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The Radiation of Sufism in Whitman's Poetry

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Abstract. Considering Walt Whitman as a mystic and a Sufi is an amazing subject. The passion, depth and richness of the *Leaves of Grass* themes are more praiseworthy than any other work. The resemblance between the *Leaves of Grass* and the works of Sufi poets depicts the inner revolution of the poet. Apparently Walt Whitman found his true homeland in his inner relationship with God. He wants to return to the heavenly life that everyone will go to. In other words, Whitman sees the place of man in God as Sufi Poets. At the same time, the language of Whitman's poems practically reflects his mystical experiences. Purpose of writing this article is the inference of Whitman's mystical goals which are clear in his works. Based on the findings of this study, Whitman's ultimate goal in human is considered to be the annihilation and survival of God. In this article, mystical spiritual contexts have been used in the interpretation of Whitman's poems. Thus my intention is to express to some extent the factors of Islamic mysticism in Whitman's poems. With a fresh and wonderful look, the mystical dimensions of his poetry should be examined. In this article Whitman's mysticism seeks to be regarded as a kind of Sufi mysticism.

Keywords: Mysticism; Sufism; Whitman; Leaves of Grass

Acknowledgements: I would like to extend thanks to my mother; the most beautiful word on the lips of humanity, a word full of love and hope, an eternal soul full of beauty that rises from the depths of the heart. Neither death nor fear bends my head, but it always bends to kiss and appreciate her hands.

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Significance of the Study

This paper is significant because it is new in terms of Mysticism and Sufism which are related significantly to poetry. The paper should be of interest to readers in the areas of Sufi, Mystical, or American Literature. Although Whitman is a very famous poet in the world and his outstanding work the *Leaves of*

Grass is so remarkable, his poetry has taste of Sufism which is discussed in this article to open a new window of Sufi poetry in American Literature.

Introduction

Whitman's poetry is not strangely similar to Iranian mysticism, especially to Sufi

poets such as Rumi, Saadi, and Hafiz. In 1866, Lord Viscount Strangford, a famous English scholar pointed out the striking resemblance between the *Leaves of Grass* and Iranian mysticism. An early and important British oriental scholar, Lord Viscount Strangford in his *Walt Whitman*, published in *The Pall Mall Gazette*, February 16, 1866, claimed:

“We should have caught him early, sent him to study at Shiraz, and eventually set him to work on a bona fide metrical and rhythmical translation or reproduction of the glorious rolling hendecasyllabics of Jelaluddin Rumi ... Walt Whitman has a very good ear; *the Masnavi* has to be translated sooner or later, and the sympathetic American would have been rescued from his sty of epicurean autolatry by devotion to the great master-work of mystic transcendentalism in the East” (Blodgett, 1934: 198).

Although Strangford’s view is undoubtedly exaggerated, there is no reason for Whitman to be unfamiliar with Iranian Sufi poets and to be influenced by their poetry. Emerson a contemporary poet and Whitman’s spiritual relative was keenly interested in Iranian Sufi poets, especially Saadi and Hafiz. Whitman could have inspired Sufi ideas through Emerson’s writings, basically by Emerson’s inspiration of the Sufis. According to Russell, it was Emerson’s translation of Persian poets like Hafiz, and his ideas derived from “the visionary and philosophical traditions of the ancient world” (Ahmad, 2014: 155) that influenced Whitman. On the other hand, Whitman’s *Persian Lesson* which was written in 1891 and its first title was a *Sufi Lesson*, actually illustrates the tremendous and inspiring influence of Iranian Sufism on Whitman.

Yet no one took Lord Viscount Strangford’s words seriously, nor did Whitman’s *Persian Lesson* attracted anyone’s attention. In this article, I don’t intend to emphasize strangford’s speech. In addition, I don’t want to emphasize that Whitman mysticism is undoubtedly a kind of Sufi mysticism. No real mystic distinguishes between types of mysti-

cism. Rather, it is my point to discuss the Sufi elements in Whitman’s poetry to the extent that one can imagine Whitman being influenced by Sufism and his remarkable poem, a *Persian Lesson* is the epitome of his long-term acquaintance and drowning in Sufism.

1. Mysticism

Mysticism is an amazing collection of the various Schools of philosophical values of the world. It is an ocean which has all water of beliefs and divine religions, theology or belief in the absolute love. Intuition can help a person to get the knowledge of absolute reality, and it can be done directly without any visible and material reference. The reality is the most important concern in mysticism. “Mysticism, a doctrine or discipline, maintaining that one can gain knowledge of reality that is not accessible to sense perception or to rational, conceptual thought” (Audi, 1999: 593). Intuition can be considered as a source of knowledge for mysticism. Mysticism is a widespread phenomenon with no discrimination of color, creed, nation and race, which exists in all human beings.

“Mysticism can be defined as love of the Absolute” (Schimmel, 1975: 4) because, in order to tolerate all difficulties, test, and purify our soul, the presence of Divine love is necessary. Mysticism in special meaning is to find the reality of things through intuition.

The spirit of mysticism is deeply rooted in the soul of all human beings. This is the tradition of human souls to bring them closer and closer to their God in every possible way, see the beauty and His glory, drown in His character, and to be close to Him. The concepts of mysticism are very rich and broad because it expresses human relationships with God and the world. The true seeds of mysticism are sufficient for the last steps of the path to reach the Reality.

2. Sufism

‘Sufism’ which is called *Tasawwuf*, has been found in the nineteen century. *Tasawwuf* or *Irfan* are words whose existential nature is a mixture of eternity and immortality. The element of time and place has no way to their sanctuary. The passage of time does not di-

minish their freshness, the description of the two does not fit in the form of words and phrases. Love must be mingled, the life-giving taste blended it, take an honest step through mysticism and refine the inner soul to become aware of the truth of love and mysticism. In the valley of mysticism, the tools of sense and intellect do not work. The mirror of the heart must be purified to make the manifestation of the Divine. The mystic's heart, relying on the element of love, embraces the path of perfection; becomes aware of the Divine secrets; his existence disappears in the beauty of the Beloved. There is no doubt that the subtle essence of mysticism is love and the central core of Sufism is mysticism. Sufism is a manifestation of true mysticism. As a matter of fact, the spiritual aspect of Islam has been known by the true spirit of religion. In every country, 'Sufism' has been a critical aspect of the Islamic geography. According to Chittick, "The word Sufism refers to a range of theories and practices that have been present in one form or another within the Islamic tradition from its inception" (Chittick, 1995: 132)

A Sufi is the one who worships God with heart and soul, in the solitude of their souls, they are overwhelmed with pleasure from their Beloved. The first characteristic of the true mystics is the remembrance of God, so they are called "*Ah al- Haqq*" the followers of the real (Nicholson, 2002: 1). Martin Lings in his book *What Is Sufism* said: "Sufism is nothing other than Islamic mysticism, which means that it is the central and most powerful current of that tidal wave which constitutes the Revelation of Islam; and it will be clear from what has just been said that to affirm this is in no sense a depreciation, as some appear to think. It is on the contrary an affirmation that Sufism is both authentic and effectual" (Lings, 2005:15-16).

'Sufism' is a rebellious ocean, thus numerous dangers, which can drown a new swimmer. He ought to be a master, calm, and full of information. It is an endless ocean with roaring waves, which its definitive destination is God. The great Sufi Muhyid-Din Ibn Arabi

used to pray: "Enter me, O Lord, into the deep of the Ocean of Thine Infinite Oneness" (Ibid: 11). 'Sufism' seems to be a relationship with the Almighty and the Ultimate. It is a perilous relation, on the grounds that as the sun is closer to the sea, water vanishes sooner. Hence, whatever closer to God, the more you evaporate.

3. The Age of Whitman

The age of Whitman was the flourishing of transcendentalism movement. American Transcendentalism began during the first half of the Nineteenth century. The inherent goodness of both man and nature was the main belief of transcendentalists. Ralph Waldo Emerson was one of the greatest thinkers and writers of America. He has been considered the "Father of American Transcendentalism," and his *Nature* is referred to as, "The Bible of Transcendentalism." In his idea, "Transcendent" was 'beyond' and 'above', hence a transcendentalist is the one who believes in an existence of the divine world. All the diverse elements of mysticism, intuition, and spiritualism have been included in his view of transcendentalism.

They believed in the oneness of God, which manifests in all religious traditions; they declared every person must be free to realize his fullest capacity, if he has a Divine reason, hereafter the meaning of heaven and hell would be possible. In his essay *Nature* Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "The foregoing generations beheld God and Nature face to face; we through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" (Emerson, 1836: 5).

In their view, God exists within every creature and intuitive thought. It was based "a monism holding to the unity of the world and God, and immanence of God in the world" (Dame 10).

4. Whitman and Sufism

Considering Whitman as a mystical poet is one of the critical points in his *Leaves of Grass*. Transcendentalism is closely connected with mysticism, because of the emphasizing the intuitive and spiritual above the practical. Mysticism cannot be apparent to the in-

tellec and has a spiritual meaning. Thus mysticism discovers the real nature of man, God, and the universe, which can be achieved through one's intuition. Whitman's poetry can be considered a puzzle. However, the enigma will be solved, if his poetry is investigated in the light of the mystical experiences.

The first traces of Whitman's mysticism manifest itself between 1850 and 1855, as he stated in his notebook: "I never yet knew how it felt to think I stood in the presence of my Superior... if the presence of God were made visible immediately before me, I could not abase myself" (Holloway, 1921: 64).

Whitman's mysticism can be approached differently. Hence, Whitman's inspiration in the beauty of Sufi poetry can be investigated. In the *Leaves of Grass*, various Sufi elements can be seen.

4.1. The image of grass:

Whitman used grass, and in section 6 of 'Song of Myself', he said:

"A child said What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;

How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,

A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,

Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say whose?

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic" (Whitman, 2007: 56).

In Whitman's poetry, the grass is the symbol of the divine, which is hidden in the ordinary, common life of man. It could be a manifestation or representation of God, which attributes to grass divine qualities.

4.2. The concept of Sema

Whitman in his "A Persian Lesson" applied Sufi and Arabic expression and danced with words like a Dervish, when he praised the name of God and repeated Allah like a

whirling Dervish, "Finally my children, to envelop each word, each part of the rest, /Allah is all, all, all—immanent in every life and object, / May-be at many and many-a-more removes—yet Allah, Allah, Allah is there" (Whitman, 2007: 656). The name Allah discovered the ecstatic feeling. Thus, it is not surprising that Whitman's poem "A Persian lesson" was originally called "A Sufi Lesson" (Farzan, 2004: 164).

His "Proud Music of the Storm" expands his interest in the orient: "You formless, free, religious dances - you from the Orient" (Whitman, 2007: 461), then, from those dances he hears "dervishes monotonously chanting, interspersed with frantic shouts, / as they spin around turning always towards Mecca" (Ibid: 464), and witnesses "the religious dances of the Persians and the Arabs" (Ibid). He used the name 'dervishes' and the way of their turning as the same as turning towards Mecca and spoke about the religious dances of the Persians as if he was familiar with whirling dervishes (Sema).

4.3. The Divine Unity

Whitman's thoughts in his poetry might have resulted in different impressions.

The core of 'Sufism' is the concept of the divine unity. A Sufi "becomes one with God" (Farzan, 2014: 170). Whitman in section 24 of "Song of Myself" represented the concept of Unity; he has been considered divine and representative of the universe.

"Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan son,

Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch

Or am Touched from" (Whitman, 2007: 72-73).

He became everything, which contains men, women, and nature. In *The Contemporary Reviews*, Kenneth M. Price said: "Walt Whitman is everything, and everything is Walt Whitman. He is here, there, and everywhere at the same moment. He is not born yet; he is dead and buried, alive and kicking" (Ibid: 102).

Even the concept of Unity can be seen in Whitman's "Song of Myself": "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / and what I assume you shall assume, / for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (Ibid: 52).

The verse "for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" represents the pure Sufi concept of Unity, which is included in everything, the "I" in the "You". Having presented himself as being everything and as part of everything, the Sufi concept of Unity is recalled, which is "the station of being addressed by God" (Gulen, 2005: 6).

4.4. The Universal Self

Whitman in "Song of Myself" celebrated self and made a distinction between "You" and "I". "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, /and what I assume you shall assume, / for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (Whitman, 2007: 52). In his idea, all creatures made of the same "atoms," so they are all one. In the reality, every "I" and "You" refers to the Divine self.

4.5. The intimate link between body and soul

Whitman represented the importance of the soul as well as the body. The poet already acknowledged in Section 21 of "Song of Myself", "I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul" (Whitman, 2007: 69). With the equality of the body and the soul, the body, the soul, God and the Self have been considered the same. He continued the same idea and said, "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" (Whitman, 2007: 102). Whitman created an equivalence between the soul and the body. He described the encounter between his body and soul to represent his special view about God and the soul by creating equalities between body and soul, Man and God.

In section 5 of "Song of Myself," he said, "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" (Whitman, 2007: 55). Whitman realized the importance of both the body and the soul. In truly Sufi interpreta-

tion, he said that neither of the two can be ignored.

4.6. The language of eroticism to reach the Divine

According to the Sufis, self contains everything. Unity of the two bodies leads to be the one to form one single entity. As Ibn Arabi, a famous Sufi puts it, "orgasm produces pleasure so intense that the partners lose consciousness of their own selves, and become 'annihilated', each in the other" (Hoffman, 1995: 46). Hence, the physical aspect leads to the spiritual experience, for "once one has entered into the Unity of God, male and female, like other categories of distinction, cease to exist" (Ibid).

Whitman's view for the physical aspect is no different than that of the Sufi's notion of annihilation. In his "A Woman Waits For Me", he says:

"Sex contains all, bodies, souls,

Meaning. proofs, purities, delicacies, results, promulgations, Songs, commands, health, pride, the maternal mystery, the seminal milk, All hopes, benefactions, bestowals, all passions, love, beauties, Delights of the earth,

All the governments, judges, gods, follow'd persons of the earth,

These are contain'd in sex as parts of itself and justification of itself" (Whitman, 2007: 117).

Physical aspect contains everything because it unites everything; it echoes the Sufi notion of annihilation to be the one. In this poem, physical aspect reaches the spiritual one through an act of the union, where "the link between divinity and sexuality could scarcely be more explicit" (Hoffman, 1995: 47). Whitman's notion of the body can be interpreted in the light of Sufi thought. His physical pleasure leads to the spiritual one.

Conclusion

American transcendentalists and Sufi poets tried to manifest the new age of humanity with the world of nature, the truth of higher life, the Divine, the spiritual, and the eternal. Their ideas belonged to the world of intuition to open the new window of the hu-

man life derived from the world of experiences. Thus, Whitman was highly influenced by Sufism.

There are many Sufi issues and themes which can be found in Whitman's poetry but in this article, it is impossible to mention all. Whitman considered nature and its elements as a sign which represents the spiritual presence of God. Whitman tried to represent God's relation to the nature and the material world ontologically and epistemologically in the immanent sense, which is an important aspect of 'Sufism,' which is synonymous with *Tawhid*.

All in all, the mystical thoughts of Whitman are interpreted in the field of "Islamic Mysticism" which is Sufism. The voice of Whitman, the lover of God and humanity, always reverberates in the world.

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