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WHITMAN AS A MYSTIC POET

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Abstract:- Mysticism is a temperament or a mood rather than a systematic philosophy of life. Mystic is thoroughly anti-rational and anti-scientific in temper. The most interesting thing about Whitman as a mystic poet is that in his book we find the typical characteristics of absolutely all the various mystic doctrines. Leaves of Grass, once considered as, "the expression of beast," is now regarded as, "the Bible of democracy." The poet invites his soul (self) to stay in the arms and lap of nature. He begins his observation and appreciation of nature from a blade of grass. A mystic has a conviction that the human soul is eternal. The body dies but soul lives on. The facts of science are very useful for Whitman, but the real "I" about which he sings in his poem dwells beyond the world of facts and science. He is frequently exploring the material so as to penetrate to the 'reality' that lies behind. The smallest sprout shows a there is really no death. Whitman approaches democracy from a new angle. His democratic faith is related to his concept of mystical self. He believes that democracy must yield spiritual results. The present paper attempts to uncover an undercurrent of mysticism in Whitman's poetry.

Keywords:- Whitman, mysticism, democracy, supernatural, divine, soul.

Mysticism is a temperament or a mood rather than a systematic philosophy of life. Mystic is thoroughly anti-rational and anti-scientific in temper. A mystic has comprehensions of a world of divine reality behind and within the ordinary world of sense perception. The poet feels that the external universe speaks to him to his soul through his senses. He is eager to know who it is that speaks to him. Finally he comes to the conclusion that the external world must be animated by a soul of its own. But when does this soul of nature come? Its soul must be the same as that of the soul of man. He does not think but feel that the supreme soul i.e. God is one and the same assuming myriads of forms. The mystic believes not only that all Nature is alive but also that there is essential identity of being between Man, Nature and God. He also taken it for granted that all things in this visible world are only forms and manifestations of the one divine life. All these manifestations and shapes are merely temporary phase; while the soul that informs them is eternal. He looks beyond the world of sensations and through it at the divine which is the only reality for him. He realizes this truth not by intellect and reason but by his intuition or by inspiration and by his mystical supernatural experiences. However, it is all a matter of faith and experience because, if he is asked about it, he has no reason for his conviction. His vision is intuitive and he feels that we can have this vision through contemplation and meditation. Union with the soul of Nature is possible because it is the same as the soul of man.

The most interesting thing about Whitman as a mystic poet is that in his book we find the typical characteristics of absolutely all the various mystic doctrines. Without having read them or heard them, they rose naturally out of his own temperament. He has developed

characteristic mystic tenets, often even more striking and paradoxical than those of his predecessor's. Whitman often remained lying for hours together contemplating the leaves of grass, the apple tree, the blossom and the sky and such moments, he would have a mystic experience, when his soul would embrace the entire universe. This all-pervasive mystical note in the *Leaves of Grass* makes it, "a sort of American Bible."¹ He has a feeling of oneness with all created things and beings and his soul would embrace even the smallest objects as well as greatest. This feeling of "oneness" with both the large and the small objects appears frequently in his poetry. He gives expression to this feeling of "oneness" to this mystical experience.

Whitman does not reject the physical existence, for it is only through the physical that we can have perception of the spiritual. This makes Whitman a poet both of 'the body and the soul.' His acceptance of the body differentiates him from the other mystics. So *Leaves of Grass* has been regarded as, "the Bible of nations."² God has created both the body and the soul, so both are equally important. Both the lady and the prostitute find a place in his poetry because the inner reality, the soul of the both, has been created by the same 'Almighty.' So both are equally sacred and divine.

Leaves of Grass, once considered as, "the expression of beast,"³ is now regarded as, "the Bible of democracy." The poet invites his soul (self) to stay in the arms and lap of nature. He begins his observation and appreciation of nature from a blade of grass. This spear of grass offers the gates leading to the road of mysticism. The poet travels on it and proclaims that he is made up of the soil and the air he breaths. He considers nature as the best teacher. He wishes this soul to be in harmony with the soul of nature. Though there is diversity in nature, yet there is harmony in it. "Song of myself" represents an awakening of the self and for the first time coming to consciousness the real meaning of being alive and in the flesh, of seeing, hearing, tasting and feeling. This awakening of consciousness penetrates beyond the senses. It discovers secrets and uncovers mysteries... the eternity of the self, glories of the body and soul. The spear of grass symbolizes the miracles of the universe as it starts the poet's mystical journey.

According to Whitman, Nature is the best teacher of mankind. The poet wants the people to gain first hand experience from their own eyes and ears. Books only describe what the poet has seen. It is the second hand knowledge and experience for the people. Whitman informed that the first hand knowledge of nature is reward in itself. The poet describes intoxicating life in houses and rooms. He wants to go to nature to mingle and become one with her. He wants to roam in the lap of nature, listening to the "echoes, ripples, buzzes, whispers, loveroot, silk thread, crotch and vine" and observing life in the woods and smelling the fresh greenness of the leaves. He likes the play of shine and scene of the trees, "a few light kisses, a few embraces, reaching around of arms, the full moon trill." Every insignificant activity of nature has a meaning for the poet. This treatment of the nature is personal. Every object in nature symbolizes the greatness of the God. His equal love for animals, birds, flowers, trees, plants show his democratic approach to nature, so he invites the readers to get united with nature. He sings of the body.... the physical and of the soul..... the spiritual. He goes into a mystic trance. The loving bedfellow is compared to God, and the poet's encounter with the bed-fellow suggests his mystical encounter. The result is the divine bliss. The poet's sexual vision correlates his mystic vision resulting in the spiritual fusion of the individual soul

and the supreme soul. He stresses the thirst of 'urge'.....'the procreant urge' which fills the world and which is the essence of life, and without it there is stagnation. All parts of the body are equally important. All creation in the world, petty or great, animate or inanimate are equally sacred. He does not appreciate one and depreciate the other. He recollects a bygone scene, when on a clear summer morning, he lay on the grass with his beloved soul. When the body has been elevated to a state of bliss by the soul, the poet achieves transcendental illumination.

A mystical experience transcends 'all arguments of the earth.' Their knowledge is not result of the logic of the mind, but it is the result of spontaneity of the soul.

In the preface Whitman admitted that the reader is right in asking the poet to indicate the path between reality and their souls. The "Song of Myself" indicates that he is "the poet of the body" and also "the poet of the soul."

"The pleasures of heaven are with me
and the pains of hell are with me
The first I graft and increase upon myself,
The latter I translate into a new tongue."4

This is what a new kind of mysticism asserting the self and wandering. He relates the body to the mystical experience. The "song of myself" presents his entrance into the trance of the mystic:

"I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent
Summer morning,
You settled your head athwart my hips and
gently turned over upon me,
And panted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and
Plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart,
and reached till you felt my bread
And reached till you held my feet."5

The passage, in spite of the sex-imagery, refers to the fusion of the body and the soul. In this passionate scene the lovers are body and soul.

A mystic has a conviction that the human soul is eternal. The body dies but soul lives on. Whitman accepted the Darwinian concept of evolution, however, he never lost his faith in power working behind the material, a power which is referred to as God. Though believing in science and technology, he went beyond them into the realm of the unknown, and these mystical experiences were conveyed by him in his many poems.

In "Passage To India," he celebrates the progress of the human soul conquering the earth, but he believes that it must not stop there, it must seek God through the Universe, until it finds Him and, "Nature and Man shall be disjoined and diffused no more."

"Bath me O God in thee, mounting to thee

I and my soul to range in range of thee"⁶

Whitman accepted science in this profoundly religious and mystical spirit and built it into his poetry. He sang in the "Song of Myself,"

"I accept reality and does not question it,

Materialism first and last imbuing,

Hurrah for positive science!"⁷

The facts of science are very useful for Whitman, but the real "I" about which he sings in his poem dwells beyond the world of facts and science. He is frequently exploring the material so as to penetrate to the 'reality' that lies behind. His poems are so many explorations and so many expressions of his mystical quest for the 'divine reality.' His mystical experience of his self comes through various stages. The first may be termed the "Awakening of self," the second the "Purification of self." Purification involves an acceptance of the body and all its functions. This reflects the poet's goal to achieve mystical experience through physical reality. According to Whitman the self can be purified not through purgation but through the acceptance of the physical. The mystical experience paves the way for the merging of physical reality with a universal reality Like all mystics he believes in the existence of the soul, in the existence of divine spirit, in the immortality of the human soul and in the capacity of a human being to establish communication between spirit and Divine spirit. But he is quite different from the traditional mystics. He declares that he sings of the body as much as of the soul. He feels that spiritual communication is possible without sacrificing the flesh.

When we call Whitman a mystic, then obviously the question arises on what he gives more emphasis, body or soul? Like oriental mystics he does not give over emphasis on soul. Rather to him both the soul and body are equally important. He himself makes it clear that "the soul is not more than the body," just as "the body is not more than soul." God is not even more important than one's self. He asks people not to be "curious about God," because God is omnipresent and omnipotent. He says;

"In the faces of men and women I see God,

God in my own face in the glass."⁸

In "song of myself," we know that a child appears with leaves of grass in his hands and asks the poet, "What is the grass?" The poet replies, "The grass is itself a child or may be it is the handkerchief of the Lord." The grass is a symbol of the divinity latent in the common life of man. It is also a symbol of cycle of life and death. Like a true mystic, Whitman believes that no one really dies. It is for him rebirth; it is the way by which man can establish a relation being one with God. He says that even:

The smallest sprout shows a there is really no death.... Indeed, one can say that mysticism constitutes the very poetic form of Whitman's poems. He looked upon the universe as constituting a unity of disparate objects, unified the Divine Spirit. The dominant metaphor of grass presents a case for unity and harmony, a basic component of structure. Mysticism is an experience that can be achieved by spiritual journey from the immortal human soul to the divine spirit. It has a spiritual meaning, which is not apparent to the senses nor to the intellect. To him, time and space are unreal; since both can be overcome by man's spiritual conquest.

Whitman approaches democracy from a new angle. His democratic faith is related to his concept of mystical self. He believes that democracy must yield spiritual results. He takes recourse to metaphysical doctrine to discuss the material world. To him soul is limitless and this limitless itself speaks for equality. And the equality is potential. He seldom lost touch with the physical reality even in the midst of mystical experience. Physical phenomena were symbols of spiritual reality. He believed that "the unseen is proved by seen." He makes use of highly sensuous and concrete image to convey his perception of divine reality. He finds a purpose behind natural objects like grass, sea, birds, animals and flowers. The smallest sprout of grass shows that there is really no death. The dominant metaphor of grass represents unity and harmony. "As a devotee of transcendentalism, Whitman also believes in mysticism. As we go through his 'Songs of Myself,' we find that he gives lot of emphasis on mystical experiences. Mysticism is not really a coherent philosophy of life, but more a temper of mind."⁹ His vision is intuitive feeling the presence of a divine reality behind and within the ordinary world of sense perception.

Conclusion:

To sum up, it is to be concluded that Walt Whitman is a mystic as much as he is a poet of democracy and science, but a mystic without a creed. He looks at the body as the manifestation of the spirit which is delivered by death into a higher life. What we call Whitman's mysticism is democratic mysticism which is available to every man with equal terms embracing contradictory elements. But it is undeniable that Whitman's mysticism is the central theme of his poem "Song of Myself." Whitman philosophizes that the human self can be purified not through purgation but through the acceptance of the physical. The mystical experience paves the way for the merging of physical reality with a universal reality.

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