

EXPRESSION OF SELF IN WALT WHITMAN'S SONG OF MYSELF

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ABSTRACT

Leaves of Grass, the path breaking collection of poems, by the great American poet, Walt Whitman, was first published in 1855, comprising twelve poems. The very first poem, 'Song of Myself', encompasses the poet's vision of self and life – both interrelated and inevitably a reflection of the other.

The present paper seeks to dwell upon Whitman's expression of self in the poem, as he says, it is "Song of Myself"...where he intends to "celebrate myself/and what I assume you shall assume/For every atom belonging to me as good belong to you". Here Whitman concerns himself, primarily with his idea of the self, his identification of the self with others, and finally his relationship with the elements of nature and the universe. It is intriguing to find traces of Indian philosophy in general, and specifically of the teaching of the Bhagvad Gita, and at the same time the influence of the Western philosophy of Kant, and Hegel, and of Emerson's Transcendentalism.

Primarily, the idea that seems to emerge is that of his 'self' in amalgamation with every individual that Whitman describes in the poem. He seems to blend together the forces of nature, and the American idea of democracy. Essentially, one finds that the self is conceived as a spiritual entity, which remains relatively permanent in and through the changing flux of ideas and experiences which constitute its conscious life. The self that emerges, then, comprises ideas, experiences, psychological states and spiritual insights.

The research paper would elucidate the varied hues and shades of self that emerge in different sections of the poem, which finally ends with the epochal lines, which truly crystallise the essence of the poem, "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, /If you want me again look for me under your boots."

KEYWORDS: Self, Spirituality, Democracy, Philosophy

INTRODUCTION

Song of Myself, is the first of the collection of twelve poems, that were published by Walt Whitman in **Leaves of Grass** (1855). The newly published book, created ripples in the traditional Segments of the society, for its informality of expression, its conversational style, and free verse, which was later in the twentieth century to make a huge impact through the Modernists, such as, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Ezra Pound, T.S Eliot and the like. But, in America, which was still reeling under the influence of the European masters, and especially the British models, such a departure did not go unnoticed. While it garnered criticism from the orthodox and traditional scholars, there were those stalwarts like the famous Transcendentalists, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Alcott, who welcomed the poems published in the Leaves of Grass as a new voice that was truly American, embodying the American life in word and spirit.

Emerson's appreciation of Whitman's poems is worth citing at this juncture. Malcolm Cowley cites Emerson's letter, in his Introduction to the book, Leaves of Grass:

I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of "Leaves of Grass". I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed... I give you joy of your free and brave thought. I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things said incomparably well, as they must be... I greet you at the beginning of a career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty. It has the best merits, namely, of fortifying and encouraging. (p.ix)

The present paper aims at citing and analysing the "incomparable things said incomparably well", especially with reference to Song of Myself. The most outstanding quality that one finds permeating through the poems in the collection, Leaves of Grass, is the poet's eye for detail, his achievement lies in rendering even the most basic and mundane of experiences as subjects for poetry, partaking a certain spiritual import that borders on the philosophy of universal brotherhood, and the American concept of democracy. It is indeed a journey that the poet undertakes, much

like Dante does in the Divine Comedy, recording all the sites on the way, thereby giving

it a truly epic status and dimension so to say. Here, the hero of course is Whitman, who even published a picture of himself in the original edition of Leaves of Grass. It is a portrait of the poet,

"a bearded man in his middle thirties, slouching under a wide-brimmed and high-crowned black felt hat that has a rakish slant... His right hand is resting nonchalantly on his hip; the left is hidden in the pocket of his coarse woven trousers... his shirt is thrown open at the collar to reveal a burly neck... it is the portrait of a devil may care American working man, one who might be taken as a somewhat idealized figure in almost any crowd" (p.2)

Song of Myself, is not a narcissistic, self-congratulatory account of the self, it is rather, a 'celebration' of each of Whitman's experiences vis a vis his encounters along the streets of New York, not only the beautiful and the lovely, but also the sordid and the ugly face of humanity and nature. Though democratic in spirit, the poem is hardly at all concerned with American nationalism, contemporary progress, or other social themes. The "incomparable things" that Emerson found in it are philosophical and religious principles. Whitman presents himself as an dramatized or idealised figure, put forward as a representative American man, but one who prefers to loaf and invite his soul.

The poem, Song of Myself, consists of 52 chants. Malcolm Cowley in his Introduction to Leaves of Grass, has given a very useful and appropriate structure to the poem by looking at it as a poem with 9 significant sequences. While the eighth sequence is devoted primarily to mystical experiences, one can find traces of it in most of the chants. The poem begins with the poet's physical 'self', moves on to the identification of the self with nature and mankind that he encounters, and eventually in true Transcendentalist spirit seems to blend and diffuse in thin air, with the promise to return to each visitor, in the form of grass under the boots. Such an approach and vision is indeed renders Whitman as a saint, a visionary, a romantic, and even a philosopher.

The present paper attempts to locate this sense of 'self' through a close study of the poem, thereby bringing to fore the ideas of personality, democracy, romantic notion of brotherhood, mysticism and finally the philosophy of "one amongst many", of grass being a blade yet imparting an appearance of universality.

The poem begins with an invitation to the reader, giving it a sense of continuity, the reader of the 19th century or the reader in the 21st are all welcome to join him in a journey of self exploration. In the second section he promises the comrade reader, that

Have you reckoned a thousand acres much? Have you reckoned the earth much?.../Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,/You shall possess the good of the earth and sun...there are millions of suns left/You shall no longer take things at second or third hand...nor look through the eyes of the dead...nor feed on the spectres 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 yourself.(p.3)

The very first thing that Whitman offers to the reader is self reliance, the virtue much talked about by Emerson in his famous essay by the same title. Dependence on others is replaced by an ability to search for meanings, hidden in the "thousand suns" and "earths" It imparts a certain magnitude to the vision, to be able to see life and evolution as a continuum, and self as a significant part of the whole. He is grateful to all, and welcomes anyone 'who is hearty and clean', he is satisfied that he can 'see, dance, laugh, sing', and looks at any individual who spends the night with him as 'God'.

Chant 6 of the poem begins with a child's query "What is the grass", and the poet's response to the innocent, simple question, gives the reader an answer to the poet's self, and identity. Grass, he says, is the "flag of my disposition", "handkerchief of the Lord", "a child", "a uniform hieroglyphic", or the "beautiful uncut hair of graves". Through this question, Whitman is able to capture the entire gamut of human experiences, the black mother, her offspring, the dead young men and women, those who are dead, yet alive in the form of grass, "They are alive and well somewhere;/The smallest sprout shows there is really no death". The section ends with the optimism of Vedanta philosophy, even Greek and Transcendental – that life does not wither permanently, it rather transforms to something superior. Whitman expresses this idea in his unforgettable words, "All goes onward and outward...and nothing collapses;/And to die is different from what one supposed and luckier."

One thus finds the idea of self, maturing from one's physical self to something more essentially universal, and everlasting, immortal, he admits he is not "contained between my hat and boots". His approach is not circumscribed by choices and prejudices, but is rather all encompassing and egalitarian, he accepts boys, girls, men, women, old and new, 'lips that have smiled, and eyes that shed tears', are all welcome to his spiritual self.

The poet seeks ecstasy through the senses of smell, taste and eventually through touch and sex. Whitman believes that everything emanates from the universal soul, and since his own soul is of the same essence, he can identify himself with every object and with every person living, or dead, heroic or criminal.

With this the poem also acquires a sexual stance in defining the poet's personality. Sex is another mode of communion with men and women, the larger purpose being the same, the willingness to blur boundaries, to blend and create mutual connection of the life force, the spirit that keeps the centre together. Like the Sufi poets, Whitman sees his lover as God, who would help him traverse the realm of the unknown, the great mystery of life and after life. In this respect he defines himself in identification with other selves. Sexual union is a figurative anticipation of spiritual union. Whitman's ecstasy is both physical and spiritual, he develops a sense of loving brotherhood with all mankind. As Whitman, himself

said of the poem, "Whoever touches this , touches a man".

As Ezra Pound observes, in his essay , Walt Whitman

He is America. His crudity is an exceeding great stench, but it is America. He is the hollow place in the rock that echoes with his time He does "chant the crucial stage" and he is the "voice triumphant". He is disgusting. He is an exceedingly nauseating pill, but he accomplishes his mission. (Whitman p.4)

Despite his 'crudity', the 'stench', unorthodox treatment of self, life, poetry , and sexuality, indeed Whitman is , as Pound says, "He is America".

From 42 chant onwards, the poem acquires a predominant mystical tone. "A call in the midst of the crowd, My own voice orotund sweeping and final". The poet proclaims that the society is full of injustice , but that the reality beneath it is deathless persons; that he accepts and practices all religions , but also looks beyond them to , "What is untried and afterward", that he and his readers are products of the age , and also the offspring of the ages to be, and finally that our final goal is appointed: "God will be there and wait till we come", as he travels further , he makes companions , whom he treats as his pupil, he assures that he is not curious about God, but sees the godly entity everywhere, at every moment. The Hindu concept of rebirth is echoed here, when he asserts that we shall all be born in different forms, " No doubt, I have died myself ten thousand times before", he reiterates that evil in the world is like moonlight , a reflection of the sun. The idea of everything being a manifestation of a superior form is a mystical idea, very close to the Eastern religious philosophy echoed in the Bhagvad Gita by Lord Krishna, in his address to Arjuna.

Krishna: Because we have all been for all time: I and thou, and those kings of men. And we shall be for all time, we all for ever and ever.

As the Spirit of our mortal body wanders on in childhood, and youth and old age, the Spirit wanders on to a new body: of this the sage has no doubt.

Interwoven in this creation, the Spirit is beyond destruction. No one can bring to an end the Spirit which is everlasting.

If any man thinks he slays, and if another thinks he is slain, neither knows the ways of truth . The Eternal in man cannot kill : the Eternal in man cannot die.

He is never born, and he never dies. He is in Eternity : he is for evermore. Never- born and eternal, beyond times gone or to come , he does not die when the body dies. (The Bhagvad Gita p10-11)

A similar idea is echoed by Emerson in his essay , Oversoul:

Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul. The simplest person, who in his integrity worships God, becomes God; yet for ever and ever the influx of this better and universal self is new and unsearchable. (emersoncentral.com)

Roger Asselineau , begins his essay , *Whitman's Style: From Mysticism to Art* , with these words:

Emerson one day confided to a friend that *Leaves of Grass* reminded him at once of the Bhagvad Gita and the New York Herald. Its style is indeed most incongruous. Lyrical flights are to be found side by side with prosaic banalities,

mystical effusions with the most familiar expressions from the spoken language.(Whitman p.89)

Whitman too voices the same idea in his impassioned words in Chant 48 of the poem:

I hear and behold God in every object, yet I understand god not in the least...

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 face in the glass:

I find letters from God dropped in the street , and every one is signed by God's name,

And I leave them where they are, for I know that others will punctually come forever and forever.(p.83)

The poem ends with with the poets promise to become an unending saga on the face of the earth.The leaves of grass become his soul, he reiterates that in th end is the beginning.He completely surrenders and etherises his identity and persona at the end saying:

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,

If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles.

You wil hardly know who I am or what I mean,

But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,

And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,

Missingme one place search another,

I stop somewhere waiting for you.(p.86)

CONCLUSIONS

The poem written in 52 sections is a personal , philosophical , mystical journey that Whitman undertakes unfolding the myriad hues of his persona , and inevitably fusing them into one anonymous whole , like the leaves of the grass , which have been and will always be there , like the indestructible soul elucidated in the Bhagvad Gita.The self that emerges is that of his physical being , who celebrates his self, from his body , to his senses of touch , smell, hearing ,taste, to his interaction with men , women , boys , girls, blacks, whites, mechanics, mothers , a whole gamut of day to day American experience of the 19th century , till he transcends all barriers at the end of the poem , and blends with the air, the grass, and becomes one with eternity , in a true Transcendentalist and also the Vedantic idea of the Soul and the Oversoul.

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