

Walt Whitman and Sufism

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It is audacious to call Walt Whitman a Sufi—a qualifier that many would dispute to be ill-suited to the poet who was so profoundly and authentically American; yet he was much more than the term ‘American’ could ever signify. The above statement owes its genesis to Whitman’s indebtedness to diverse mystical, spiritual, and philosophical traditions of the world; and it is precisely the reason why his sense of the Self baffles most but Indians who have notions such as - *Viraat* ingrained in the psyche ever since 400 BCE, i.e. the *Mahabharata* days. Moreover, calling Whitman Sufi has a reason, and a textual one for that matter, as one accepts his 1891 poem, “A Persian Lesson” as quintessentially Sufic not only in tone and tenor but in content and thematic spirit as well. The point is not that of delving into Whitman’s historical proximity to/distance from Sufi masters, nevertheless, one comes across striking points of convergence in their poetic weltanschauungs.

Not that Whitman was formally initiated into Sufism; nonetheless, he had assimilated its essence much before the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855¹—a fact that has not been much heeded by critics. Basic postulate of Sufism is that the Divine Essence permeates the animate as well as the inanimate objects of this universe; so is the case with Transcendentalism, which believes in “essential unity of all creation” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). Poems that Whitman wrote initially viz., “Song of Myself,” “Song of the Open Road,” and “One’s-Self I Sing,” arguably exhibit profound Sufic character of his creative consciousness besides being transcendentalist in spirit.

Whitman’s 1891 poem, “A Persian Lesson” depicts a “greybeard sufi” (metaphorically Whitman) telling “young priests and students:” “Finally my children, to envelop each world, each part of the rest,/ Allah is all, all, all – is immanent in every life and object,/ May-be at many and many-a-more removes – yet Allah, Allah, /Allah is there.” (LG 464)

Whitman had keen insight into Sufism as these lines lucidly underscore Sufi notion of *Tawhid* signifying ‘one’; nevertheless it refers to doctrine of God as One Reality, “unitive” in character, and manifesting through a “variety of forms” (Khosla 222). As Whitman writes about the immanence of Allah in every aspect of creation, he has ‘unitiveness’/ oneness of Allah’s Being in mind, which manifests in variety of forms. Sufis believe that whole universe is innate in God’s Being (*Wujud*). It is only when the seeker (*murid*) can see *One* in *many* and vice versa that he realizes *Tawhid*.

Whitman’s poetic consciousness has a marked Sufi slant, which becomes evident through Arthur L. Ford’s insightful article on “The Rose Garden of the world: Near East Imagery in the Poetry of Walt Whitman” wherein he claims that his 1891 poem “A Persian Lesson” “reveals Whitman’s understanding of Sufism.” He further quotes Christy and F. O. Matthiessen who wrote that “Sufism appealed to Whitman as well as other American Romantics because the philosophy mirrored their own.” It seems convincing as Ford further observes that “[t]he Sufi’s lesson is pure

Sufism, but also pure Whitman, particularly when the Sufi tells his disciples that Allah is everywhere . . .” (Ford 17-18).

The poem, “The Persian Lesson” had an initial title, “A Sufi Lesson,” which was cancelled before its publication in *Goodbye My Fancy* (1891) (LG 464). Michael Moon, the editor of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, in a footnote to the term ‘sufi’ says that he is a “teacher of Sufism, an ecstatic spiritual tradition within Islam. Sufism has produced a rich poetic heritage much admired by WW [Walt Whitman] and his contemporaries [such as R. W. Emerson] (LG 464). The choice of the term ‘Persian’ in place of ‘Sufi’ in the title may be an unconscious attempt on Whitman’s part to obfuscate an important lineage of his poetic impulse, or perhaps, to lend context-specificity to the sufic tradition he was indebted to in particular.

“This Persian Lesson” (1891) may be viewed as a summation of his poetic quest culminating in pure sufic insight; nevertheless, it can also be the starting point of our journey back to the years while Whitman was writing and preparing to publish the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. Farzan too suggests the same when he observes that this poem can be “looked upon as a fitting coda for *Leaves of Grass*, not only because it presents a synthesis and recapitulation of the rest of the book, but also because of the marvelous sense of tranquility and wholeness it conveys” (Farzan 587). Reading the poem as a “coda” is viable but selection of the essence of Sufism must have a serious reason behind it. Hence a brief journey backwards into the nascent stage of his poetic consciousness prior to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* is in order.

The earliest critic to suggest about the predominantly sufic implication of Whitman’s poetry was Lord Strangford who in 1866 observed, “Whitman managed to acquire and imbue himself with not only the spirit, but with the veriest mannerism, the most absolute trick and accent of Persian poetry” (quoted in Rajasekhariah, p. 32 from *The Pall Mall Gazette*, Feb. 16, 1866). In one of his articles written for *Long Island Democrat* in 1840, Whitman describes having “traveled in imagination from Tibet to Arabia by way of India among lamas, Brahmins, and Moslim pilgrims. . . . Among his papers were found several magazine articles on Asia which he had carefully preserved and annotated”

One such article that provides an authentic evidence of his knowledge of Sufi poetry prior to the publication of 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* is a “Newspaper piece” entitled “Persian Poetry” dated “October ’48” (Asselineau 302). The source for this is Whitman’s *Notes and Fragments* edited by Richard Maurice Bucke in 1899. But more than a year prior to this there is a brief entry dated August 16, 1847 in *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman: The Journalism, Vol. II: 1846-1848* saying “The July number of the Westminster Review contains an elaborate and interesting review of a new work, by Miss Costello, on Persian poetry. At the close of the article, the reviewer gives some translations of his own from the Persian poets” (Bergman, ed. 312).

This lead review article of Louisa Stuart Costello’s book *The Rose Garden of Persia* (Longman) offers ample range of information about the Persian poetic heritage. Besides dealing with the core concerns of Sufi thought, it also throws light on how Persian poets were different from their Turkish, Greek, and Roman counterparts. The greatest reason that has been attributed for the greatness of Persian poetry is the fact that it is “national” without which “all literatures are worthless.” It starts with applauding great Persian poets such as Hafiz, Firdausi, and Sadi; and what is meant by “poets” is worth mentioning: “By poets of course we mean not those who can count syllables, or tessellate rhymes, but those, who, with poetic feeling, have also poetic (i. e. creative . . .) power” (*The Westminster Review* 145).

This article offers deep insights about poets such as Firdausi (940 A. D.), Moasi (11th century), Anwari (12th century), and Omar Khiam (called the “Voltaire of Persia”). Interestingly Khiam’s translated poem “The Wisdom of the Supreme” has remarkable similarities with Whitman’s “A Persian Lesson.” The last four lines of Khiam’s poem are worth quoting here: “The world is thine, from thee it rose,/ By thee it ebbs, by thee it flows./ Hence worldly lore! By whom is wisdom shown?/ The eternal knows, knows all, and He alone.” (WR 154)

When Whitman writes that “Allah is all . . . immanent in every life and object” (LG 464), the purport of the above lines gets echoed. The review also discusses considerably about sufi poets viz. Nizami, Sadi of Shiraz, Ferideddin Attar, Jaleddin Rumi, Hafiz, Jami, and Hatifi. Moreover, description of the Sufis too therein must have been enlightening as well as inspiring for ever keen and perceptive Whitman, who emerged as one of their ilk upon maturing as an American bard—not in narrow, parochial sense but as someone with cosmic proportions like the Sufis described below:

The Sufis, as is well known, are a sect, who spring up apparently by a necessary law in the human mind. They take root in every soil, and under every religion; and whatever name they may bear, their opinions are essentially the same. The inherent love of mysticism which lies in the heart, finds in every religion the necessary warmth to quicken it. Reverence and wonder, which, as Plato tells us in the *Theætetus*, are the beginning of all wisdom, spring up in every climate; and the Eleusinian mysteries, Hindu Brahminism, the Persian Sufeyism [sic], and, in our own time, the new German philosophy are only developments of the same deep-rooted principle in the soul, under different outward circumstances of time and place. All these systems are but as glosses and commentaries on the wide volume of nature, when the true revelation from heaven is unknown, or lost sight of, and nature’s volume is the only revelation left and acknowledged. (WR 155)

Thus, it will be hard to deny, particularly in view of Whitman’s cosmic consciousness, that it definitely struck a profound chord with Whitman. It also shaped up his poetic vision as American bard. The concluding comment, which says: “When nationality, which is the sap [of a nation’s literature], is dried up, leaves, blossoms, and branches must die; and no spring visits the fallen nation,” (WR 163) must have deeply impacted upon the gradually evolving poetic consciousness of Whitman who was to emerge as a powerful poetic voice of America that mattered multiply and meaningfully in the “vast volume of nature” that is not just confined to physical time/ specific geographical clime, but also obtains subliminally through the “deep-rooted principle in the soul.” (WR 155)

Prior to *The Westminster Review* became available to Whitman in 1848, he must also have come across Emerson’s poem “Saadi” published in *The Dial* in 1842 (Dimock 44). Ghulam M. Fayez rightly observes: “Since most of Emerson’s translations appeared between 1843 and 1865 [. . .], Whitman, curious as he was, might have read some of Emerson’s works directly” (Fayez 40). However, he was not very certain. Emerson delivered a series of six lectures in New York in March 1842, and Whitman attended all of them. Justin Kaplan is absolutely right in his assumption that during his lecture on “The Poet”, Emerson “might have been speaking to Whitman alone, fixing him with a tyrannous eye” (Kaplan 101). Besides giving a concrete expression to his idealized conception of the poet, Emerson also paved the way for the future poet of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman strove hard to embody the spirit of ‘the poet’ a la Emerson, but he kept the streak of rebellion and innovation alive in him and it became known through his Art Union talk on March 31, 1851 wherein he underscored the importance of “the great old masters” are important, but up to an extent simply because the “loftiest and purest art” may only be learnt in “the school of all

grand actions and grand virtues, of heroism, of the death of captives and martyrs” (Kaplan 169) and their deeds of sheer courage.

Massud Farzan’s has viewed Whitman’s poem, “A Persian Lesson” as a suitable summation of Whitman’s poetic universe. The “greybeard sufi”/ (or enlightened *wali*, *sheikh*, *murshid* in sufic terms) is the poet himself who chooses to share his Sufic wisdom towards the end of his poetic career in 1891. As a matter of fact, the sufic seed of his poetic consciousness had sprouted during early and mid-1840s. Later it ramified considerably and took profound roots in his poetic consciousness before Whitman published the very first edition of his *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. Massud Farzan’s observation is apt when he writes that Whitman’s “A Persian Lesson” may be “looked upon as a fitting coda for *Leaves of Grass*, not only because it presents a synthesis and recapitulation of the rest of the book, but also because of the marvelous sense of tranquility and wholeness it conveys” (Farzan 582).

Thus, Sufism powerfully influenced Whitman well before the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* came out. He had assimilated its essence during 1840s, even though it formally seems to have culminated in “o’erarching and last lesson,” (i. e. “A Persian Lesson”) one year before his death. Arguably, Whitman’s creative consciousness is considerably indebted to sufic thought and it becomes evident in the choice of his themes and their poetic treatment in poems such as “Song of Myself,” “Song of the Open Road,” etc.

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