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### **Whitman's Song of Myself – Quest of the Divine Soul**

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#### **Abstract:-**

*The 'song of myself' is a précis of the Leaves of Grass. The 'I' becomes a teacher and next a philosopher. The 'I' is now a cosmic entity. The poet is a "kosmos and he is involved in human suffering imaginatively and spiritually." Whitman offers the democracy of the emotions emphasizing the values of health, vigour and lustiness. There is then a distinction between the "I" or Whitman of daily relation and the soul which is dramatized as the "I" in the poem. His supreme power develops a new light. He feels the need to explain himself. The "Song of Myself" is the development of the "self" of the poet. The self 'Oozes' itself in the Universe. The Song of Myself is not just the poet's self-celebration but it is a celebration of himself as a man and an American. In the 'Song of Myself' what Walt Whitman assumed, he applied to the entire mankind. It does not have one law for the poor and another for the rich. It does not have one law for the man and another for the woman. The poet sings that his 'self' includes people of all caste, all hue, every rank and every religion. He is like any other being-eating, drinking and indulging in the pleasures of the senses. He does not believe in ancient customs. He does not want the modern man to be bound by ancient chains. One is not superior to the other. Nobody in this world is inferior to the other. As a democrat, he believes in the inherent dignity and equality of all man. He can, therefore, be rightly regarded as the champion of the poor, the down trodden and the oppressed. Whitman has been the worshipper of his own body and soul and he considers it superior to the churches and bibles. He knows the greatness of God as witnessed in all the creation in the Universe. According to him everybody must have sense of appreciation of everything in this world. The grass is here on the back of earth to prove the existence of God. The grass replies that they are all alive. There is no end of life after death. Death extends life. Life continues even after death. The word 'God' permeates the whole world, earth and the universe. If it is well understood, the poet feels it unnecessary to question the Whereabouts of God. The poet accepts death as a part of life and he welcomes it as he says death as the gateway to another life. The poet finds an inexplicable feeling surging throughout him after experiencing the mystical trance after the journey of his soul. The poet rises high in the sky trying to translate his mystical experience into words. But the words may be incompetent to voice his mystic experience. The paper attempts to explore Whitman's quest of the divine soul in his Song of Myself.*

Every new edition of Leaves of grass represents a stage in the growth of the poem. Even the first edition clearly revealed the new voice of America. Emerson observed: "I find it as the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I am very happy in reading it; as great power makes us happy. It meets the demand I am always making of what seemed the sterile and stingy nature as it too much handiwork were making our western wits fat and mean. I give you joy of your free and brave thought. I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things said incomparably well as they must be. I find the courage of treatment, which so delights me and which large perception only can inspire. I greet you at the beginning of a great career."<sup>1</sup> These words of Emerson constitute even today the best introduction and commentary on the book. The method of presentation of a poem is subjective. This is well suited to the preoccupation of the Quaker with the inner life. As the individual grows, the poem too grows. The growth of the poem is in reality the awakening of the self. It has been coming to consciousness of being alive. So we have been made to see, hear, taste and feel in new and significant ways. We watch a personality developing an identity as it passes through a mystic evolution.

The 'song of myself' is a précis of the Leaves of Grass. The symbol of the self is equated with the leaves, the sea, the earth and America. The self becomes the lover. As he said in the preface, "the known universe has one complete lover and that is the greatest poet."<sup>2</sup> In the 'song of myself', the self is not felt to be incomplete but it is at the centre. The self summons the universe standing at the centre of the mystery. He proceeds from the grass to the grave and from death to continuity and identity. He is in the farm, in the mountains, and in the sea. He is everywhere participating, co-operating, helping and joining. The self embraces to mankind and it derives its power from nature and from its identification with others. He becomes one with mankind. He becomes one with all of them irrespective their professions:

A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, Quaker, prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.

At the same time he realizes that everything is in its place. This identity gives an assurance and he is able to look ahead through space and time.

The 'I' becomes a teacher and next a philosopher. The thoughts belong to "all men in all ages and lands," and they have to "untie the riddle" of the self and the universe. The awareness of identity leads him to a consciousness of the equality of all beings.

This is the meal equally set, this the meat for natural hunger. This equality brings forth a new awareness:

I am the poet of the body,  
And I am the poet of the soul.

In this process he "clarifies and transfigures" even the indecent voice. He launches into the tactile sensations and images and discovers a new identity. The 'I' is now a cosmic entity. The poet is a "kosmos and he is involved in human suffering imaginatively and spiritually." In the song of myself he identifies himself with Christ and re-enacts the crucifixion spiritually. He participates in the experience of the suffering. Yet he sought the role of Christ without desiring to find new religion:

No friend of mine takes his ease in my chair,  
I have no chair, nor church, nor philosophy,  
I lead no man to a dinner-table or library or exchange,  
But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll,  
My left hand hooks you round the waist,  
My right hand points to landscapes of continents,  
And a plain public road.<sup>3</sup>

Whitman offers the democracy of the emotions emphasizing the values of health, vigour and lustiness. There is then a distinction between the "I" or Whitman of daily relation and the soul which is dramatized as the "I" in the poem. The soul turns to solitude and gradually proceeds to identify himself with Christ. A sudden knowledge of illumination and enlightenment has come. He experiences divine energy and certainty:

I troop forth replenished with supreme power,  
one of an average unending procession:

His supreme power develops a new light. He feels the need to explain himself. He has the mystic insight and he understands time and space. He can not find a church or a sect, for everybody must seek with diligence his own deliverance. He contemplates God:

I hear and behold God in every object :  
Yet I understand God not in the least,  
Nor do I understand who there can be  
more wonderful than myself.



Death can't alarm him. He sings his assurance like a true mystic and contemplates God and sees God in his world and in his self. He is not frightened of death because he will always 'ascend.' The last section is his testament and farewell. He wrote, 'if you want me again, look for me under your bootsoles.'<sup>4</sup> Death is only an extrication of the self from our body. Death is inevitably forever here, in the process of life. In the last line he declares:

I stop somewhere waiting for you.

He is waiting for us somewhere. Curiously enough the 'song' begins with "I" and ends with "You."

The "Song of Myself" is the development of the "self" of the poet. The self 'Oozes' itself in the Universe. It identifies itself with everything in this Universe. It studies the nature step by step. The 'self' of the poet transcends the physical limits and sets out on a mystical journey. Walt Whitman deals with self, love, nature, death and transcends it in an appealing manner. He finds the new significance because it is penetrated and permeated by the eternal, by which we may say that he was not a puritan but a true Transcendentalist. The 'self', the modern man in the song of myself is not only brave and American, but universal.

The Song of Myself is not just the poet's self-celebration but it is a celebration of himself as a man and an American. Walt becomes in his own person the whole world, the entire Universe, the complete eternity of time... Democracy, En - masse, One identity.

In the ' Song of Myself what Walt Whitman assumed, he applied to the entire mankind. His thoughts are the thoughts of all people of all ages. His timeless trust in the divinity of man, in the dignity of man, his trust in-body and soul-is apparently seen in the Song of Myself. The poem stands the test of time.

The self of the all inclusive. It has no bias towards one religion or the other. There is no distinction of caste, creed, color, sex or religion. The poet sings when he reaches it culmination :

Of every hue and caste am I  
of every rank and religion  
I am of the old and the young  
of the foolish as much as the wise.

It does not have one law for the poor and another for the rich. It does not have one law for the man and another for the woman. The poet sings that his 'self' includes people of all caste, all hue, every rank and every religion. A physician, a priest, a lawyer, a farmer, a mechanic, an artist, a sailor, a Quaker, a monk, a teacher, a gentleman, a commoner all are equal to him. He identifies himself with all of them irrespective of their status in society. He identifies himself equally with the wise and the foolish. The good or bad, the high or low, the rich or poor, the wise or foolish belong to him. He also belongs to them. The children, the elderly, the rich, the poor, the northern states, the southern states, a Yankee, a Kentuckian, a boatman, a westerner all belong to him. He is not just a citizen of America about but he is a citizen of the world. His 'self' expands and transcends the physical limitations of the human form. His self embraces everything in the universe. This is the beginning of mystical journey of the poet. The journey begins with the self observing life and the mystic touch starts when the self transcends the earthly bounds. The self manifests itself in the external world. He calls himself a 'comrade of all who shake hands.' He defines himself to be of every hue and caste, every rank and religion. In describing his self as inclusive the entire humanity, Whitman gives us panoramic view, a pen-picture of the active life of the Americans. The poet's identification with the entire humanity and universe is described in an elaborate manner. The poet seeks this trait of self identification in every animate and inanimate being. After all, it is the same common air that everybody breaths and the same water that everybody drinks. Whitman is not a sentimentalist but a realist. He has been a true democrat. He addresses himself a 'cosmos.' He

identifies himself with everything in this Universe. His 'self' includes in the Universe. The Universe becomes the self.

He is like any other being-eating, drinking and indulging in the pleasures of the senses. He does not believe in ancient customs. He does not want the modern man to be bound by ancient chains. He wants everyone to unscrew the locks from the door and unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs. Whitman wants everybody to welcome the democratic way of life. He wants people to be broad-minded and open-hearted. He wants this feeling of identification to be reciprocal amongst the mankind. He recognizes the inherent dignity of every individual. He considers body and soul equally important. He asserts that every part of human body is equally important, sacred and holy. Whitman glorifies copulation as it is the ingredient of procreation. Copulation is as important as death.

One is not superior to the other. Nobody in this world is inferior to the other. Whitman's poetry suggests equality which explains the poet's passions for democratic system of government which regards all being equal. The poet sings of himself and he finds complete identity between himself and others. He is confident enough to say that his own beliefs and ideals are also the beliefs and ideals of others. He does not degrade one for the sake of other. He does not hate other. He loves all equally well. The poet is with the greedy and persistent, as well as with those who work tirelessly for some noble cause. He is with all and he knows the truth about all and none can escape from his presence. His self contains multitudes. He is not of one Nation, but of many Nations. The poet's self expands and acquires a cosmic dimension. The "I" may be taken as the symbol of average American, or Everyman. He has been an average human being with normal human sensibilities. The poet wants to achieve total identification with other selves. He is absolutely one with others and therefore, whatever is said or done to him is naturally done for others.

As a democrat, he believes in the inherent dignity and equality of all man. He can, therefore, be rightly regarded as the champion of the poor, the down trodden and the oppressed. He becomes the voice of the slaves, prisoners, thieves, dwarfs, sick, poor and suffering. He believes that both the body and the soul, the good and the evil, the flesh and the spirit, have been created by the divine hand of God, so they are both equally holy and sacred. "Man is divine inside and out."<sup>5</sup> the poet has realized this truth and he conveys this message to others also. He celebrates and glorifies each and every part of the human body, for every organ is equally sacred, divine and pure. Nothing is vile, impure, indecent or wicked. Each part of the body is a miracle, the miracle of the divine. His glorification of the body is a glorification of the divine, for it is the handiwork of God, the sign and symbol of his might. In celebrating himself he is celebrating all, celebrating the divine, his Maker, While celebrating all this he sings:

Divine am I inside and out and I make holy,

Whatever I touch or am touch'd from,

The scent of these arm-pits is aroma finer than prayer.

This head more than churches, bibles and all creeds.....

Whitman has been the worshipper of his own body and soul and he considers it superior to the churches and bibles. He knows the greatness of God as witnessed in all the creation in the Universe. In glorifying himself, he glorifies everyone and naturally he sings of the greatness of the creator-God. He emphasizes the fact that there is nothing indecent and impure in copulation. He calls the sex as sublime. He is proud of his body and soul. He glorifies the maker of the Universe. But he declares that even God cannot be greater than one's self. He declares that human being must have sympathy and fellow feeling on his journey of his life.

According to him everybody must have sense of appreciation of everything in this world. If he is bereft of this then he is merely, "drest in his shroud." He does not want mankind to cross-examine the mystery of the omnipresent. He feels the presence of God in everything even in tiny objects of this world. He is present in every being. When a child brings a spear of grass to the poet questioning him about its



nature, the poet finds it difficult to answer. But he tells the child that it is the symbol of God's disposition. It may also be the handkerchief of the Almighty, a gift full of perfume which reminds us of God's presence.

The grass is here on the back of earth to prove the existence of God. The leaves of grass express the nature of a child because it has all those qualities found in a child. The leaves of grass is humble, lovely and carefree like a child. Both the leaves of grass and a child are equal in their qualities. The grass is also a key to the sacred mysteries of this Universe. It grows at all places. It is also a symbol of democracy. It grows in broad zones and also in narrow-zones. It grows among black people as well as among the white. It loves equality. It is also the beautiful hair of graves. The grass grows on the graves of those who die. The poet asks the grass to tell him what has become of the dead and what has happened of the dead.

The grass replies that they are all alive. There is no end of life after death. Death extends life. Life continues even after death. The smallest spear of grass exhibits that life continues even after death. There is continuity of life and there is really no end of life. Death is merely a birth into another life. Death is simply a transformation of one life into another. The poet suggests that the bodies of the dead sprout in the form of blades of grass growing on the graves and so continue to live even after their so-called death. According to the poet it is as lucky to be born as to die, for death is not the end of life, but a birth into a better life. It is merely a transformation into a different state of being. An individual is not contained between his hat and boots. The self is as vast as the Universe itself and it is all inclusive. The Poet is not rooted to any particular place on the earth. He is as much of the sky as of the earth. He loves all people, both men and women, young and old. He loves all equally well. The Poet's self becomes Brahma, a transcendental witness of all that goes on in this world, both good and evil. His self or ego expands outwards and achieves identification with various objects and individuals of this world. The poet launches on his mystical journey so that he would achieve an ever increasing expansion to embrace all humanity, for he regards all objects and individuals equal.

The word 'God' permeates the whole world, earth and the universe. If it is well understood, the poet feels it unnecessary to question the Whereabouts of God. The poet suggests that mankind with sympathy, compassion and understanding of God can lead a placid, happy, pleasant and contented life. The world runs on the wheels of sympathy and love. If the people will understand this, they can equally face death in a calm manner. The notion of an existence of God in this Universe comes closer to Hindu Philosophy, where Hindus call God 'Sarvantharayami.'<sup>6</sup> An impact of Hindu Philosophy is inherent in Whitman's poetry.

The poet accepts death as a part of life and he welcomes it as he says death as the gateway to another life. He sings that life is the leasing of many deaths! The corpse will be fine manure for vegetation. He regards that death is just a passing phase into another life. The body dies but the soul is immortal. It ascends towards the stars, the sun and the moon. It becomes one with them. The poet delineates his approach to death and asks mankind not to shudder at the word 'death' because soul merges with the divine after the release from death.

The poet finds an inexplicable feeling surging throughout him after experiencing the mystical trance after the journey of his soul. He is entirely tired after the mystical journey. He cannot depict the divine in mystical trance. He explains that he has realized his self and with this self realization his mystical journey is over. His soul accepts that there is no 'chaos' or death in this Universe. Everything in this Universe has a certain order maintained under the guidance of the divine who plans everything. Death is not the final stage of life. It is the beginning of another life. The poet calls all the people as brothers and sisters and he regards that life is full of happiness. It is up to mankind to make the best use of happiness in life. Whatever the poet has realized of the self, of the soul, of the divine, of life and death and the Universe, he has put before the reader. The poet is an optimist, so he asks the reader to be

optimistic to become happy. 'Happiness' is not confined to a directory, nor it is to be bought anywhere. Happiness lies within the mind. It is up to mankind to tap happiness and spread it everywhere. That is the message of the poet to mankind. Whitman wants the readers of confide everything in him. The poet is ever ready to receive anything and everything, as he said:

Do I contract myself?

Very well then ... I contradict myself,

I am large .... I contain multitudes.

His vast self encompasses everything. The poet has no time to linger long for the readers. He invites the listeners to join him on his journey immediately. He wants them to join him so that they can also derive the wisdom through the mystical trance.

The last cluster of Song of Myself is like a testament. The poet suggests that the hawk may accuse him of simply wasting his time and energy in sounding.

'The barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.'<sup>7</sup> But hawk has mistaken. The poet rises high in the sky trying to translate his mystical experience into words. But the words may be incompetent to voice his mystic experience. The words can't express his mystic experience. Yet the poet attempts to put forth his mystic experience. During his mystic experience he has become one with the divine. Hence, he is not afraid of death or the problems of life. He wants to do his best for his fellow human being. He is equally humble. He says:

I bequeath myself to the dirt

to grow from the grass I love,

If you want me again

look for me under your bootsoles.

The poet wants to become grass. The people could search for him beneath their boot-soles. It was a blade of grass that launched him on a mystical journey. This section is overflowing with thought provoking ideas about that mystic experience. The poet wants the reader to grasp him and his ideas. The poet invites to the reader:

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,

Missing me one place search another,

I stop somewhere waiting for you.

The poet's help will definitely lead the reader to know what the divine is. If that awareness is awakened in the reader then the purpose of Walt Whitman – the poet, philosopher, prophet, seer, the spokesman of the entire world... has been achieved. He wants every being to live in harmony. He wants everyone to exist with compassion, love and sympathy. He wants everybody to sustain life with peace, pity and equality.

### **Conclusion:-**

At the end it is to be concluded that Walt Whitman wants people to live life full of zest, a healthy life, full of vitality with the belief that there is one Almighty power who is the creator, the Mastermind behind the entire Universe. Whitman does not want mankind to make arguments about the existence of God but to accept HIM. This is the message of the poet. The poet emphasizes the idea of Bhagavat Gita, that God is omnipresent and omnipotent: God is present everywhere and in everyone. But everybody does not realize it. It is people and poet's like Whitman, who awaken the mechanical minds to the realization of 'self' and soul. This presumption will only result if one knows that the body is mortal and soul is immortal and that the immortal soul is on a never-ending quest of the Divine soul. The study of Song of Myself is a reward in itself. It makes the reader rich with the thoughts of the mystic experience of the poet and of his broadminded views and his approaches to the many facts of life.

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