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**Glorification of the Creed of Individuality and Exposition of  
Self in “Song of Myself” By Walt Whitman and “Bidrohi”**

**By Kazi Nazrul Islam**

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**[Abstract:** *Walt Whitman (1819 - 1892) and Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) are two of the ever dominating poets in the literary world among their own people and beyond. Born in two widely different territories and different ages, they share similar attitudes to love, nature, politics, and rebellion. Both are votaries of Democracy, a system that allows equality of opportunity to every man whatever his color or creed or economic status. They wanted to eradicate all the bondages and wanted to establish new society by removing all obstacles. Both of the poets entered into world of literature with revolutionary spirit. They raised their voices against traditional rules. This study focuses on Glorification of the Creed of Individuality and Exposition of Self in “Song of Myself” By Walt Whitman and “Bidrohi” by Kazi Nazrul Islam.]*

At first this is to say that a multidimensional genius is exposed in such brilliance that sometimes it demands inspiration of others. This inspiration later flourishes to such a height of artistic flame independently that it overshadows the existence of its earlier influence. The number of

multidimensional literary genius in Bengali literature is not meager. The pioneer of modern Bengali literature, the genius of Michael Madhusudan Dutt who was greatly influenced by the Western literature to envision a new dimension in the world of his literary career. Yet would we say that all the achievement of Madhusudan is just the imitation of Western literature? Let us consider one literary work of Madhusudan where he has taken the story and characters from *the Ramayana* of Valmiki whereas his conception of characters, their development, poetic philosophy, quest of life, poetic diction, rhythm and word choice of his *Meghnadbadh Kavya* have been taken from Homer's *Iliad*. Such levels of assimilation and imitation along with his own creativity and originality have made his epic poem so great. Many critics have talked much of the influence of Western literature in Rabindranath's *Khudhita Pashan*, *Gora*, *Jogajog*, *Dakghar*, *Raktakarabi*, and many other stories, novels and plays. Yet the greatness of Rabindranath's work has not been slackened in the regard of Bengali readers from their overwhelming worship of this great Bengali literary genius. This is what any great genius can do as he extracts life from the seed and flourishes that to a Great Star. Therefore, any discussion of Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) and Walt Whitman (1819-1892) demands special attention to such process of inspiration, assimilation and thrive in their works.

Born in two widely different territories and different ages, American poet Walt Whitman and Bengali poet Kazi Nazrul Islam have some astonishing similarities in their personal lives which are surely interesting coincidences yet significant. Both of them have started their lives with strong challenges. Son of a British carpenter father and Dutch mother Whitman was forced to take a job as a postman of a lawyer for his father's sheer economic crisis when he was only eleven. We all know about Nazrul's early life as he started his career in a breadshop. Both share similar attitudes to love, nature, politics, and rebellion.

Walt Whitman was an American poet, essayist and journalist. As a humanist, he was part of the transition between transcendentalism and realism, incorporating both views in his works. Even though he was a post-independence poet of America, his time was also significant for the second phase of independence movement of the native Americans, black Americans and their internal fight with the whites on various human rights related issues. Moreover, a silent war between the farmers and feudal lords was going on during that period to take control over various economic issues as well. Whitman dedicated himself for the equal rights of the farmers and the blacks and for the establishment of democracy. Meanwhile Nazrul's fight and activities were much more direct and the possible reason might be the existing British rule at that time. Nazrul successfully bridged

humanity with his fight for equality-harmony-freedom together. In 1861 American Civil War broke out and Whitman joined the War in 1861. Nazrul too reached Karachi to join in the First World War. One has direct battlefield experience whereas the other does not have so. Yet some poems of Nazrul reflect so many details about the warfare that one cannot perceive his lack of experience of war. Thus this Bengali poet might have relentlessly engaged in his internal warfare as he deliberately portrayed in poems like “Kamal Pasha” and “Ranaveri”. The British Raj sentenced imprisonment to Nazrul for writing poetry. Whitman too was terminated from his job for writing poetry. Nazrul was attacked by an incurable disease and lost his speech and senses when he was only forty-three. Whitman too became paralyzed at the age of fifty-four and he never recovered completely from this illness. Among many of such coincidences between the two great poets, another interesting similarity is that both of them were born in the same month of May. Nazrul’s first published poetry collection of twelve poems was *Agni-beena* (1922) and “Bidrohi” was its longest and most important poem. Similarly, Walt Whitman’s first published poetry collection was *Leaves of Grass* (1855) which also had twelve poems and “Song of Myself” was its longest and important poem as well.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For historical details I have taken help from Reynolds David S. *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*. New

This study focuses on Glorification of the Creed of Individuality and Exposition of Self in “Song of Myself” By Walt Whitman and “Bidrohi” by Kazi Nazrul Islam. Walt Whitman (1819-1892) and Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) are two of the ever dominating poets in the literary world among their own people and beyond. Born in two widely different territories and different ages, they share similar attitudes to love, nature, politics, and rebellion. Walt Whitman was an American poet, essayist and journalist. A humanist, he was a part of the transition between transcendentalism and realism, incorporating both views in his works. However, let us analyze how both Nazrul and Whitman glorify the creed of individuality and exposition of self in the cited poems.

At the outset of the long introduction of 1955 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman vividly identifies the creed of individuality and exposition of self and promise. He says: “Only soul is of itself.... all else has reference to what ensues. Not only that the power and promise of soul are also celebrated here with a large canvas. Whitman starts his poem “Song of Myself” with the meditation of his soul:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,

And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you .

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York: Oxford University Press. 2000. and from Goswami K. *Kazi Nazrul Islam: A Biography*. Dhaka: Nazrul Institute. 2014

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I loafe and invite my soul,

I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass<sup>2</sup>

Whitman's liberty seems not to gain political or economic emancipation, rather, an all-engrossing liberty of the self. For this reason, he keeps himself away from a direct clash with the power related bodies and does not tend to indulge in protests like Thoreau in his "Civil Disobedience" against American policy during the Mexican War in 1847. Whitman, a Free-Soiler who had editorially opposed slavery extension in the *Eagle*, was prepared neither to go to jail for his beliefs nor to demand immediate disunion, as the Garrisonians were doing. Instead, his first instinct was to write poetry in which the two sides of the slavery divide were held in friendly equilibrium.<sup>3</sup> In his note book, he scribbled the first known lines of the kind of free-flowing, prose like verse that would become his stylistic signature.

I am the poet of slaves and of the masters of slaves, [...]

I go with the slaves of the earth equally with the masters

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<sup>2</sup>All "Song of Myself" quotes are from web <<http://www.bartleby.com>> 24.12.2013.

<sup>3</sup>Reynolds David S. *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2000. p. 8.

And I will stand between the masters and the slaves,

Entering into both so that both shall understand me alike.<sup>4</sup>

Here, Whitman invents a poetic “I” who can comfortably mediate between the political antagonists whose opposing claims threaten to divide the nation. His pronoun cement to enter in to both the confronting entities signifies the development of the poetic persona constructed as an absorptive device that could imaginatively defuse rancorous sectional quarrels.<sup>5</sup> On many occasions, the “I” of Whitman transcended to “We” and he was not always rigid with his “I” since he rejoiced collectivity. He was actively involved with American Democratic Party. He was a conscious fighter for the blacks and oppressed farmers and it was unthinkable for him to be confined with only “I”. Therefore, he writes:

I and this mystery here we stand.

Or

We should surely bring up again where we now stand,

And surely go as much farther, and then farther and farther.

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<sup>4</sup>Whitman, Walt. *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*. Ed. Grier Edward F. 6 vols. New York: New York University Press, 1901 . Vol. I. p. 69.

<sup>5</sup>Reynolds David S. *A Historical Guide to Walt: Whitman*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2000. p. 9.



But in “Bidrohi”, Nazrul’s “I” is not for plurality but the conception is of an unruly, powerful subjective self:

Proclaim, Hero,  
proclaim: I raise my head high!  
Before me bows down the Himalayan peaks!<sup>6</sup>

One of the most striking differences between Nazrul and Whitman in using “I” and “We” is that Nazrul is much more confident with his rebel mind and proclaims “I” valiantly whereas Whitman is confused with his “I” and “We”. Nazrul is so adamant and unruly with his “I” that he is atop his voice and summons the rebel:

Say, Valiant,  
Say: Ripping apart the wide sky or the universe,  
Leaving behind the moon, the sun, the planets  
and the stars  
Piercing the earth and the heavens,  
Pushing through Almighty’s sacred seat

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<sup>6</sup> All “Bidrohi” quotes are from the English translation by Sajed Kamal with the title “The Rebel” in Huda, Mohammad Nurul. Ed. *The Poetry of Kazi Nazrul Islam in English Translation*. Vol 1. Dhaka: Nazrul Institute. 2014.

Have I risen,

I, the perennial wonder of mother-earth!

On the contrary Whitman is much more faithful to his creator and his

“I” bows down to His power:

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

Thus Nazrul is not as mystic as Whitman here and he is not surrendering to

God here and his “I” emerges from his own conscience whereas Whitman’s

“I” surrenders to the mystic God:

My voice is the wife’s voice, the screech by the rail of the stairs,

They fetch my man’s body up dripping and drown’d.

This submission involves a certain amount of physicality in it. In fact,

Whitman tends to make use of “the physical realm” in relation to the

spiritual, advocating the importance of God and the worth of the soul- “he

[saw] God in everyone and divinity in everything, and wanted to encourage

his fellow Americans to do so, too.”<sup>7</sup>

Nearly all themes discussed by Whitman in “The Song of Myself” are intertwined, for without this unity of sexuality and spirituality there is

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<sup>7</sup>Karbiener, Karen. *Comments and Questions: Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman*. New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004. 881-90.

nothing: “Lacks one, lacks both ...and the unseen is proved by the seen/Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn.” (“Song of Myself”). Whitman states that, in order to experience religion and spirituality, one must have a sense of the all-encompassing world besides oneself and one’s place in it. As “Whitman writes of being more concerned with creation than libido and sex, he centers on the idea that his concentration is faultless and that the “self” may attain [identity]” through this procreation.<sup>8</sup> When he, in “Song of Myself,” asks “What is a man anyhow? What am I? And what are you?” he questions the human perception of the surrounding world and its tangible impact on the reader’s insight into the procreant unity of the human and the divine.

On the other hand, Nazrul’s persona assumes a unitary ideal self for all people concerned. The rebel self has the infinite capability to change and transform shape according to the necessity of the circumstances. At every metamorphosis, it transcends any limitations whatsoever. It may not be mystic but it can assume everything—every identity. Nazrul has captured the scenario with some audacious paradoxes:

I’m the unbridled hair of a maiden,  
The fire in her eyes,

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<sup>8</sup> Pearce, Roy Harvey. *The Continuity of American Poetry*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961. p. 82,

... ..

I'm the sigh of the grief of a widow,

This is just an instance. There are a lot like this in the poem. Though many Bengali critics like Saroj Bandopadhaya are not happy with such excessive use of paradoxes in Nazrul's poem and regard this as a weakness in his style,<sup>9</sup> to our consideration, the series of paradoxes has aptly apprehended the true identity of the individualistic creed of Nazrul. These are the tools with which it can be understood that the speaker of the poem wants to address everyone around as a rebel. Thus "Bidrohi" becomes the metaphor for the individual spirit which Nazrul emphasizes to the utmost for the political and moral emancipation of his people.

It can then be said of both Whitman and Nazrul that both of these poets celebrated the creed of individual self in their respective poems but Whitman was more for the assumption of that creed through the mystic apprehension and Nazrul redirects the essence of the self towards an upheaval of the spirit in every individual around so that the political and moral emancipation can take place. This makes them more alike than different because both of them aspire for the freedom of whatever human in man.

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<sup>9</sup> Bandopadhaya, Saroj. *Bangla Kabitar Kalantar*. Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 2000. pp. 116-127.

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