

Unity of the Self and the Universe: A Vision of Walt Whitman and Kabir

Dr. Shruti Srivastava¹, Srishti²

¹Associate Professor, Department of English, D.A-V. College, Kanpur, UP, India.

²Research Scholar, Department of English, D.A-V. College, Kanpur, UP, India.

Article Detail:

Received: 27 Dec 2025;

Received in revised form: 21 Jan 2026;

Accepted: 26 Jan 2026;

Available online: 31 Jan 2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Keywords— Inner-transformation, Self-Realization, Consciousness, Compassion, Interconnectedness, Divinity, Transcendence, Universal Unity.

Abstract

Whitman, the renowned 19th century American representative poet and Kabir, the acclaimed 15th century Indian mystic poet and singer have immensely contributed towards transformation of the inner self, the society and the world through their works which propagate the ideas and themes which are universally relevant and acclaimed. The paper would be a select study of how the themes and areas such as dissolution of ego; inner transformation; expansion of consciousness; transcendence of duties; compassion and universal brotherhood covered by Whitman and Kabir during their respective ages can altogether bring self-realization and cosmic consciousness. The study would be an analysis of how these themes and sub-topics are still prevalent and essential witnessing the current scenario of inner-conflict and the turmoil in the outer world. It would also reflect on the idea that how these sub-themes through the poetry of the acclaimed authors, Whitman and Kabir can bring about a transformation, awakening and unity of the self and the universe.

I. INTRODUCTION

Walt Whitman, one of the prominent American poets of the 19th century and Kabir, the renowned 15th century mystic poet and singer have predominantly contributed towards the awakening of the individuals, society and the world through their words of wisdom in their works. The major themes covered by Whitman in his initial years as a poet included democracy, personal freedom, self-expression, progress and America's future. The inclination towards nature, humanity and spiritual enlightenment in his poetic themes increased after the incidence of American Civil War.

Kabir was born in the era of the Bhakti movement, when the poetry was recited by the poets and singers in the forms of couplets, hymns and songs. They were penned down by the disciples of the poets and were then acclaimed after widespread reach and acceptance in the nation and the world. Kabir was

one of the Bhakti poets who propagated his messages through poems and songs by reciting it to the audience of his era. Since childhood he imbibed in himself the ability to perceive the reality of the external world around and voiced against or for the same through his own experiences and perception.

The central idea of the paper is to explore and analyze the attempt made by Whitman and Kabir to shed light on the idea how as an individual one can contribute towards self-realization, inner transformation and universal unity.

1.1. The Dissolution of Ego

This is an umbrella term which covers various aspects of life such as a state of not getting affected by the criticisms in life and be able to imbibe in us the ability of letting go. It is one of the initial steps of self awareness and inner transformation. It may be referred to a state of detachment from self. Detachment involves freeing ourselves from the

illusions which trap us from seeing the real world. Whitman has very well quoted on this idea in his poem 'To You' from his work 'Leaves of Grass'. He states:

"Whoever you are, I fear you are walking the walks of dreams,

I fear that these supposed realities are to melt from under your feet and hands..."

(Whitman, To You 1)

Whitman in these verses attempts to awaken our lost state of mind. He warns us to be conscious enough and not be trapped by the mere appearance or our self-constructed image about something. When we constrain ourselves within our assumptions, beliefs and judgments, it might also result in limited awareness and awakening.

Kabir also attempts to warn us of the illusions or 'maya' and portrays a real picture of the eternal world. Linda Hess, in her popular work on the translations of Kabir – *Bijak of Kabir*, quotes;

"Within the heart a mirror

But no face shows.

You'll see the face when the heart's doubleness goes."

(Kabir 29)

Dissolution of ego can also be connected with the idea of losing oneself and eventually finding the ultimate truth. 'Losing oneself' states the process of freeing ourselves from the shackles of the materialistic things of the external world and to seek inner peace within. When we remove the "I" then we are somehow able to transform our way of living as it refines and cleanses our insight and perspective towards life which results in awakening and expansion of our consciousness.

1.2. The Expansion of Consciousness

"The mind in its own place, and in itself can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven."

The above quote very well justifies the relevance of expansion of one's consciousness. It is our own thoughts that help us perceive the world around us. That is why self-realization is an important step to visualize the ultimate truth.

Kabir has propagated the idea of expansion of consciousness by saying:

"The best of all things is a true heart,

Without truth no happiness, though you try a million tricks."

(Kabir 64)

He attempts to awaken the individuals from their current state of mind and claims that it is an ultimate truth that no matter how far we roam around in our quest for the real world or the eternal world, it won't be possible unless we have a true heart and a pure soul. Sometimes we are ignorant of the reality even though it is right in front of us. It is mainly due to the knots of the worldly ties which make the truth blur for us.

Similarly, Whitman in his poem "Song of Myself" writes:

"You shall no longer take things at second or third hand,

Nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the specters in books,

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,

You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self."

(Whitman, Song of Myself 36-37)

These verses emphasize on the notion of putting one's own critical thinking and analysis in following any set of societal implications or defined rules and regulations. He attempts to encourage the individuals over self-exploration and independent decision making based on one's own experiences and life-lessons. According to Whitman one should be able to filter from the different sources that claim to guide us in the direction through proper insight and analytical reasoning.

Emerson, one of the notable American essayist and poet in his popular essay – "Self-Reliance" says:

"A man should learn to detect and watch the gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within"

These lines address the relevance of self-belief rather than seeing the social mirror to analyze something. Self-belief also includes the expansion of the consciousness which is attained after the dissolution of the ego. Emerson was one of the transcendentalist essayists who propagated that true wisdom was not attained from the awareness of external impositions but through one's own intuition. It can be referred to an inner driving force of the mind and the heart which either prevents us from any misdoing or

motivates us towards something. According to Emerson, this inner voice connects oneself to the ultimate truth or universal reality. In one of his essays –*Spiritual Laws* he quotes;

“What your heart thinks great is great. The soul’s emphasis is always right.”

It may also be extracted from these verses that intuition also is a sort of intelligence or a power which has a supreme or a divine origin which transcends our soul in the right direction.

Therefore it can be concluded by the lines of William Blake that:

“If the doors of perception are cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.”

1.3. Transcendence of Duties

When the ego is dissolved and the consciousness is expanded our doings and actions may somewhat tend to transformed and align with a sense of deeper meaning and have a broader purpose transcending the boundaries of ‘I’ or the self. Transcendence of duties mainly refers to a state when the individuals have attained enough awareness through their expansion of consciousness that the duties performed by them are beyond any moral obligation.

In the day to day life people are engrossed in putting all of their energy and effort in doing their tasks as per the situational demands. The force that drives us to complete our tasks is generally to obtain the results that cater to our own personal growth and self interests. Transcendence is attained when one embarks on the path to seek a deeper value or meaningfulness in the tasks performed by him. This practice involves the carrying out of one’s duties on a mode of selflessness or beyond one’s own interest.

When the actions of the individuals are beyond a sense of duty or responsibility to a higher purpose or spiritual obligation, the tasks accomplished by them are representative of transcendence of duties. Whitman has attempted to encourage the individuals to develop a self-expression which is beyond any such prescribed or defined regulations but through the wisdom of our own soul. According to Whitman, transcendence of duties is something which is also correlated to self-love and self-belief. It is something which is not confined to criticism and social

acceptance. Whitman in his poetry – *Myself and Mine*, writes on this idea:

“I give nothing as duties,

*What others give as duties I give as living impulses,
(Shall I give my heart’s action as a duty?)”*

(Whitman, *Myself and Mine* 20-21)

This transformation of thought process is also observed in the writings of Whitman during the American Civil War. *The Wound Dresser* is a poem by Whitman which represents the first hand experiences dealt by Whitman during the Civil war where he volunteered as a nurse and dressed the wounds of the wounded soldiers. In his poem - *Song of Myself*, also he proclaims;

“I do not ask the wounded soldier how he feels, I become the wounded person...”

(Whitman, *Song of Myself* 845)

These verses were published in his work “*Song of Myself*” prior to the Civil War in the year 1855 but a different essence could be extracted from these verses after the instance of the American Civil War. These verses highlight on the idea that serving as a volunteer nurse during the Civil War somewhat inclined his thoughts towards empathy, compassion and mysticism or spirituality. The duties performed by him during taking care of the soldiers were not merely carried out for the so called ‘duty for duty sake’ but to also find a deeper meaning, connection or relevance in his service. This transformation is somewhat associated with the transcendence of duties.

Kabir also emphasized on the concept of transcendence of duties as a state of performing selfless actions without any expectations. According to him, this transcendence of duties can lead one to embark on the path of divinity.

1.4. The Divine in All Beings

It is believed that divinity could be attained through religious practices. Different religions have their own set of principles to connect to the Almighty. Individuals embark on their own journey to reach God through their own beliefs and religious practices. On religion Whitman in his poetry – *Starting from Paumanok*, suggests:

"I say that the real and permanent grandeur of these states must be their religion,

*Otherwise there is no real and permanent grandeur;
(Nor character nor life worthy the name without religion,
Nor land nor man or woman without religion.)"*

(Whitman, Starting from Paumanok 110-112)

Whitman in these verses does not seem to favor any particular religion but attempts to signify the importance of religion as a whole. The phrase 'their religion' in the above verses may also propagate the idea of not confining oneself to any particular religious belief but to explore the true path of divinity through one's own pursuit and self discovery.

Whitman's quest to God is not confined to any religious teaching but to one's own level of self-realization. According to Whitman all the religious beliefs are the postulates of the mankind and are limited to their understanding. The religious values and teachings available to us in the forms of scriptures, songs and others hold no permanence and their meanings may differ from one person to other irrespective of the due course of time. It is solely based on the individual's ability to perceive them.

Kabir explicitly denounced religious norms and superstitions. He believed in formless God and for him religious practices such as idolatry, offerings and fasting to find God were merely futile. According to him, God's abode was something beyond pilgrimage and spiritual places.

Whitman and Kabir have their own unique ways to shed light on the presence of divinity. Whitman heard and beheld God in every object. Similarly, for Kabir God whom he loved resided within himself and amidst every creature on the earth. The following verses highlight on Whitman's vision of God and the divine. In his poetry - *Song of Myself*, he declares:

"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 own face in the glass..."

(Whitman, Song of Myself 1284-1285)

1.5. Nature as the Mirror of the Self

Nature also acts as a source of self-realization or a mirror of our consciousness. Whitman in his poetry has extensively written about nature as a representation of our inner psyche; nature as a mirror of the self; landscape of our inner reality or soul. Whitman himself attained inner most joy and peace in the lap of nature. He visualizes himself even in the minutest particle of grass and feels contended.

Nature is present in its most original and purest form. This can also be associated with the idea that individuals should also be in their original and purest form, free from any masked identity. Nature also acts as a teacher and imparts us the wisdom to stay in one's original and purest form that is with a clear heart, mind and soul. The way nature is getting affected by the anthropogenic activities such as pollution, global warming and so on; one's inner soul is also adversely impacted by the negative influences, manipulation or other forms of worldly ties. Just the way nature serves the mankind selflessly without any expectations it also imparts us the lessons to carry out one's own duties accordingly. Wordsworth has also visualized nature as a teacher and suggests in one of his popular poem - *A Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*:

"Come forth, into the light of things, let nature be your teacher."

Thoreau, one of the notable American essayists, also highlights on the relevance of nature on the inner psyche of the humans. In his essay - *Walden*, he writes:

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life."

These lines attempt to reflect on the idea that humans tend to find solace, serenity and peace in nature. Amidst the commotion of life we at times seek our shelter in the nature's lap. Sometimes it also helps to visualize and analyze a clear picture of a situation or a dilemma which held us back from an important decision.

Nature is also a representation of one's true self. We attempt to analyze our surroundings as per our inner state or mind. Unless we have self-belief, self awareness and self realization we cannot attain the true wisdom no matter what the elements of nature try to teach us. Whitman also emphasized on the

same idea in his poetry – *A Song of the Rolling Earth* and suggests:

“I swear the earth shall surely be complete to him or her who shall be complete

The earth remains a jagged and broken to him or her who remains jagged and broken.”

(Whitman, *A Song of the Rolling Earth* 90-91)

Kabir has his own way of using the elements of nature such as plants, soil, air and other creatures as literary devices such as symbolism, personification, metaphors and others to address the themes such as non-discrimination; oneness; compassion; pride and downfall; life and death; God and self realization. Apart from these themes he has addressed many other themes of universal relevance. In one of his couplets, he proclaims:

“Clay cries out of potter, ‘Why quash me with your feet?

A day will come when I shall trample you beneath!”

(Kabir 97)

1.6. Universal Brotherhood and Compassion

The world is a beautiful place when equality, non discrimination, humility, good conduct and a unified oneness prevails in a society. This eventually contributes to universal brotherhood and compassion. Whitman and Kabir have proclaimed and advocated on the significance of universal brotherhood and compassion in their works.

Whitman in his poetry – *Song of Myself*, conveys:

“Whoever degrades another degrades me

And whatever is done and said returns at last to me.”

(Whitman, *Song of Myself* 503-504)

Whitman encompasses on the idea that our deeds and actions are returned to us as an outcome in the form of Karma. Therefore, one must be aware enough of what one contributes to the society. Kabir directly advocated against discrimination on the basis of caste, color, creed or any other parameters. He voiced for equality, harmony and brotherhood among the individuals. For Kabir every individual was a creation of the Almighty and the universe and were equal in his eyes. *Bijak of Kabir*, highlights:

“Color is born of color.

I see all colors one.

What color is a living creature?

Solve it if you can.”

(Kabir 24)

1.7. The Self as the Voice of the Universe

In his poetry Whitman seems to become the voice of the universe. He addresses the entire universe in his poetry without any discrimination. He attempts to maintain a perfect balance between perfection and materialism. In his poetry – *To Think of Time*, Whitman suggests:

“The whole universe indicates that it is good,

The past and the present indicate that it is good.

How beautiful and perfect are the animals!

How perfect the earth, and the minutest thing upon it!

What is called good is perfect and what is called bad is just as perfect.”

(Whitman, *To Think of Time* 110-114)

Whitman visualizes that perfection exists in the entire cosmos. He embraces the goodness even in the tiniest particle of the universe. He analyses that the past is equally good as the present and it can be extracted from his belief that there is no such thing as the good time or the bad time. Each minute of one’s life and all the incidences hold its own degree of significance. Our definition of something good or bad depends on our level of insightful thinking and analysis. Therefore, Whitman suggests that what we call as good is perfect and what is called bad is just as perfect.

Whitman’s vision of perfection seems to be quite unique and interesting. This vision is not confined to something flawless but to something which also accepts and embraces the reality despite of its flaws and shortcomings. His poetry is an attempt that propagates the idea that he himself accepted his flaws and good qualities. Through his poetry also he has explicitly proclaimed that he is not ignorant of the negative or evil aspects of the reality and willfully addresses them in his poetry. In his poetry – *Starting from Paumanok*, he declares:

“I make the poem of the evil also, I commemorate that part also,

I am myself just as much as evil as good, and my nation is and I say that 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 something else.)”

(Whitman, Starting from Paumanok, 99-101)

Whitman also delves on the idea that perfection lies in the present moment. He states that no matter what life offers us at the present or may in the future, every phase of life can be turned into beautiful results. It is the individual's responsibility to awaken and evolve oneself through one's own soulful insights. In the same poetry he also emphasizes:

"And I will show that there is no imperfection in the present, and can be none in the future,

And I will show that whatever happens to anybody it may be turn'd to beautiful results."

(Whitman, Starting from Paumanok 167-168)

[10] Thoreau, Henry David. Walden. Maple Press, 2013.

[11] Whitman, Walt. The Complete Poems. Penguin Books, 2004.

[12] Wordsworth, William. Lyrical Ballads. Oxford University Press, 1967.

II. CONCLUSION

It can therefore be concluded that Whitman and Kabir have well contributed their part in imparting self awareness, self-realization and global awakening. They have fore-grounded the idea of one's personal endeavor in embracing the universe as a unified whole and not considering oneself as a separate entity. It is through an attempt towards the dissolution of ego, expansion of consciousness, transcendence of duties, all pervasive divinity, interconnectedness, compassion, universal brotherhood and cosmic unity one can hear the echo of the universe in one's own voice.

REFERENCES

- [1] Blake, William. The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. Oxford University Press, 1975.
- [2] Bly, Robert. Kabir: Ecstatic Poems. Beacon Press, 2004.
- [3] Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Self-Reliance and Other Essays. Sanage Publishing, 2020.
- [4] Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Spiritual Laws. Cosimo Classics, 1841.
- [5] Kabir. The Bijak of Kabir. Translated by Linda Hess and Shukdeo Singh, Penguin Books, 2002.
- [6] Milton, John. Paradise Lost.
- [7] Prasoon, Shrikant. Knowing Sant Kabir. Hindology Books, 2012.
- [8] Sinha, Chandan. The Vision of Wisdom: Kabir. Rupa Publications, 2022.
- [9] Sharan, Pandit Ram. Sant Kabir. Vijay Goel Publisher, 2017.