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MYSTICISM OF WALT WHITMAN AND PURAN SINGH: A COMPARATIVE STUDY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THEIR "SONG OF MYSELF" AND "THE BRIDE OF THE SKY" RESPECTIVELY

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ABSTRACT

Walt Whitman and Puran Singh are the two great poets belonging to two different cultures. Whitman inherited western cultural problematic and Puran Singh Eastern Indian and in particular the Punjabi cultural problematic. These two cultures differ from each other in many ways yet one finds a cord of identity both thematic and structural between the poetry of Whitman and Puran Singh. The present study analyzes the nature of mysticism in the poetry of Walt Whitman and Puran Singh and brings out their unique qualities, similarities and differences.

Keywords: mysticism, noetic, consciousness, Cartesian, antinomian

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Walt Whitman and Puran Singh are the two great poets belonging to two different cultures. Whitman inherited western cultural problematic and Puran Singh Eastern Indian and in particular the Punjabi cultural problematic. These two cultures differ from each other in many ways yet one finds a cord of identity both thematic and structural between the poetry of Whitman and Puran Singh. Therefore a comparative study between the works of the two poets is feasible. It is desirable all the more because Puran Singh himself has boldly acknowledged the influence of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* on him: "To him Walt Whitman appears as a poetic prophet whose spirit has passed on into his own and who leads him into that great good place where kindred souls disport themselves in mystic delight and companionship" (Maini, p.viii). When Puran Singh came back to the Sikh fold late in his life, he found the poetic spirit of Whitman almost identical with the Sikh spirit. He called him "the Guru's Sikh born in America" and wrote: "From the striking identity of Whitman's spirit with the spirit of the Sikh, I do feel as though a Sikh of the Guru had

slipped out to America from behind the screen to plant the Guru's ideals for the future humanity in the new soil" (Maini 7).

The discussion of the mystical attitudes of Whitman and Puran Singh comes under thematology which is a sub discipline of comparative literature. Thematology is a theoretical discipline of studying themes. Theme is that structural and aesthetic aspect of a literary work which presents the problematic of life and existence and is shared by various cultures archetypally. Ulrich Weisstein quotes Harry Levin who approves thematology in the following words: "We are now willing to admit that a writer's choice of subject is an aesthetic decision, that the conceptual outlook is a determining part of the structural pattern, that the message is somehow inherent in the medium" (Weisstein 135). He also quotes Van Tiegham who assigned to thematology (stoffgeschichte) the task of determining not only "the dependence of more recent authors upon their foreign predecessors" but also "the role played by their own genius, their ideal, and their art in the variations they have played on a

common theme" (Weisstein 130-131). So the study of themes is a valid subject in comparative literature.

It is important to understand the term mysticism before the mystical attitudes of Whitman and Puran Singh are discussed. This is because mysticism does not have the same meaning for all readers or critics. F.C. Happold's statement is relevant here. He says: "To some it (mysticism) is simply a type of confused, irrational thinking. In the popular mind it is associated with spiritualism and clairvoyance, with hypnotism and even with occultism and magic..... To some it is bound up with visions and revelations. Others use it as a synonym for other-worldliness..... Some would limit its use to that rare state of consciousness which is found in the contemplative saints" (36).

So mysticism is a temper, a mood rather than a doctrine or a systematic philosophy of life. Evelyn Underhill in her "arbitrary classification" suggests five "phases of the mystical life" viz. 1. The Awakening of Self; 2. The Purification of Self; 3. Illumination; 4. The Dark Night of the Soul; 5 Union (Underhill 169-170). On the other hand William James in his *The Varieties of Religious Experiences* (1902) has described mysticism as a state of consciousness characterized by four qualities viz. ineffability which means inexpressible in ordinary human language and known only through the experience of itself; noetic quality which means the revelation of a truth; transiency because the illumination is very short, and passivity because the mystic only receives the revelation.

The above description of mysticism by William James is quite comprehensive. Roger Asselineau and James E. Miller have found the four qualities of mysticism in Whitman's poetry, and particularly in his 'Song of Myself.' Asselineau analyzes section 5 of this poem to show the four qualities. In fact this section was also cited by James as an example of "the sporadic type of mystical experience." Consider the section:

I believe in you my soul, the other I am
must not abase itself to you,
And you must not be abased to the other.
Loafe with me on the grass, Loose the stop
from your throat,

Not words, not music or rhyme I want,
Not custom or lecture, not even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved'
voice.

I mind how once we lay such a transparent
summer morning,
How you settled your head athwart my
hips,
And gently turn'd over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone,
And plunged your tongue to my bare-stript
heart,
And reached till you felt my beard, and
reach'd
till you held my feet.

Swiftly arose and spread around me the
peace and knowledge that pass all the
arguments of the earth.

And I know that the hand of God is the
promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the
brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also
my brothers, and the women my sisters
and lovers,
And that a kelson of the creation is love.

In this section there is a "genuine mystical ecstasy." Mystics have always asserted that the knowledge bestowed by their experience passes "all the argument of the earth." There is an intuitive knowledge that originates not in the logic of the mind but in the spontaneity of the soul (Miller, *Walt Whitman* 151). The mystical experience in the passage is sporadic because the poet gains sudden fleeting insight or transcendent knowledge. All mystical emotion is accompanied by an intense and unutterable joy and Whitman is no exception to this rule. "Each moment and whatever happens thrills me with joy," he says in section 24 of "Song of Myself." James E. Miller has tried to establish that the whole "Song of Myself" is a dramatic representation of an "inverted mystical experience." According to him, section 1-5 show entry into mystical state; section 6-16 awakening of self; 17-32 purification of self, 33-37 illumination and the Dark Night of the Soul; 38-43 union (faith and love); 44-49 union (perception); 50-52 emergence from the

mystical state (Miller, *Whitman's Song of Myself* 135).

But Whitman is not a mystic in the traditional sense of the term. His mysticism is of a special kind. He is not a mystic like the Sufis. His mysticism also differs from the Upanishads. This is because unlike them he never rejects body and the senses. The "antinomian impulse a necessary means to the freedom without which there could not be a full sense of that sort of community in which men may realize the dignity which makes them human" (Pearce 5) was very strong in him. He revolted against the puritanical norms of life. He gives equal value to the body and says "I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul" (sec.21). In section 24, he presents himself as "Turbulent fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding and proclaims "I believe in the flesh and the appetites." But he is not merely sensual. Only his mysticism is "bodied." The body is a means and not an end in itself. It is the "theatre and the point of origin for his mystical states" (Asselineau 4). In his poetry mystical joy and sexual climax are confused. The sexual act is as upsetting to him as a revelation: "Is this then a touch? Quivering me to a new identity (sec, 28). In fact Whitman considers coitus as a mode of knowledge. In this connection, Asselineau says, "It is undeniable that for him sexual climax was the source - and condition - of suprarational communication, of mystical revelations" (Asselineau 8). In section 5 of "Song of Myself" quoted above, sexual imagery is used to describe the state of mystic trance.

Unlike the traditional mystic, there seems to be too much self assertion in "Song of Myself." Self effacement is partial. Pearce is of the opinion that the poet's ego asserts itself endemically in his poetry. He says "In Whitman's poetry, the ego is made not only to assert but to preserve itself. Its tremendous creative powers somehow militate against that fusion of ego and cosmos... If we see a relationship, it is because Whitman has made it, not because it was already there for him to discover and report" (Pearce 166). No doubt Whitman has kept some ego but he is not egocentric at all as Pearce says. He has kept only a minimal 'I' in order to structure his world. Through this minimal 'I'

Whitman gives the consciousness of the cosmos. This aspect of his poetry brings him close to the Sikh way of life. Sikhism does not believe in the annihilation of 'I' as Upanishads preach. Through the divinely integrated 'I' you structure the world. This is what happens in Whitman also though with some difference. Whitman expands his poetic 'I' so much that nothing is excluded. He calls himself a "kosmos" "absorbing all to myself." He writes:

I am of old and young, of the foolish as
much as the wise,
Regardless of others, ever regardful of
others... (sec.16)

He further says in sec. 20:

To me the converging objects of the
Universe perpetually flow
All are written to me....

In sec.24. he has this to say:

Divine I am inside and out, and I make holy
Whatever I touch or am touch'd from....

But he is as he says "no stander above men and women or apart from them. No more modest then immodest." Like a mystic, he sees unity in diversity. For him "a leaf of grass is no less than the journey work of the stars" (sec.31). Like a mystic, he asks:

Who goes there? Hankering, gross,
mystical, nude;
How is it I extract strength from the beef I
eat?
What is a man anyhow? What am I?
What are you? (sec. 20)

It is obvious that Whitman was influenced by Emerson and therefore, it is easy to trace Whitman's mysticism to Emersonian transcendentalism and to see him simply fulfilling Emerson's doctrine of self-trust, according to which everyman should commune with the divinity within him. He resembles the ideal American scholar in the mystical insights of his poems. But actually he was original, fresh and far more than a mere imitator. Thoreau found him "wonderfully like the Orientals." James E. Millar has tried to sum up the characteristics of Whitman mysticism saying that in the last analysis, Whitman's temperament seems eminently unsuited to the selflessness of the Christian mystic and to the passivity of the Oriental.... It is possible that Whitman, out of the multiple obscure sources and

out of his own soul, created a unique mysticism designed for America - a "democratic" mysticism available to every man on equal terms, embracing both the body and soul, science and myth, life and death, the active and passive, material and spiritual" (Miller, *Whitman* 154). It may also be noted that Whitman like other mystics uses symbols and the technique of 'indirection' to convey his perception of the transcendental reality. But as he believes that "the unseen is proved by the seen," he uses many catalogues and concrete imagery to convey his cosmic consciousness.

Coming to Puran Singh's mysticism, it is found that he is quite close to Whitmanesque mysticism at places. As told above, Puran Singh was highly influenced by Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and at places his poetry bears the mark of this influence to point of identification. But at the same time he was almost equally influenced by other sources also like Buddhism while in Japan, Vedantic thought in the company of Swami Ram Tirath and finally, the philosophy of the Sikh Gurus made a lasting impact on his psyche and a sea change came into his being. His mysticism is, therefore, the result of all the above influences. It is discussed below.

Like Whitman, Puran Singh does not reject the body and the physical love, rather he elevates it and makes it sublime. Actually here Puran Singh is in line with the Sikh Gurus who combined gyan and bhakti and did not consider the body an illusion. In his book *Walt Whitman and the Sikh Inspiration*, Puran Singh quotes parallel passages from Guru Nanak and Whitman's 'Starting from Paumanok' to prove that "Walt Whitman's body and soul are spoken of in the spirit of the great Sikh Masters" (111). It may be pointed out that the four qualities characteristic of the mystical experience as described by William James and discussed above, can be easily found in many poems of Puran Singh.

Puran Singh's mysticism is essentially the mysticism of the Sikh Gurus. This is because ultimately it is the Sikh philosophy of life that prevails on him. A very powerful and spiritual metaphor developed by the Sikh Gurus to realize God is that of a passionate newly married woman yearning for her husband lover (God). This perception of the universe through the bridal

consciousness was imbibed by Puran Singh. Another mystical metaphor in Sikhism is the sword that inspired Puran Singh very much. According to Puran Singh, "Sword is the symbol of the creative process of that mysterious incomprehensible creator-complex of Nature" (*Puran Singh Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1,2 p.23). The "Flash of Sword" in the Guru's religion is necessary to reveal the dark mystery-complex to which the Sword itself belongs (Gurbhagat Singh, *Puran Singh Studies* vol 3, no. 1,2 p.21). The "sword" according to Puran Singh is also related to song and beauty in which the Sikh Gurus perceived the universe. All these aspects of Sikh religion shaped his world view.

Whitman inherited the Cartesian problematic. Despite his efforts to combine body and the mind, they remain disjointed. His "Song of Myself" is the communication of an expansive 'I' He experiences the universe in "bipolar unity" as Howard J. Waskow believes. Yet he could not integrate the polarities into one strain. On the other hand, Puran Singh inherited Indian consciousness that has remained free from the Cartesian split of mind and body and has rather developed into a Sahaj-psyche or the consciousness of cosmic balance both as Shunya and hyper-intensity, sometimes called "Surti" or "Chetna" (Gurbhagat Singh, *Western Poetics and Eastern Thought* 70). Puran Singh's mysticism is also different from Vedanta. Unlike Vedanta, he sees body and desire as real and not illusion. His belief is in the Sikh philosophy which believes in the 'rasik' way of life. It means enjoying the beauty of life and nature with cosmic intoxication, while Upanishads and Vedanta are without the sense of incredible beauty. He writes "All the old Brahmanical renunciation and asceticism based on this philosophy of self is the petty turning away from the Beautiful One. It is based on the sorrow of separation" (Puran Singh, *Walt Whitman and the Sikh Inspiration* 48). He further says "feeling of life is not generated in us by our so called self, but by the beautiful spirit of things. And it is the response of the universe which makes like worth living" (Puran Singh, *Walt Whitman and the Sikh Inspiration* 49).

Another feature of Puran Singh's mysticism is his powerful faith in "Guru Surti" or "Guru

Consciousness.” It is the ultra-psychic faculty in which there is a dialogue of body and mind but in which both transcend themselves. God is always present in it and this “Guru-Surti” is flooded by energy which is divine and militant as well. In one of his poems “Surti Te Hankar” or ‘Consciousness and Ego,’ he refers to Iqbal’s and Nietzsche’s view of the self and rejects the ego because it is limited and is a law to itself:

Consciousness is never alone,
Ego is forever lonely and friendless,
Only this difference
Consciousness is preserved by God’s lovers,
Know this secret:
Consciousness is God’s flame in man
Ego vile, brute barbarian.

In another poem, Puran Singh writes:

Consciousness is not alone
Consciousness is a great army,
The Commander of the army coming
behind.

“By calling ‘Surti’ as ‘great army’ Puran Singh has definitely separated it from individualistic mind-consciousness” (Gurbhagat Singh, *Puran Singh Studies* vol.1, p. 9). Perceiving life through “Guru-Surti” is living with God. He explains it further saying that it is analogical to the spirit of a newly married woman yearning passionately for her husband lover (God). A total realization of universe and life is possible only through “Guru-Surti.” “Puran Singh believes that the Gurus have given us the life of realization of beauty and luminosity all at the same time. There are no Freudian or ascetic schisms in it. It is an art energy moving in and toward large possibilities, from Eros to Buddhahood, and Sword to Flute, all in the same breath” (Gurbhagat Singh, *Puran Singh Studies*, vol. 2, pp. 52-53).

From the above discussion, it should be clear that Puran Singh is not a mystic in the accepted religious sense of the word. Like Whitman, he does not consider libidinal desire and physical love inferior. Love to him is a substance and concrete thing. It is not an abstraction. His integral consciousness is not ready to accept any kind of dichotomy. In his poetic play “The Bride of the Sky” he combines saintliness and libidinal desire, heavenly and earthly love, freedom and love. In the

play, a young man of earth falls in love with a heavenly apashchara named Alanika. She comes down on the earth to love him. The earth and the heavenly love are seen one and the same thing. The romantic love is sublimated here and lifted to the divine level. The human desire is shown to be equally divine because it has transcendental element in it. Alanika’s heavenly lover the Yaksha is angry and complains about this. But Alanika replies:

But is not love and freedom one?
Absolutely free?
Is not the choice always mine?
Love is beyond all sense of possession,
beyond all needs of sense
It is self-realization of God in Beauty. (Puran Singh, *The Bride of the Sky and other Poems* 27-28)

The saint-lover also tries to believe that:

No soul is single, it seems,
We love a myriad when we love one,
And we have to love millions as if we
really loved one. (Puran Singh, *The Bride of the Sky and other Poems* 40)

Obviously love is not to be confused with self-centred personalism. It should be a means to extend ourselves. In the play, Puran Singh attacks Vedantic kind of asceticism and thinks it to be a cremation fire. It is a sign of death to him. Naturally intoxication is through fullness of being i.e. by being responsive to body, instincts and higher things at the same time. Richness of being is possible only when you love. This kind of devotional love is close to bhakti. Though ultimately, the holy man’s love is not fulfilled and he dies, yet his yearning for his beloved has made him flow with life energy which is nothing short of divinity. According Puran Singh Gyan is reflected through body and face is the great emblem of one’s experience and knowledge or Gyan. In this way, Puran Singh in his mysticism does not accept any gap between being and consciousness unlike the Western tradition inherited by Whitman. The milk-giver’s face is ablaze with the flame of knowledge that confirms the faith in the knowledge of being. This kind of integration does not take place in Whitman where being and consciousness do not come together; though he tries, yet some sort of schism remains.

Another important poem of Puran Singh to highlight his mystical attitude is "Puran Nath Jogi." In the poem, he adopts Whitman's free verse but transforms it into a different genre in order to communicate a consciousness of Nothingness or Shunya. Puran Singh seems to present the Buddhist kind of anatta. "Sundran's womanly love for Puran, his mother's maternal anguish for him, have been presented by the poet as aspects of cosmic concentration, radiating out of anatta or not-I awareness" (Gurbhagat Singh, *Western Poetics and Eastern Thought* 75). Puran Singh compares mother Ichhran's heart with that of God and portrays her heart when she was separated from her son Puran:

God Himself descends into the mother's heart,
In her arms, in her lap,
God Himself raises her sight and straightens,
The mother is God's some most beautiful presence.

Ichharan's love for Puran is love in Dhyana. She loves him through "Guru-Surti." In the same way, Sundran's love for Puran is not libidinal at all. Her attraction towards Puran is solely spiritual and based on the faith that man-woman relationship is life giving. For Sundran, this relationship is a sublime union of two burning lamps. She says clearly:

Nathji, higher than the worldly joys
Happiness, joy of spirit, spirit begetting spirit,
Like flames of two lamps subtly uniting.

According to Puran Singh any kind of human relationship, whether man-woman or child-parent, it is full only through "Guru-Surti." Thus one finds in his poem "the luminous dhyana-body in which mind and body are enjoined together" (Gurbhagat Singh, *Western Poetics and Eastern Thought* 76). In this way Puran Singh has overcome the dichotomy between the physical and the mental. Whereas Whitman being rooted in his Cartesian problematic, structures the universe through his minimal 'I' but Puran Singh does this through no-mind consciousness or "Guru-Consciousness." It should be known well that though Puran Singh in many of his mystical experiences has expressed his staunch faith in the religion of the Sikh Gurus, but he should not

be taken at all dogmatic and orthodox. In his poem "If You Were Mine" he boldly says (in tune with the Sikh spirit) that when God resides in the heart, all else is useless:

If you were mine,
I would look at you every minute,
Then I won't need temple;
You would be my mosque, church.

In another poem, "Come to Me My God" he expresses his mystical feelings in this way:

Come to me my God
Come with leisure,
And throw away those bells in my hands
Which I took to worship Thee,
And come, extinguish with your
Own hands
The lamps I placed on the plate
To worship Thee.

For Puran Singh God is not something abstract. He is a reality and to be experienced with senses also. This view is held by the Sikh Gurus also. But in Whitman, this kind of notion of God is not there. Consider what Puran Singh says:

Glory rains everywhere,
And God is the most Beautiful person.
(from an untitled poem by Puran Singh written in a letter dt. 3.5.16 to his friend Ranbir Singh)

A very important difference between the mysticism of Whitman and Puran Singh is that whereas Whitman considers coitus as a mode of knowledge, this notion is nowhere explicit or even implicit in Puran Singh's poetry. This is because Puran Singh believes in "Guru-Consciousness" in which both body and mind are combined and both transcend themselves in the experience of the universe. As for Whitman, being rooted in the Cartesian dichotomy, sex remains as a "starting point." A number of parallel examples of mystical attitude can be cited in the poetry of Whitman and Puran Singh. Just as Whitman sang in "Song of Myself" "A morning-glory of my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books" Puran Singh also in his poem "Philosophy and Art" says:

Philosophy stands for deceiving,
It expels from God's world, throws in to some cave.

In his poem "Dil Mera Khachinda" Puran Singh says:

My heart longs for thee,
I am but a kite
Flown by the Master.

In section 32 of "Song of Myself" Whitman says:

I think I could turn and live with animals,
They're so placid and self-contained,
I stand and look at them long and long.

But Puran Singh goes much beyond in this mystical attitude. In his poem "The Grazing Cattle" he says:

Seeing them graze, I long
To be an animal again,
I am tired of donning man's mantle.

The titles of Puran Singh's Punjabi verse volumes are very revealing. All his three collections –*Khule Maidan* (The Wide Open Grounds), *Khule Kund* (The Open Veils) and *Khule Asmani Rang* (The Wide Sky Blue Colours) show his love for the mystic freedom and his cosmic consciousness as well.

Many other instances can be cited from Puran Singh's poetry to show that mysticism is a dominant note in his poetry. The influence of the Sikh Gurus was immense on him. He imbibed their Philosophy, their metaphors, their imagery and used them to express his mystical experience in his poetry, though at the same time, traces of Buddhist influence can be seen at places. No doubt he has frankly acknowledged the influence of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, but it does not separate him from the Sikh thought because he found "the poetic spirit of Walt almost identical with the Sikh spirit." From the above discussion, it is clear that both Whitman and Puran Singh are great mystics but their mysticism is not of the traditional type. If there is any difference between the mysticism of Whitman and Puran Singh, it is on account of their different cultural problematic inherited by them and also because of the different influences they received. As has been shown above that in their mystical attitudes and experiences, they come close to the point of identity at many places and at the same time remain distinguished from each other at other places. The anti-nomian impulse was very strong in Whitman yet he could not overcome his Cartesian roots, while Puran Singh knows no dichotomy. He found the revolutionary Weltanschauung or world-view of the Sikh Gurus

wholly in tune with the compulsions of his psyche. Ultimately his consciousness merges in "Guru Consciousness" and in a mystic rapture he says:

Punjab is neither Hindu nor Muslim
Punjab lives by the Guru's Name.

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