

# SPIRITUALITY OF WHITE AND WHITMAN: A CRITICAL STUDY

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**ABSTRACT:** The paper explores the spirituality of White and Whitman. Patrick White and Walt Whitman were two luminaries of the world and seekers of truth. White was an Australian Nobel Laureate while Whitman was a representative poet and prophet of America. Both of them believed in national and international development and found a religion based on human values as a basic necessity of man. They declared that there is only one RELIGION which has hundreds of versions. The core point of every religion is God and the essence of RELIGION is spirituality. **Spirituality means to love and sacrifice.** Spirituality is the mantra for peace and prosperity. Spirituality means the oneness of man and the oneness of God. A spiritually sound person can tackle any condition of life boldly. Both White and Whitman believed that **spirituality is the permanent solution to human suffering.** Like Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, they believed that man is not warring by nature and that solutions to war are temporary. Their call was to come back to our true nature for individual and world peace. Spirituality of White and Whitman is **democratic spirituality, Vasudev kutumbukam** or connectedness. Both White and Whitman believed that all life is sacred and all life is important. Spirituality teaches reverence for all life.

**Keywords:** democratic spirituality, love and sacrifice, luminaries, RELIGION, Vasudev kutumbukam.

**INTRODUCTION:** The core point of every religion is God and the essence of religion is spirituality. In the same way essence of spirituality is to find our soul, being a part and parcel of the Supreme Soul. Vivekananda in *His Call to the Nation* says that "Mankind ought to be taught that religions are but the varied expressions of THE RELIGION, which is Oneness, so that each may choose the path that suits him best (75). He further says that there is one Light and there is a common aspiration toward truth and love. In the past man and God moved together. But today we have made a distance from Him. Man today has lost faith in religion. We are standing on the cross-roads. Man is never at rest and peace. He has been struggling since antiquity. Unrest in all the countries of the world is deepening and nations are moving into a jungle of darkness. Passion for power, lust for fame, the greed for gold—all these have disturbed the balance of the world. Man is groping in the dark, crying for light. He is always in conflict with truth and illusion. Spirituality is the formula for peace and prosperity. Religion is a unifying force. It gives direction to human beings. No social engineering will help national life that is ignorant of man's inner, spiritual nature and no

economics will secure true welfare that ignores the love of God and man.

What we need is the science of the West coupled with the spirituality of the East, as says the Indian yogi Swami Vivekananda. It is the light of this understanding that the nations need, otherwise there would be wars and battles. Mostly the battles have been fought in the name of 'religion' because religion has been misunderstood by us. Form or symbol does not mean religion. Rather religion is a way of life. It is the path of all absorption. It asserts the **oneness of man** and the **oneness of God**. For individual and world peace, there is no other way but true religion based on truth and spirituality. We need a **man-making religion**. We shall have to retrace our steps from sheer materialism to religion of the spirit. We shall have to come back to our true nature. We shall have to return to God. There is no other choice. Says Dr.S.Radhakrishnan in his famous book *Recovery of Faith*:

"Our age is still in desperate need of that which religion alone can give" (1).

"The fundamental need of the world, far deeper than any social, political or economic readjustment is a spiritual reawakening, a recovery of faith" (7).

**RESEARCH PAPER:** The present study is aimed at exploring the spirituality of Patrick White, the grand old master of Australia, as propounded in his novels. The same shall be compared with that of Walt Whitman, the voice of America and the spirit of democracy. Both of them had a transcendental vision and were not confined to any religious dogmas. They believed in the **new trinity of Man, God, and Nature**. They believed that the individual is the centre of the universe and intuition is above reason. The heart of religion is the message of love and sacrifice. For peace and harmony, reverence for all creation is necessary. The high and the low, the rich and the poor, the king and the clown— all are equal in the natural system. Nature may seem cruel at times, but it is the best teacher and guide. Everything happens for our good. There is no place for hatred and cruelty in the realm of God, as says Mahatma Gandhi: "I don't know how people find time to hate when it is already too short to love." Both believed in national and international development. Their message can be summed up in a tri-fold formula:

- Know the Truth
- Realize the Truth
- Live the Truth

Man is a traveler. Our entire life is wandering. Since the dawn of history, man has been seeking happiness. He hankers after worldly pleasures for permanent peace, which is an anomaly. Worldly pleasures are confined to the senses, hence short-lived. Permanent peace can be obtained only from the permanent source i.e. God Himself. Man is more than a physical being. He is a combination of body, mind, soul, and intellect. Man's personality needs growth and development in all these aspects. He should be sound physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. If we want inner peace along with world peace, we need a balance between the body and the soul, emotions and the intellect. According to a study, man is 2% physical and 98% mental and spiritual. But the physical claims most of our attention, time, and energy.

Man is not warring by nature. But wrong notions of so-called 'religious' people and the power-hunger of politicians give birth to wars, which is not the way to solve problems. Moreover, such solutions are not permanent. For the sake of the world and each individual, spiritual awakening is necessary. Spiritual life is a life of balance. It ensures physical, mental, emotional, and social development. Truth is the effortless way. Hidden Soul or Oversoul is the greater self of man. Man today has become a traveler in space. But true life is a life lived in God. It is a life of sacrifice. The service of man is the service of God. **Spiritual life is the realization of unity.** It is the form that passes away but the soul does not die. Death is of the body, not of the soul which is the real being. A truly spiritual man is not disturbed by events and incidents. He has learned to lay his mind in a state of tranquility. He beholds the **One in all and all in One**. He rises above the barriers of creed and colour, country and race, which is the need of the hour as says Lala Hardyal in his famous book *Hints For Self-Culture*:

A time like this demand

Strong minds, great hearts, true faith, and ready hands,

.....

Tall men, sun-crowned, who live above the fog,

In public duty and private thinking" (287).

Patrick White was a powerful novelist, playwright, and storyteller of Australia. He got a Nobel Prize for his humanistic vision of life. He found unity in the ultimate message of all religions, which is the message of self-development and God-realization. In his autobiography *Flaws in the Glass*, he asserts that he is very much religious but his religion is not confined to any ism. He combines in him the qualities of all religions. He supported the spirit of universal brotherhood like Whitman, the poet, and prophet of America. Both of them had been influenced by the Indian philosophy and the exhortations of Emerson, the sage of Concord and spiritual leader of America. Both agreed on the relation between man, God, and nature. Whitman not only wrote but also lived as a believer in the essential divinity of every human life. The man was no longer a sinner now. Each creature was a mini copy of God Himself, hence sacred. Emerson was his spiritual guru who made him familiar with oriental wisdom to make his view of life mystical. Whitman's work during the civil war, as a kind of one-man Red Cross agency in the army hospitals, was heroic. He sang praises of Abraham Lincoln, the President of America because he took bold steps to end slavery. As written in *American Literature of the Nineteenth Century, An Anthology*:

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"...he felt that the material world and all its inhabitants were emanations of divinity, and therefore sacred, and that man could achieve a sense of unity with God"(31).

In the same way, White raised his voice for the aborigines who had the primitive right of the Australian continent. Both of them realized that religion is the idea which is raising the brute unto man, and man unto God as says Vivekananda in *His Call to the Nation* (V.409). They concluded that there is some purpose in life.

Whitman, under the impression of Transcendentalism, wrote in free verse justifying his communion with nature and God. Emerson called him the poet of America because he was fulfilling the mission in both content and style. He was writing from the core of his heart. He had expanded himself to form its relation with the whole universe. He found his spirit in each and all. To him, a negligible thing like a blade of grass was representative of the divinity of God, and a small part of the world. Whitman confessed that it was all due to the blessings of Emerson. He wrote an epic poem called *Leaves of Grass* where "Song of Myself" is the core point. He celebrates his life and asks others also to make their lives a celebration because they also constitute the same elements. His celebration of self is the celebration of life itself since self or soul represents the Over-Soul or God, and nature is the living entity that helps in such union and communion, as Wordsworth says in his famous poem *The Tintern Abbey*:

And I have felt

A presence that disturbs me with the joy

Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused,

Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,

And the round ocean and the living air,

And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:

A motion and a spirit, that impels

All thinking things, all objects of all thought,

And rolls through all things (Lines 95-104).

Since God is the creator of this universe, His spirit pervades all objects. Men and women, animals and trees, good and bad, foolish and wise, fair and foul, peasant and priest, prince and pauper, old and young, animate and inanimate-all are contained in Him. As a poet, Whitman sings the praises of God and His creation. His *Song of Myself* contains such self-explanatory memorable verses which speak out his philosophy of life. He believes in immortality and the transmigration of the soul. From animals, even he gets some messages about life. Like a mystic, he finds unity in life and death. In God, all dichotomies vanish. His concept of 'Myself' contains the essence of Vedantic mysticism which is a way of embracing the other, the objective world, in an inclusive conception of selfhood. He propounded **spiritual democracy or democratic spirituality**. Like the images in the Bhagwad Gita and the Upanishads, Whitman describes his **cosmic self** as enunciated in his poem *Song of Myself*

- "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 I)

- "In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barleycorn less,

And the good or bad I say of myself I say of them."

(Section 20)

- "I see something of God each hour of the twenty four, and each moment then

In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my face in the glass;

I find letters from God dropped in the street, and everyone is signed by God's name."

(Section 48)

- "I think I could turn and live with animals, they're so placid and self-contained,

I stand and look at them long and long.

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,

They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,

They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,

Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things.....

So they show their relations to me and I accept them."

(Section 32)

- "They are but parts, anything but a part,

See ever so far, there is limitless space outside of that,

Count ever so much, there is limitless time around that."

(Section 45)

- "I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least, Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself." (Section 48)

- "Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself

(I am large, I contain multitudes.)"

(Section 51)

- "I pass death with the dying and birth with the new wash'd babe, and am not contain'd between my hat and boots

(Section 7)

- "Behold, I do not give lectures or a little charity, When I give I give myself."

(Section 40)

- Whoever degrades another degrades me, And whatever is done or said returns at last to me

(Section 24)

As written in the background chapter entitled "Indian Thought in Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman", "He (Whitman) did not despise the body but declared that it was as miraculous as the soul. He was too good a citizen of the nineteenth century to surrender his faith in material progress as the necessary counterpart of spiritual progress. Although he yearned for ecstatic union with the soul or Oversoul, he did not try to achieve it by subjugating the senses. On the contrary, he

thought the 'merge' could also be achieved by total surrender to the senses" (38), as he says:

- "I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,

.....

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,

And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man

And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men."

(Section 21)

- "And I say there is in fact no evil:

(Or if there is, I say it is just as important to you, to the land, or to me, as anything else)".

(Section 7)

Patrick White was much impressed by the transcendentalists like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. He had studied the men of wisdom, of the East and the West like Mahatma Gandhi, Kant, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Shakespeare, Dickens, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Carlyle, Jung, Dostoevsky, Plato, Aristotle, Tennyson, Tolstoy, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot, Blake, and others. He also studied different religions and imbibed in him the spirit of true religion. His novels contain the wisdom for all men to come, giving the message of the divinity of man and universal brotherhood. He found that **expansion is life and contraction is death**. Like Whitman, he declares that the needy and the indigent have a special claim on our supine or service. He supported the cause of upliftment of the aborigines and highlighted Whitman's message of spiritual democracy or democratic spirituality. He agreed that spirituality is the solution to all worldly problems and the right way to inner peace. He knew that strength grows when we dare, unity grows when we pair, love grows when we share and relation grows when we care. As such his message was to **live in peace, not in pieces**. White, according to Colmer, has dared to reach out to the totality of life. The meaning of life lies in its totality but the totality in each life is individual. There is always duality in life which has to be synthesized for spiritual growth.

White knows that **to live is to give**. The Vedas says, "If you have anything, give." Selfishness is sin. Unselfishness is God. He gave the entire amount he got in Nobel Prize to help those writers who were struggling hard but not got the recognition. He wrote more than a dozen of novels such as *Happy Valley* (1939), *The Living and the Dead* (1941), *The Aunt's Story* (1948), *The Tree of Man* (1955), *Voss* (1957), *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), *The Solid Mandala* (1966), *The Vivisector* (1970), *The Eye of the Storm* (1973), *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), *The Twyborn Affair* (1979), *Memoirs of Many in One* (1986), *The Hanging Garden* (2012). The characters of the novels are his representatives. Through them, he gives the message of a full-fledged life. The call of life is **inward, forward, and Godward**. He expresses his strong desire for cosmic order and meaningfulness. In the very first novel *Happy Valley* his idea of life and living is conspicuous:

"Life in jerks, in stages. It ought to flow, theoretically, in an even rhythm...Everything would be beautiful" (9).

The novel depicts that life is based on binary opposites like light and darkness, night and day, heat and cold, loss and gain, pain and pleasure, in and out, up and down, far and near, good and evil, praise and censure. We cannot have one without the

other. Moreover, each is contained in its opposite. Each loses its importance without its counterpart. Moreover, opposites add colour to life and give it impetus. White quotes Mahatma Gandhi to justify that suffering is necessary for peace and spiritual progress. Sufferings purify the heart, giving rise to humility. This in turn gives birth to equanimity paving the way for God. Moreover, sufferings are unavoidable and are thrown by the Providence in our way for our upliftment. This is the secret of happiness. In this way sufferings are redemptive:

“It is impossible to do away with the law of suffering, which is the one indispensable condition of our being. Progress is measured by the amount of suffering undergone the purer the suffering, the greater is the progress” (3).

Like Whitman, Patrick White agrees that the whole world is contained in God. God is all and all, in God. Therefore, all creation is our family. We need to cooperate with our fellow beings and love all creation. The cause of the suffering of the residents of *Happy Valley* is recorded by White to be non-cooperation among them. United we stand, divided we fall. In this materialistic society, we have cut off our relations with our fellow beings which is the main cause of our sorrow. The message is given in the *Happy Valley* as under:

“There never was co-Operation in Happy Valley, not even in the matter of living, or you might even say less in the matter of living. In Happy Valley the people existed in spite of each other” (28).

In his second novel *The Living and the Dead*, White shows three members of the family living in the same apartment but there is no communication between them. The novel describes the dilemma of Elyot Standish who is a “London intellectual” but is afraid of life. Like Hamlet of Shakespeare, he is always in a state of indecision and is not bold enough to take decisions in life. He fails to have a dialogue with his would-be brother-in-law who is going to participate in Civil War in Spain not likely to come back. Similarly, when he goes to see off his sister at the railway station, he finds a drunkard likely to be run over by a bus. But again, he fails to fulfill his duty to save him but instead goes to his “cocoon”, showing thereby his inability to face the challenges of life. In the same way, his mother has been estranged from her husband due to her ego problem and has built a cocoon of so-called friends. His sister builds a cocoon of politicizing her life. White warns us to **be conscious** in life.

White’s novel *The Solid Mandala* is based on the idea of union given by Whitman in his *Song of Myself*. The Mandala is a symbol of totality where opposites make the whole. The novel has a simple story but a deeper meaning. It is a tale of two brothers-Arthur and Waldo, the twins but contrasting in opinion. Waldo stands for head and Arthur for the heart. Waldo thinks that he is superior to his brother who is childish and mentally-retarded. Waldo is proud, well-read, serving in a library, but fails to understand life. On the other hand, Arthur is simple, good-natured, loving, kind, and contented. Patrick White through the characters of Waldo and Arthur has given us an epic of life like *The Tree of Man*. Life consists of both day and night, good and bad, head and heart, love and hate -two in one. Arthur and Waldo stand for two perceptions of the human mind. Both are distinct but complementary halves of human nature. Intelligence and love-both are necessary. The purpose is to access where and how one of the two is to be given the upper hand. Both unite to form wisdom.

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However, each problem is a challenge and makes us more intelligent and wise. To understand life in totality is the religion of the self, the way to transcend in life spiritually.

The novel *The Aunt’s Story* is a spiritual novel written by Patrick White. It contains the spiritual journey of the protagonist Theodora who is a spinster. She has a love for nature and goes on long walks with her father, who loves silence. She forms a spiritual union with nature and all its ingredients. Like Whitman and Wordsworth, she feels the spirit of God in Mother Nature. She feels herself and all other creations as its part. But society fails to understand her. Her mother Mrs. Goodman always scolds her and loves her sister Fanny who knows the ways of the world. Theodora is happy to serve dinner to her father’s old friend who had gone poor while her mother looked down upon him. After the death of her father, Theodora is strictly under the control of her mother and has to live with her in the city. But after the death of her mother, she is free to go on tour to Europe to seek enlightenment but has a bitter experience. Ultimately she retraces her steps and thinks of her ancestral home in the countryside and finds an abandoned hut where she sits and realizes through Holstius (who might be the spirit of her father) to realize the wisdom of life and the core of spirituality:

“You cannot reconcile joy and sorrow... in flesh and marble, or illusion and reality, or life and death. For this reason... you must accept and you have already found that one constantly deludes the other into taking fresh shapes, so that there is sometimes little to choose between the reality of illusion and the illusion of reality. Each of your several lives is evidence of this” (293).

In *The Tree of Man* White has written **an epic of life** that reminds us of the **genesis myth**. According to Cooper, the tree in the novel is a universal image like the leaves of grass used by Walt Whitman in his *Leaves of Grass*. The novel contains a simple story of a couple Stan Parker and Amy who make the hard bushy land fertile and settle in the jungle. Stan is the archetype of the man himself. He positively phases the natural calamities and performs the duties of a human towards man, God, Nature, nation, and so on. He is not disturbed by natural calamities and declares that there is some purpose of God in them. He saves a young girl from the burning house and participates in the war for the sake of the country. Stan and Amy produce a son and daughter for the growth of the family and society. Life teaches him the meaning and reality of human existence. He raises himself from sex to super-consciousness. He does not go to church but makes the world a place of worship. Before death, he has his grandson and God with him. He comes to realize that **“One, and no other figure, is the answer to all sums”** (477). The concluding lines of the novel assert the continuity of life: **“So that, in the end, there was no end”** (480). Similarly, in other novels by Patrick White, we find a message of spiritual upliftment.

**CONCLUSION:** Both Patrick White and Walt Whitman are spiritual beings. They believe in the unity of man, God and nature. They understand that in this turbulent world, spirituality is the only way to redemption. They believe that **matter is the display of spirit**. So, the matter should not be castigated in itself but should be made the right use of. In the same way, the body should be put to advantage by serving the needy and the poor. Patrick White in the spirit of spirituality

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raises the question of **reverence for nature and the aborigines**. In his novel *The Tree of Man*, he writes: **“One, and no other figure, is the answer to all sums” (477)**. Similarly, Whitman was a transcendentalist. He sang praises of Abraham Lincoln because he took bold steps to end slavery. He gave importance even to a leaf of grass. In his world-famous poem *Song of Myself*, his idea is the expansion of his soul i.e. self as he says: **“I am large, I contain multitudes”** (Section 51). We should plug all differences and make the whole world our family, *Vasudev kutumbakam*. That is why Patrick White has chosen to form a relationship between man and God as he says:

“Religion. Yes, that's behind all my books. What I am interested in is the relationship between the blundering human being and God....In my books I have lifted bits from various religions in order to come to a better understanding; I have made use of religious themes and symbols”(White, "In the Making").

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