

BA (ENG) Hons 3rd year

Paper VII - Other Literatures

Unit 2- Walt Whitman

Discuss Whitman's treatment of the American ideal of democracy in his poems.

Walt Whitman is rightly called the prophet of American democracy. As Gay Wilson Allen, a critical biographer of Whitman has observed, for a proper understanding of the breadth and depth of Whitman and his work, one needs to delve through "philosophy, comparative religion, mysticism, prosody, aesthetics, mythology, history, comparative literature and other related fields". The evolution of his ideas, the growth of his mind and the development of his art and philosophy of life out of his personal experiences are of great interest to anyone who makes a serious study of Whitman's personality. He has been hailed as the poet of America and the poet of democracy. His vision of democracy is very much humanistic. By invoking all sorts of people and describing all types of conditions *Leaves of Grass* presents humanistic view of life. His ardent desire is for the unity of America, his great Mother-land. *Leaves of Grass* is an epic of humanity that deals with Man, his origin, nature, and destiny. It ranges widely from birth to death through the various stages and circumstances of human life. Life on earth for him is no consequence of 'sin' rather he enjoys innumerable bonds of delight in happy engagement with life.

Whitman, during his life, was known more for his influence as a prophet of democracy and 'an enthusiast of the common man'. There are numerous illustrations in his poems which clearly evince the influences of Hindu view of life working upon Whitman and his all-compassing Humanism. His firm belief in 'Nothing is more divine than humankind' and 'Entire universe is divine' must have been drawn from Vedantic scriptures. When he talks about "for many years or stretching cycles of years" (*Leaves of Grass* 364) in "Starting from Paumanok" which refers to more than one lives. His careful use of 'One-self' instead of 'Myself' makes it clear that the poem is not autobiographical and not revealing personal statements but a complete revelation of humanity. He purposefully utters the phrase "democratic, the word en-mass," to let others know that though he sings seemingly of himself but actually, 'Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power, / Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws divine, / The Modern Man I sing .' (*Leaves of Grass* 59) More than fifty biographers have tried their hands at a comprehensive understanding of Whitman, but the author of *Leaves of Grass*, 'the good gray poet' of democracy has always remained a mystery.

Even the greatest writer of the time, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the poet and prophet of transcendental individualism and acknowledged spokesman of American idealism was "not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of *Leaves of Grass* and found in it "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed". There was a prophetic vision in the words that Emerson wrote to Whitman: "I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet

must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start". He believed that the hope of America lay in the common man, he was sensible enough to recognize the dangers of general suffrage while admitting the fact that it was the only means of ensuring future democratic institutions. It was his conviction that the strength of democracy is the strength of truly enfranchised people. Therefore, he was of the opinion that the common man must be more than a voter, he must learn the political responsibility well formed by great men of letters and perfect personalities announcing the advent of a new world.

Literature to Whitman is for life's sake. Despite his faith in the human spirit and commitment to Humanism, Whitman was aware of man's limitations. So he works hard on the themes of human greatness and human smallness. He seeks to develop 'grand individuals' and through them the ideal democratic society in which power, glory and dignity of each individual is asserted. Though he seeks to build an ideal democratic society on the principles of universal brotherhood, unity and equality yet he is very much aware that only great individuals can build a great society. So Whitman does not hesitate in promoting the creed of Individualism: It is not the earth, it is not America who is so great, / It is I who am great or to be great, it is You up there, or any one, / / I swear nothing is good to me now that ignores individuals, / The American compact is altogether with individuals, / The only government is that which makes minute of individuals, / The whole theory of the universe is directed unerringly to one / single individual—namely to You. (*Leaves of Grass* 352)

Whitman brings to the countless generations a message of power and glory inherited by each human being. He has unwavering faith in the beauty, bounty, unity, dignity and divinity of humanity. Each member of the human society is potentially great but not greater than the society. His indulging into the self eventually turns into his reverence for the race which becomes a special trait of his Humanism. Whitman lays stress upon the value of human act, word, thought, and their consequences. He urges men to utilise all their energy to achieve perfect manhood. He sets high goals for humanity which can be achieved through ability and nobility. Even after grand success one should approach one's fellow human beings with humility. One may have love for divine things and aspiration for high achievements but cannot afford to forget the eternal quest for self identity. He speculates on Humanity thus: "What is a man anyhow? What am I? What are you? / All I mark as my own you shall offset it with your own, / Else it were time lost listening to me. (*Leaves of Grass* 47)

There are many poems of Whitman that can be considered to comprehend his ideal of democracy. Whitman viewed democracy not only as a political theory, but also as a cultural idea. For him it is a way of life. Hence, he gave it such a social dimension that his sensibilities were formed and nurtured by his concept of democracy. With his literary vision centred on democracy, Whitman has made great contributions to democratic theory though they were not often appreciated. Whitman's career as a journalist, his poems, "Song of Myself," "Song of the Open Road," "Drum-Taps" and his prose works, "Democratic Vistas," "Preface, 1855" "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," and "Specimen Days" along with a few other poems

and prose works in the collection of his most famous work, *Leaves of Grass* have been the primary sources for the discussion.

After a broad spectrum of discussion on his democratic ideals, let us consider the poem “I sit and look out”, taken from his collection of poems entitled *By the Roadside* to get an idea of how he incorporates his ideals into the context of the poem. The textual analysis will justify his prophetic vision as a democratic poet. In his poem he gives out a catalogue of sorrows of the world. He simply gives us a list of the misfortunes of mankind without going into the cause of the malady or suggesting a remedy. The poet in confinement within the four walls of his abode observes carefully what is happening to thousands of citizens of his motherland. He finds that some people are shamefully oppressing others. Some young men commit blunders and become remorseful thereafter, sobbing convulsively in secret. Among the poor people there are many others who are neglected by their children and consequently they become desperate and die. There are wives who are not cared for by their husbands. Among young lovers jealousy, anguish of unrequited love, seduction etc, are rampant. The whole society suffers due to war, pestilence and tyranny. Among the sailors famine spreads and it becomes necessary to throw away people one by one into the sea so that the others may survive. To quote some lines from the poem justifying the aforesaid statements-“I observe the slights and degradations cast by arrogant/persons upon laborers, the poem negroes and the like/And these – all the meanness and agony without/end I sitting look out upon/See, hear and am silent.” The long list the poet has made after a keen and compassionate observation has accorded variety and breadth to his poetry. Of course the poet has not cared to find out the reasons for these sufferings. Nor does he offer concrete remedies to ameliorate the grievances of the down-trodden workers. As far as the poem goes there is enough pathos in it and the realistic imagery appeals to the reader. There is an emphasis on “I” in the poem as almost all the lines begin with I. According to James Miller, the “I” is identical with the “Modern Man” of whom he sings-it is the collective ego, a composite of the varied humanity of America. The “I” is Everyman, a creature of contradictory impulses and instincts, both good and bad; and “I” contains multitudes, embracing many minds and even many nations.

Edward Dowden feels that his feeling for individual personality overmasters his pantheistic tendency towards oneness of all. But if he sings of America, it is precisely because he associates the nation with democracy. It would be most apt to endorse the opinion of John Burroughs : “The reader who would get at the spirit and meaning of *Leaves of Grass* must remember that its animating principle from first to last, is Democracy, that it is a work conceived and carried forward in the spirit of the genius of humanity, that is now in full career in the new world – and that all things characteristically American (trades, tools, occupations, productions, characters, scenes) therefore have their places in it. It is intended to be a completed mirror of the times in which the life of the poet fell, and to show one master personality accepting, absorbing all and rising superior to it, namely the poet himself. Yet it is never Whitman that speaks so much as it is Democracy that speaks through him. He personifies the spirit of Universal brotherhood and in

this character launches with his “omnivorous words”- he serves as the spokesman of ideal democracy...”

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