

A Critical Reflection on the Enigmatic Self in the Selected Poetry from East and West

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<p>ISSN</p> <p>eISSN: 2789-6331 pISSN: 2789-4169</p> <p></p> <p>Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. This is an article open access distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Common Attribution (CC BY) license</p>	<p>Abstract: This study deals with the interpretation of the enigmatic self in the selected poetry of Bulleh Shah (1680-1753) and Walt Whitman (1819-1892). The aim is to explore the complex layers of self while living in this world of division, disorder, centrelessness, fragmentation, mistrust and doubt. This paper employs particular theoretical ideas of Soren Kierkegaard (1843) and Roland Barthes (1967) related to the multiple dimensions of self. The main objective is to shed light on the hidden aspects of enigmatic self in order to expose the inner reality of self as well as to deconstruct the established idea of human self. The multiplicity of voices in a text is explored</p>
	<p>though the reader by filling the gaps left by the author. This paper emphasizes that the spiritual reconstruction of the divided and disconnected self can be attained through accomplishing the spiritual insight and mystical enlightenment. Key Words: Enigmatic Self, Spirituality, Psychology, Deconstruction, Multiplicity, Spiritual Reconstruction</p>

1- INTRODUCTION

The central problematic of this research paper is to explore the enigma of Self for the revelation of concealed, illusive and hidden self. We as individuals are striving hard to exist in this world of uncertainty, doubt, confusion and distrust. In this state of precariousness, we require some

direction to deal with the crisis of self and existence. Therefore, a critical reflection on the enigma of self has a great potential for recovering shattered and fragmented bits of individual self by means of becoming spiritually elevated. The enigmatic Self in a Postmodern world is unstable, insecure, illogical and absurd. Accordingly, the reader is required to interpret the text or his/her own existence as an enigmatic individual in relational to his/her own idea of self which opens room for multiple interpretations of a single text or individual. The present paper anticipates that the deconstruction of the enigmatic self by means of understanding the spiritual and psychological dimensions of self can offer some hope for reconstructing a sound and stable self with reference to the pertinent philosophies of Shah and Whitman.

1.1 Existentialist Crisis and Multiple Dimensions of Self

This research paper interprets the selected poetry of Shah (1680-1753) and Whitman (1819-1892) through the theoretical lens of Soren Kierkegaard (1843) and Roland Barthes (1967). The individual suffering from an existentialist crisis remains in a state of self perplexity, suspicion, anguish and conflict regarding the meaning of life and existence. Kierkegaard emphasizes the struggle of the individual to find some meaning of his/her existence in this absurd life. He defines life and the state of being in the world through three spheres of existence which are related to one's aesthetics, ethics and religion.

He focuses on the individual in relation to his/her existence, choice and freedom. He presents an individual grappling with his/her own choices.

Barthes (1967) in “The Death of the Author” proclaims a figurative happening that is the Death of the author who is no more considered as an authentic authority to generate meanings out of a literary text. For him, the author is only and purely a scripter and the role and task of a scripter is for the sake of producing and not for elucidating and explicating the work. As a result, manifold meanings can be produced by various interpreters and in this way, the death of the author becomes the birth of a reader who proliferates different meanings.

Like Postmodernism, the central focus of deconstruction (1960s) is on disintegration, centrelessness, inconsistency, division of self, and negation of individual self, perspectives and manners. deconstruction observes and examines dearth, divergences, cracks, fissures and exceptions. It abandons the thought that a text has only one voice, one meaning and singular reality. It appreciates every reader as an individual reader having his or her own novel and subjective voice, idea, significance and singular reality in terms of a particular text. The idea about the multiple voices within a text has even broader meaning and it is not restricted only to literary premise. It can be generalized to other state of affairs like deconstruction’s threats of mayhem, fragmentation, centrelessness and notions about multi-faceted self. The construal of a literary text varies from reader to reader in relation to his

or her social, cultural, religious and sexual individuality. Therefore, the multi-vocality in a text and in constructs of self can be located by deconstructing the established notions of self.

The preceding discussed ideas by both theorists create space for multiple voices at a time due to which a sense of fragmentation, self-division and centrelessness pervades. Therefore, the objective of this research is to employ the relevant ideas of Kierkegaard (1843) and Barthes (1967) to deconstruct the established notions of Self. Thus, a solution for mayhem, split and divided self is found in the analysis of the enigmatic self by means of mystical growth of self in Whitman and Shah's poetry related to the initiation of the journey of self into the spiritual domain. Whitman (1819-1892) belongs to West and Shah (1680-1753) to East, both have affiliation to two remote far-flung traditions. They are parallel and divergent at the same time from each other in relation to the enigma of Self. The current comparison aspires to discover and explore common spiritual thoughts and beliefs to evaluate similarities and contrasts among Eastern and Western constructs of enigmatic self.

1.2 Deconstruction as a Methodology

Post-structuralism refuses to accept the emphasized assertions of Structuralism regarding objectivity. It highlights the volatility and multifaceted interpretation of meaning with the help of deconstruction to expose discrepancy and variation in language. Jacques Derrida's (1976) notion of Deconstruction in his book *Of Grammatology* holds a vital role in the thoughtful perceptions of aporias. As a result,

deconstruction is considered to be an applied and practical form of Poststructuralism. In the present study, deconstruction has been used as a methodological tool and not as a theory with its particular focus on meaning because it does not lie in a meaning tilting premise. Therefore, I have focused on stillness, silences, fissures, cracks, gaps, breaks and spaces. It also focuses on the unsaid and unheard parts of text, where meanings are scarcely formed in conventional mode of reading. But in doing so, deconstruction does not merely reject logocentrism of texts rather it has questioned, faith, certainty, belief, identity, individuality and truth. It shuns, removes and confiscates the conflict of binaries involving representation and veracity. Moreover, it also uncovers and exposes unconscious mind rather than conscious workings of mind. Derrida postulates decentring progression against the established idea of center. He reads text against itself to illustrate and confirm the textual incoherence.

As it has already been stated that the diluted, destabilized and decentered position of the author not only leads to multiple interpretations of a literary text but also to the deconstruction of illusory, decentred self through a critical reflection on the spirituality of the enigmatic self. In this situation, it is important to unearth and decipher not only the illusory self but also the spiritual dimensions of the enigmatic self for the sake of bringing harmony, faith and peace in a single as well as shared existence. For this purpose, the illusion of the individual meanings and significances has been deconstructed to

explicate how words develop into symbols and offer the potential for creating multivocality and multiplicity of text, meanings and self.

The central rule of deconstruction with reference to present research is the principle of difference. The difference is present at the extreme point of existence. The opposites can neither be a unity nor completely opposites, rather they are broken impression of one another. Derrida (1976) in *Of Grammatology* asserts that meanings constantly shift due to which there is no established center and only vibrant even contradictory significances and meanings are present at the same time. All we need to do as humans is to construct and deconstruct meanings.

In this respect, the construction and deconstruction become a reconstruction of meanings from the commotion outside and inside all of us. Thus, meanings turn out to be interlinked and entwined and significances become manifold.

2- LITERATURE REVIEW

There are various dimensions of self through which self can be interpreted and comprehended. Self can be seen in the light of philosophy, psychology, science, religion, skepticism, faith and spirituality. This study focuses on various dimensions of self and highlights the significance of spirituality in resolving the enigma of the enigmatic self. The following researches provide a base for doing this research on the spiritual dimensions of self and existence.

Being and Becoming or Know Thyself is ingrained in being and it does not imply to be lost in your thoughts. In a similar way, Eckhart Tolle (2005) in *A New Earth: Awakening to your Life's Purpose* also promotes the idea of self exploration and digging deep into the enigmatic self. He emphasizes that incompleteness is a feeling in the beginning of mystical journey and almost every spiritual seeker undergoes and experiences it. Only a devoted spiritual seeker is constantly lost in the idea of discovering and delving further and further into the inner recesses of being and the purpose of existence. Selfdiscovery and actualization confer an extraordinary state of ecstasy and surmount each and every lurking dread of the sense of being incomplete. The sole purpose of human existence is to identify not only the inner but also the outer realm of every individual. The one who knows himself knows not only others but also comprehends the Ultimate Reality (God) and meaning of existence. However, on the other side, the state of being aware entails a sense of vulnerability, doubt and insecurity on the part of an individual. Within the mystical doctrines, the seeker is always vulnerable in the process of confronting his own incompleteness, in this attempt, he may relapse into fragmentation and chaos which in turn could culminate into anarchy and disintegration. Tolle further highlighted the significance of consciousness because he considers that consciousness is eternal and everlasting in essence. Consequently, the presence of consciousness can be witnessed in every phenomenon. In the following lines, he expounds the very truth that consciousness expands as it is never born or dead. He

explains that consciousness flows in whatever you do, it is not what you do but how you do and how you do is determined by your state of consciousness (p. 291).

Esoteric constructs are those constructs of self which are understood by specific group of people, who have exceptional and extraordinary curiosity and awareness. If we think that we are not one of those exceptional and extraordinary spiritual people, then, we are badly mistaken. According to mystic philosophies of both East and West, every one of us is in his or her own way spiritual and mystic and can easily delve into the deep meanings of esoteric Self. All we need is to deconstruct the inner recesses of our very own being and thereby reconstruct the illusory, fragmented division within us into a compact whole. According to John F. Nash (2007) in *Christianity: The One, The Many*, the word esoteric has been derived from Greek word pronounced as *esoterikos* which means inward, within and mystic. There are many misconceptions about the esoteric meanings and constructs of Self. For instance, the illusive sense of individual self has its roots in Einstein's (2011) notion of Optical Illusion of Consciousness. It is basically the consciousness of Who you are? It does not mean that you know yourself by believing how you see yourself and others, rather by knowing how you become known. Subsequently, the false impressions and misconceptions about the concept of identity become known. Accordingly, the difference between knowing yourself and knowing in relation to yourself happens to be comprehensible. At the same time, we ought to be mindful and aware about the distinction between being and

becoming which is one of the principal sites of reflection within mystical doctrines of East and West.

Nobody is born without a purpose as stated above, the purpose of this article is to strengthen harmony, faith and peace in a single as well as shared existence by deconstructing the illusory self and this I have tried to do with particular reference to Whitman and Shah's pertinent ideas about the enigmatic constructs of self.

3- ANALYSIS: ENIGMATIC SELF IN WHITMAN AND SHAH

The concept of enigmatic constructs of Self is central in relation to a comparative study of Whitman and Shah's selected poems in this article. The selected clusters of Song of Myself by Whitman and Shah's pertinent poems titled "One Alif is All You Need" and "Reciting Just One Alif Will Liberate You" contain multiple aspects of enigmatic self that explore the meaning of existence through spiritual illumination and realization of who you are?

The conscious endeavor in the present research has been to unearth the symbolic meanings embedded in the spiritual and transformational initiated step of Self. In this way, the spiritual symbolic meanings have been generated by deconstructing the enigmatic self in Whitman and Shah. Thereby, this research has attempted to fill the gaps and fissures left by the selected poets by means of reading, reflecting and reinterpreting the poetry of these two poets.

The idea of enigmatic self with its ever-evolving significance in existing state of affairs requires positive replications. There is another misconception about the inner and outer crises of the spiritual and social self that people consider both inner and outer world as a separate entity but both are part and parcel of each other and thus are interconnected. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1988) in *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man* clearly illustrates that the pollution of the environment is no more than the after-effect of a pollution of the human soul which came into being the moment Western man decided to play the role of the Divinity (p. 12).

Nagi (2009) in *Bulleh Shah: Personality and Poetry*, substantiates that Sufis belonging to old or new era of East or West have one thing in common that their “subject matter or main issue is and was human Self” (p. 59). Consequently, the illusory self needs to be deconstructed and as a result of this a reconstruction of mystical and uplifted self has been found in the cracks of enigmatic construction of self. I have marked out the Post-structuralism’s threats of mayhem, fragmentation, centrelessness and notions about multi-faceted self. Once, all the threats are marked out by a reconstruction with a conscious realization that is only possible by taking insights from the spiritual traditions of Whitman and Shah with a particular focus on the enigmatic dimensions of self.

Whitman and Shah both have a shared concern just like other mystical doctrines- namely the Unification of self with God. In other

words, the aim of all mystics is same but ways to achieve this aim are different. For example, Whitman's Self in Song of Myself is uplifted and at the same time he accepts others and thereby God. On the other hand, Shah presents degenerated fragmented Self and by highlighting the divided and collapsed self, his aim is also to uplift the illusory self.

The analysis reflects that Whitman unwraps the Song of Myself through the carnival of personal self. The hyped carnival of the enigmatic self in a roundabout way stands for all and signifies all human beings. Both Whitman and Shah use comprehensive symbolic images and metaphors for the sake of communicating deep and shifting spiritual meanings of self. The appeal of their symbolism is identical to one and all. The self of Whitman perceives himself and others as identical, accordingly such relationship turns out to be mutual. Whitman and Shah consider the enigma of self as a matter of significant concern. For Shah, the knowledge of A (Alif-God) is sufficient to deconstruct the truth of all living creatures. Whitman (1982) glorifies self and celebrates it by signing a song for myself. He sings a song that connects both "me and you" as every atom belonging to me belongs to you because whatever I assume the same you shall assume. Moreover, Whitman acknowledges nature and natural world. He invites his soul and deliberately misspells the spellings of "loaf" and suggests symbolic meanings of the word "loaf" which more than simply being lazy or idle (p. 188). Whitman indicates that it is a state of leisure and relaxation when an individual develops a connection with the natural world by reflecting on self and others. He wants to resolve the mysteries of self and does it through the

medium of exploring interconnection of everything and everyone. Whitman gives so much importance to observation but it makes the all difference in life as he says that “I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass” (p. 188).

Whitman (1982) provokes each and every self, even the self of the interpreter to start a sacred and divine expedition in his own company. In this way, he fortifies, reinforces and uplifts the self of everyone to the metaphysical elevations of unification with God. He observes others by standing in their own boots and thereby he accepts others as he accepts himself. His Self- actualization provides him consciousness in relation to every self. In this regard, Whitman enhances his relationship with others. The very sense of empathy helps him to board on some sacred expedition. It can be considered an Instigation of Enigmatic Self into the Divine Dominion.

Very much like Whitman, in Shah we also see the same parameters of introspection and self-discovery. Similar to Whitman, Shah tries to comprehend the mystery of the alphabet Alif (First letter of Arabic language). The letter Alif is extremely significant for him as it gives him awareness about the existence and reality of God. He recommends everyone to gain the knowledge of this letter as it can give him full understanding of everything and no more study is required. God is the source and foundation of everything inside and outside world. Whosoever gets this only idea, he or she becomes successful. According to Shah (2008), who whispers that one “Alif” is required and one should not take pride in one’s knowledge (p. 12).

Shah reflects on the idea of cathartic energy of the alphabet Alif, as it is the power of Almighty. Since, God is the Creator of everything so all alphabets and numbers spring out of Him. Shah (2008) in his poem, Reciting Just One Alif Will Liberate You, assumes that the recitation of one Alif is liberating as it gives us relief from all troubles, woes and oppression. For him, every alphabet comes out of Alif (A) and in this way these alphabets turn into millions and billions and finally become countless (p. 31).

Shah criticizes heaps of many books as people just buy books for the sake of collecting not for getting any practical help by studying them. If they study books, they do it just for the sake of boasting such readers just do superficial reading. That is why, they become hollow intellectually as well as morally due to the load of their wrong doings. As a result, such reader will have to pay for his sin in another world after Judgment Day. Further, Shah contemplates that why do people pile up books and why do not study books for knowledge? (p. 32).

The concept of enigmatic self in Whitman and Shah has universal appeal because both postulate the idea of Oneness of all. In this way, there are similarities in both poets but still social context of Eastern and Western constructs of self cannot be overlooked. In this context, we may say that there are common grounds as well as divergences in both of them. But, the real thing is the contribution of exploring the enigma of self that helps to deconstruct the illusory enigmatic self by replacing it with a reconstruction of self as found in both Eastern and Western mystical traditions.

Whitman (1982) considers that the function of nature is better than the instructive organizations in shaping, building and uplifting esoteric self. He connects soul of the self to the soul of nature and this connection further leads the self to be united with the Eternal self that is God. The poet helps the self of the reader to untangle the metaphorical significances of esoteric self. In this context, Whitman is parallel to the philosophy of Wordsworth in term of instructive role of nature. Whitman (1982) expounds that nature is the real instructor as compared to any school or creed (p. 188).

The symbol of grass embodies the split nature of self as a part in the entire whole of existence. The leave of grass symbolizes I of the self of the poet as a part in the collective whole. In this regard, a leave of grass becomes a reason to deconstruct the symbolic concealed meaning of life. Whitman (1982) summons his individual spirit to examine the leave of grass. In this way, the world of nature becomes a source of opening doors to the inner realities of life. He invites his individual self and the self of the readers to witness God in the world of nature.

As mentioned above in the similar vein of Whitman, Shah (2008) too postulates the concept of witnessing God through nature instead of finding Him in heaps of books. Whitman (1982) just like Shah do not appreciate the superficial bookish knowledge as it does not give self of the readers an insight into the spiritual world. Whitman asserts (1982) that shelves are full of books but real knowledge is the exploration of self and others (pp. 188-189). Further Whitman (1982)

illustrates his inclination to the instructive role of nature by pointing out the importance of observing nature instead of reading piles of books (pp. 189-190).

Whitman (1982) highlights the significant role of nature in the spiritual elevation of his individual and collective enigmatic self. He employs symbolism like Shah to witness God in nature. Whitman says that “The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising from bed and meeting the sun” (p. 189). Moreover, Whitman (1982) verifies his above-mentioned claim in the following words that “the hand of God is the promise of my own” (p. 192), the spirit of God is like the spirit of my brother and all men of the world are my brothers and all women of the world are my lovers and sisters.

Similarly, Shah (2008) disapproves any study that is done only for the sake of study. The extreme study is not welcomed if it does not give any practical benefit to the spirit since, we as humans are embodied beings. For example, the enigma of self cannot be resolved without practical implication of any type of study. Shah further suggests that one should study his or her own self in order to solve the dilemma of illusory and fragmented self lying within. As, he puts forward that that we read and write too many books but we do not go for the practical application of the knowledge in our lives (p. 12).

Shah (2008) highlights the relapsed phases of illusory self that create problem for the self to be purified by means of reconstructing esoteric meanings. The fragmented self of spiritual scholars is the target

of his criticism, whose knowledge is not for the welfare of others rather it is to gain material comforts. Such scholars are entirely different from the genuine spiritual guides because unlike them they are hypocrites.

Nature persuades and invites us to examine face to face the spiritual aspects of every living and inorganic things. Catherine Belsey (2002) puts forward in *Critical Practice* that the bias and prejudice of the writer obstructs the mind of the reader. In this context, the reader is bound to understand only that the writer has already planned and proposed to convey. In contrast, the poet achieves and expands his knowledge from his first hand, direct and genuine study of natural world that he furnishes with symbolic meanings afterwards. The pedantic comprehension on superficial level of natural world is not enough to create a spiritual activity. Whitman attracts a self that is all inclusive to embark on a holy pursuit with the help of his direct and genuine interaction with the world of nature.

Like Whitman (1982), Shah (2008) too disapproves the undue study because in the world view of Shah, the worldly knowledge may have practical and realistic advantages but lacks something to furnish human soul and spiritual needs of humans. Shah talks openly to the head in prayer who is also an embodiment of hypocrite self. The ostentatious head offers loudly to show his religious virtue. In contrast, he does not realize that by being a double standard hypocrite religious figure, in reality he has lost his value not only in the eyes of people but also God who even knows the very truth of every heart. Such prayer leaders are

humiliated and all of their prayers become worthless as they lose their place due to their hypocrisy and lechery. Shah declares that religious people give sermons, say prayers and scream loudly just in greed and it has brought only disgrace upon them (p. 14).

Shah (2008) assesses as well as disapproves the corrupt and unjust self of judges. According to him, if there is a clash between the sayings and doings of a judge then such a person can never please God. Just like a contradictory self, he acts in a sightless manner and does injustice blindly and sees only the light of unfair money. He overlooks the reality that a day of judgment will expose everything and only mortification and debasement will be his final destination. Shah believes that the concern of God is not with the knowledge of people but he looks for the heart and intentions of human beings that is why the inner-self always seeks gains (p. 15).

The term butcher has been employed by Shah (2008) for a knowledgeable person. In this respect, the educated person gets derogatory significance as he develops into a monster and ruthless brute. Hence his knowledge becomes a smoke screen between him and God as he does not justify his position on account of the fact that his knowledge is false. Shah addresses to a self having false knowledge and says that a knowledgeable person just kills for a little value or a coin but still we have a lot of affection for educated butchers. For Shah, the arrogance and self-righteousness of a person having worldly knowledge can only be substituted by inculcating the tenderness and warmth of love. Hence, love becomes an antidote against the poison of worldly

knowledge and its superficiality and sterility as Shah asserts that when he came to know the real meaning of love he started diving into the river of divine union. He was unable to swim in the river of union and his teacher “Shah Inayat (my murshid) helped” him to go through the river (p.18).

Whitman (1982) in Cluster 5 of Song of Myself greets as equal and holy, both inner and outer self (body and soul), living and nonliving things, insignificant and grand on the whole. In his view, the instigation of the enigmatic Self into the Divine Dominion can be only achieved by means of equally praising and accepting both sides of the inner and outer self. Both play as a part and parcel in the formation of a spiritual holistic self. Whitman uses sexual imagery to present the essential relationship of body and soul but in reality, it is an act of Mystical interfusion as he assumes that “And parted the shirt from my bosombone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart, and reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet” (p. 192).

Hourihan (2004) in *Mysticism East and West* *Mysticism in American Literature – Thoreau’s Quest and Whitman’s Self*, also presents that for Whitman, the human soul is both holy inside and outside. The divinity of human nature is transcendental and is beyond all religions. Whitman (1982), in Cluster 24 of Song of Myself also calls himself: a kosmos and Divine. For instance, he says that he is Divine “inside and out”, and he values self and other “more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds” (p. 10). Hourihan (2004) adds that the eminent self in Whitman’s poetry is all inclusive and universal. As, he

says that Whitman unites the “imaginative, creative and universal self” that provides the key to most of the fundamental affinities” (p. 17). So, both Whitman and Shah try to unite people but the way of uniting them is different.

4- CONCLUSION

Summing up the debate, the study highlights that there are authentic and genuine points of similarities about the enigma of self in both Whitman and Shah. As, the present paper presents the idea by deconstructing both Eastern and Western interpretive perspectives of the enigmatic self and thereby reconstructing a spiritual self. Through this, the present investigation provides the opportunity not only to acknowledge the Western concept of enigmatic self but also attempts to turn a self-critical eye onto Eastern authority regarding the meaning of enigmatic self. The gaps and aporias which are inevitably found in such theoretical debates can be filled, explained and deciphered by fusing Eastern and Western perspectives of self. The present study concludes with the evidence that in both Whitman and Shah, the self initiates its journey of Instigation of Enigmatic Self into the Divine Dominion. In this way, the enigmatic self in Whitman and Shah becomes aware of the fact that the instigation, awakening and initiation of enigmatic spiritual self is essential in order to embark on a journey of understanding and illumination.

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