

THE STRUCTURE AND IDENTITIES OF SELF IN THE *BHAGWAD GITA* AND WALT WHITMAN'S *LEAVES OF GRASS*

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ABSTRACT

Self enjoys a prestigious place in the field of mysticism. It is an organised whole. Self is a unity of diverse parts with an enduring structure. It is neither mere body nor simply consciousness. Self is the most integrated and the highest product. It is a searcher *par excellence* and possesses a rare power of penetration. Self is known for its superb organic vision which is all-inclusive. It is an ever-present reality in experience.

Whitman's exact involvement in the *Bhagvad-Gita* has always been a subject of literary debate. Emerson enthusiastically hailed Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* as a "remarkable mixture of the *Bhagvad-Gita* and the New York Herald".¹ H.D. Thoreau found it "wonderfully like the Orientals"² T.R. Rajasekharaiah admits that Indian classics do not "throw any direct light on our problem of tracing Whitman's knowledge of Indian ideas prior to 1855".³ V.K. Chari has over-emphasised the analogies between Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Indian Vedanta.⁴ K. Srinivasá Sastry's exploration of self is limited to Whitman's "Song of Myself", which constitutes a section of *Leaves of Grass* only.⁵ Som P. Ranchan's 'adventures with self' does not provide any vital information about the role of self in the *Gita* and *Leaves of Grass*.⁶ V.N. Dhavale does not believe that Whitman "belongs to any particular tradition, Eastern or Western".⁷ The present study is not an attempt to Indianise Walt Whitman or to prove that *Leaves of Grass* is wholly or partly inspired or influenced by the *Gita*. The seeming similarities between the *Gita* and *Leaves of Grass* are not deliberate but coincidental. The present investigation proposes to deal with the controversial structure of the self and its constituents in the two epics. It will further investigate self's identification with Nature, the ephemeral and spiritual worlds, death, God, etc., and the consequences of such inter-actions of selves on its spiritual growth.

Self's paradoxical nature has never been fully explained to the readers' satisfaction even by its most committed exponents. None can claim to have unearthed its 'real' reality. The Buddhists equate intellect with self and call it consciousness. Bhatta feels that the consciousness associated with ignorance is the real self; it is material. The Sankhya system shows that the *purusha* is the empirical self and is related to the supreme Imperishable. Self's ambiguous nature is explicitly presented in the *Gita*: "Some look upon the self as marvellous. Others speak of It as wonderful. Others again hear of It as a wonder. And still others, though hearing, do not understand it at all".⁸ The *Gita* recognises the true self as the *atman* which is "indestructible"⁹ and the Supreme *Purusha* as "the Highest Self".¹⁰ Like the *Gita*, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is never specific about Self's true nature or *akara*. Whitman finds Self "fatherless"¹¹ and confesses that it is "never measured and never will be measured".¹²

Self has no one specific identity in this world. Self in the *Gita*, is *purusha* and has roughly three manifestations in it. First, it stands for an ordinary human being: it is the smaller self. Second, it may stand for the true self, the eternal yet individual that symbolises purity. Third, it refers to the divine person Krishna who is the highest person, *purusa uttama*, or the supreme divine person, *parama purusa divya*. He is distinguished from other selves for His "Boldness, forgiveness, fortitude, purity,

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absence of hatred, absence of pride".¹³ It is bonded but still "deemed to make for liberation".¹⁴ *Purusas* can be "perishable"¹⁵ or "imperishable".¹⁶ All beings are perishable, but the *kutasha* is imperishable. The demonical self (*Asurika*) is inferior and knows "neither activity nor right abstinence, nor purity, nor even propriety, nor truth is in them".¹⁷ It symbolises "hypocrisy, pride and arrogance".¹⁸ Unlike the *Gita* Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* dramatises Self in its most generic sense. Whitman believes in the basic parity of all selves. Self, in *Leaves of Grass*, is known for its divinity and is quite independent: "I exist as I am" (40). Its range of observation is all-inclusive: "I have the idea of all, and am all and believe in all (193). Self's divinity is a two-way process: "Divine am I inside and out, and make holy whatever I touch or touch'd from" (44).

Self's intriguing structure can be tentatively explained vis-a-vis body and soul. Self, in the *Gita*, is least dependent on the body which is its "agent"¹⁹ only. Soul, the "indweller"²⁰ in the body, is "Absolute".²¹ Body is, in reality, the temple of the soul. Soul, though resides in the body, is not bound by its limitations. The self presented in the *Gita* is "eternal"²² and indestructible. Self, in *Leaves of Grass*, fully recognises the claims of the body and gives due weightage to it. Whitman is the "Chanter of Personality" (3) and glorifies the "body electric" (78). He declares that if "anything is sacred the human body is sacred" (83) and "superb and divine is your body, or any part of it" (20). Whitman has always equated the body with the soul: "I have said that the soul is not greater than the body, / And I have said the body is not more than the soul" (72). For him, the body 'includes and is the soul' (20) and ironically asks "if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?" (78)

Self is a searcher *par excellence* and noted for its agility-cum-mobility. It can likely be bound by the limitations of time or space. Self, in the *Gita*, is always seen "in action".²³ The *Gita* has always glorified the life of action.²⁴ "Action is superior to the renunciation of action".²⁵ It cautions us that the cessation of action is not a way to "perfection".²⁶ None should "test for even an instant, without performing action."²⁷ The *Gita* desires every person to "engage in all work"²⁸ for self-realisation. A man remains a searcher till he attains God-consciousness. "He who knoweth Me thus is not fettered by action".²⁹ Self, in *Leaves of Grass*, is voyager clairvoyant and is involved in a never-ending spiritual quest: "I tramp a perpetual journey" (69). It has opted for the "roving Life" (108) and is determined to overcome the "vast realms of space and time" (427). Self has deliberately "abandoned myself to flights, broad circles" (9) and is "afoot with my vision" (51). It is to remain involved and has "no time to lose" (191) in this heroic mission. Self has to face a "path ahead endlessly" (23) and never plans its moves in advance: "I am going away, I know nowhere" (429).

Self is keen to identify itself with all forms of being, sentient or inanimate. It can easily project into the consciousness of others. It sees the kindred relationship of things, for they are made of the same material. Self, in *Leaves of Grass*, cannot alienate itself from others and is ever-ready to "adhere" (22) to them. Self is never selective in its identifications: "I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise" (37). It can have no life apart from others: "Why should I exile myself from my companions?" (91). Self goes ecstatic in such mergers and looks pretty contented: "I do not ask any more delight, I swim it as in a sea" (80). It wants to temporarily, identify, but never nourishes the idea dissolving itself in others. Self ought to retain its identity or individuality in its spiritual explorations. Self in the *Gita*, is equally keen to be identified with others. It is finally to merge in Brahman and be united with Him for ever. The entire effort of the self is to work out its relationships with others.

Self's field of exploration is the objective world or *Prakriti*. The world depicted in the *Gita* is both real and unreal. Self at the phenomenal level "perceives the universe of diversity and is aware of

one's own individual ego".³⁰ Nature is the power of God or spirit in the *Gita*. "The spirit", observes Aurobindo, "is the upholder of Nature and her action and the giver of the sanction by which alone her law becomes imperative and its ways operatives".³¹ The *Gita* conceives that the Absolute manifests himself in the cosmos: "All this world is pervaded by Me in My unmanifested form".³² The lower (*apara*) aspect of Absolute represents the world of Nature. As S. Radhakrishnan puts it: "The world is not essentially being like Brahman; not is it mere non-being".³³ *Prakriti* is the play of the Infinite on the finite. The world of existence has a meaning. The *Gita* preaches a dynamic social ethic and "insists on the performance of the social duty".³⁴ In the *Gita*, the spiritual and transcendental point of view regards the world as unreal or *Maya*. The *Maya* is the sum total of space, time, and causation. It is the power which enables Brahman to produce mutable nature.

Self, in *Leaves of Grass*, is earth-bound and finds nothing illusory or unreal about this world. *Leaves of Grass* dramatises this modern "superb humanity" (190) in all its authenticity. According to J.J. Chapman the World of *Leaves of Grass* gives us "life in the throb".³⁵ Self is mad after the "most copious and closer companionship of men" (105). It accepts all, loves all, and elevates all. Self finds its "soul reflected in Nature" (81). Self can readily identify with the selves of animals, birds, and insects. It can "stand and look at them long and long" (50) because they are placid and self-contained. Self finds Nature "full of perfume" (24) and is enthralled in her presence. It is "enamour'd of growing out-door" (34). Self finds Nature indispensable to its self-development: "The air tastes good to my palate" (45). It has an abiding faith in it: "The earth good and stars good, and their adjuncts all good" (39). Self emerges as a great democrat and stands for absolute EQUALITY: By God: I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart on the same terms" (43). It is anti-exploitation. "Whoever degrades another degrades me" (43). Whitman's self is the mouthpiece of every individual or class: "I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also" (42). Self finds the Absolute as the substance and reality of all things. God dwells in sense-objects but is distinct from them. "Whitman", observes N.K. Sharma, "always seeks the spiritual through the material."³⁶ The devotion to God must accompany living service to humanity.

Self's involvement in sex or love is a controversial matter in the field of mysticism. The *Gita* recommends the outright renunciation of "*Kamyā* action"³⁷, because it is man's "unseizable fee".³⁸ It demands that all the sensual desires must be curbed "at the outset".³⁹ The *Gita* points out that passions (*rajas*) originate from "Craving and attachment"⁴⁰ and must be suitably channelised. He who consciously opts for this passionate life "lives in sin".⁴¹ It is no life. It can never let a person to be identified with Brahman. Unlike the *Gita*, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, is love-centered. Whitman believes that the "kelson of creation is love" (27) and is not unaware of "the flesh and the appetites" (44). Self, in *Leaves of Grass*, is mad after "robust love" (107) and feels "tremulous aching" (77) for "amorous love" (91). It is always seen brimming with love: "O my breast aches with love for all" (185). In *Leaves of Grass*, the sacredness of the body is fully recognised: "If anything is sacred, the human body is sacred" (83). None can corrupt or exploit this divine body. D.H. Lawrence finds "flesh is spirit"⁴² in *Leaves of Grass*. Love is a great ordination of the universe. it is an "act divine" (78) and the subject is "Carried eternally" (96) in its process. Love serves "the soul well" (80) and can bring about the "resurrection" (76) of the love-thirsty person. The ecstasy of physical love becomes a vehicle of the divine in *Leaves of Grass*.

Self can also identify with death in the *Gita* and *Leaves of Grass*. Self is non-decaying in the *Gita*: "This self cannot be cut, nor burnt, nor wetted, nor dried".⁴³ It is invulnerable and immutable: "None has the power to destroy this Immutable".⁴⁴ Self cannot be "slain"⁴⁵ and "is not killed when the

body is killed".⁴⁶ It is eternal and is "unborn, eternal, changeless, ever-Itself".⁴⁷ It can never cease "to exist in the future".⁴⁸ Birth and death are related to each other in the *Gita*: "Of that which is born, death is certain, of that which is dead, birth is certain".⁴⁹ Death can identify self with Brahman: "Dying thou gainest heaven".⁵⁰ An embodied self is self-controlled: "The wise grieve neither for the living nor for the dead".⁵¹ Like the *Gita*, Self in *Leaves of Grass* is in constant dialogue with death. Self knows that death "draws sometimes close to me as face to face" (428). It has almost overcome the fear of death: "And as to you Death, and you bitter hug of mortality, it is idle to try to alarm me" (73). Death is a "real reality" (94). Self is always conscious of its immortality and never feels nervous or shocked in the presence of death: "I know I am deathless" (40) and jeers at "What you call dissolution" (40). It has no doubts about the continuity of life: "The smallest sprout shows, there is really no death" (102), And "All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses and to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier" (29). Self finds death delicious and is convinced that "nothing can happen more beautiful than death" (19). Nothing is permanently lost in this universe: "Nothing is ever really lost, or can be lost. No birth, identity, form—no object of the world" (404). Life, in *Leaves of Grass*, continually renews itself.

Self tries to identify with God in the *Gita* and *Leaves of Grass*. The hankering after God is the very back-bone of spiritual experience. Yoga relates self to Brahman vis-a-vis soul in the *Gita*. A *Yogi* having a "supersensuous sight"⁵² can attain God-consciousness. A person "With mind and intellect absorbed in Me, thou shalt doubtless come to Me".⁵³ He can also identify with God by "the renunciation of *Kamyas* action".⁵⁴ Renunciation can ensure eternal peace: "Peace immediately follows renunciation".⁵⁵ Self can also bridge the gap between itself and God by "Yajna, gift, and austerity".⁵⁶ A person who has realised "Supreme perfection"⁵⁷ is absorbed in God-consciousness. A "Strong and content" (118). Self in *Leaves of Grass* can come closer to God. It can realise God by remaining "firm" (132) in its spiritual quest. It is to overcome "the teeming spiritual darkness" (323) and "trackless seas" before having the glimpse of God.

Self's identification with Brahman can lead to *jivamukti* in the *Gita*. The *Jivatma* is eternally merged in God-consciousness and forgoes its individuality. It is "no more subject to rebirth—which is the home of pain, and ephemeral".⁵⁸ The *yogi* "attains the bliss of contact with Brahman"⁵⁹ and enjoys "undecaying happiness".⁶⁰ Self's merger with God can ensure "peace"⁶¹ and "eternal abode".⁶² Self gets rid of the problem of "rebirth".⁶³ The absorption of self in God gives birth to *Sattvika* happiness which appears "Poison at first, but nectar at the end".⁶⁴ This happiness is difficult to realise in one's life. As Swami Nikilananda rightly observes: "Worldly happiness is but an infinitesimal part of the bliss of Brahman".⁶⁵ A "deluded"⁶⁶ or "unrefined"⁶⁷ Self will remain isolated from God. A

non-believer is bound to be "deluded in the path of Brahman".⁶⁸

Self, in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, is eager to meet but reluctant to be identified with God: "Bathe me O God in thee, mounting to thee, I and my soul to range in range of thee" (327). It continues to seek "Something yet unfound though I have diligently sought many a long year" (76). Self calls God a "comrade perfect" (327) or simply an "Ideal Man" (216). Self is no less than God: "And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is" (72). Like God, he too becomes "an acme of things accomplished, and I am encloser of things to be" (67). Self refuses to be "encaged" (141) in Him: "O confine me not!" (88). Unlike the *Gita*, there is no end to the spiritual quest in *Leaves of Grass*: "O daring joy, but safe! are they not all the seas of God? O farther, farther father sail" (328). The identification of self with God is a grand delusion and cannot last long: "All hold spiritual joy and afterwards loosen it" (20). Self keeps itself "Tumbling on steadily, nothing dreading" (178), as it has

“no time to lose” (191) in this spiritual quest.

Self is the chief motivating force both in the *Gita* and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Self, in the *Gita*, is divine but its divinity is mainly due to the presence of the divine *Atman* in it. Body, though important, is decidedly inferior to the soul. Self, in *Leaves of Grass*, is no less divine but its divinity includes the divinity of the body also. For Whitman, there is no difference between the body and the soul. Self's identification with Brahman leads to its salvation in the *Gita*, and this marks the end of the spiritual quest. Self's material-cum-spiritual quest is not to be terminated in God in *Leaves of Grass*. Self has never intended to seek salvation by merging in God-consciousness. In *Leaves of Grass*, Self experiences the Divine Spirit in its identification with Nature. Self is almost hypnotised in its presence. Self is equally keen to identify itself with Brahman vis-a-vis Nature in the *Gita*. The phenomenal world presented in the *Gita* is Maya or pure delusion and Self shows no urgency to communicate with it. The world depicted in *Leaves of Grass* is substantial and thrillingly alive. Self's identification with Brahman is the ultimate aim of the Self in the *Gita*. Self can forgo anything to be absorbed in God-consciousness. Self, in *Leaves of Grass*, is not to lose or dissolve itself in God forever. The duality between the self and God is eternal. Sex can hinder or aid the spiritual process. The *Gita* calls for the total renunciation of *Kamyas* actions for self-realization. Sex, in *Leaves of Grass*, is a divine act and there is nothing shameful or repulsive about it. Self's involvement in death has no traditional fear attached to it. Self is a constant companion of death in the *Gita* and *Leaves of Grass*. In the *Gita*, it seeks death to be identified with Brahman. But in *Leaves of Grass*, Self accepts death because it is a part of the progressive universe. It welcomes death because it finally leads to life. Life continually renews itself in *Leaves of Grass*. The message of the *Gita* is not other-worldly but has a definite relevance to society. It preaches the doctrine of social activism for the socio-moral rejuvenation of the sick society. The leading motif of *Leaves of Grass* is the glorification of the Self and the spiritual transformation of the corrupt and fast crumbling life.

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