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The Grim Realities Of Life: Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*

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Abstract

Reading Walt Whitman is like opening a big album of life with the 'self' as the axis around which the whole world revolves. Whitman is not only the lover and the redeemer of the body and the soul but also of life in all its form. The purpose of this study is to explore how Whitman — the happy-go-round person, who enjoyed life with all, hailing the workers, appreciating the beauties and love of nature, loafing in grass while celebrating his independence — reacted when he came in contact with the miseries of life around him. "Song of Myself" is a miniature portrayal of America of his time. In it, he has managed to depict almost all the aspects of its life.

Keywords: Walt Whitman; Song of Myself

Introduction

In the poem "Song of Myself", Whitman begins with the celebration of the self, and from his 'I' moves on to the 'others' around him, entering like air and becoming an integral part of them for a while, feeling what they feel. This is how he sympathizes with whosoever he comes in contact with. His vast embrace encircles humans, animals as well as nature. Lacan believed that we come to know ourselves after coming in contact with the others, which can be our own self too (which he discusses when he talks about his famous mirror stage¹) and thus the others become important to us, for they help us to form our person.

Whitman not only knows the others to know his own self; he becomes 'the other' with the help of deep sympathy that he feels for them.

He fused in his poetry the two literary movements of romanticism and realism without totally submitting to anyone in particular. The result was his inclusion of the commonplace and elevation of the 'self' in an individual.

In Whitman's poems, the individual "identity" is always identifying itself and then, as it were, unidentifying itself with the "En-Masse" (Joyce, 8).

American society that had newly won freedom was on the road to progress, and had started dealing with the issues at home. Walt Whitman felt the miseries equal with the jubilation of independence. Being sceptical, he could not ignore the problems at hand. So, he felt it his duty to give voice to the voiceless as he says,

Through me many dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generations of slaves,
Voices of prostitutes and of deformed persons,
Voices of the diseased and the despairing, and of thieves and dwarfs...

(Song of Myself, 57[ii])

This passage contains the issues that I would like to discuss in my paper. The phrase 'long dumb voices' is very evocative and can be taken for various interpretations. Here, I take it as the repressed desires of the people who were not allowed to speak for themselves for fear of execution. So far, America was the society of mostly puritans who had strong moral codes and a hold on the governing bodies. They were mostly occupied by the problems of sin and punishment. The overall atmosphere was sombre, and unrestrained enjoyment was strictly forbidden. The new generation of that time had become aware of changes in Europe, where the idea of individual freedom was very much in vogue, and as a result they could not be repressed any more. Furthermore, as reaction to Puritanism and Calvinism, later followed by Deism and Unitarianism, came Transcendentalism. This new movement gave a lot of importance to individual and his soul. Religion became a personal matter and general good intentions the criteria for salvation. Whitman was all for the liberty of man and his soul, and there are references in his poetry showing how fervently he believed in it. He had no patience for those who subscribe out of fear of the society. He was much influenced by Emerson in this regard.

Whitman was deeply religious in his own way and so for him,

The relationship of God is not the relationship of a subject to his superior but the relationship as the ideal brotherhood, the perfectly fulfilled comradeship (Miller [iii], 64).

He was not in favour of animal-like freedom. He disliked those who talked much about religion and discussed sin and salvation without doing any good to their fellow beings. He would rather appreciate the animals for,

They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins.
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God . . . (SoM, 65)

His references to God are at times even blasphemous when he calls him his 'elder brother' in Section 5, and later 'Divine I am inside and out', but it was only to prove his philosophy of unity with the divinity.

You will be powerfully drawn or strongly repelled by his utterances. You will have your ideas of poetry challenged: you will be moved to argument: but you cannot go to sleep over Whitman. (SoM, 742)

He was deeply religious from within, and so his continuous references to Christ and identification with the suffering of Christ. For him, God is loving and benevolent and very near to his creation. He does not wish to pick a quarrel with the priests and other religious leaders for he says,

I do not despise you priests. My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths, Enclosing all worship ancient and modern, and all between ancient and modern. . . . (SoM, 85)

The lines above reveal his belief in a universal religion with goodness as its basis. He would never harm anybody but would rather sympathize with the oppressed and the maltreated. He believed in self-reliance, and that is his key to all the problems. 'What have I to do with lamentations?' This attitude makes him an all-time favourite, for he had a very optimistic approach towards problems, which he believed could be solved by faith and love. His moral and psychological consequences of the democratic principles are emphatically related in his poetry. His belief in the inward spirit of the individual and relation to the inward reality of the others made him sympathize with others creating a bond of love, friendship and understanding. Some critics have a sympathetic view of this issue so to them,

he is not against religion; not, indeed, against any religion. He wishes to drag with a larger net, to make a more comprehensive synthesis, than any or than all of them put together (Stevenson, 67).

His bird eye view of American life in *Song of Myself* reveals the activities of the people of that age at work. He appreciates their dedication and their earnest involvement. He roamed a lot in wilderness as well as towns, and nothing escaped his observation. He saved his experiments in the form of a mental picture album, which would come to his assistance when he was writing poetry in the form of catalogues.

Sometimes a picture distasteful to him would evoke series of such other pictures; e.g., in section 15, while viewing the activities of common men and women he recalls,

The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirmed case,
He will never sleep any more as he did in the cot in his mother's bedroom;
(SoM, 45)

The incidence perhaps reminded him of his own brother Jesse, who had to be admitted to the Kings County Lunatic Asylum, while his younger brother Eddy was mentally retarded. Whitman had strong family ties and having first-hand knowledge, he could not but sympathize with the suffering of such people. It is said that in 1862

The New-York Hospital staff gave him the freedom of wards, the offices and examining room, the pathological museum with its appalling specimens of tumors and hypertrophied limbs. (Kaplan, 265)

Having these experiences he felt disgusted by the atrocities of war and its after effects, so there is nostalgia in his tone when he writes,

The malformed limbs are tied to the anatomist's table,
What is removed drops horribly in the pail.... (SoM, 45)

Here, he gets reminiscence of soldiers who were brought to hospitals with severe injuries and most of them had to be amputated for fear of infection. Whitman was a witness to such events, for he stayed voluntarily in a hospital during the war cheering up the dying soldiers. He was even present at the surgeon's table and could see all that "drops horribly in the pail," referring to the limbs of the soldiers being amputated. For Whitman, the human body was a great creation of

God and throughout the poem, we hear him speak highly of the human body, calling himself the poet of the body. Critics appreciate his

Bold assertion of the loveliness of the human body, male and female; of the beauty and propriety of all its functions; of the enormous importance of the vital relationships of the sexes . . . (Crawford, et. al, 1413)

Many a time in his poems, he refers to it whether the maltreated bodies are of soldiers or Negroes, who were made slaves by the rich people of his time,

The sun falls on his crispy hair and moustache...falls on.
The black of his polis'h and perfect limbs (SoM, 43).

Whitman could not see the body, which he celebrated and admired, treated with scorn or insult, and here he is reminded of

'The quadron girl is sold at the stand...the drunkard nods by the barroom stove . . . ' (SoM, 45)

He is obviously hurt at the treatment of a divine spirit in a divine body and the insensitivity of those who witness such events without being bothered at all by the tragedy. Whitman could feel what the girl was going through and inwardly blushes for those who were responsible for such an ignominious act. The treatment of this woman later reminds him of another episode, to which he was a witness,

'I saw the marriage of the trapper in the open air in the far-west . . . the bride was a red girl. Her father and his friends sat nearby. . . . On a bank lounged the trapper. . . . One hand rested on his rifle...the other hand held firmly the wrist of the red girl . . . ' (SoM, 41-42)

The girl is obviously being married by force and her executers are her own father and his friends as witnesses with no female around. This made it look more like a business transaction than a true marriage. Furthermore to emphasize his point, Whitman tells us that the trapper, who was obviously marrying the girl by force, had a rifle in one hand and with the other he held, not the hand, but the 'wrists' of the girl as if he was afraid that she would run away.

The above lines reveal the miserable condition of women of that society. They were treated like animals and their wishes and desires were totally ignored.

Later Whitman writes about twenty-eight young men who were bathing by the shore and he mentions a lady who watched them secretly from behind the curtain of her window.

She owns the fine house by the rise of the bank.
She hides handsome and richly dres't aft the blinds of the window...
Where are you off to lady? for I see
You splash in the water there yet stay stock still in your room. (SoM, 41)

Identifying himself with the lady he could feel her suppressed desires and hence gave voice to the voiceless. Though she lives in a fine house yet she is a prisoner of the society and only in her imaginations she could have her heart's desires fulfilled. Her loneliness is stressed without the use of emphatic words and Whitman's all-embracing sympathy is obvious.

I am the poet of the woman the same as man,
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man
And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of man. (SoM, 53)

Lines like these make him sound like an active feminist. He would not have females treated severely. Even the prostitute is worthy of his attention and no matter what others do he would not join them.

The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and
pimpled neck,
The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer and wink to each
other.
(Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you.) (SoM, 46-47)

The prostitute for him is a human being worthy of love and care. He could see her 'pimpled neck' and that the 'blackguard oaths' were her only revenge she could take on those who insulted her. It is said that his own sister-in-law became a prostitute after his brother's death. In those days, prostitution was in vogue for there were no respectable jobs for the females rather they were discouraged. Such conditions later led the intellectual raise voice for female liberty. By speaking for the prostitute, Whitman reminds us of Christ who once defended a woman who had committed adultery.

In his poems "You Felons on Trial in Courts" & "To a Common Prostitute", Whitman shows his all-pervading sympathy with those who have to resort to

prostitution and obscene degraded life due to poverty. He refuses to shun them for being what they are and claims,

I feel I am of them – I belong to those convicts and prostitute myself,
And henceforth I will not deny them – for how can I deny myself.
(SoM, 204)

To emphasize his sympathy, at another place he says,

Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you. (SoM, 205)

Another hot issue of Whitman 's time was slavery. The intellectuals had long discussions on abolition and were dead against this institution, for demeaning one man would mean degradation of humanity. The transcendentalists were the biggest group that gave voice to their opinion regarding this subject. Literary figures like Emerson & Thoreau even wrote in journals openly against this malpractice. They were aware of the maltreatment, which the slaves were receiving from their masters. Whitman's great concern for slaves is seen in more than one sections of "Song of Myself". In section 10 when Whitman talks about the forced marriage of the red girl with the trapper, he sees the girl become a lifelong slave to him and so in the immediately next section comes forth in his mind the slaves of his own country and he quotes an instance when,

The runaway slave comes to my house & stopped outside..." He heard his cautious movement and went outside to find him "Limpsy and weak ", and so he went to assure him. After feeding & clothing the poor miserable man, I had him sit next me at table. . . . my fire lock leaned in the corner. (SoM, 41)

The rifle in the corner refers to the terror, which the slave had to face, but Whitman's rifle lies in the corner to win the confidence of the slave, or perhaps, ready to save him from the enemy. I do not interpret it otherwise because in a later section Whitman dramatizes a tragic scene of a runaway slave who was caught by the pursuers.

The hounded slave that flags in the race & leans by the fence, glowing and covered with sweat
The twinges that sting like needles his legs and neck
The murderous buckshot and the bullets,
All these I feel or am. (SoM, 72)

A human being hunted like an animal desperately trying to save his life arouses the emotions of the poet to such an extent that the suffering of the slave becomes the suffering of the poet and he declares,

I am the hounded slave... I wince at the bite of the dogs,
 Hell and despair are upon me ... crack and again crack the marksmen,
 I clutch the rails of the fence and my gibs thinned with the ooze of
 my skin,
 I fall on the weeds and stones,
 The riders spur their unwilling horses and haul close,
 They taunt my dizzy ears ... they beat me violently over the head.
 (SoM, 72)

The persona of the narrator, i.e. the poet, enters the body of the slave and becomes him for such is the sympathy that he feels for this human and is led to utter,

Agonies are one of my changes of garments;
 I do not ask the wounded person how he feels ... I myself become the
 wounded person.' (SoM, 72)

Every line of these verses is charged with the suffering that the poor slave goes through. The whole Scene is loaded with fear, misery, suffering, hurt and agony following each other and the climax is when Whitman personifies himself with the slave. He could feel the blows and kicks received by the slave in the same way that he did. Like Keats's negative capability he could identify with the object of his sympathy and love. As compared to the cruel men the horses are 'unwilling' which further intensifies the atrocities of the human beings towards their kind. Perhaps it was one such instance that led Whitman write,

I think I could turn and live awhile with animals . . . they are so placid and
 self-contained, . . . Not one is dissatisfied . . . not one is demented with the
 mania of owning things.
 Not one kneels to another nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago.
 . . (SoM, 165)

The issue of slavery, which began in the late eighteenth century, gathered momentum in the later age because of the intellectuals who were selfless people and could not see humanity being degraded so pitilessly. They were witnesses to the evil treatment that then slaves received and soon the north of America was declared a slave free zone.

Walt Whitman was not only a democrat and a free thinker in his approach but he also “listened appreciatively to the discourses on the liberty of slaves, women’s rights and other critical issues by the Scottish-born Francis Wright” (304).

It is the art of the poet to observe and feel and relate his experiences. His job is not to moralize but to make his countrymen become aware of the problems that surrounded them so that they try to solve them sincerely. Stevenson summarizes his character well when he writes about Whitman, ‘He was a theorizer about society before he was a poet. He first perceived something wanting and then sat down squarely to supply the want’ (Stevenson, 57).

Whitman’s feelings for all those who suffer made him give a ‘voice’ to the ‘voiceless’ through his poetry. After reading Whitman, one tends to compare the problems of the world around us. Be it nineteenth century or the twenty first the suffering of the humanity still exists. Though the forms have changed yet the problems are still there and more complicated than before because of the complexities of modern era. We are the slaves of machines, bureaucrats; politicians so on and so forth. We are still offering ourselves to the highest bidder for petty comforts, still caught in the quagmire of crime and punishment. The modern world is waiting for a Whitman to expose the suffering of the new men and women and jerk them to reality.

Notes

¹ For detail see Benvenuto, Bice & Kennedy, Roger. *The Works of Jacques Lacan*. Free Association Books. London. 1986

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