



Yogi as a Poet: Revisiting the Poems of Swami Vivekananda

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ABSTRACT

The poet has often been called a prophet. But in Swami Vivekananda's Poems we find the yogi as a poet. The foundation of Swamiji's romantic perception can be traced among his boyhood imaginations, stimulated by nature. In this context, we might recall Narendranath's admiration for Wordsworth's nature-poems. This paper is an attempt to revisit Swamiji's poems that are at once spiritual and lyrical.

KEYWORDS:

The pantheist consciousness of the *param* (real) right from *Brahmo* (the Utmost) to the lowest creature forms an important characteristic of Vivekananda's poetry. The foundation of this perception can be traced among his boyhood imaginations, stimulated by nature. In this context, we might recall Narendranath's admiration for Wordsworth's nature-poems. The passionate nature of Narendranath at this point of life has been accurately documented by his companion, Brojendranath Shil:

Undeniably a gifted youth, sociable free and unconventional in manners, a sweet singer, the soul of social circles a brilliant conversationalist, some-what bitter and caustic, piercing with the shafts of a keen wit the shows and mummeries of the world, sitting in the scorer's chair but hiding the tenderness of hearts under the grab of cynicism: altogether an inspired Bohemian but possessing what Bohemians lack, an iron will; somewhat preemptory and absolute, speaking with accents of authority and withal possessing a strange power of the eye which could hold his listeners in thrall. (*Prabuddho Bharat*, 1907)

After a long gap, even Sister Nivedita has pointed out the elements of bohemianism in her guru's character: "Vivekananda is nothing if not a breaker of bondage." (*Notes of Some Wanderings*, 34).

Shelley's love for nature and his vision of a glorified millennial humanity as conveyed through "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" could move the young Vivekananda more than any philosophical dissertation. Shelley has been also a major influence on the upcoming poet Biharilal, the proof of which again can be found in his then-newly composed *Sharadamangol*. Like Shelley, both Biharilal and Vivekananda have transitioned from romantic to mystic poet.

The most romantic poem composed by Vivekananda, is evidently the one titled "Thou Blessed Dream":

Thou dream, O blessed dream!
Speed near and far thy veil of haze,
Tone down the lines so sharp,
Make smooth what roughness seems.

No magic but in thee!
Thy touch makes deserts bloom to life,
Harsh thunder blessed song,
Fell death the sweet release. (*In Search of God and Other Poems*, 32)

Vivekananda's romantic notion of dream can be compared to Michael Madhusudan Dutta's "Madhukari Kalpana" or Coleridge's 'imagination'.

The mystic in Swamiji has strived rigorously for the collective good, but his main concern has always been the upgrading of poor, ignorant, reprobate and belittled ones. Hence he desires:

May I be born again and again and suffer thousands of miseries, so that I may worship the only God that exists, the only God I believe in—the sumtotal of all souls; and above all, my God the wicked, my God the miserable, my God the poor of all races, of all species is the special ob-

ject of my worship. (*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol VIII, 67)

Vivekananda has interrogated: "Ye divinities on earth—sinner? It is a sin to call a man so; it is a standing libel on human nature." (*The Complete Works*, 46); for he has maintained that the evil, filth in human being is a passing phase of this life due to veiling of cognizance with ignorance. For Swamiji, all pleasure derived from the world of senses is temporal and detrimental: "The whole life [of senses] is only a swan song." ("The Master as I saw Him", *Works of Sister Nivedita*, Vol I, 124). The moment a person is self-awakened, s/he will discover his real pure essence. In the poem "Angels Unawares" Swamiji gives the same message:

One bending low with load—of life
That meant no joy, but suffering harsh and hard—
And wending on his way through dark and dismal paths,
Without a flash of light from brain or heart
To give a moment's cheer—till the line
That marks out pain from pleasure, death from life
And good from what is evil, was well-nigh wiped from sight—
Saw, one blessed night, a faint but beautiful ray of light
Descend to him. He knew not what or wherefrom,
But called it God and worshipped.

Hope, an utter stranger, came to him, and spread
Through all his parts, and life to him meant more
Than he could ever dream, and covered all he knew,
Nay, peeped beyond his world. The Sages
Winked, and smiled, and called it 'superstition'.
But he did feel its power and peace
And gently answered back—
'O Blessed Superstition!'

(*In Search of God and Other Poems*, 26)

Death, darkness, Kali—these chronically appear as corresponding archetypes in Vivekananda's poetry. Kali denotes the definitive aim to transcend this world of disease-suffering-sorrow-death. From Kali, the awful image of *Matri-shakti*, one also derives the command, strength to struggle with profanity and achieve exactness. The Kali of *Shakta* tradition, becomes the Mother of the universe in Vivekananda's poems—the valiant, non-submissive mother who induces the spirit of fearlessness and heroic pursuit in the soul of her children. Composed at Kashmir in 1898, "Kali the Mother" has been scripted or rather forced itself into writing, when during the days of pilgrimage to Kshir Bhavani (Kashmir), the Swami has been in such a spiritual ecstatic state as if it is too much for him to bear the corporeal frame. Sister Nivedita who has accompanied him on that pilgrimage says:

His brain was teeming with thoughts, he said one day and his fingers could not rest till they were written down. It was that same evening that we came back to our houseboat from some expedition and found waiting for us, where he had called and left them, his manuscript lines on "Kali the mother". Writing in a fever of inspiration, he had fallen on the floor, when he had finished—as we learnt afterwards—exhausted

with his own intensity. (*Works of Sister Nivedita*, Vol I, 94)

Kali, the dark Mother is the ultimate achievement that one attains through his perish from the confinements of time and place; "the souls of a million lunatics", trapped in this existential "prison-house" get liberated through their exposure to "A thousand, thousand shades/ Of Death begrimed and black" by the Mother, who come "dancing mad with joy" through "darkness vibrant, sonant":

Who dares misery love,
And hung the form of Death,
Dance in Destruction's face,
To him the Mother comes. (*In Search of God and Other Poems*, 25)

This Death does not mean extinction, rather a new awakening, a new resurrection from mundaneness to elevation. In Aurobindo's creative impulse, death gets depicted like almost an *abhisharika*:

Death wanders through our lives at will, sweet Death
Is busy with each intake of our breath.
Why do you fear her? Lo, her laughing face
All rosy with the light of jocund grace!
A kind and lovely maiden culling flowers
In a sweet garden fresh with vernal showers,
This is the thing you fear, young portress bright
Who opens in your souls the worlds of light.
Is it because the twisted stem must feel
Pain when the tenderest hands its glory steal?
Is it because the flowerless stalk droops dull
And ghastly now that was so beautiful?
Or is it the opening portal's horrid jar
That shakes you, feeble souls of courage bare?
Death is but changing of our robes to wait
In wedding garments at the Eternal's gate.
("The Fear of Death", *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol I, 144)

'Death' and 'Kali', the Mother become the archetypes for the 'terrible' that one need to confront and conquer only to be determined and enlightened. However, in the process the human being should become, not lopsided; rather an ideal person with a [perfect balance of the tenderness that can be paralleled with the interior softness of 'mother's heart', and fortitude that forms the exterior of the mother Kali:

The mother's heart, the hero's will
The sweetness of the southern breeze,
The sacred charm and strength that dwell
On Aryan altars, flaming, free;
All these be yours, and many more
No ancient soul could dream before—
But thou to India's future son
The mistress, servant, friend in one.
("A Benediction", *In Search of God and Other Poems*, 33)

The Mother, despite being terrible, is essentially the caring and loving monitor who shows the correct track to her children, not with severity and strictness, but with love and affection; the only thing that is re-

quired is the stout motivation and a robust self-conviction to abide by her: Hence, Mother, "The sight Divine in great, in small", also becomes the harmonizing power who unites all the creatures, and even all the creeds:

... pours the nectar in mother's kiss
And the babies' sweet 'mama'.
Thou wert my God with prophet's old;
All creeds o come from Thee;
The Vedas, Bible, and Koran bold
Sing Thee in harmony.

'Thou art', 'Thou art' the Soul of souls
In the rushing stream of life.
'Om Tat Sat Om: Thou art my God.
My love, I am Thine, I am Thine.
("In Search of God", *In Search of God and Other Poems*, 3)

Vivekananda's pantheistic vision, derived from the *Upanishad's* doctrine of "*Sarvang Khaluidang Bhahman*", has found its poetic expression in other poems too:

Many a time I see thee—I am Thee!
Aye! I am Thee, and Thou, my Lord, art me!
Thou art within my speech. Within my throat
Art Thou, as Vinapani, learned, wise.
On the flow of Thy current and its force
Humanity is carried as Thou wilt.
The thunder of Thy voice is borne upon the boom
Of crashing waves of over-leaping seas;
The sun and moon give utterance to Thy voice;
Thy conversation, in the gentle breeze
Makes itself heard; in truth, in every truth,
True! True! ... ("A Song I Sing o Thee", *In Search of God and Other Poems*, 52)

This realization, "I am Thee, and Thou, my Lord, art me", is the supreme knowledge that the *Upanishads* have conveyed: '*Atmaanam Vidvi*', i.e. 'Know thyself' as the very Divine Being. Socrates said, 'Man know thyself'. So do all the great spiritual teachings. Amongst the Sufis, there is a saying, which they attribute to Prophet Mohammed, which says, 'man arafa nafsahu faqad arafa rabbahu'; which means, 'he who knoweth his Self, knoweth his Lord'. The *Vedantic* teachings instead of saying God-realization usually use the word 'Self-realization'. This exact outlook can be found even in the very opening verse of *The Songs of Innocence*, "The Lamb" by the mystic poet William Blake:

While concluding we can assert that Vivekananda as a sage-poet has demonstrated all the qualities that one finds in an ideal poet: "Vision", says Aurobindo, "is the characteristic power of the poet, as is discriminative thought the essential gift of the philosopher and analytic observation the natural genius of the scientist. The Kavi was in the idea of the ancients and seer and revealers of truth... Therefore the greatest poets have been always those who have had a large and powerful interpretative and intuitive vision of nature and life and man and whose poetry has arisen out of that in a supreme revelatory utterance to it." ("The Future Poetry").

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