

Sufic Interpretations of Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself'

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Even though Walt Whitman was not formally grounded in Sufism, his poems such as 'Song of Myself' and 'Song of the Open Road' have a predominant sufic strain. V.K. Chari who analysed Whitman's poetry in the light of Indian thought¹ was unable to find any 'established evidence' in regard to his Vedantic orientation. Professor Gay Wilson Allen, who besides being an authority on Whitman was also his biographer, observes: 'Whether Whitman had read any Oriental literature . . . the most diligent search . . . has not yet determined.'² The present paper seeks to analyse Whitman's 'Song of Myself' in the light of some of the basic postulates of Sufism. The first part works out the sufic schema of quest in terms of stages keeping in mind Sufi masters/writers such as Jalaluddin Rumi,³ Ibnal-Arabi,⁴ Farid Al-Din Attar,⁵ etc. The second part of the paper will examine the sufic implications in Whitman's 'Song of Myself' (Sections such as 1-6, 21, 33, 48, 50-52 in particular).

I

The term 'Sufism' pertains to a kind of mysticism that came into being in the seventh century AD (i.e. the first century of Islam). More commonly it implies purity of being that is attained through wisdom or holy spiritual exercises and renunciation of worldly desires and glories. Sufism is characterised by intense love and devotion (*bhakti*) to God. It, in fact, aims at exposing the quester to his hidden, real inner self, which is then developed fully with a view to actualise its immensity and infinitude. Unlike *Yoga* which recommends withdrawal from the phenomenal, fullness of living is preferred and propagated in Sufism. It is ' . . . designed as the means to help awaken man . . . Those who waken are able to return, to start "the journey" while also living this present life in all its fullness.'⁶

A commonly misconstrued dimension of Sufism is that the seeker can attain the status of a Perfect Being (*Wali*) or saint only after retiring into seclusion. However, a true Sufic quester should never shun society and must live in it, serve it and also guide it if possible. In this sense, a harmonious co-existence with the society at large is the hallmark of a *Wali* or Perfect Being.

In Sufism, for the transformation and purification of the soul, the seeker (*Murid*) has to undergo the first stage of *Sharqat*, which means the company of the master (*Murshid*). The thinning and refinement of the personality of the seeker, which is effected by the company of a *Murshid*, mark *Marfat*, the second stage. This stage, moreover, is in the service of *Barqat* (Grace) dispensed by the *Murshid*. It also signifies the psycho-spiritual transformation of *Murid* (the seeker). J. Spenser Trimingham in his book *The Sufic Orders in Islam* mentions seven stages in the process of purification/transformation of the seeker. He says that:

The aspirant has: (d₁) to purify his nafs, i.e. his personality self, from its inclination to Shahawat, the thoughts of desires of natural man, and (d₂) substitute these with love (mahabba), then (d₃) he must be cast into the flames of passion (ishq), to emerge (d₄) in the state of union (wusla), with (d₅) transmutation of self (fana), through (d₆) the gifts of dazzlement of wonder (haira), to (d₇) everlastingness (baqa).⁷

As such, the goal in sufic seeking is direct communion or ecstatic union with God. Moreover, the personal relationship of the individual with God, an intuitive knowledge of God along with the love of God, are considerably emphasised in Sufism.

The Sufi masters believe that Truth is beyond language and that the philosophers can at the most have a partial glimpse of it. The first condition of the sufic quester is to purge his heart entirely of all that is not divine, which means the clearing of one's *Nafs* in order to embark on the spiritual journey with the sole mission of seeking total absorption in God addressed as Beloved by and large. In order to fathom the 'unitive' character of the whole of creation, a Sufi has to see with his inner being (eye), which only can perceive the truth, the whole. The Sufis lay emphasis on the complete merger of the quester with the divine in the quest process. In other words, it is believed that to see the whole, one has to become the whole thereby absorbing one's being completely. Like the Vedantins, the Sufi Masters liken the whole (which in turn can be likened to Whitmanesque 'Self') to the ocean which further signifies the Over

Soul/God/the Beloved, and the part to a drop which symbolizes the seeker or *Murid*. The Sufis suggest that it is not possible to see the ocean with the eye of the ocean. Sri Atmananda's perception in regard to the true Vedantic perception of "attributeless pure Consciousness" corresponds to the sufic postulation. He says:

If one looks through the gross organ eye,
gross forms alone appear. The same relation
exists between other gross organs and their objects.

Leaving the physical organs, if one looks through
the subtle organ called mind, subtle forms appear.

Looking through the attributeless pure Consciousness,
one sees Consciousness only and nothing else.⁸

The path that a Sufi follows to apprehend the attributes of the Beloved /the Divine is technically called *Tariqat*. There are three pre-requisites to tread the sufic path that leads to the communion with the Divine —*Faqr* (the spiritual poverty), *Kiherqeh* (the cloak of the dervish) and *Zekr* (selfless and continual remembrance of God). *Faqr* signifies the realisation of the imperfections and discrepancies on the part of the seeker. Moreover, he has to have an intense yearning in the heart to realise the Divine Essence. *Kherqeh* or the garment of the dervish (sufic quester) stands for Divine Attributes. *Zekr* implies remembering God eternally by numerous names of His. This path leads the seeker eventually to complete absorption in God. Maghrebi, a Sufi poet beautifully puts it thus:

The Beloved sat facing my open heart
For so long that
But for her Attributes and Nature,
Nothing remained of my heart.⁹

Rumi the greatest Persian Sufi poet holds body (the physical 'self') in high esteem. His standpoint is that had the 'earthly body' not been necessary for the manifestation of the Divine, he would not have created it. As such, the 'external world' is not altogether 'purposeless'. According to him, 'Form is necessary to manifest the invisible, and so the body is a purposeful part of the creation. It is an outward manifestation of the spirit in this world, and without it the body cannot live.'¹⁰ Abu Nasral-Sarraaj, the author of the oldest treatises on Sufism, mentions seven stages in the spiritual journey towards the unification with God, namely, repentance, abstinence,

renunciation, poverty, patience, trust in God and satisfaction. He also talks about ten psychic states to experience *hal* (state of rapture) and *muqam* (state of ecstasy) such as meditation, nearness of God, love, fear, hope, longing, intimacy, tranquility, contemplation and creation.¹¹ Farid Al Din Attar allegorically gives a beautiful account of the Sufi Path in *Mantiq al-Tayr* ('The Conference of the Birds') where he tells the story of the spiritual journey of thirty birds (*si murgh*) signifying Sufi seekers to seek the fabulous 'Bird' *Simurgh* epitomising the transcendental Spirit/God/the truth. As they arrive after an arduous journey, the surviving birds discover that their leader, in fact, is not another individual, but themselves, as a cohesive group. Attar thus uses allegory to illustrate the Sufi doctrine of union between the human and the divine. He has divided the seven stages of the sufic path into seven valleys¹².

In the first valley of Quest called *Talab*, the seeker has to face trails and hardships thereby renouncing all worldly possessions. *Talab* is characterised by a deep longing on the part of the seeker to pursue the Sufic Path. The valley of Love namely *Ishq* is characterised by the burning of the lover/seeker in the fire of love and yearning for the Beloved/God. The valley of Gnosis known as *Ma'rifat* signifies seeing, or mystical knowledge that dawns upon the quester as per his merit and ability. In the fourth valley of Independence and Detachment, all kinds of desires die in the aspirant. Attar has termed it as *Istighna*. Next is the Valley of Unity or *Tawhid* in which the quester develops the capacity to see *one* in *many* and vice versa. In the sixth Valley of Bewilderment (*hayrat*), the entrant is again subjected to pain, sighs and burning to test his resolve as to whether he is an unshakeable seeker, firm in his determination, or not. He may be seemingly bewildered and lost, but the Unity of Being is deeply imprinted on his soul. The seventh Valley is that of Poverty/*Faqr* and self-abnegation/*Fana*. 'Its essence is forgetfulness, dumbness, deafness and unconsciousness, Here the aspirant is lost to self and sunk in the fathomless Ocean. He is existent and yet non-existent' (Khosla, 165). After the perilous journey which the seeker undertakes vigorously, he reaches the abode of *Simurgh*/God/the Truth. The exhausted and utterly dissipated birds numbering thirty (*si murgh*) out of the thousands (symbolising sufic questers) who undertake the hazardous spiritual journey, are now aware of their beings as *si murgh* and *Simurgh* simultaneously: 'It is a state not of unity or duality, but of identity-in-difference and difference-in-identity' as perceived by Attar (Khosla 166).

Sama in Sufism implies music, singing, dancing and also ecstasy. Rumi could perceive divinity in music and emphasised the importance of *sama* in religious service. Characterised by 'vitality', *sama* is extremely important in Sufism '... as a means of partaking in the experiential dimension of spiritual achievement.'¹³ Rumi's followers were known as the 'Whirling Dervishes'. He knew that music (*sama*) could intensify 'the flame of love'. K. Khosla pertinently observes: "The dance symbolizes the ecstasy both of dying to self and of attaining to life everlasting, *fana* (total transmutation) and *baqa* (everlastingness)—a doubly rapturous experience" (Khosla 195). In a state of ecstasy and deep spiritual rapture, the Sufi is intently focused at the Beloved. He continuously remembers God who is perceived as the Beloved with special, rhythmic music and peculiar gyrating movements. Like a drunken lover, the Sufi is absolutely oblivious of himself as well as everything else except the Beloved/the Divine during the performance of *sama*. Analysing the impact of *sama* on the listener (the quester), Regula B. Qureshi aptly observes that, 'In the performance of *sama*, music and poetry fuse together, and have a special effect on the listener. They reach a spiritual state which expresses itself in gestures – weeping, vocalizing and ultimately a dance of ecstasy.'¹⁴ Whitman's 'Song of Myself' exudes (explicitly as well as implicitly) the *sama*-consciousness as discussed above, and hence, may be called the 'song of ecstasy'.

II

Celebrating and singing of the 'Self' with a torrential gush of 'original energy;' the 'Self' attaining cosmic dimensions yet remaining markedly distinct; witnessing the fullness of the immediate present/the 'now'; acknowledging the 'other' and merging with it; experiencing a sense of eternity in a spear of grass; embracing the cosmos; watching and observing the phenomenal as well as the transcendental; laughing, singing and dancing ecstatically—Walt Whitman like a true Sufi rejoices and celebrates with wild abandon his mystical merger with the Cosmic Self and the Divine Essence (perceived as the Beloved/God in Sufism) in 'Song of Myself'. The poet simultaneously experiences *wusla* (a state of union with the Divine), *tawhid* (unitive vision), *hal* (state of rapture) and *muqam* (state of ecstasy) as he sings ecstatically of his 'Self'. Whitman's concept of the 'Self' directly corresponds to the sufic concept of the

'real'/'universal self', which stands in contrast to the 'phenomenal self'. Expounding upon the sufic perception of the "real self" A Reza Arasteh observes:

The cosmic self can be thought of as the image of the universe which must be unveiled. It is wrapped in our conscious, if it is not the unconscious itself, whereas the phenomenal self encompasses consciousness; it possesses infinite potentialities while consciousness is limited; and only the unconscious provides the means of attaining the real self. The cosmic self embraces all our being while the phenomenal self constitutes only a part of our existence. The phenomenal self has separated us from our origin, that of union with all of life. Having now become aware of this separation, we can only live fully by emptying consciousness, bringing to light the unconscious achieving insight into our whole existence, and living in a state of complete awareness. I shall call this state *cosmic existence or transcendental consciousness*. The real self can be thought of as the crown of the unconscious, which is potentially conscious existence, the Sufi's goal.¹⁴

The aim of the Sufi, as such, is the actualization of the 'cosmic existence' of the 'real self' along with developing an insight into the 'transcendental consciousness'. This is precisely what Whitman experiences in 'Song of Myself'. In a spiritually exalted state, which is akin to intensely rapturous states of *fana* (total transmutation of one's self) and *baqa* (everlastingness), Whitman sings ecstatically as the one who is deeply embedded in *sama* experiencing supreme bliss along with *haira*, which stands for a thrilling sense of wonderment. Thus, remaining firmly rooted in the 'unitive state' of his self (being), Whitman celebrates the Divine Essence manifesting itself through an infinite range of 'attributes' signifying the physical universe with all its diversities. In his opening chant, Whitman sings mystically:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (Section 1)

The delight and exuberance in the given lines spring from Whitman's 'unitive' perception. The 'I'-protagonist is in no way different from 'you'— the reader as an imperative sense of unity pervades between both. Loitering aimlessly the poet leans to observe 'a spear of summer grass' which takes a significant turn in Section 6 of the poem where it emerges as a 'flag' of the poet's disposition and 'handkerchief' of the Lord. Whitman's elucidation of the essential oneness of everything

existent in the world corresponds to the sufic postulation of the 'unitive life' manifesting through 'variety of forms' (Khosla 222). His tongue and every particle of his blood are made of the soil and air. The constant, endless and timeless prevalence of the elements called earth and air symbolically represent life as a continual process of which his parents along with his grandparents are equal parts. As such, Whitman brings forth the essential oneness of the human life and the natural elements.

Section 5 of 'Song of Myself' is replete with Sufic motifs. For instance, Whitman realises the importance of both the body and the soul. In truly sufic vein, he says that neither of the two can be abased, ignored or relegated before the other. In the opening Section, the poet extends an open invitation to the soul to 'loaf' and loiter with him on the grass. Now the 'soul' transmutes into the soul mate/the beloved who should loosen the lump of hesitation from her throat. Then the poet recalls an experience of intimate sexual union with his beloved, which is a pointer towards the mystical union with his soul/soul mate. Whitman does not spurn the senses in the process of attaining mystical union or the state of *wusla* with the beloved; he rather approaches it through consummation of *mahabba* (love) and and *ishq* (flames of passion). Thus, through ecstasy and illumination, the poet achieves the supreme 'unitive state' in which the seeker is 'at-one-ment' with Divine attributes/Divine Essence in sufic sense. Whitman depicts his mystical experience thus:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass
all the art and argument 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. . . (Section 5)

The finest sufic stroke comes through the last line in which a serene sense of 'peace and joy' mingled with divinity, fuses into love which is the 'kelson of the creation'. To deepen the sense of diversity of his poetic universe, Whitman talks about the innumerable 'leaves stiff or drooping' along with the 'brown ants in the little wells beneath them', 'mossy scabs of the worn fence' thereby highlighting his awareness of diverse aspects of the phenomenal world. Nevertheless, love, which is integral to Sufic seeking, has been presented as the 'kelson', the great integrating power cohering diverse elements. In

Sufism too it is believed that *ishq* (intense love) produces change and evolution. Rumi's finding was that the lover (quester) and 'the beloved (God/image of the perfect man/cosmic self) both emerged from love' (Arasteh 74). Thus, love is indeed the kelson' of creation as well as evolution.

The symbol of "grass" in Section 6 is a carry over from the opening Section and represents the eternal life cycle of 'birth-death-rebirth.' The simple question, "what is the grass?" posed by an inquisitive child, untangles the mystery of existence before Whitman, the mystic. In Section 26, the poet calls himself "a kosmos, of Manhattan the son." His perception is mystical as the grass becomes a universal signifier of the entire phenomenal world around him. Whitman makes different conjectures as to what the "grass" could symbolize. It could be the "flag of his disposition" which, of course, is cosmic in form; "the handkerchief of the Lord"; the newborn babe of natural vegetation; a "uniform hieroglyphic" which can grow anywhere and everywhere without any sense of discrimination. Whitman's sufic celebration of the phenomenal does not end here. In his effort to respond to a curious query raised by the child, the poet observes the beauty of the grass growing on the graves and calls it "the beautiful uncut hair of graves." In a flash, Whitman recapitulates the young, the old and the newborn babies buried in the graves. Their memories evoke a sense of pain, sympathy and loss in him. It leads him to enquire earnestly as to what becomes of the dead. The answer that occurs to him has sufic connotation. For a Sufi, death does not mean the end of this life; it rather implies the birth of a new form of spiritual life. As such, death cannot be grieved over as it means the homeward/God-ward flight of the sprit. There is every reason to celebrate it. Whitman perceives the reality of life after death by observing the "smallest sprout." Death in no way arrests life; it rather paves a way to resurrection, rejuvenation and renewal of life. Section 6, in fact, ends on an epiphanic note:

The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
 And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest
 it,
 And ceas'd the movement life appear'd.
 All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
 And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier. (Section 6)

Section 33 is the longest in 'Song of Myself' due to Whitman's catalogue presenting the infinitude of his poetic sweep. This section

is interpreted as an instance of the mystical trance of the poet. It opens with the poet's comprehension of the Divine Essence in everything that he comes across in the process of the celebration of his 'Self' having cosmic dimensions. Whitman's cosmic vision is identical with the concept of the *Viraat*¹⁵ as delineated in the *Gita*. It is all-inclusive and all embracing. The poet beholds himself somewhere near the city's quadrangular houses, in the savannas, in the sugarcane and rice fields, etc. Gradually, the poet becomes omnipresent and all pervading. His cosmic vision takes into account everything that is existent in this universe and hence corresponds to the Sufic belief that 'All is God' (Khosla 16) and that the world is a mere 'objectification' of His innumerable attributes, be they oceans, rivers, mountains, the plains or all the continents taken together.

In Section 48, Whitman chants about the importance of the soul as well as the body. The poet already acknowledges his status of 'the poet of the body' and that of the 'soul' in Section 21. Placing the body, the soul, God and the Self on an equal pedestal, Whitman chants thus:

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 . . . (Section 48)

Whitman's equal preference for the body and for the soul overlaps Rumi's belief that the body should not be dishonoured. He holds it in high esteem, as it is the carrier/container of the spirit. He knew that "'form' was necessary to manifest the 'invisible'. Moreover, in Sufism it is also believed that without '. . . bodily development and sensual appetite there would be no question of self-conquest without which no spiritual growth or perfection [is] possible'. Whitman's beholding of 'God in every object' and in 'the faces of men and women' is analogous to the sufic perception of the creation as God's outward 'Self-manifestation'. Whitman's 'unitive' state fills him with delight and a sense of satisfaction. Hence, he sings: 'I am satisfied—I see, dance, laugh, sing . . .' (Section 3).

The 'duplicate' self also finds expression in Section 42 of 'Song of Myself'. Whitman calls it 'another self' which is 'duplicate of every one'. Though 'formless', it is 'smartly attired' with 'countenance smiling'. In Sufism, the counterfeit self is equated with evil, which is not absolute but relative in character: 'It exists because good exists' (Khosla 17). For Whitman there is no recoil from the

narrow, constricted and negative self represented by *Nafs* in sufic terms. *Nafs* is further sub-divided into *Nefs-e-Mutma 'inna* (state of certainty, clarity and insight) and *Nafs-e-Ammara* (instincts, urges and impulses). Whereas the latter is equated with the evil, the former signifies 'intuition' and 'the power of spontaneous living' (Arasteh 93). An 'integrated man' experiences and assimilates both of these states along with 'love'. Interestingly, Whitman too derives propulsion from the 'hankering, gross, mystical, nude' (Section 20), and the 'natural hunger' (Section 19). The existence of the '*wicked*' and the '*righteous*' is simultaneous for him. The sufic consciousness which is pervasive in 'Song of Myself' overwhelms Whitman so irresistibly, and enables him to comprehend and celebrate the existence of contraries, paradoxes, conflicts and counterfeit selves. Hence he sings:

What blurt is this about virtue and about vice?
 Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand indifferent,
 My gait is no fault-finder's or rejecter's gait,
I moisten the roots of all that has grown. [Italics mine]. (Section 22)

Whitman's 'integrated' and holistic sense of being, which is quite evident from the given lines, is truly sufic in nature. Towards the end of Whitman's mystical chant, one may observe a kind of emergence from a state of ecstasy or intoxication to what is called 'the second sobriety' in Sufism. Sufis equate the ecstatic state with *sukr* (intoxication), which is not the goal of the sufic seeker. *Sahw* (sobriety), in fact, is his actual goal, which has two types—'the first sobriety' and the 'second sobriety'. The first is marked by the return of the aspirant to 'normal consciousness' whereas the second implies a return to 'higher, super-normal consciousness': '. . . it is a continuation of union and separation, with the essence revealing itself as attributes' (Khosla 197).

Thus, the poet has returned to a higher, super-normal state in which he remains constantly aware of some divine presence within him. Therefore in the opening line of Section 50, Whitman says:

There is *that* in me—I do not know what *it* is — but I know *it* is in me" [Italics mine].

As such, Whitman strongly feels the divinity within him but cannot express it. However, in the last line of this section, Whitman is able to visualize 'eternal life' and 'happiness' as he sings:

Do you see O my brother and sisters?
It is not chaos or death – it is form, union, plan-
it is eternal life-it is Happiness (Section 50).

Richard Volney Chase has pointed out the paradoxical aspect of Whitmanesque 'Self' by calling it the paradox of 'identity'. He does not subscribe to Whitman's 'ruthless equalitarianism', but interestingly Whitman himself has viewed this aspect of his cosmic vision. Transcending all paradoxes and contradictions, Whitman Chants ecstatically in Section 51 thus:

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.) (Section 51)

As such, in a typically sufic manner, Whitman is firmly established in 'cosmic consciousness'. For him, the universe ('The All' as suggested by Volney Chase) could be micro-reduced into 'you', 'I' or even 'an atom'. Hence, a 'simple separate person' becomes the embodiment of the masses, humanity at large. Viewed in sufic terms, the mystical play between the states of 'intoxication' (*Sukr*) and 'sobriety' (*Sahw*) goes on eternally. K. Khosla's insightful observation regarding a sufi's state of being most aptly corresponds to Whitman's mystical state as is evident in 'Song of Myself':

The Sufi tends to swing between intoxication and sobriety, between Contemplation of plurality in Oneness and Absolute Unity, between this Immanence and Transcendence. Both are veils. Sometimes, the One veils Many, and sometimes, the Many veil the one, that is, the outward world Of phenomena veils its inward Reality. In either case, his vision of the Divine Essence is partial. The oscillation ceases and the veils are rent When the Sufi attains to the second sobriety, which is the unitive state at its highest. In this state, remaining full-rooted in the Divine Essence, he descends to this world of attributes and mingles with people, affirming the One in the Many. . . . Intoxication is lost in sobriety, which is no more its superior, nor even distinct from it. Both stand transcended, both harmonized in a single unity (Khosla 197).

Summing it up can be averred that 'Song of Myself' is Whitman's most authentic statement on the mystical experience in sufic sense. One aspect of Whitman's mysticism which is akin to sufic mysticism, is a sense of unity (referred to as 'unitive state') which permeates everything that exists in this universe. For Whitman, nothing exists in isolation. His first person singular 'I' comprises all that is

phenomenal along with everything that is transcendental. Like a true Sufi Whitman beholds the Divine¹⁶ in every aspect of creation as enunciated lucidly and convincingly in Section 48:

And I say to mankind, be not curious about God,
For I who am curious about each am not curious about God,

.....
I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand
God not in the least,

.....
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four,
and each moment . . . (Section 48)

Thus, each aspect of creation along with every fleeting moment is a complete revelation of God for Whitman. This is precisely where he comes very close to the sufic perception of the world.

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13. B. Qureshi Regula, "Localizing Islam: Sama in the Royal Court of Chisti Saints", Shankar Dayal Sharma et al, p. 317.
14. Sharma, Shankar Dayal, et al. p. 319.
15. See verses ix-xiv (xiv in particular) of Chapter 11 in Swami Ramsukhdas, *Srimad Bhagvadgita Vol. II*. Trans.by S. C. Vaishya (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1999), p. 821.
16. Witman's vision is akin to the "Theophanic vision" of Ibn al-'Arabi, which implies that "... the subtle essence of God is in all things." See Falconar 55-56.