

LEAVES OF GRASS: JOURNEY OF WHITMAN

By Nishant Khatri

Walt Whitman is an American poet, essayist and journalist. He is considered as one of the most influential writers of American history and also regarded as the creator of free verse (a form of poetry that is free from meters or rhyme). He was influenced and inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson's *The Poet* in which Emerson expressed the need for the United States to have its own new and unique poet who can write about the new country's virtues and vices. His works primarily used free verse with cadence based on the Bible. His works were quite controversial in his time and the popularity which they enjoy today was not the same during his life time. They were described as obscene for its candid display of delight in sensual pleasure. His most notable yet controversial work is *Leaves of Grass*. It was an attempt at reaching out to common people with an American epic. It was first published in 1855 by Whitman himself and later several editions were published in which more poems were added. The last edition or 'death-bed' edition (since it was published in 1891-92 and he passed away in 1892) contains over 400 poems ranging from different themes like sexuality and spirituality to different school of writings like transcendentalism and realism. In the very first edition, he published just 12 poems including 'Song of Myself' which is described by Emerson in his letter to Whitman as, "... the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom America has yet contributed." The appreciation of Emerson did garner him fame but on the other hand it also brought heavy criticism for its explicit portrayal of sexual activity and specially homosexuality. Many other poems from this collection are in praise of nature and the importance of every individual in it. Moreover, he amplifies the role of human mind and spirit, and deemed it worthy for poetic praise.

His poetry collection *Leaves of Grass* is a literal projection of Whitman's reformation as a poet. With each new edition, he brings in new theme and new literary style. In the opening section *Inscription*, he provides an overview of the work to his readers. The subject of this poem- "one's self" is not only Whitman's self, though he certainly identifies himself as the hero of the epic, but it is also the reader's self.

The poem which gives us a picture of Whitman's journey as a poet is Starting from Paumanok. He commences the journey with his own beginning of self-awareness and poetic inspiration. He states this thought in section 2:

Victory, union, faith, identity, time, The indissoluble compacts, riches, mystery, Eternal progress, the kosmos, and the modern reports. This then is life,¹

(W. Whitman, 2 Starting from Paumanok)

He takes into account a long list of people who have accompanied him in this long journey of life starting from his mother. This poem is of those people and for those people. But amidst all these physical figures, he did not forget the spiritual figure, his soul. He says that his poem is written with soul in mind.

The section of this collection which sparked the most controversy was Calamus. It had a very explicit, homo-erotic and homosexual theme. In his opinion, the feelings that men have for each other is incomplete until all facets of friendship are not explored.

At he-festivals, with blackguard gibes, ironical license, bull-dances, drinking, laughter,
At the cider-mill tasting the sweets of the brown mash, sucking the juice through a straw,
At apple-peelings wanting kisses for all the red fruit I find,²

(W. Whitman, 33 Song of Myself)

He shifts his exploration from interpersonal relationship to the relation between an individual and the world. He brings transcendental ideology in his collection with Crossing Brooklyn Ferry. He develops a vision of unity of all things while on his way from Brooklyn to Manhattan. He believed that all people at all time are joined together in a great scheme which is reflected in "The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme—myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated, yet part of the scheme:"³(W. Whitman, 2 Crossing Brooklyn Ferry) But interestingly, he didn't invest time in developing an ideology rather he urged his readers to understand that they are unified through time and through this poem.

The most remarkable and notable group of poems of this whole collection is undisputedly Song of Myself. This poem holds such a great importance that it is credited as the representative of Whitman's core poetic vision. It celebrates individualism with the words, "I CELEBRATE myself, and sing myself, And what I assume you shall assume, For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."⁴ (W. Whitman, 1 Song of Myself). According to him, he did not create himself with the help of a traditional institution rather he portrays himself as the quintessential modern man, created through nature and through his own journey of self-discovery. The individual consciousness evolves through the amalgamation of body and soul; an experience available to everyone which produces a prototypical personality that is consciously prepared for union with other similar personalities.

Later in his writing we encounter one phase of American history which has a profound impact on Whitman and has been vividly described in his poetry is American Civil War (1861 – 1865). He chronicled this event in the sections like Drum-Taps and Memories of President Lincoln. He exploits the situation to state his position against slavery and also the inability of America's population to achieve its hope of individuality. His most famous poem from this phase of his journey is "O Captain! My Captain!". He uses simple yet beautiful metaphor to compare Abraham Lincoln to a fallen captain of a ship. He motivates the people to sing for its victory, but he admits that he can only mourn for the fallen leader.

The concluding sections of the collection like Autumn Rivelut and From Noon to Starry Nights reevaluate the theme of spirituality and the vision death as a part of the journey while continuing the exploration and discovery of the self. These sections showcase that the poet has developed a clear understanding of 'Death'; it is a regeneration of life just like autumn leaves which fall and grow again. He pauses (ends) his collection with Songs of Parting where he is not saying a permanent goodbye to his readers by considering death as a part of that 'Journey'.

In conclusion, we can say that Leaves of Grass is an exemplary piece of literature which vividly deals with varied themes and motives of life. It also practices different ideologies like transcendentalism, romanticism and realism, showing the development of the self. In a very true

sense, it can be said that it projects a journey of a man from being inspired to being an inspiration.

References

- ✚ Whitman, Walt, 2 Starting from Paumanok, “Leaves of Grass”, Walt Whitman, New Jersey 1892
- ✚ 33 Song of Myself, Ibid.
- ✚ 2 Crossing Brooklyn Ferry, Ibid.
- ✚ 1 Song of Myself, Ibid.

Bio

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