

# A Comparative Analysis of Transcendental Elements in the Poetry of Vivekananda, Kamla Das, and Whitman

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this article is to conduct a comparative analysis of transcendental themes in the poetry of Swami Vivekananda, Kamla Das, and Walt Whitman. It aims to explore how these poets, from diverse cultural backgrounds, engage with and express transcendentalist ideas in their work, providing a cross-cultural perspective on this philosophical movement. It is focused on the study of Self-transcendence or individual perspective of Indian poets Swami Vivekananda; A representative of Hindu religion and; Kamla Das; a renowned feminist and further is compared with the American poet Walt Whitman; an American poet. Their emphasis on subjective intuition through nature, intuition, experience or imagination is discussed with reference to their illustrious poems like "Light", "Kali the Mother" "The Living God" of Swami Vivekananda taken from the book "Complete works of Swami Vivekananda", Kamla Das's poems "Ghanashyam", "Only the Soul knows How to Sing" a collection of poems and Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" highlighting on "songs of Myself".*

**Keywords:** Transcendentalism, inherent divinity, self-transcendence, unifying interconnectedness

## 1. Introduction

Transcendentalism is an American philosophical movement in the 19th Century that believes in the inherent divinity of the human being that can be engendered completely by insights with slight attention. This movement is greatly influenced by the Indian religion and philosophy of mind and spirit. In the Bhagvad Gita transcendence is described as a level of spiritual attainment, or state of being which is open to all spiritual aspirants. It is a diverse perspective of every individual. By comparing the works of Vivekananda, Das, and Whitman, the article sheds light on the universal appeal and adaptation of transcendentalist thought in various cultural and temporal contexts, offering valuable insights into the interplay of philosophy, culture, and literature.

## 2. Objective

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the understanding of transcendentalisms impact across different literary traditions.

The essence of Upanishads is that the soul or the spiritual consciousness is the source of true knowledge and if one concentrates on the soul, which is also called the "seer" or the "knower", one can confront the Reality. The soul is capable of this because in essence it is one with the Param Brahma, the universal soul. The ego of a person and his apparent separation from the Param Brahma is caused by Maya – the illusion of matter. Hence, according to Hindu scriptures, Maya is an obstruction and a deception, and the Eastern mystic rejects and subdues all that is part of the Maya and uses all his faculties to realize his spiritual consciousness. Vivekananda's mysticism belongs to this very order. Vivekananda's poems are an invitation to the eastern mysticism which is a world of poetic interpretation of the transcendental and sublime beauty.

His poems display his eagerness to communicate this divinity and inspire man to recognize own divinity. There is a hope in transcendentalist mindset as Swami Vivekananda says

*I look behind and after  
And find that all is right,  
In my deepest sorrows  
There is a soul of light. (Light, Swami  
Vivekananda)*

Swami Vivekananda sees the power of divinity inside every human being as their liberator. But the evil spirit has to die to bring forth that power which could be possible only through Nature. He in his poem "Kali, The Mother" glorifies the power behind manifestation. The Swami worships the terrible here. The universe provides a stage for the enactment of the Mother's frenzied dance. Kali destroys those traits in man that hinder him from an awareness of his divinity. The supreme must be thought of either as Infinite Being or as Infinite Power. Here the poet sees Her as Infinite Power. Kali is an Indian deity; symbolically it's the will power to destroy the evil thoughts, negative energies in the human being. It's the kali who kills the evil one and glorifies the power the purity, sympathy and kindness of human soul

Kamla Das (1934-2009) an Indo- Anglian writer is one of the best known contemporary Indian Women writers. Das provocative poems are known for their honest explorations of the self and female sexuality, issues of post-colonial identity and the political and personal struggles of marginalized people. Her poetry is obsessed with herself, about her intensely felt desire for love and her emotional involvement and her failure to achieve such a relationship. Self is the nucleus from which all her poetry originates. Most of her poems deal with the theme of unfulfilled love and yearning for love. "The Dance of the Eunuchs" is a good instance in this context.

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In the collection *The Descendants* (1967), the poem "The Maggots" frames the pain of lost love with ancient Hindu myths, while the poem "The Looking-Glass" suggests that the very things society labels taboo are the things that women are supposed to give. In *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), poems such as "Substitute," "Gino," and "The Suicide" examine physical love's failure to provide fulfillment, escape from the self, and exorcism of the past, whereas poems such as "The Inheritance" address the integrity of the artistic self in the face of religious fanaticism.

Kamla Das is a confessional poetess who outpours her own loneliness, disillusionment, and sense of frustration. Nevertheless, with the mellowness her poetry shifts progressively from personal to the general and universal that conciliated her quest for true love. She realized the existence of God within her heart. In her poem *Ghanashyam* she compares God with a Koel (a bird) who has built her nest in the heart of the poet.

*"Ghanashyam  
You have a koel built your  
Nest in the arbour of my heart.  
My life until now a sleeping jungle,  
Is at last astir with music"* (Tonight This Savage  
rite, 1979)

Until now the heart or in a broader sense, her life was solitary, gloomed and ruined jungle which has now been excited is back into life by the sweet music of koel i.e. the *Ghanashyam*.

*"Your body is my prison, Krishna,  
I cannot see beyond it.  
Your darkness blinds me  
Your love words shut out the wise world's din"  
(From Only the Soul Knows How to Sing)*

And now that she has attained the spiritualism, she ironically satirizes the so-called wisdom of the society. The play is on the word "wise". The word wise here means the folly ideology of the society. The wise words of the people are therefore on contrary to the divine. Kamla Das sees the Almighty as liberator from all the worldly sufferings she got in her life. She at first was hoping to fulfill her quest for happiness, fulfillment in the worldly attractions but at last her mistaken belief is shattered with the recognition of Krishna as her ultimate guide. She realizes that her body has lost and soul has merged with the God; Parmatma she has given up all the mortal temporary worldly attractions and has devoted herself to the worship of Krishna. For her, Krishna is the ultimate destiny, beyond which there seems to be nothing.

*Everything in me  
Is melting, even the hardness at the core  
O, Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting  
Nothing remains but you. (Radha)*

Now that the society is plagued with a number of vices that are unbearable by the woman, "It's time for a revolution"; "It's time for an overturning". Krishna has shown her the path of revolution which she was unaware of. She as the

representative of divine becomes a revolutionary person for the woman of the contemporary world. The headings of some of her articles themselves depict the revolutionary ideas like-"Why Not More Than One Husband", "What Women Expect out of Marriage and What They Get.

Walt Whitman an American poet, a pioneer of Transcendental Movement in America, reflects his transcendentalism in the following lines

*"Divine I am inside and out  
And make holy whatever I touch or am touch'd from  
The scent of these arm pits is aroma finer than prayer,  
The head more that churches, bibles and the creeds."*

Walt Whitman was a democratic and revolutionary poet of America. His family background (his father was a liberal thinker), education and civil had moulded his personality into a betrayal against social restrictions. Walt Whitman is an American poet known for his collection of poems "Leaves of Grass" specially "Songs of Myself" wherein he resembles himself with all the creations on this earth, thus visualizes divinity in them and himself. He gives a practical approach to transcendentalism. He transcends his body and visions towards to all the creations of God and tries to serve them all. He approaches the philosophy towards humanity. At the outbreak of Civil War, Whitman freelanced journalism and visited to the wounded in New York hospital. Overcome by the sufferings of the wounded people in Washington, Whitman decided to stay and work in the hospital and he stayed there for eleven years. In 1882 he published his third edition of "Leaves of Grass".

The eastern mysticism of Divinity in all represented by Swami Vivekananda in "The Living God" in the lines

*"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. 2007: 20).

are analogous with the Walt Whitman's concept of divinity

*"I celebrate and sing myself,  
And what I assume, you shall assume  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."*

Acquiescing with the Vedanta concept of the Absolute and the soul's capacity to realize the Truth by internal contemplation and meditation, Vivekananda wanted to inspire the mankind to find its own divinity. Several of his poems include the assertion that the Brahma is not without but within the human soul. He also acknowledges that Maya is a device of Brahma himself to keep the soul engaged to the worldly pleasures. It is for the man to realize that the pains and joys of this world are nothing but illusions and that there is a greater reality that exists and the knowledge of which can liberate him from the endless cycles of birth and death and the roller-coaster of expectations, disappointments, happiness and sorrow, in life. In The Song of The Sannyasin, he writes:

*“There is but One—The Free—The Knower—Self!  
Without a name, without a form or stain;  
In Him is Maya dreaming all this dream.  
The Witness, He appears as nature, soul.”*  
(Vivekananda. 2007: 17).

The pursuit of the Divine is a longstanding theme of Vivekananda’s poetry. He discusses in details the trials of a man in quest of the transcendental. He sings the glory of the “Lord of Light” and bemoans at the same time the fact that he has indeed not become one with it yet. It troubles him to live in a world of sorrows and to have prayed all his life to the God for deliverance, and not to have reached his goal yet. His poems reveal that the heart of this sage longed and despaired for the ultimate spiritual union, which is the aspiration of every seer. Having understood the fleeting nature of all worldly things, he laments a weariness of the world in the poem *My Play Is Done*:

*“Alas for me. I cannot rest. This floating bubble, earth -  
Its hollow form, its hollow name, its hollow death and birth -  
For me is nothing. How I long to get beyond the crust  
Of name and form! Ah, hope the gates; to me they open  
must.”* (Vivekananda. 2007: 10).

Similarly, Kamla Das is quite astonished to see the reaction of the society that, for the sake of its worn-out doctrines, seizes the right to freedom of a person. For Kamala Das, the hatred spread by our orthodox religious beliefs left behind by our ancestors is worse than the nuclear waste.

*“Worse memory than even the nuclear waste  
The wastes religions leave behind  
In human genes and”* (*Garbage Disposal*)

When she grows up into a mature woman and recognizes the reality of such worn-out doctrines, she decides to not believe or act upon them as she has believed in Universal God (i.e. the God of all).

Vivekananda, Kamla Das and Walt Whitman all write without care for form and structure. Their literary aspirations are governed by the theme of the poem, thoughts, and moods.

Swami Vivekananda has depicted the vibrant mien of Hindu gods and goddesses in several of his poems. His poetic imagery is fresh, intensive and has an evocative power. The depiction of the deities in is usually dark and ominous with a touch of drama. “Kali the Mother” presents the best side of imagery, symbolism and drama in Vivekananda’s poetic works. Vivekananda describes a scene of destruction and “of death begrimed and black” – a looming darkness shadows the poem, which starts with the image of “stars blotted out” clouds covering the sky and the roaring wind whirling in the darkness. Against the backdrop of this scene,

*“Are the souls of a million lunatics  
Just loosed from the prison-house,  
Wrenching trees by the roots,  
Sweeping all from the path.”*  
(Vivekananda. 2007: 25).

The soul of these people freed from the “prison-house” of the body is driven to chaos and bedlam. In this scene of death Vivekananda evokes the “Mother”, the “All-destroyer” and a saviour against the evil forces. Vivekananda celebrates the “destruction dance” of Kali in all its glory for according to the mythologies when there is an abundance of evil in the world, Kali destroys it, making way for the creation of a new world. In the dance of Kali is the salvation of the universe.

There are several depictions of nature in Vivekananda’s poem. For Vivekananda, nature was a constant source of inspiration and a cradle for his imagination. To serve his mystic tendencies, the definition of nature extends from the characters of earth, which he likened to a “fleeting bubble”, to the universe with all its cosmic attributions. In the span and factors of this extent he found immeasurable beauty and his muse.

Vivekananda’s poetic imagination takes flight on the wings of images, symbol and sounds. He presents the vivid image of crashing waves of the sea, the bold and daunting picture of Goddess Kali and the mystic vastness of the universe while resounds with the echo of “I am” “I am”. His poetry is enlivened by his poetic imagination.

Walt Whitman sees himself and God with all the things on this earth. He emphasized the futility of searching God outside of one’s existence

*“I hear and behold God in every object,  
Yet understand God not in the least,  
Not do I understand who there can be more wonderful than  
myself,  
Why should I wish to see God better than this day?”*

He transcends his body and visions towards to all the creations of God and tries to serve them all. He approaches the philosophy towards humanity. At the outbreak of Civil War, Whitman freelanced journalism and visited to the wounded in New York hospital. Overcome by the sufferings of the wounded people in Washington, Whitman decided to stay and work in the hospital and he stayed there for eleven years. According to Eastern mysticism, Walt Whitman has evoked his divine self and worked for the solace of his soul by serving the human beings or touching the other’s soul through their bodies.

### 3. Conclusion

Therefore, this comparative study reveals that despite their varied cultural backgrounds, Swami Vivekananda, Kamla Das, and Walt Whitman exhibit striking parallels in their transcendentalist expressions. It highlights their diverse vision and experience of transcendentalism like Whitman’s pragmatic approach in Unifying interconnectedness, Vivekananda’s dissolution of self-based on spiritual and religious beliefs and Kamla Das’s quest for completeness with the Almighty (Krishna). At the same time, it braces their summon for divinity, humanity and oneness with all. This convergence highlights the universal nature of transcendentalism, transcending geographical and cultural

boundaries, and underscores the enduring relevance of transcendentalist ideas in global literary discourse.

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