. p. 86).

Whitman reveals the various stages of the evolution of Manas (the spiritual consciousness) in his poetry. These stages lead upto the evolution of Buddhi, the pure Reason or the Higher understanding which ends in wisdom. From the level of *Manas* (intellect), Whitman sketches the oneness with others in the in the text of *Leaves of Grass*.

They seize, every object and lead it harmlessly through me
I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers and am happy,
To touch my person to some one else's is about as
much as I can stand (*Leaves of Grass* p. 28).

The concept of *Sthitaprajna* of the Gita celebrates the points that such a man does not move from the righteous way of life. Whitman like a *sthitaprajna* sings his songs and in they he brings the emotions of non-attachment :

I celebrate myself and sing myself and what assume you shall assume, for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (*Leaves of Grass*, 78) In the same poem, he acknowledges the energy as "Nature without check with original energy". Here, the phrase original energy becomes suggestive of the contents of higher self.

He accepts the constituents of time and space and thus rises beyond the temporal conditions. He has utilized as least forty times the conjunction, "where" for bringing into being the following images: "cattle stand" "trip hammers", "the tear shaped balloon" "the she whole swims", "the steam ship trails", "the half burn'd bring" "the dense starr'd flag", "the" mocking bird", "the hay Rick stands", "sun - down shadows", "the humming - bird", "the bee hives range" and the "yellow crowned heron". These images conjoin the temporal and the spiritual objects together first to from the wholeness of life. Whitman as a sadhaka undergoes the deeper influences of the *Bhagavadgita* chapters 15,16 and 17 of Vol. 11, Issue 6 (April 2026)

The Gita reveal the nature of purushottama (the supreme Being). Lord Krishna makes divisiveness in different species according to their nature.

Whitman with his usual metamorphosis describes the faith in an action of good and evil and the nature of the supreme being in section 3,4 and 5 of song of myself. Through the syntax of folklore, Whitman uses the term "talkers" and their "talk" in order to convey the mysticism of the Gita in section 3 of *Song of Myself*. It becomes now a fact that Whitman in his song of myself deals with the philosophic system of India and more especially the influence of the Gita on his poetry. Apart from the vedantic concept of the *Gita*, Whitman also leans on Indian philosophic system that is being analysed in Upanishads, Puranas and other Brahma Sutras of Indian philosophy. In *Leaves of Grass* Whitman has a mission to carry on for the sake of society. His urges to deliver a message of mystical import establishes his concept of the divine world. He thus becomes a prophet for a new era of paternal human relations.

Know you solely to drop in the earth the germs of a
greater religion the following chants each for its
kind I sing (*Leaves of Grass* p. 07).

The over all impression one holds after reading the poetic bulk of Whitman is that he decides the final design of his *Leaves of Grass*. But in the making of his poems especially "*Song of Myself*" could not be composed, without the *upanishadic* teachings and the messages of *the Gita*. The use of *puranic* philosophy *upanishadic* mysticism and the philosophy of Sankhya have been worked out in the composition of the text of *Leaves of Grass*. But all these philosophic theories can fully be realized if one reads the entire poem instead of reading it into fragments.

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