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Thematic Analysis of Swami Vivekananda's Poetic Works

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Abstract:

This paper offers a thematic analysis of Swami Vivekananda's (1863-1902) English poetry – a body of work that until now has been neglected in scholarship on Indian English literature. Although his philosophy, public speeches and religious teachings have been meticulously examined (Sen; Medhananda; Rambachan), his poems have not been considered as literature; they have usually been relegated to secondary status as devotional works. Using a combination of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis and reading Vivekananda's poems through postcolonial theory (Chatterjee; Nandy), Advaitic hermeneutics (Rambachan), and comparative literature (Mukherjee), this paper highlights four key themes: Bhakti devotion, the spiritual imagination of nationhood, inner struggle and self-realisation, and Vedantic symbolism. Comparisons with Wordsworth and Shelley are grounded in a close reading. In all, this paper argues for the place of Vivekananda's poetry in the foundational canon of Indian English literature.

Keywords: Swami Vivekananda; Indian English poetry; Advaita Vedanta; Bhakti; spiritual nationalism; postcolonial literary studies; Romanticism; thematic analysis.

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Introduction

Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), born Narendranath Datta, is best remembered as the principal disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, as the figure who electrified the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, and as the founder of the Ramakrishna Mission. He occupies an important place within the intellectual tradition of India, as Tapan Raychaudhuri describes it, in the "reconfiguration of Hinduism" during the "Bengal Renaissance" period (Raychaudhuri 216-220). It is also argued that he is responsible for formulating a modern and universal interpretation of Advaita Vedanta philosophy (Medhananda 5-15; Rambachan 49-54). There has been considerable scholarly interest in his works in history, religion, and political philosophy (Sen 1-22; Chattopadhyaya 45-60; Killingley 11-30).

However, Vivekananda was also a practising poet. He wrote in Bengali and English throughout his short life. His English poems—namely, *The Song of the Sannyāsin*, *Kālī the Mother*, *To the Awakened India*, *Peace*, *Requiescat in Pace*, *Hold on Yet a While*, *Brave Heart*, and his rendering of *Nirvāṇa-Ṣaṭkam* of Śaṅkarācārya—have hitherto not been subjected to extensive analysis in literary studies. Earlier academic writings on his poetry, including those by Chakravarti (18–24), Arora (58–72), and Nagrath (11–30), have often focused on his biographical background and devotional themes. Modern-day journal writings (Mund 386–388; Singh and Chaturvedi 91–95; Tiwari 41–45; Banerjee 3–6; Goyal 2–5) have also begun recognising his literary status, though so far without developing a coherent theoretical perspective on his poetry. Similarly, Meenakshi Mukherjee's seminal work on Indian English literature has tended to treat early devotional/philosophical poets as on the margins of the novel-dominated mainstream (Mukherjee 1–12).

This study attempts to fill this gap. The key argument of this study is that the English poetry of Vivekananda creates a sophisticated literary synthesis, utilising the metaphysical philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, the affective tradition of Bhakti devotion, and an emerging anti-colonial nationalism within the genre of English Romantic lyric poetry, while at the same time resisting its full assimilation into the conventions of nineteenth-century Romantic poetry written in English. Reading Vivekananda's poetry through an interdisciplinary critical approach combining thematic interpretation, postcolonial theory, and comparative literary criticism helps us understand how this body of literature articulates a poetics of the 'inner' realm of the colonial state, as defined by Partha Chatterjee (6–13), long before the birth of the independent nation-state.

Methodological Framework

This study employs a qualitative approach to textual analysis, combining three different perspectives. First, there is thematic analysis, as defined by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, which involves identifying, coding, and interpreting recurring patterns of meaning in a collection of texts (Braun and Clarke 79-86). In this case, the textual collection comprises Vivekananda's English poems gathered in *Poems of Swami Vivekananda* and *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, volume four. Close readings have identified four thematic groups: (i) divine love and Bhakti; (ii) spiritual nationalism and sacred motherland; (iii) internal struggle and Advaitic self-realisation; and (iv) Vedantic symbolism and the renunciate archetype.

Second, the study employs postcolonial literary theory in which Vivekananda's poetry reflects themes related to nationalism according to Partha Chatterjee's differentiation of the 'material' and 'spiritual' realms in anti-colonial nationalist discourse (Chatterjee 6-13), Ashis Nandy's discussion of colonial psychology (Nandy 1-11), and Peter van der Veer's claim that religious reform movements during nineteenth-century India were instrumental in formulating modern nationhood

in India, not distinct from its emergence (van der Veer 14-22). Against this theoretical backdrop, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Said 1-9) sets the context for Vivekananda's anti-Orientalist representation of India.

Third, there is Advaitic hermeneutics as articulated by Anantanand Rambachan and Ayon Maharaj (Swami Medhananda). For Rambachan, Vivekananda's Vedanta represented a shift from classical Advaita in privileging direct experience (*anubhava*) as a valid means of knowledge equal to scripture (Rambachan 47-55), whereas for Swami Medhananda, Vivekananda's Vedanta represents an instance of philosophical cosmopolitanism as opposed to narrowly sectarian revivalism (Medhananda 15-32). Both these readings provide a framework for discussing the religious themes presented in this essay.

Finally, the comparative approach, particularly the comparisons drawn between Vivekananda's work and that of Wordsworth and Shelley, is based on M.H.Abrams's reading of natural supernaturalism in English Romantic poetry (Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* 12-18, 65-70) and Harold Bloom's reading of Shelley's poetic vision of apocalyptic vision (Bloom 87-96). However, no effort is made to canonise Vivekananda within the Romantic tradition; instead, the texts in question are examined for their similarities and differences. The methodology rejects both a descriptive approach and the reduction of Vivekananda to Western literary norms.

Contextualising Vivekananda: The Poet-Monk

It is impossible to comprehend Vivekananda's verse without situating it within the specific ideological and political backdrop of *fin de siècle* Bengal, a period that Amiya P. Sen shows was characterised by a distinct engagement with liberal education, reformist Hinduism, and nascent cultural nationalism (Sen 32–44). Vivekananda's initiation into Ramakrishna Paramahansa's cult,

travels across India and abroad, and exposure to the scientific rationality of colonial education systems resulted, according to Medhananda, in the emergence of a 'cosmopolitan Vedanta,' aimed at addressing both the Indian and the global audience (Medhananda 17–22).

This dual address is clearly evident in the texts themselves. While suffused with terms drawn from the Upaniṣads and Advaita metaphysics, they are also composed in English—a language Rajagopal Chattopadhyaya observes had distinct political implications in the 1890s (Chattopadhyaya, Swami Vivekananda in India 210–214). Writing Vedantic verse in English meant entering the domain of the colonial public sphere while also rejecting its cultural order. In *The Song of the Sannyāsin*, when Vivekananda writes,

There is but One—The Free—The Knower—Self! / Without a name, without a form or stain. (Vivekananda, Poems 4)

This statement is more authoritative than a simple reiteration of the Advaitic doctrine of the unity between Ātman and Brahman. Moreover, it is a reaction to the colonial discourse in which Indian spirituality was depicted as being derivative, superstitious, or escapist (Said 3-9). Through this subtle articulation of a cosmopolitan metaphysics of non-dualism, the poet responds to the colonial discourse through their own discourse form and language.

Moreover, the poet-monk is itself a literary construction rather than an unambiguous indicator of autobiography. As Chakravarti points out, Vivekananda's poetic protagonist is often a fictionalised Sannyāsin whose speech combines first-person narrative with didactic address (Chakravarti 4248).

The rhetorical dualism of confession and instruction is essential to the claim made in this paper that Vivekananda's poetry is difficult to categorise by genre.

Theme of Divine Love and Bhakti

The encounter of Vivekananda with Bhakti is intricately religious and must not be simplistically regarded as mere emotional devotion. According to A. K. Ramanujan, in his acclaimed study on South Indian bhakti verse, Bhakti involves the structure of opposition between individual desire and mystical identity, between saguṇa (with attributes) and nirguṇa (without attributes) divinity (Ramanujan 103-110). It is in this very structure that Vivekananda's verses move. In *To the Awakened India*, the nation is addressed in maternal and quasi-sacral terms:

*From the land of thy birth, where vast cloud-belted / Snows do bless and put their
strength in thee, / For working wonders new.... (Vivekananda, Poems 16)*

It serves as a geographical metaphor for the Himalayas, evoking the goddess Parvati as her mythic habitat, while representing an embodied, yet transcendent, divine motherhood. From Ramanujan's perspective, the passage represents a typical Bhakti pendulation, in which the 'Mother' symbolises both the immanence of the landform and the transcendence of spirituality.

The devotional mode intensifies in Kālī the Mother, where Vivekananda confronts the terrifying aspect of the Divine Feminine:

*Come, Mother, come! / For Terror is Thy name, / Death is in Thy breath.... (Vivekananda,
Poems 9)*

The poem also reflects elements of the Tantric Śākta tradition in which Kālī represents the dissolution of ego-centric reality. According to John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, in radical Bhakti, propriety and decorum are often disturbed by embracing that which may be considered shocking or horrific (Hawley and Juergensmeyer xii–xvii). Vivekananda's act of welcoming the Mother rather than appeasing her reflects this tradition. In the context of this poem,

the aesthetic element of horror is not simply a means of creating drama for the reader; it is the theological message in its own right. True devotion, as defined by Vivekananda, involves both dissolution.

Nationalism and the Sacred Motherland

Nationalism in Vivekananda's poetry can best be understood by examining Partha Chatterjee's analysis of the "inner domain" of anti-colonial nationalism. According to Chatterjee, the colonised Indian elite made a distinction between the "outer domain," where the superiority of Western science and political institutions was acknowledged, and the "inner domain," where cultural autonomy was considered sacrosanct. (Chatterjee 6–13). Vivekananda's poetic address to India is a paradigmatic instance of that inner domain being articulated. In *To the Awakened India*, he writes:

*Awake, arise, and dream no more! / This is the land of dreams, where Karma / Weaves
unthreaded garlands with our thoughts.... (Vivekananda, Poems 17)*

This command, "Awake, arise," goes beyond mere exhortation to nationalism. It takes up the Upaniṣadic call "uttisthata jagrata" ("awake, arise") in the Kaṭha Upaniṣad, embedding it in the colonial context and thus situating the political awakening within a spiritual tradition that precedes and surpasses colonial temporality. This corresponds to Ashis Nandy's concept of reclaiming indigenous self-consciousness as a necessary condition for decolonisation (Nandy 31–48). The depiction of India as a sleeping mother is not a passive representation of the Orientalised femininity typical of colonial imagination. It is precisely the inversion of such a stereotype in which the state of sleep becomes latent and thus a potentiality for action.

The apocalyptic imagery found in the lines "'The sea has entered into the struggle/ And churns up the mountains into waves,/ To touch the smoky heavens' (Vivekananda, Poems 9), while drawing

on Vivekananda's political theology, does so on another level of signification. As Peter van der Veer has demonstrated, nineteenth-century Indian reformist Hinduism did not separate religion from the nation but constructed the latter out of former categories (van der Veer 17–26). In Vivekananda's formulation, the destructive nature of Kālī's dance comes to signify a breaking apart of an illegitimate world order, the necessary precursor to a rejuvenated spiritual-political unity. It follows that Vivekananda's Kālī poem can be understood as an articulation of what van der Veer describes as "the religious nationalism of that age," in which sovereignty was defined by theological rather than contractual principles.

It is important not to confuse the analysis here with either a liberal-secular or a simple communal approach. As Medhananda has noted, Vivekananda's spiritual nationalism, while relying heavily on Hindu iconography, is metaphysically universalist in its presuppositions (Medhananda 63–74).

Inner Struggle and Advaitic Self-Realisation

The theme of inner conflict in Vivekananda's poetry is inseparable from the metaphysical commitments of Advaita Vedanta, but the poems are not straightforward advertisements for renunciation. Angels Unawares narrates suffering and moral failure as vehicles of awakening:

*Then sorrow came—and Wealth and Power went— / And made him kinship find with all
the human race. (Vivekananda, Poems 13)*

The transition from privilege to loss to solidarity remoulds the traditional Advaitic structure, in which ignorance (avidyā) can be overcome only by discriminative wisdom (viveka). Rambachan has contended that Vivekananda radically transforms Advaita by asserting that solidarity with suffering in an act of compassion ('daridra-nārāyaṇa,' 'the poor as nārāyaṇa,' in other words, with the divine) is integral to enlightenment (Rambachan 88-96). In this way, the final reversal,

"Blessed Sin! " (Vivekananda, Poems 14), represents an eloquent and condensed statement of the idea: sin, as the destruction of egocentricity, is necessary for education. The line is not a casual paradox; it is a compressed theological argument.

This metaphysical commitment receives its most explicit articulation in Vivekananda's English rendering of Śaṅkara's Nirvāṇa-Ṣaṭkam. The refrain—

I am neither the mind, nor the intellect, nor the ego... / I am He, I am He. (Shivoham, Shivoham) (Vivekananda, Poems 27)

—is a poetic application of the technique of neti neti ('not this, not this'), employed by the Upaniṣads, which posits identification of the Self by constantly denying what it does not constitute.

According to Medhananda, Vivekananda's choice of the particular text to be translated was strategic, in that he wanted the idea that 'the ultimate identity is neither psychological nor ethical but ontological' conveyed to his readers succinctly (Medhananda 102–08). In view of this, the poem must not be read as a personal outpouring of a mystic experience; it is rather a lesson in philosophy written in poetic language. Requiescat in Pace, composed on the Death of J. J. Goodwin, extends this schema into elegy:

'Thy bonds are breaking, thy quest in bliss is found, / And one with That which comes as Death and Life' (Vivekananda, Poems 25).

Death here is figured not as a terminus but as the final collapse of the subject–object distinction, a reading fully consistent with the Advaitic identification of Ātman and Brahman.

Vedantic Symbolism and the Archetype of the Sannyāsin

Vivekananda's symbolic vocabulary is not ornamental. As D. V. Tarkunde has argued, it is 'doctrinally saturated,' with each image anchored in a specific Vedantic or Tantric concept (Tarkunde 54–61). The poem Peace makes this clear:

*It is not joy nor sorrow, / But that which is between... / It is the Goal of Life, / And
Peace—its only home! (Vivekananda, Poems 32)*

The poetic structure consisting of a string of oppositions negated one by one reflects the Upaniṣadic dialectics used to define Brahman, which involves rejecting everything conditional. The 'between' here cannot be a compromising middle, but an unconditioned ground without which the very possibility of the oppositions will be impossible. About Swami Ranganathananda's interpretation of the Upaniṣadic method of teaching (Ranganathananda 211-220), the poem becomes much more than a lyrical reflection on a tranquil state of mind.

The Sannyāsin serves as an archetype of Vivekananda's ethical and metaphysical programme. The speaker starts his song as follows:

*Strike off thy fetters! Bonds that bind thee down, / Of shining gold, or darker, baser ore...
/ Then off with them, Sannyāsin bold! (Vivekananda, Poems 3)*

The 'fetters' include not only material wealth but also, crucially, moral and religious identifications. As Bhajananda has argued, Vivekananda's Sannyāsin is an activist figure, simultaneously a jñānin (knower), a karma-yogin (servant), and a bhakta (devotee)—a synthesis that departs from earlier models of Indian renunciation (Bhajananda, Essays on Vivekananda 73–81). It is precisely this hybrid figure that allows for the poem's trajectory from individual freedom to social

commitment, and it forms the basis of Vivekananda's belief that spiritual enlightenment cannot be separated from history.

A Comparative Dimension: Vivekananda and the English Romantics

While scholarly work on Vivekananda has often referenced his relationship with the English Romantics, there has seldom been sufficient attention paid to textual parallels or to the critical theory of the Romantic tradition. Indeed, what appears to be lacking is a clear sense of the underlying metaphysics at work in Romantic thinking.

For example, one might usefully compare Vivekananda's *Peace* with William Wordsworth's *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*. According to M.H. Abrams, in his book *Natural Supernaturalism*, Romantic poetry involves a "displacement" of categories originally associated with religion into the natural and psychological realms; that is, the transcendent is found within, not outside, nature (Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* 65-70). The most famous statement of Wordsworth's idea is the description of "a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused." In Vivekananda's *Peace*, we find something of a similar effect: "That which is beyond joy or sorrow, beyond victory or defeat." The similarity is in structure, not content. While Wordsworth's transcendental experience is somewhat indefinite, influenced as he is by Deism and the Protestant tradition, the Vedantic conception of Brahma as described by Advaita Vedanta is explicit in Vivekananda's *Peace*.

The parallel with Shelley is likewise telling in textual terms, for in *Ode to the West Wind*, Shelley speaks to the wind as 'Destroyer and preserver' (Shelley, line 14), imploring it to carry out the apocalypse as a dialectical act in which devastation and rebirth become one. As Harold Bloom has demonstrated, Shelley's apocalyptic vision has a strong political component, harnessing the

millenarian power of the end of the eighteenth century to envision a revolutionary transformation (Bloom 87-96). The formal similarity with Vivekananda's poem "Kālī the Mother," in which Kālī is similarly addressed as the destroyer and redeemer, is obvious. Both poems rely on a similar aesthetic of creative destruction, using the violent imagery of nature to express the imminent rebirth. However, differences do exist. While Shelley's apocalyptic vision is forward-looking and secular, aimed at political change in this life, Vivekananda's apocalypse belongs to eternity and metaphysics, and his Kālī's dance is already a manifestation of reality, not an event awaiting fulfilment. As Meenakshi Mukherjee points out, Indian English literature in its early days followed the Western literary tradition. However, such a style had often been put to use for reasons completely alien to its origins (Mukherjee 8-14). The similarities between Vivekananda, Wordsworth, and Shelley could best be described as concerns handled in different settings.

Poetry as an Instrument of Social Awakening

For Vivekananda, poetry was a political act. In his letters, compiled in the Letters of Swami Vivekananda, he emphasises the need for culture as a means of man-making in the colonised society (Vivekananda, Letters 149). This commitment to a project of cultural production is clearly evident in the poem "To the Awakened India," with its opening exhortation: "Awake, arise, and dream no more!" (Vivekananda, Poems 15), which engages the reader in an exercise of historical agency. Colonised passivity is equated to dreaming, but at once the condition from which the colonised need to wake up and the imaginative frame through which it is possible. Through her study of colonial literary education, Gauri Viswanathan demonstrates that literature in English in colonial India functioned as an ideological apparatus of the colonial state (Viswanathan 23–44); through writing poetry in this tradition addressed to the colonised country as a sacred entity, Vivekananda appropriates the institution's logic for his own ends.

This idea is developed further in the short poem *Hold On Yet a While, Brave Heart*:

'Still hold on yet a while, brave heart, / The victory is sure to come' (Vivekananda, Poems 14).

Written during a period when Tagore felt personally and politically discouraged, the poem conveys a sense of metaphysical certitude born of the Advaitic belief that ultimate authority lies in the Self. This transition from metaphysics to politics is not mere metaphorical resemblance; it is an element of Vivekananda's poetics and reflects the colonial nationalist strategy of constructing political agency through a sacred spiritual space, as Chatterjee (6-13) suggests.

In total, it becomes evident that Vivekananda's civic discourse does not reflect a liberal reformist stance or communalist ideology. Instead, it represents a unique instance of what Sudhir Arora calls 'spiritual activism' (84-92), in which Karma Yoga serves as the ethical framework. At the same time, Advaita philosophy serves as the metaphysical basis of a poetics of collective healing in colonial India.

Conclusion

The conclusion from the above discussion should be that Swami Vivekananda's English poetry constitutes a distinctive genre of Indian English poetry that deserves to be considered as such in literary criticism, on the grounds of its critical importance and literary merit, rather than merely as a supplementary element to the swami's philosophic and political legacy. The preceding chapters have examined some of the thematic commitments of Vivekananda's poetry—the theme of divine love and Bhakti, spiritual nationalism, internal struggle and Advaitic self-realisation, and Vedantic symbolism—and the way in which these themes are articulated within the lyrical framework that draws on, but goes beyond, the conventions of English Romanticism of the nineteenth century.

A detailed analysis of Vivekananda's poetry compared with that of Wordsworth and Shelley demonstrates both similarities and the limitations of such a comparison. In fact, while both Romantic poets were dealing with a similar problem—the problem of lyrical treatment of an absolute or transcendent reality—they differed in their metaphysical and political horizons. While the horizons of the former two poets were vague, for Vivekananda, they were quite clear: Advaitic and anti-colonial, respectively.

Methodologically, the implication from the above conclusion is clear. A methodological approach of this nature is needed for a comprehensive understanding of Vivekananda's poetics, which can be achieved through prosodic and linguistic analysis of the poetry and comparison with his contemporaries, such as Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo. Also, Vivekananda needs to be positioned as an anti-colonial modernist within a new global canon that includes various writers who have resisted colonisation through their works. It will help recognise Vivekananda not only as a philosopher and social reformer but also as a literary icon of Indian English poetry.

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