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The Poetic World of Swami Vivekananda: The Power of Spontaneity

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Abstract

Swami Vivekananda has very rarely been considered as a poet. He has been taken into scholarly consideration as a mystic, philosopher, yogi and mentor but rarely as a soft hearted man of letter with poetic bent of mind. His poetic world is not very large but undoubtedly the composition he has written deserve to be read and discussed due to their sheer poetic merits. The present paper is an effort to critically evaluate his profound greatness on the ground of his poetic world that he has created. Various facets of the personality of Swamiji has been tried to explore through his poetic rendering and the less known quality of Vivekananda as a poet is unveiled while comparing his poetic pieces with that of great Romantic poets with whom he may be said to have some sentimental similarities. The semi-comparative study of Swami Vivekananda's poems along with generously quoted lines from his poetic contribution promises to bring forth a subject of Indian English writing which is very less explored.

Keywords: Swami Vivekananda, Mysticism, Awakening, *Advaita Vedanta*, Devotion, *Sat*, *Chitta*, *Ananda*, *Avidya*

For the most of the lovers, followers and disciples of Swami Vivekananda-- who have gone through his literary and non-literary works-- he was only an idealist, visionary, a mystic and above all a prose writer. The poetic sensibility and the poetic achievements of the sage have never been acknowledged by the true readers of Swamiji. Thorough, careful and keen reading of his works reveals the fact that he was not only a profound religious thinker but also a poet

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by his heart. His poetic output is very small--which is published by *Advaita Ashrama* with an illuminating preface written by some unknown author--but provides a fascinating reading experience to an alert reader. Once he has remarked to Miss MacLeod: "Do you not see that I am first and foremost a poet?"¹ His poetic renderings are romantic and infused by the poet's individuality, non-dualism, his yearning for a unification, with the Supreme Being. What floods his poetic world is his mission of life that is the reestablishment of *Advaita Vedanta*. At places the poet in him tries to bring home to the readers his contemplative principles; he turns out to be no less matter of fact than a plain preacher and seems to show conformity with Samuel Taylor Coleridge's explanation of a poet that "No man was ever yet a great poet, without at the same time being a profound philosopher."²

For few only know the truth. The rest will hate
And laugh at thee, great one; but pay no heed.
Go thou, the free, from place to place, and help
Them out of darkness, Maya's veil. Without
The fear of pain or search for pleasure, go
Beyond them both, Sannyasin bold! Sat—
Om Tat Sat, Om.³

At times a poet lapses into set of guidelines and when he appears to be so, the euphony of the poem breaks. One clear cut short coming of the lyrical works of Swami Vivekananda may be that he hardly could fabricate a firm form of poetry and tried his poetic exercise in no other form than lyric--the poem with single emotion. His lyrics, if some dull patches of prosiness are overlooked, are well suited to the famous definition of poetry by William Wordsworth that "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, it takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquility."⁴ Swami Vivekananda's poetry when read with diligence promises one the traces of the great Western mystics like that of William Blake, mystical pantheism like that of Wordsworth and the wonderful Sufi tradition like that of Rumi. As far as his spiritual understanding of the universe is concerned his rendering are, up to great extent, similar to that of St. John of the Cross, Richard Rolle of Hampole and St. Francis of Assisi.

The myth making power of Swamiji keeps his reader spell bound as he prefabricates devotion with richness of poetry. '*Kali, the Mother*,' one of his most celebrated poems is the example in hand where the poet performs his best while painting nature in myriad images with the exuberance of soul shaking might of the words. He takes resort of the nature for selection of images and symbols as most of them are firm and distinct, visual and striking, vivid and vibrant. Swamiji had firm belief in Indian concept of creation that everything is a kind of divine play and that God is not only *Sat* and *Chitta* but also *Ananda*. The illogical distrust and nihilism of the nonbelievers are the outcome of the unawareness that is *Avidya* as is popularly known in Indian context. If God's dominion is absolute and vanquishes every

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earthy mortal, one should partake in *Ananda*. As the poet Vivekananda writes in his lyric 'Thou Blessed Dream':

If things go ill or well—
If joy rebounding spreads the face,
Or sea of sorrow swells—
A play – we each have part,
Each one to weep or laugh as may;
Each one his dress to don—
Its scenes, alternative shine and rain.
Thou dream, O blessed dream!
Spread far and near thy veil of haze,
Tone down the lines so sharp,
Make smooth what roughness seems.
No magic but in thee!
Thy touch makes desert bloom to life.
Harsh thunder, sweetest song,
Fell death the sweet release.⁵

When the poems of Swamiji are taken into consideration in their entirety, they display a thematic structure and a particular design. Not only the recurrent images from nature and *Advaita* philosophy that runs through his lyrics as thematic design but, at the same time, the threads of *Bhakti Yoga* hold the different poetic beads. Therefore the poems of Swamiji become a document dealing with the images and sentiments which are deeply rooted in Indian thoughts through the series of myth, religion, philosophy and spirituality. His poems are truly Indian in every sense and essence. In the poem '*To the Awakened India*' or '*Prabuddha Bharata*' the poet deals with all principal forms of *Yoga*, particularly, *Bhakti* and *Karma Yoga*.

Once More awake!

For sleep it was, not death, to bring thee life
Anew, and rest to lotus-eyes for visions
Daring yet. The world in need awaits, O Truth!
No death for thee!

Resume thy march,

With gentle feet that would not break the
Peaceful rest even of the roadside dust
That lies so low. Yet strong and steady,
Blissful, bold and free. Awakener, ever
Forward! Speak thy stirring words.

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Thy home is gone,

Where loving hearts had brought thee up and
Watched with joy thy growth. But Fate is strong—
This is the law—all things come back to the source
They sprung, their strength to renew.

Then start afresh,

From the land of thy birth, where vast cloud-belted
Snows do bless and put their strength in thee,
For working wonders new. The heavenly
River tune thy voice to her own immortal song;
Deodar shades give thee eternal peace.

And all above,

Himala's daughter Uma, gentle pure,
The mother that resides in all as Power
And Life, who works all works and
Makes of One the world, whose mercy
Opens the gate to truth and shows
The One in All, give thee untiring
Strength, which is Infinite Love.

They bless thee all,

The seers great, whom age nor clime
Can claim their own, the fathers of the
Race, who felt the heart of Truth the same,
And bravely, taught to man ill-voiced or
Well. Their servant, thou hast got
The secret—its but one.

Then speak, O Love!

Before thy gentle voice serene, behold how
Visions melt and fold on fold of dreams
Departs to void, till Truth and Truth alone
In all its glory shines--

And tell the world—

Awake, arise and dream no more!
This is the land of dreams, where the Karma
Weaves unthreaded garlands with our thoughts
Of flower sweet or noxious, and none
Has root or stem, being born in naught, which
He softest breath of Truth drives back to

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Primal nothingness. Be bold, and face
The Truth! Be one with it! Let visions cease,
Or, if you cannot dream but true dreams
Which are Eternal Love and Service Free. ⁶

There are eight stanzas in this poem and each stanza is introduced with a half thematic liner that sets the mood of the coming stanza. The poet invokes the countrymen to undertake the spiritual journey for the weal of one and all. The journey has to be started with 'gentle feet,' so gentle that even 'the rest of the peaceful roadside dust' shall not be unsettled. But to undertake that journey one has to awake once more with the awareness of spiritual kind. The poet says you are not dead as yet, you are not finished, and you are just submerged under the burden of the sleep of ignorance. And why the fellow countrymen need to undertake this spiritual journey? The poet answers that this has been the goal of life for one and all, and the same has been remained unknown. The poet seems to be more preoccupied with the matter related in the poem and manner has been paid less attention. The images are very strong and vivid taken from the bountiful cup of nature that draws the clear cut picture of things from the lifeless life to the selfless life of 'Eternal Love' and 'Service Free,' of dust and dales, hills and rivers, snows, and Deodar shades among the fervid talk of Truth, Infinite Love, Fate, Karma and Blissfulness. Each stanza of the poem contains different number of lines. They are four, five, four, five, seven, six, four, and ten lines respectively. The very same sentiments as mentioned in his *To the Awakened India* can be well located in the famous poem entitled 'Ulysses' by Lord Alfred Tennyson, where the protagonist is all set to start a journey afresh in his old age as he is sick of rest and ruling as a king to his countrymen. But his journey seems to be more physical in nature and apparently sounds less spiritual and more mythical in approach. "Come my friends, 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world."⁷ The sentiments of spiritual journey may well be found in 'Sailing to Byzantium' by W.B. Yeats where the old man is sick of the materialistic way of the world and finds his native country Ireland full of physical attractions suitable for the people of young age and vigour only. As the poet says 'This is no country for old man as the old man there in Ireland is like a tattered coat upon a stick. And he wanted to go to Byzantium and become an artifact of unageing intellect'.

When the question on classifying Swami Vivekananda as a poet shall be asked, he may well be classified with the group of the poets of the Romantic school of poetry, for his poetry have the qualities such as inspiration, revelation and imagination, the simplicity of language and subjective experiences of divine passion, love with the common humanity and mysticism. It will be apt here to quote Arthur-Compton-Rickett as the book says, "The great Romanticists were realists but among the lesser spirits Romanticism always generates a certain tendency to exaggeration and aloofness from the condition of ordinary life."⁸ In

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relation to Swamiji's affinity with Romanticism the example of his famous lyric entitled '*Kali The Mother*' is worth mentioning here. The necessity of apocalypse for the regeneration of the existence afresh has been one of the favourite themes of some of the Romantic school of poets. '*Kali The Mother*' by Swami Vivekananda gives a horrifying glimpse of apocalyptic vision.

The stars are blotted out,
The clouds are covering clouds,
It is darkness vibrant, sonant.
In the roaring, whirling wind
Are the souls of a million lunatics
Just loose from the prison-house,
Wrenching trees by the roots,
Sweeping all from the path.
The sea has joined the fray,
And swirls up mountain-waves,
To reach the pitchy sky. The flash of lurid light
Reveals on every side
A thousand, thousand shades
Of death begrimed and black—
Scattering plague and sorrows,
Dancing mad with joy,
Come, Mother, come!
For terror is thy name,
Death is in Thy breath,
And every shaking step
Destroys a world for e'er.
Thou 'Time' the All-Destroyer!
Come, O Mother, come!
Who dares misery love,
And hug the form of Death,
Dance in destruction's dance,
To him the Mother comes.⁹

'*Kali Ma*' in Indian Mythology stands for the extermination of the *Asur* world that is the disruption of the demon force. When the world was filled with fiends, devils and demons, they propagate black force and the Gods implored '*Adi Shakti Ma Jagdambe*' to have mercy upon the good and salvage the earth. Then the Goddess *Durga* took the incarnation of *Kali* who took the incessant rampage unless *Devadhidev Mahadeva*—the God of all Gods—spectacularly interceded. Swami Vivekananda seemingly vexed with the devilish

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developments in the world invoked the *Aadi Shakti Man Kali* to take another incarnation and destroy this world. The poem '*Kali, The Mother*' has multiple layers of meaning. In the real sense it talks about the destruction of the world of *Maya* which is illusion. A *Sanyasi* would seek to get rid of all kind of *Maya* or illusion, that is unreal self, and then only the person in search of truth can have the vision of truth, the *Brahm* or here the *Kali*. Another elaboration of the poem takes to the point that the poet wants to erase everything from the surface of the earth which is a mere burden upon the Earth. The poet demands for the celebration of death for he desires to instill the invincible might in the people. All compassionate, benevolent and affectionate God has always been liked by the one and all. The picture of all destructive force in form of God is infrequent in Indian mythology and the worship of such an image is rarer still. But the same kind of the celebration is not quite unrare in English poetry. The yearning for death is earnestly articulated in the holiest of the holies '*The Bible*.'

Oh death, where is the sting?

O grave, where is thy victory? ¹⁰

John Donne, on the other hand says death dies after death therefore thinking that death is mighty and powerful is not the correct thinking.

"One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally

And death shall be no more; death thou shalt die."¹¹

Kahlil Gibran in his celebrated book '*The Prophet*' proclaims the final decision about the death that "your fear of death is but the trembling of the shepherd when he stands before the king whose hand is to be laid upon him in honour."¹² The great American poet Walt Whitman has the in depth elaboration of death in his poetry. It is really very interesting to know that Swami Vivekananda had gone through the poetry collection of Walt Whitman. There are certain traces of emotional and intellectual resemblance between two. Both can well be termed as the poets of perpetuality and everlasting evolution. For both of them loss of life is not the conclusion of life but it is a chain in the lifecycle. This concept has been echoed over and over again by the poets of *Vedantic* bent of minds.

My Play is Done' is autobiographical poem written by Swami Vivekananda. The poem throws light on his personal experience and appears to be the best poetic creation from his prolific pen. The physical exertion of the poet has made him realize the fact that he is pretty close to the termination of his life. The poem is all about the incidents taken place in his life. The suffering of lasting nature, personal loss due to the sad demise of his father, the sudden sinking in the abject poverty and heart rendering efforts to earn the livelihood. The composition is complete in autobiographical rendering. It starts from the birth of Swamiji and ends with the desire of death with no desire left in the state of liberation or '*nirvana*'.

Let never more delusive dreams

Veil off my face from me,

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My play is done, O mother,
Break my chains and make me free! ¹³

The poem is not only an autobiographical recollection of his undisclosed experiences but also a philosophical discourse on subjects like 'life' and 'death'.

Where life is living death, alas! And death—
Who knows but 'its
Another start, another round of his old wheel
Of grief and bliss? ¹⁴

The most striking feature of this autographical poem is its reflective nature which is found to be in conformity with the theory of poetry propounded by T.S. Eliot that says that a good poem is a fusion of personal and private agonies and pleasures in a way that they are transmuted into something impersonal and universal:

Where children dream bright, golden dreams,
Too soon to find them dust,
And aye look back to hope long lost
And life a mass of rust! ¹⁵

The positive approach of a child in life and the feelings of negativity in old ages are the most common themes in English poetry. Swamiji seems to be fully convinced of the futility of this transient world. Here the poet says the very same thing in a kind of symbolic language where hope or desire is represented by motor and the natural commitment of it are represented by pokes. Like a true romantic poet he too wants to escape this world and go beyond the limits of it where there is no sorrow and no desire remains in existence.

Comparisons may be done so easily among the various poets from English background with that of Swami Vivekananda that he may be brought close to the poets of Romantic age. But to sum up his literary contribution as a poet this may be more apt to say that as a poet he has brought in use the whole range of images from common place to metaphysics, from tied to free images with the uniformity of accent, of mood and temperament and of the idea of oneness of soul. The uniformity of ideas and morals bridges the gap between Swamiji as a poet and the preacher. He may be viewed as a minor Indian-English poet due to his bulk less poetic output but he is no less plentiful in literary and poetic sensibility and in exposition of spiritual and religious poetry that may collectively be called the future poetry.

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