

## The Creative Launcher

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### The poetry of Swami Vivekananda: An Exploration into the Romanticism

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#### Abstract

The present research paper focuses on the Romantic traits and tendencies in the poetry of Swami Vivekananda. Swami Vivekananda is the initial signature of poetry on the manuscript of Indian English literature. Generally applauded as the fiery orator in the world, his poetic introduction has almost been unnoticed by the critical pens. He is not a poet who compiles volume after volume but writes when he is overwhelmed by ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’. His poetry is remarkable for various romantic traits. The portrayal of child, love to humanity, love for love’s sake, freedom, imagery and imagination are the echoes of Romanticism in his poetry. He reminds us of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats in his instincts and poetic tendencies. His poems, though countable on the finger-tips, are the sublime poetic pieces of artistic culmination. This paper also focuses on the similarities and dissimilarities of his poetry with the great poets of the Romantic era.

**Keywords-** Love, Child, Freedom, Myth, Mysticism, Imagination

Swami Vivekananda is one of the pioneers of Indian English poetry. He is the hallmark of oratory but the poet in him cannot be overlooked. His poetry is the poetry of a nation making saint, replete with morality, purity and activity. When he started to compose, it was Victorian era in its last decade in the British English poetry but the poets were inclined to the traits of Romanticism. Even the Indian English literature was not free from the impact of ‘the wonder of Renaissance’ in its primary phase. When English became a medium of poetic expression in the hands of the pioneers like Derozio and M. M. Dutt, they were inclined towards the Romantic tendencies in their poetry. Swami Vivekananda, though a man of classicism and

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principles, could not set himself free from the tenets of romanticism; Romanticism echoed in his poetry. Practically, he was an ardent reader of Wordsworth whose 'Immortality Ode' had been a life-long inspiration to him. Romanticism might have been a disease for some critics like Goethe but in the hands of a visionary like Swami Vivekananda, it became a soothing balm to humanity and an inspiration to all round development of life.

There have been given various definitions of Romanticism; in spite of differences in opinions about defining and interpreting Romanticism, most of the definitions are unanimous in carrying some points that frame the structure of the Romantic theory; the common points are the changed outlook, free persuasion of course, full play of self, distant pictures close to reality, respect to individuality and humanity, unique approach to the artistic aspects etc. The pivotal tendency of Romanticism is 'Importance to Self' and the development of individuality to the possible extent. All the Romantics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century favoured the removal of all bondage whether it is in the name of social order or political pressure. Man was a mean to them, not a medium. The Romantics realized the worth of individuality in its own circumference. In providing freedom to 'Man', most of the Romantics wrote in revolutionary zeal and Shelley was prominent bugler, playing on the strain of humanity. Swami Vivekananda proclaimed the glory of individuality and said that the potential of rising to the growth of the elephant was contained even in the amoeba and the amoeba must rise to that level. Man is surrounded by so many adverse conditions and situations that he has forgotten his real nature; if he tries to look all around him, he will find that the detachment from true nature is the cause of all his bondage. Nothing can crush the energy of man if he realizes his own importance or real nature. Only being a mortal entity and waiting for the Decease for this clayed figure is not our real nature; our reality lies in being a part of the Divinity. Generally, the Romantics spoke of external bondage but Swami Vivekananda advocated for faith of man in himself. As far as, a man feels internally strong, he does not care for external pressure. The growth and the development from inward to outward are predominant in his realizing that he is not inferior to others and he can reach there where no one has reached till now. In the 'Song of the Free', Swami Vivekananda says that the snake unfurls its hood when it is wounded, the flame always goes upward and the roar of the lion is same in both- forest or desert; it represents their glorious nature under adverse condition, why can't man. The best out of a man comes not in cradle but on the rocky pavements and so, he must not forget:

All nature wear one angry frown  
To crush you out- still know, my soul,  
You are Divine. March on and on,  
Not right, nor left, but to the goal!

(Vivekananda, 06)

The confidence of man in himself is shaken by the difficult, painful and adverse situations but like Shelley, Swami Vivekananda also believes that each black cloud has a silver line. He

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sings the glory of constant efforts of man. Man must work even if all nature is to shake his confidence in himself. Man must not forget that a good effort doesn't end in vain:

The duties of life are sore indeed,  
And its pleasure fleeting, vain,  
The goal so shadowy seems and dim,  
Yet plod on through the dark, brave heart,  
With all thy might and main.

(Vivekananda, 15)

His poetry is the poetry of his own experiences, perceptions and emotions. The ups and downs of his life and the process of overcoming them are well expressed in 'No One to Blame' and 'Hold on Yet a While, Brave Heart'. He writes about the personalities that impact him or are influenced by him. His devotion to Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa, his mentor and spiritual guide, is well penned in the hymns and salutations, paid to him. He composes to inspire his pupils all round the world in the poems like 'To An Early Violet', written to Sister Christine and 'Peace' to celebrate the day of Sister Nivedita's renunciation. 'The Song of Sannyassin' is in objective tone but the personality of Swami Vivekananda, his life of renunciation and penance and his philosophy can be easily noticed in it.

There are a few references of child- life in the poetry of Swami Vivekananda but it is one of the most important features of the Romanticism. A child is the symbol of innocence, purity and faith. Swami Vivekananda does not want to go in front of God as a matured-one but only as a child. In the very first poem of his anthology, he introduces himself as a lost child who is searching for his father or mother or guardian. The echoes of the child fill the forest with sorrow. The poet lies down in the sand and starts weeping for a long time, then 'a gentle soft and soothing voice' helps him in regaining confidence and wipes his tears; his soul feels 'entranced, enthralled in bliss'. How pathetic is the condition of the child:

I laid me down on Ganga's shore,  
Exposed to sun and rain;  
With burning tears I laid the dust  
And wailed with waters' roar.

(Vivekananda, 03)

The imagery of the lost child in the Swami reminds the imagery of Blake's child who is lost and searches for his father. The child in the Swami is not an emotional child only but a sensible one also. He listens to his soul and soon realizes that his Father is not away from him. He feels *His* presence in mother's love, innocence and friendship and finds that the Vedas, the Bible and the Koran sing the glory of his Father harmoniously. The image of child recurs in 'My Play is Done' and 'A Song I Sing to Thee'. In 'My Play is Done', he requests Mother Kali to save him from 'the struggling, crying, laughing throng' and to open the gates of her merciful realm as he is much tired and cannot struggle more. The confidence of the child is remarkable in the 'A Song I Sing to Thee' where the poet says that he may be

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notorious, nuisance and vagabond enough to be careless towards Mother but Mother is mother and she shall not turn Her merciful attitude towards the child.

Romanticism has its seed in Rousseau's principle 'Back to Nature'; this nature contains both aspects - the external nature i.e. flora and fauna and the internal nature i.e. the innocence, purity and piety. All the romantic poets were enamoured of natural scenes, flora and fauna, natural objects, high mountains, rivers, plains etc. Wordsworth, the priest of nature, spiritualized nature and felt a sublime presence of Divinity in Nature, Coleridge mystified it, Shelley made Nature the medium of his political and social propaganda and gave it a scientific touch and Keats, the most and the purest romantic, presented Nature in sensuous way. All of them enjoyed Nature and Nature became a guide, a medium and a consolation to them. Swami Vivekananda also painted the scenes of nature on papers with his pen but he cares for Nature only to the extent that helps him in carrying his vision, his love for humanity and his ideology of unison. Nature, only for its splendor, was not his enthusiasm. Nature is a medium for him to see the Omnipresent and to feel the power of the Omnipotent. His search for God begins with Nature in the introductory poem of his slender poetry collection, again goes to the bibles of various religions but finds God, only in nature:

The majestic morn, the melting eve,  
The boundless billowy sea,  
In nature's beauty, songs of birds,  
I see through them- it is He.

(Vivekananda, 4-5)

Unlike Wordsworth, he does not believe in the permanence of Nature and says that the existence of the soul is everlasting. The bond between the soul and the Super-soul was even before the creation of the universe and Time. Some beautiful objects of Nature like violet are the sources of inspiration to him as he inspires his pupil, Sister Christine of New York, to be sweet, pure, and full of fragrance in the service of humanity even if she is noticed or unnoticed. He regards the beautiful aspects of Nature the boon of the Divinity on the earth. Some descriptions of Nature are sensuous enough to draw the lively picture before the mind's eyes:

In the blue floats a multitude of clouds-  
White, black, of many shades and thicknesses;  
An orange sun, about to say farewell,  
Touches the massed cloud shapes with streaks of red.

(Vivekananda, 37)

Nature is not present only in soft touch in his poetry. When he writes of Mother Kali in dire state and finds Her irksome, the external nature changes. The stars do not shine, the clouds do not shower, the wind does not sooth and the birds do not chirp. The atmosphere is replaced by darkness, restlessness, the cry of the innocence. Dr. Radhika Nagarth finds him a bit different from the Romantic writers in dealing with nature and says, "He is not like the

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great romantics who would emerge out of their own follies and frustrations to merge into the main stream of the divinity....He was of the view that all the manifestation of the nature are caused by nature itself where nature has no purpose in view but to free the 'Purusha' i.e. the absolute."

Feeling of love is indispensable to Romanticism. All the great Romantics wrote psalms for Cupid and hymns for Aphrodite. Keats is the great sensuous love poet of the era. Shelley loves humanity and so does Byron. Love holds a pivot key in the poetry of Swami Vivekananda. He is neither a singer of sensuous love nor his love debases man. He is the singer of love that eliminates the wickedness and raises man to height. He says frankly that all the expositions like worship, yoga, science, philosophy, desire of finding Him are only 'delusions of the mind' if our hearts are dried up of love. Love is not bondage, it is freedom. He sings of the universality of Love frankly:

In Jiva and Brahman, in man and God,  
In ghosts, and wraiths and spirits, and so forth.  
In Devas, beasts, birds, insects, and in worms,  
This Prema dwells in the heart of the all.

(Vivekananda, 43)

The poet opines that the true love does not teach accumulations, it teaches giving away. It is only a single ferry that takes man across the river of mortality. He knows that the reflection cannot be denied, love reflects love and hate produces hate. Mortal Love cannot be without suffering. True love is only there where there is no expectation for, expectation creates desire; desire leads to greed and anger and finally, love loses its purity. The unattached love never goes in vain. He prefers to unload mind with useless knowledge. For the sake of selfless Love, he inspires us to seek a lesson in the relation of insect and flame. Like Robert Browning, he says that 'God' is 'Love' and 'Love' is 'God'. The true way to worship Him is to love all the creatures without differentiation. His concept of love is the concept of emancipating man from sordid selfishness and meanness and to connect him with man and God.

Although, his poems are countable, they have fire to burn the chains of slavery; he has hatred for oppression and firm belief in the freedom of man. Like Shelley, he has a passion for liberty. He thunders at the priests, rulers and foreign administrators who suck the blood of the innocent public. His literature inspired Indians to protest the British rule. His love to India could not make him chauvinist and he sang for the American freedom too. He composed a poem 'To the Fourth of July' to celebrate the anniversary of the American Declaration of Independence. He sang of the efforts of the Americans for their freedom and indirectly, it is his message to all the slave nations that freedom demands sacrifice of all sorts. 'To the Awakened India' is the poem to inspire Indians to arise, awake, and not to sleep till the freedom from the slavery is attained and the spiritual victory is gained.

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Swami Vivekananda is the harbinger of humanistic religion. His religion is not in chanting in isolation. He does not believe in a religion that cannot wipe the tears of a widow or bring happiness at the door of a hut. Unlike the 18<sup>th</sup> century poetry in which, the importance was given only to the blue-blood, the Romantic poetry stands by the solitary reaper, sings the poignant annals of Ruth, sees the Evening Star of Michael and accepts man with his weakness as well as poverty. Swami Vivekananda embraces man with all his weaknesses but believes in his boundless potential. If man is determined, he can fulfill the highest aspiration. His humanism is not in the mere glory of man but in the realization of the importance and acceptance of all. Man is the writer of his own destiny; he cannot blame anyone else for his rise or fall. He says in 'No One to Blame':

Each day my life I make or mar,  
Each deed begets its kind,  
Good, good, bad, bad, the tide once set  
No one can stop or stem;  
No one but me to blame.

(Vivekananda, 12)

His God is not in temples or idols or in the 'formulas of worship'; he is among the workers of the world. He is there where thousands arms raise arms to make the world beautiful; where thousands feet are on the pavements of actions and where thousands of hearts beat with love, devotion and sacrifice. No doubt, his God is living one and he calls him, 'Daridra Narayan'.

He who is in you and outside you,  
Who works through all hands,  
Who walks on all feet,  
Whose body are all ye,  
Him worship, and break all other idols.

(Vivekananda, 20)

Mohit Chakrabarti aptly comments,

The quest for humanism in one's own self which as Vivekananda heightens as the divine self is actually the quest for the beyonding of human consciousness. And this consciousness is that stands for the recognition of humanity. Vivekananda sets apart the so called devotion to God in prayers and offerings, and advocates for service true to humanism. (Chakrabarti, 119)

A poet is never satisfied with the harsh realities of life and he creates his own world where sufferings are restricted, tears have no entrance and the sky is free from the smoke of suffocation. The Romantics were highly imaginative and they had their own world of passion, possession, purification and justification. Wordsworth prefers to walk by the Wye River and dances with the daffodils, Coleridge is delighted in his mysterious world, Shelley wants to set fire to the world of hatred, greed and oppression to make his ideal world and Keats mingles in the dark world of nightingale. Swami Vivekananda is also an escapist, but

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he escapes from the world to meditate on the solutions to the ills of the world. Being a saint and monk, he is fed up with seeing humanity in the mess of 'Maya' (delusion). He does not consider the world, worth living where lie, selfishness, greed, violence, treachery and many other negative passions cover the virtuous qualities of humanity and life is constituted mechanically of with, 'False hope its motor; desire, nave; its spokes are grief and joy'. He tells his friend in 'To A Friend' that the world is only for one who is money-mouthed but has poisoned heart, inert, devoid of truth and only self worshipping. Being a mystic and spiritualist, he regards this mortality, transitory and wishes freedom from the cycle of reincarnation. 'My Play Is Done' exposes his escapism from this world to Nirvanam (salvation). Here, he complains to Mother Kali that she sent him on 'life's currents' ebb and flow' that is unrestrained. He expresses his suffering in highly Romantic tone that reminds us of Shelley and Keats:

Tossed to and fro, where wave to wave in this seething, surging sea  
Of passions strong and sorrows deep, grief *is* and joy *to be*.

Where children dream bright, golden bright, too soon to find them dust,  
And eye look back to hope long lost and life a mass of rust.  
And finally, he cries to break his chains and make him free:  
Take me, O Mother, to those shores where strifes for ever cease;  
Beyond all sorrows, beyond tears, beyond e'en earthly bliss;  
Whose glory neither sun, nor moon, nor stars that twinkle bright,  
Nor flash of lightning can express. They but reflect its light.

(Vivekananda, 10, 11, 11-12)

It is the nature of man that he pines for what is not possible; he wishes for joy without sorrow and smiles without tears and the Swami considers it a fool's paradise. The Swami is a practical man who says that the salvation is not possible for the masses. Heaven can be brought down on the earth if the positivity replaces the negativity. The swami wants to escape to the snow-peaked mountains to restore energy to fight against the evils of life. Unlike the Romantic sentiment of running away from the realities, there is the lack of avoidance of reality in him.

Swami Vivekananda welcomes sorrow that is an integral part of Romantic poetry. The Romantics express their personal grieves and poetry is a source of solace to them. The difference between the Swami and the Romantics is that the former is the singer of the universal poignancy and the latter universalize their own sufferings. He complains of human life that brings, "Misery in his cup of happiness, / Deadly venom in his drink of nectar, / Poison in his throat." The irony of life is that he is in such a world where ceaseless competition runs; where there is no respect for human relations as even father often turns against the son and where there is the proclamation of selfishness. No happiness can be a part of such world:

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Where darkness is interpreted as light,  
Where misery passes for happiness,  
Where disease is pretended to be health,  
Where the new-born's cry but shows 'tis alive;  
Dost thou, O Wise, expect happiness here?

(Vivekananda, 41)

The Swami opines that joys and sorrows are the spokes of the wheel of life. The pleasure comes only to those who are ready to embrace sorrow. Life exists in binary emotions to him; good and bad, love and hate, pleasure and pain follow each other and the existence of the one cannot be imagined without another.

Swami Vivekananda stands by William Blake in his visions. The sky of his vision is so grand, so enchanting and so spanned that he has left no field of human growth and development untouched. His educational views, his sympathy for society and his dream to regain the glory of India have the root vision i.e. the salvation of humanity and the realization of the Divinity in all. From the very first poem of his poetic collection, he sings of the oneness of all the religions and discards the difference among men. No one can hate or love others as by loving or hating others, he loves or hates himself because he is a part of all and all are his reflection and both, he and all are the part of *Him*. The true victory is not in conquering other but in conquering the negativity of self. Man is not bound by anything; he gets the fruits of his actions. The Swami does not want to see humanity in flying colours, so he advises us to march on the right path without hesitation, pretention, affectation and expectation but with toleration. His clarion call 'Awake, arise, and dream no more' is not only for Indians but for the long slumbered humanity also. How inspiring is his vision;

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

(Vivekananda, 23)

Symbols and imagery provide a great significance to a sophisticated thought. There are various instances in the history of literature to prove that the great writers raise to greatness by expressing their thoughts in the pattern of symbols and images. His poetry is rich in the treatment of symbols and imagery. The symbols, used by him, are conventional but have deep interpretation. He considers the world a stage where all of us are to play our part. We are the characters and we have to play our role at the direction of the unseen Director who has written our dialogues in joys and sorrows. 'Thou Blessed Dream' is composed around this theme. To Shelley, the cup of is filled in 'another measure' while others are smiling, enjoying and celebrating. Swami Vivekananda also complains of miseries in his life but soon he realizes that the supreme bliss is in accepting God's plan of providing flowers or thorns in our life. God creates thorns or puts stones in our way so that we may

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learn to develop in adversity. The violet is the symbol of temporal but sweet, pure, fragrant and beautiful life. He inspires us through the violet that even a small life is quote worthy if it is in the service without any expectation of return. The symbol of Kali is the form of creation and destruction. He is the master of imagery too. Indian poetry, especially the mystic poetry is nothing if it is devoid of imagery. We see, feel and realize everything in his poetry as if we were the direct receiver of the natural perception. Dr. Radhika Nagrath expresses her opinion on the presentation of imagery in his poetry:

With the images of the physical Nature, the poet shakes the inner being to realize its real, true nature. His imagination, continually in search of concrete pictures often turns to the world of Nature for evocative atmospheric images. He uses the visual and the kinetic images from Nature which link the inner feelings with and external situation . . . .The visual and the kinetic images combined with auditory images create an atmosphere of fear darkness which are always aiming 'to crush' one out. (Nagrath, 84)

Among other features of Romanticism, the most prominent is the writings in self inspiration. Swami Vivekananda, the poet, writes when passions are 'too much with him'. It is generally accepted if you write, you write prose but if you cannot resist writing, it is poetry. There is no proof that he writes after the external inspiration. There is no planned system of poetic development in his poetic compositions and all his great poems are written under inspiration. Many of his poetic features make him stand with the great Romantics. The pictures of a child, spontaneity of writing, his depiction of Nature bring him close to Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge whereas melancholic temperament, love to humanity and love for love's sake bring him with the younger generation of the Romantics. Though the thoughts are classical, the presentation, rhyme, rhythm and ornamentation give it a Romantic hue. K. V. Suryanarayana Murti throws light on the sublime poetic art of Swami Vivekananda and hints at the Romanticism of his poetry, "His poetry is a splendid blend of immense poetic sensibility and spiritual profundity, intellectual brilliance and indefatigable energy, unselfconsciousness, universal love and the authentic voice of a prophet. His sense of renunciation, devotion, quest, innate mystic effulgence, self realization and the consequent philosophic off-spring- all are there converged in his poetry inseparably fused."

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