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Expansion Of Self In Walt Whitman's *Leaves Of Grass*

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Abstract : The whole of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* resonates with 'I' and 'myself'. This obviously led the readers and critics to read and interpret the text in the light of the poet's biographical details. The repeated assertion of his American identity in the poem led them further to the analysis of his personal experiences as a citizen of America. From a certain individual to a national character; the poet was time and again analyzed in these two formats. The present study intends to go further from this to Whitman's self as an expression of a universal individual that is all inclusive, a cosmic one. The obvious egoism dominating his poems is just a shell. Once this shell is cracked, the universal being starts germinating and expands in all directions to 'contain multitudes'. Whitman, the individual and Whitman, the American—is the one that is in common with every individual of every time and every nation.

Key words: Americanism, egoistic, universal brotherhood, collective consciousness, unifying principle
Leaves of Grass was first published anonymously in 1855 by the one who didn't belong to any established literary circle and preferred to call himself a loafer. Two more editions were brought out before the Civil War. The volume crossed many existing barriers of expression and didn't fit in any established mould. The poet didn't bother to care for any fixed standards, spoke without inhibitions and declared himself a self-created poet. As was natural with any such expression, his work received extreme critical opinions on both sides of the scale. *The New York Daily Times* (1856) exclaimed; "What conglomerate of thought is this before us, with insolence, philosophy, blasphemy, beauty and gross indecency tumbling in drunken confusion through the pages? Who is this arrogant young man who proclaims himself the Poet of time, and who roots like a pig among a rotten garbage of licentious thoughts?"

Summing up the reasons for the then hostile reviews of the poet, Stephen Matterson writes in his *Introduction to The Complete Poems of Walt Whitman*, "Whitman's offence was two-fold. His subject matter offended the gentility that supposedly characterised poetry, and his free verse offended the very idea of what poetry should be." Contrary to such reviews, W.M. Rossetti, who introduced this radical poet to the British readers, called him a pioneer. Whitman's repeated claims to his American identity led the critics to focus on his Americanism also. *United States Review* exclaimed, "An American bard at last!" (*Complete Poems of Walt Whitman* 511)

Whitman's longest poem in the volume was "Song of Myself" where he sings and celebrates his self. Whitman's 'I' resonates in almost every page of the book. The poet himself confesses; "*Leaves of Grass* indeed (I cannot too often reiterate) has mainly been the outpouring of my own emotional and other personal nature—an attempt, from first to last, to put a Person, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the nineteenth Century in America) freely, fully, and truly on record." (*Preface to November Boughs, Complete Poetry and Selected Prose and Letters* 873) The poet's pride in singing his 'I' displeased many of the critics. Because of his obsession with self, he was again and again called an 'egoist'. 'Song of Myself' is all full of 'I', 'me' and 'my'. His ego is infinite and he revels in personal expressions and autobiographical details. For him, it's his creative force. The poem begins with "I celebrate myself, and sing myself" and he shares almost all of his biographical details to let the reader know him fully;

"Starting from fish-shape Paumanok where I was born,
Well begotten and raised by a perfect mother,
After roaming many lands, lover of populous pavements,

Dweller in Manhatta my city, or on southern savannas”(*Complete Poems of Walt Whitman* 14)

Thus, in the first appearance, the arrogance of the poet seems all-encompassing feature of his work as he even takes pride in celebrating physicality. In place of trying to humble his senses, he glorifies the pleasures of the body with exhilarating frankness. Whitman’s celebration of bodily pleasures is something that the critics find undesirable. “Always sex. This is the foundation stone of the structure of *Leaves of grass*.”(Miller 245) In ‘I Sing the Body Electric’, the poet describes each and every part of the female body and celebrates heterosexuality and procreation. James E. Miller finds it ‘probably the most impressive passage of heterosexual imagery in all of ‘Children of Adam’...”(Miller 252) Body is an important dimension of Whitman’s ego. It’s wonderful to be conscious of body. The body, be it of male or female, is celebrated by the poet with equal level of appreciation. He entreats ‘the gentlemen to look at the wonder’:

“Examine these limbs, red, black, or white, they are cunning in tendon and nerve,

They shall be stript that you may see them

Exquisite senses, life-lit eyes, pluck, volition,

Flakes of breast-muscle, pliant backbone and neck, flesh not flabby, good-sized arms and legs

And wonders within there yet.”(*Complete Poems* 76)

Further, the poet’s ego is reflected in his fervent nationalism, his pride in being American, when the poet proclaims; ‘Great is the greatest Nation—the nation of clusters of equal nations...’(*Evolution of Walt Whitman* 129) He takes pleasure in the native scene and tends to establish a new American myth. The poet’s self identifies with the varied American landscapes and American people. As O’Connor observes about *Leaves of Grass* ; “It is in first place, a work purely and entirely American, autochthonic, sprung from our own soul; no savor of Europe nor of the past, nor of any other literature in it...” (*Evolution of Walt Whitman* 137) The poet’s exuberant self, his frank physicality and his exalted nationalism have all been perceived by critics as different dimensions of his egoistic self and actually they appear to be so. Surely, on the basis of these manifestations of his personal ego, he can be termed an egoist. No doubt, the elements are strongly present in his poetry and cannot be neglected while studying the poet, but it’s just the springboard for the poet to jump to the higher levels of consciousness. This ego is not the ego of a certain person, a resident of a certain country or a certain body. It expands and becomes all encompassing. The personal ego of the self becomes a part of the universal ego. The flag of the United States becomes the flag of the whole of humanity.

Whitman’s ‘simple separate person’ becomes ‘En-masse’ where every individual holds equal importance. The poet made the first call for global brotherhood, a democratic ideal that was more of a social and spiritual nature than mere political. For him this kind of democracy can realise the possibility of universal peace, but this kind cannot be found in the theories of the past;

“It is not in those paged fables in the libraries (them I neither accept nor reject).

It is not more in the legends than in all else.

It is in the present—it is this earth of today.

It is in Democracy—(the purport & aim of all the past)

It is the life of one man or one woman today—the average man of today.” (*Complete Poems* 290)

The self that the poet celebrates is no individual but every individual, his ‘I’ is applicable to each and every self. It’s all inclusive, not somebody that differentiates him from his fellow beings. Every self is worthy of song. Walt Whitman, the individual or the American actually merges into the universe. Whitman’s enquiry into his ‘self’ suggests the oneness of ‘I,’ ‘You’ and ‘any man’: “What is a man anyhow? What am I? What are you?” (*Complete Poems* 38)

This self that the poet celebrates is not divorced from what it sees and observes, as it absorbs and gets absorbed in what it sees and becomes one with its object of experience. The poet asks the reader to assume what he assumes not because he feels himself right in assuming so, but the fact is that for him it is natural that ‘I’ and ‘you’ shall assume the same because there is no essential difference between the two; “For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.” (*Complete Poems* 24) The great and small cycles of the past and the future and all the circles of time exist in this very self. Through this identification, this self contains all men and women of all times;

“In all people I see myself, none more and not a barley-corn less,

And the good or bad I say of myself I say of them

And I know I am solid and sound,

To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow

All are written to me and I must get what the writing means.” (*Complete Poems* 38)

The American, being sung by the poet, is the citizen of the universe, containing in him all existing contradictions and unifying them all. The American experience has been used by the poet as it’s a part of

his first-hand experience; this gate leads him to universal experience. He extols the democratic spirit of America, where all occupy the same place;

“The wife, and she is not one jot less than the husband,

The daughter, and she is just as good as the son

The mother, and she is every bit as much as the father

Offsprings of ignorant and poor, boys apprenticed to trades,

Young fellows working on farms and old fellows working on farms, Sailor-men, merchant-men, coasters, immigrants,

All these I see, but nigher and farther the same I see,

None shall escape me and none shall wish to escape.” (*Complete Poems* 160)

In his poem “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” he says; “I too with my soul and body/ We, a curious trio” (*Complete Poems* 175) It’s quite amazing to notice that his soul and body are separated from the self. This self is the individual consciousness, and this too is the collective consciousness that goes on with the body, a feature that is common to all yet different in all, and the soul, the life force common to all. The grass used as a symbol in the title of book expresses the poet’s idea of universality. The grass grows in almost all climates and at all places. It’s the meanest existence that’s crushed under our feet but never ceases to exist. The poet is ready to mingle himself with this ‘uniform hieroglyphic’ and grow from there;

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

If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.” (*Complete Poems* 69)

This is the way the poet’s self is able to transcend the ordinary boundaries of the world and hence develops an enormous capacity of all-inclusive experience. He is able to participate directly in the experience of others as he identifies with each one of them as the child in the poem ‘There was a Child Went Forth’ gets fused with the world around and becomes whatever it sees. His is a vision of oneness of the inner and the outer, the good and the bad, the one and the many, the subject and the object;

“There was a child went forth every day,

And the first object he looked upon, that he became

And that object became a part of him...” (*Complete Poems* 273)

The poem shows how the self, represented by the child image, moves towards eternity and reflects a timeless continuity. Everything became a part of the child ‘...who went forth every day, and who now goes, and will always go forth every day.’ (*Complete Poems* 274) The individual self transcends to accommodate innumerable centres of consciousness and it itself remains aloof, a witness to the process. When the poet sings and celebrates his self, he only projects himself as a model of the cosmic self, running through all times and spaces. This expanded ‘self’ partakes in the continuous journey flowing with the eternal flow of humanity. In the poem ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’, the river becomes the symbol of life where past, present and future— all flow into one spiritual continuum and the poet becomes one with all of his fellow passengers on this journey;

“It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not

I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence...” (*Complete Poems* 121)

The answer to the question ‘What am I?’ posed by the poet, emerges from this expansion of his self from an egoist to a universal figure, containing in itself all existing contradictions—hunter, trapper, fisherman, lover (male and female), slave, dust and deity, good and evil, past and present, was, is and to be. The poet envisions a democracy beyond barriers resolving all the tensions. The opposites can have a peaceful co-existence here. The ‘self’ transcends all ethical considerations and ‘contain multitudes’;

“What blurt is this about virtue and about vice?

Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand indifferent.” (*Complete Poems* 40)

Good and evil are hooked with each other and cannot be untied. So the self reaches a level where it doesn’t deny evil as it’s an element of the becoming of self and will be dissolved in the last step of synthesis.

Thus we can see that, though the proclamations of the poet sound quite egoistic and self-centred, a deeper study of the pattern and rhythm of the poet’s celebration of self in his poetry reflects that the ‘self’ sung by the poet is not an exclusive self, but an all-inclusive one. In place of becoming the differentiating source, it becomes the unifying principle relating all human beings of all time zones, all geographical zones, of all sexes, all cultures and natures. This is the supreme force of equality. But finally we need to admit that the ‘self’ that breathes in the works of Whitman defies all definitions as it contains all possible contradictions. In “Myself and Mine”, he himself says “...reject those who would expound me, for I cannot expound myself.” (*Complete Poems* 179)

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