

Whitman's spiritual reality: A look into his poem *Leaves of Grass*

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Abstract

The individual sensibility gets transformed into an inclusive consciousness in the writings of Walt Whitman. How to escape the prison of the self and cultivate simultaneously self-consciousness and sympathy, using the sense of self-identity as a means of projecting oneself into the identity of others- that is Whitman's valuable legacy to modern literature. Whitman seeks for the spiritual realism in his several poetic literary works. Whitman's work was larger than the man. Although Whitman regarded himself as the poet of his own age and his native America, there are poems which are so representative of human nature and universal appeal in all ages that they assume worldwide significance also. The current study deals with the mystic ideas of Whitman, especially with a critical overview of the mysticism in his most celebrated poem *Leaves of Grass*.

Keywords: mysticism, the self, leaves of grass, poet of ecstasy, reality

1. Introduction

Walt Whitman is a mystic, spiritualist, romanticist, transcendentalist, existentialist, humanist, socialist and democrat poet of America. His poetry is a remarkable complex employment-intuitive or strategic- of a wide range of poetic and rhetorical devices such as paradox, ambiguity, abstraction, oxymoron, anaphora etc. makes his poems universal and open to a number of interpretations. Some may find in him a romantic with utopian sevens; some may find in him a transcendentalist having risen above the trivialities of human world; some may find a metaphysical quester trying to get at the meaning of life and existence; some any find in him a mystic searching for his spiritual moorings and eternal truth of human effort; some may find in him a socialist talking about an ideal egalitarian social setup; some may find in him a democrat advocating the worth of each individual in a nation; while others may find in him a racist concerned with his nation/community only; and yet others may find in him an ordinary confused man striving on the horns of dilemma, trying to resolve the tangles of his ironic realism.

1.1 Objectives

The primary objective is to find out the mystic standpoints of Walt Whitman in his literary works. The general objective is to deal with the spiritual ideas and thoughts in the poem *Leaves of Grass* of Walt Whitman in a critical probe.

2. Review and Methodology

The compilation of critical interpretative essays and research papers provides new critical insights into the poetry and spiritual philosophy of Walt Whitman. The most supportive method for the study was 'observation method'. Several critical journals and magazines were collected to get information about the spiritual reality of Walt Whitman and the ideas of his writings. The books of Michael Moon, J.A. Symonds, H.M. Jones and Walt Whitman were proved to be supportive for the study of the current research. The researchers also go through

several enough critical articles in order to be acknowledged in the related materials in proper way.

3. Discussion and Findings

3.1 Transcendentalism in *Leaves of Grass*

Whitman is the ultimate transcendentalist. He united the democratic themes and subject matters with free verse form. In *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman celebrates unity of all life and people. He embraces diversity of geography, culture, work, sexuality, and beliefs. Whitman's impact solidifies American dreams of independence, freedom, and fulfillment, and transforms them for larger spiritual meaning. Whitman values hard work and being humble and non-egotistical. His ideals are things such as good health, soul and the love of nature. (Khan *et al.*, 2014) [6].

3.2 *Leaves of Grass*: The Masterpiece

Leaves of Grass has the sense of spiritual reality. The concrete facts the open road, the river the grass the bird, the flowers, the people all are invested with deeper meaning than what they have on a superficial level. The poet is a seer and a priest. This concept had already been put forward by English Romantic poets, but not by an American poet. Whitman broke with rationalistic tendencies and spoke of the poets insights which enable the poet to perceive the "oneness of nature" or as Wordsworth put it "to see into the heart of things". In the 1855 Preface, Whitman writes: "Of all mankind the great poet is the equitable man. He is the arbiter of the diverse and he is the key. He is the equalizer of his age and land he supplies what wants supplying and checks what wants checking. He is more he is the one complete lover of the known universe. He is the individual, complete in himself. He is different from others only in that he "sees" and they do not. If the poet prophesies about the future, it is not through supernatural gift, but through a sensitive perception. In *Passage to India*, the poet is elevated to divine status "the true son of God." Such a high concept of the poet is bold if not entirely original. The poet, according to Whitman feels a terrific urge to create. *Leaves of Grass* is full

of images of the overflowing container and smoldering fire signifying the turbulence of creation activity. Poetry however, is not to be a purely personal expression according to Whitman. (Symonds, 1893) [1] The "Complete Lover" of the universe talks of "self" but this self-embraces all selves in the world. The great poet has a cosmic vision; he is cosmos and hence when he speaks of self he speaks of all. *Leaves of Grass* is conceived to be "the song of a great composite democratic individual, male or female. Thus the greatest poetry is seen to be dramatic and cosmopolitan, expressing not merely the self of the poet but the very spirit of the country and age in which it is written. The "I" in Whitman's poetry is not so much a personal reference as a fusion of several characters. The poet being the lover of the universe does not exclude anything from his poetry. The most trivial object has importance in poetry because of the significance given to it by the poet.

3.3 Whitman's Opinion about Poetry

The new poetry in Whitman's opinion had to be simple. Its form would be decided by its contents the meaning argument or subject. The poet's vocation was to mirror reality and this inevitably demanded unvarnished language. Even slang was to be used if its use contributed to vivifying the poet's meaning. "The fluency and ornaments of the finest poems or music or orations or recitations are not in depending but dependent. In other words, form and language grow the meaning and subject and intensity of emotion of the poem. The poet, according to Whitman is a "maker" (a concept close to the modern as well as classical concept the nation as a whole such a high concept of the poet had Whitman. His one hope was that his own poetry, embodying the ideals of democratic America, the New World, would help make those ideals prevail. The effect of poetry was not to be immediate and short lived enjoyment but of a slow intensely fortifying and lasting nature. It was to "cheer up slaves and horrify tyrants. Whitman, however felt that the poet was not to be fully explanatory. He was to be suggestive, and it was the reader's duty to make an effort to understand. Whitman considers the reading of the poem as a sort of "gymnastic struggle". (Whitman, 2002) [4] The reader must cooperate with care and attention. Whitman's conception of the poet and poetry of the future is significant. Revolutionary in many aspects, it is a key to the understanding of his poetry. He tried to achieve what he sets as one of the prime principles of his poetics indicating "the path between reality and their souls.

3.4 Cosmic Consciousness

Whitman believed that the cosmos, or the universe, does not consist merely of lifeless matter; it has awareness. It is full of life and filled with the spirit of God. The cosmos is God and God is the cosmos; death and decay are unreal. This cosmic consciousness is, indeed, one aspect of Whitman's mysticism.

3.5 Mysticism

Mysticism is an experience that has a spiritual meaning which is not apparent to the senses nor to the intellect. Thus mysticism, an insight into the real nature of man, God, and the universe, is attained through one's intuition. The mystic believes in the unity of God and man, man and nature, God and the universe. To a mystic, time and space are unreal, since both can be overcome by man by spiritual conquest. Evil, too is unreal, since God is present everywhere. Man communicates

with his soul in a mystical experience, and Whitman amply expresses his responses to the soul in *Leaves of Grass*, especially in "Song of Myself." He also expresses his mystical experience of his body or personality being permeated by the supernatural. Whitman's poetry is his artistic expression of various of his mystical experience. (Hossain *et. al.*, 2014) [5].

3.6 The Self

To Whitman, the complete self is both physical and spiritual. The self is man's individual identity, his distinct quality and being, which is different from the selves of other men, although it can identify with them. The self is a portion of the one Divine Soul. Whitman's critics have sometimes confused the concept of self with egotism, but this is not valid. Whitman is constantly talking about "I," but the "I" is universal, a part of the Divine, and therefore not egotistic.

4. Poet of Ecstasy and Buoyancy

In the treatment of his themes, Whitman is a poet of joy and optimism. His mystic awareness of the unity of the universe and the continuity of everything leads to an optimistic viewpoint. Man, in Whitman's mind was evolving towards greater and greater progress. In such a context death is not an end but a re-birth into a better life. It is his optimism which conceives of a universal brotherhood, a free democratic world-

A reborn race appears- a perfect world, all joy

He sees the discoveries and inventions made in the field of science and geography as part of the evolutionary progress of man. The conviction is expressed in *Pioneers O! Pioneers!* as well as *Passage to India*.

5. 'Leaves of Grass': the Song of America

The songs of America, the melody of its common men and women and their daily occupations, the peculiar fragrance of the very soil of America find expression in Whitman's poetry. It is most befitting to call *Leaves of Grass* the epic of America. It embodies America's first terrible trial in the shape of the Civil War and it prophesied the greatness of America. It is a reflection of America's character, of America's soul, and of America's achievements and aspirations. The hero of this epic is the average American—whom the "I" of Whitman's poetry reflects. *Drum Taps* illustrates the victory of the American epic hero "en-masse".

The appearance of Walt Whitman's "*Leaves of Grass*" ushered in a significant era in the history of American poetry. It was as momentous an event in American literature as the appearance of the "Lyrical Ballads" was in the literature of England. The language that poetry should have, has always been a fertile ground for controversy. Whether it should be 'language such as men do use'— the language of the common man or the traditional diction of poetry, has been much-discussed question. Whitman's intention in writing poetry was to reform both the form and the content of poetry. His frank talks of sex and his grandiose egoism appeared shocking to many readers. But the form of his poetry was even more unconventional and daringly novel. Whitman called the '*Leaves*' a 'language experiment.' Hence the mixed critical reaction, it evoked.

"He revised constantly, but not always for the better. In fact, Whitman at his worst is unbelievably bad. He flaunts his queer style as a savage might flaunt a top-hat retrieved from somebody's dustbin." Whitman also used laughable epithets. (Hossain *et al.*, 2014) [5].

Whitman's strong national feeling had also a hand in shaping his peculiar poetic technique. In his poem 'Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood' Whitman expresses his firm resolve to offer to his mother country a kind of poetry different from that of Europe both in form and content.

The conceits of the poets of other lands I'd bring thee not Nor the compliments that have served their tun: so long Nor rhyme, nor the classics, nor perfume of foreign court of indoor library.

6. Conclusion

Whitman was one of the significant voices of the nineteenth century expressing in his poetry its creative, its transitional, and its revolutionary character. He may not be its transitional, and its revolutionary character. He may not be its perfect voice; he is undoubtedly its prophetic voice. He was the first to celebrate in powerful verse the upsurge of the masses and the potentiality of the "divine average" in terms of an ideal democracy. His impulses are modern; particularly in his healthy attitude to sex as being of vital importance in human relationships the Freudian perception has been anticipated by Whitman. If craftsmen hailed him as the father of the free verse movement, philosophers considered him to be the first of the modern prophets, "a rhapsodic mystic with a magnificently vulgar sense of democracy" To the psychologist, he was the revealing autobiographer, and to the lay reader he was a protagonist of the "divine average" hearty, gross, noble, "sane and sensual"

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