



DEATH IN WHITMAN'S LEAVES OF GRASS- A GLOBALPERSPECTIVE

Dr. N. K. SHARMA

Lecturer in English & American Studies (Retd)

Hindu College (P.G), Sonapat, Haryana.

e mail-amitsharmav2@gmail.com



Dr. N. K. SHARMA

ABSTRACT

Death in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is studied via multiple religious' perspective to determine its place in man's life on earth and life after death in this article. It is further revealed that Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism or Jainism have no direct or indirect impact on the poet's mind. Whitman is his own religion and the so-called parallelisms pin-pointed by his detractors are purely co-incidental and unrealistic.

Whitman's concept of death is highly individualistic and original. It is self-centred and not conditioned by any holy priest, Maulvi or Gurmukhor monk. Death, in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, is not an abstraction but a vibrant super-power controlling man's life on earth. It spares none and treats everyone equally without prejudice. The traditional fear of death has no place in Whitman's poetic universe.

Key Words: Mystic, Death, Transcendental, Spiritual, Ecstatic and Salvation.

Introduction

Walt Whitman is one of the leading mystic poets of death in the field of American poetry. Death is assigned a distinguished space in his poetic universe of *Leaves of Grass* which immensely colours his vision of life. This paper is an attempt to present Whitman's attitude towards death vis-à-vis global mystic perspective.

Reality of Death

Whitman reposes absolute faith in the real reality of death. Death is an established fact of life and is intimately related to it: "O living always, always dying", and "Have you guess'd you yourself would not continue" (*Leaves of Grass*, 351). In Sikhism, too, the inevitability of death is emphatically stressed: "Everything gets devoured by death" (SGGS, 15). Islam also shows that death befalls every human-being on the earth: "Every living creature shall taste death" (Quran, 3.78). In Hinduism, death's inevitability is unquestionably

acknowledged: "For one who takes birth, death is certain and for one who has died, birth is certain" (*The Gita*, ch.2, verse 27)

Inevitable and impartial

In Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, death is an integral part of the mundane existence and nobody can show off escaping from its deadly clutches. Death treats everybody, rich or poor, white or black, gentleman or criminal on par and does not discriminate people on the basis of caste, colour or creed. "To Think of Time" shows that death spares none in this material existence and it descends on human-beings at some point of time in their life. Nothing stays forever in the death-dominated world:

"To think of time-for all that retrospection,
To think of today, and the ages continued
hence forward,
Have you guessed you your self would not
continue" (L.G.338)

The poem 'Scented Herbage of My Breast' is the whole-hearted celebration of the glory of death. It reinforces the idea of the ultimate reality of death, the final goal of life:

"O I think it is not for life I am chanting here
my chant of lover I

think it must be for death" (L.G.94)

Transcendental Nature of Reality

Walt Whitman has always sought to examine the transcendental nature of reality. His divinely inspired vision led him to the domain extending beyond the reach of empirical experience. The unknown, the unseen, the unheard and the unexpressed revealed to his mind the deepest truths about the ultimate reality. For Whitman, according to V.N.Dhvale, "the world of senses is not real world, it is only a poor substitute for the real, the ideal, the transcendental" (Walt Whitman 43). Whitman's approach to the transcendental nature of life is free from any obscurity or dogmatism.

Limitations of Material Life

Whitman is invariably analysing the material in terms of transcendental in his poetic universe to highlight its limitations. For Whitman, the material life, though alluring, is short-lived. It is merely a transit camp where the spiritual searcher equips himself for encountering hazards and obstacles of the subsequent spiritual journey. Whitman urges the divine lover in "Song of the Open Road" to delink himself from the pleasures and temptations of earthly life and opt for the road not taken for enjoying the peace and bliss of heavenly life:

"Be not discouraged, keep on, there are
divine things well enveloped,
I swear to you there are divine things more
beautiful than words can tell.
However convenient this dwelling
Allons! We must not stop here,
We cannot remain here....." (L.G.123).

Like Walt Whitman, the leading religions and mystics of the world consider the material as an obstacle for the realisation of divine goals. No union between a spiritual quester and God is possible in materialistic terms. Man has to first forgo his "ego", remarks R.N.Tagore, and "bondage Of finery" (Gitanjali, song 8) to be united with God. Aurobindo Ghosh states in

Savitri that immersion of Self in God is feasible by the destruction of the ego only: "The ego is dead; we are freed" (Savitri, 311).

No Fear of Death

The fear of death finds no place in the world of mysticism. In the *Gita*, death is visualised as a resting place for the man who lives the inner life. To him, death is anything but extinction. In Buddhism, it is stated that a person should not fear death as it leads to rebirth. The *Bible* shows that love of Christ protects a person from death: "For to me, to love is Christ and to die is gain" (Bible, Psalm, 23.4) Death is a blessing in disguise in Guru Granth Sahib: "Kabeer, death, of which the world is terrified, is pleasing unto me; as it is in death alone that one is blessed with the Supreme Bliss" (S.G. G. S, 1365)

Personification of Death

Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* shows that the poet has never felt terrified or panicky in the presence of death. He loves to personify death and is often seen in dialogue with it. In 'Song of Myself', he jokingly tells death that it cannot harm him in any way:

"And as to you Death, and you bitter hug of
mortality, it is idle to try to alarm
me" (L.G., song 49)

"Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" shows how the sea waves privately remind the poet about the arrival of death:

"But edging near as privately for me rustling
at my feet
Creeping thence steadily up to my ears and
laying me softly
All over,
Death, death, death, death, death" (L.G.203)

Celebration of Death

Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is the whole-hearted celebration of death. Mark Kinhead-Weeks, too, concurs with this courageous response to death: "Death is a part of a continuous cycle, and must be celebrated with life, even joyfully" (19th Century American Poetry, p.49). This points to the philosophical acceptance of death as a natural phenomenon. Whitman often finds himself in an ecstatic mood while encountering death. He joyfully extends a red carpet welcome to death at its very

arrival in the poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd":

"Come lovely and soothing death,
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving,
arriving,
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner or later delicate death"(L.G.346)

The poet, thus, addresses death in a very friendly and courteous manner and shows no signs of fear in its presence. It is the inevitability of death which makes him stay cool and unperturbed.

The poem "Starting from Paumnok" shows that the happening of death in man's life is the unmatched experience of it. It enlivens life and makes it worth-living: "I will show that nothing can happen more beautiful than death"(L.G.19)

Life-After Death

The subject of life-after death has its supporters and detractors in the realm of mysticism. Death in Islam is nothing more than a transition from this world onto the next. It marks the termination of worldly and initiation into after-life: "Let every person consider what they have sent ahead for tomorrow" (Quran,59:18). Christians have no doubts about life-after death on the earth: "For Lord so loves the world, that he gave only son, that whoever believes in Him should not pause but have an external life"(Bible,3.16). In Buddhism, death is not the end of the life, it is merely the end of the body we inhabit in this life. The life-after death and the place of birth depend on man's past actions or karma. The *Bhagavad Gita*, too, reinforces the idea of the extension of life-after death: "From birth comes death and from death comes birth"(The Gita, ch.2, verse27)

Whitman also believes in life-after death for the fulfilment of man's uncherished dreams on the earth. The poem 'Good-Bye My Fancy' shows that love-ties cannot be broken before and after death:

"Then if we die together, (yes, we'll remain one,
If we anywhere we'll go together to meet
what happens"(L.G.15)

'Song of Myself' also points to the perpetuation of life after death:

"They are well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is no death,

And if ever there was it led to forward life,
and does not stop wait

at the end to arrest it,
And ceases the moment life
appeared"(L.G.,song 6)

The Sikhs vehemently reject the concept of life after death because no concrete evidence is available on this mysterious phenomenon.

Salvation

Finally, death prepares the ground for the salvation of the soul and its final merger with God. The idea of salvation of the soul varies from religion to religion. Salvation, for the Hindu, can be achieved in one of three ways: the way of works, the way of knowledge, or the way of devotion. A Hindu believer must act selflessly to be identified with God. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, there are three paths of salvation: Bhakti, Jnna and karmayoga. In Islam and Judaism, salvation is attained by performing good deeds and following the moral law. Jainism holds that salvation is achieved through right belief, right knowledge, and right conduct. Salvation in Christianity is Christocentric. Jesus says: "Whoever believe in me, though he died, yet shall never die"(Bible,11;23-26). For a Buddhist, salvation is reaching *nirvana*. It is through human works. In Sikhism, "Salvation rests in the Lord's sanctuary"(S.G.G.S, 398). R. N. Tagore's *Gitanjali* shows how the union between the self of the poet and God fills his heart with joy and pride: "All that is harsh and dissonant in my life melts one sweet harmony..."(*Gitanjali*, song 2)

Whitman is vehemently opposed to the Christians' concept of God which underplays the role of death in man's unity with God to attain salvation. He equates death with God which initiates the spiritual searcher into Lord's sanctuary. He humbly requests Death for granting him this special favour:

"Be thou my God,
O Death, (for life has served in turn,
Open and usher to the heavenly
mansion"(L.G.216)

Individualistic Attitude

Whitman has never been a blind worshipper of any particular religion or metaphysical creed. As V.N. Dhavala rightly

observed: "For he never claims to represent any particular faith-not even Christianity in a popular sense"(Walt Whitman,40). Karl Shapiro admits: "Whitman is one of those who hate religion and eventually becomes a religion" (Start with Sun, p.7.)

Whitman's concept of God is highly individualistic. For Whitman, man's communion with God is direct and without any external agency. This concept of salvation is opposed to Islam or Sikhism where a divinely inspired priest helps the spiritual quester attain salvation or spiritual oneness with God.

Conclusion

Whitman's concept of death is interpreted via world religious perspective in this article. Death occupies a pivotal position in Whitman's poetic universe of *Leaves of Grass*. For Whitman, death is not an abstraction, but a living reality. Whitman's encounters with death are quite realistic and insightful. Death is all-powerful, unavoidable and treats all human-beings on par. Moreover, the traditional fear of death has lost its relevance in *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman welcomes death and accords it a red-carpet treatment on its arrival on the earth. Death is not a curse but a blessing in disguise as it ensures a better life-after death. Whitman visualises a close relationship between life and death. Death cannot block the progression of life, which is always in a state of flux. Death is a birth in the spiritual sense. Whitman equates death with God which paves the way for the soul of the spiritual searcher to be united with God.

References

1. S.K.Kumar,ed., *Walt Whitman: Leaves of Grass* (New Delhi: Eurasia Publication,1962)The text herein after referred to as L.G.
2. *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, ed.,translated in Text by Singh Sahib Khalsa (Arizona, Tucson). The text herein after referred to as S.G.G.S.
3. *Quran*, ed., Translated by Dr. Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al. Hilali&Dr.MuhammadMusin Khan.
4. *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita*, translated byJayaram v, 2000.

5. V. N. Davala, *Walt Whitman* (New Delhi:Tata Mac-Graw Hill Publishing Co. Ltd. 1976).
6. R.N. Tagore,*Gitanjali*, W.B. Yeats (Macmillan and Co.,1910).
7. Sri Aurobindo Ghosh*Savitri*, Shradhdhavan, SavitriBhavan.
8. *Bible*.
9. Mark Kinhead-Week, "Walt Whitman passes the Full Stop" in *Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*,ed. A. RobertLee(London:Vision Press Ltd.1985).
10. Karl Shapiro's "The First White Aboriginal" in James, et al. *Start With Sun in Whitman Tradition*(Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1960).