

Walt Whitman and Wole Soyinka's select poems: A Marxist Approach

Rekha R

Assistant Professor

PG Department of English

Don Bosco College, Yelagiri Hills

rekhafren@gmail.com

The study, Walt Whitman and Wole Soyinka's select poems: A Marxist Approach will examine the poems of Walt Whitman, an American poet and Wole Soyinka, an African poet. These poets have been the subject matter of many discussion and debate throughout the world. Moreover they were the poets who were much concerned with the society and its people and they always tried to bring the social issues to the fore front. Marxism was a movement which was mainly an attack on the capitalist countries and their production method. An interesting aspect of this study is that, America being the most capitalist of all the countries, it is interesting to know how far the American writers themselves are able to understand the serious social issues and portray it in their writings. By analyzing Soyinka and his writings, we get black writers views on the issues in the society.

Walt Whitman brought universality to poetry by bringing the working class people and their life in his works. He is aware of the condition of working class people in American society. He depicted both the defects of American urban society and the promise of working class behavior. He portrayed both the white working class section of society as well as the black people who were compelled to work under the white masters as slaves.

"I Hear America singing" is a typical poem of Walt Whitman who is considered as the first modern American poet. Here Whitman takes his subject matter of poetry from the American working class folk and their democracy. Throughout his writings, Whitman makes himself a person who stands for the working class. Through this vibrant and energetic poem, Whitman tries to voice the American democracy. His focus is on the working class people who make up the larger sections of American society. The poem is a sort of celebrations of the working class people who are happy and content with their work and thereby contributes to the growth and development of American civilization and also for the betterment of its citizenship. The greatness of America is described by Whitman here by bringing each individual of the industry doing and enjoying their different works.

Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,

The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,

Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs (9-11)

Whitman gives importance to those people like mechanic, carpenter, wood cutter, shoe maker, mason, boatman, mother, the young wife, and the girl who are not usually discussed in poems especially in a capitalist country like America. It might be because Whitman is not as educated as his contemporaries and so his friends were these people. These images bring the picture of a working class society. They are the major section of American society who contribute to the glory and development of America with their productive labor. He brings in the images of men and women without any sort of gender bias and he projects them as a group of strong vital people who performs their duty in a fine manner. Each person becomes important

for Whitman because every job he mentions requires skill and effort and each one contributes to the smooth running of the nation.

Walt Whitman consideration is about the individual and thereby the individual freedom too. They all are leading a busy life. Everyone is busy with their work. The poet hasn't mentioned about anybody who is sitting idle. And they are happy and proud with their work as the narrator hears them singing. These singers represent the nation; the whole of America. Each of them is singing their own songs.

The first line of the poem becomes the title of the poem in all his poems. When we read the title for the first time, we may think that America is singing as a whole country. But as far as my reading goes, Whitman here indicates to the all people of America who does their work in different fields sing various songs and each song contributes to the whole of the country. Whitman here feels like everyone is singing together a good song. While going through the poem we can understand that America believes in the glory of its working class. The word "America" in line one and also in the title represents each individuals of the nation especially workers. The phrase "democratic" which usually appears in his writings refers to the working class. The phrase "carols" is a religious term which denotes to some sort of a holy song about Christmas and so here the poet celebrates individuals with the physical manifestation of God.

The phrase "singing" is used twelve times in the poem including in the title. It itself shows the pride of American labor. It is this repetition of words and sounds that which creates a sort of rhythm to the poetry. The poet switches from one subject to another in each line of the poem. Later the act of singing becomes stronger.

Whitman has a positive notion about America. Being part of a capitalist country like America, Whitman is able to bring the theme of working class sections and their fruits in to consideration. He depicts the people who though because of their hard work celebrate the outcome of their labor. The form of the poem contributes to the theme which it conveys. He uses this technique to showcase the diversity of American population. He uses realistic imagery to convey his theme.

“Song of the Broad-Axe” is a highly symbolic dramatic poem composed by Walt Whitman which reveals his concept of mystic evolution. In the beginning of the poem, the “broad-axe” symbolizes the creative constructive power of the pioneers of America. It also stands as a metaphor for the American nation and its people; their power to do what they choose to do. It may also stands for an evolution in which the supremacy of good may stand over the evil. It is a powerful tool in the hands of the common people and it can bring both destruction and violence alike. Whitman gives much importance to individuality or self and he sees it as part of a universal self or a mass of mankind. This view of Whitman extents to the notion of America in general and American in particular. So the brad-axe symbolizes the growth and development of the nation America which has multiple faces in it. But still it is one entity and one country according to Whitman. It also stands for the growth and development of the citizen of America and thereby the growth of a civilization. The broad-axe also exemplifies the quality of “Unity in Diversity” in the American society.

When Whitman is describing the government, he states the importance of American citizens and their role in the society. For him, to have a great city, there should be “greatest men

and women” and for him the elected government or rulers are the workers for the American citizens.

Soyinka once in an interview mentioned that he used to go to the farms. From this we can assume that he developed a close affinity to the fields and its workers. Soyinka was also able to experience the division between the peasantry, the ordinary people and the traditional rulers and portray it in her writings. “Season” and “Ever-Ready Bank Accounts” are the poems selected for this analysis.

“*Season*” is a poem composed by Wole Soyinka which talks about a particular “season” of farming of corns. There is a corn gatherer in the poem who waits for the time between autumn and winter. It is the season of corn harvest or the cycling of the season for getting the fruit of the corn. This change of season is portrayed through the mind of a corn gatherer who is supposed to be a farmer. Farmers are more concerned with the change of seasons than any other people. Here in this poem the poet is depicting the feelings of the corn gatherer in his fields.

The reader gets the real feeling of the readiness of the farmer to have his golden harvest while going through the poem. The poet with his use of highly poetic techniques and imageries makes the feelings of the farmer reach the reader effectively. The setting of the poem is in cornfield and the ritual of harvest has been portrayed in the poem. There is also an implied idea in the poem that the gem of the corn will rise again to have another fruitful golden time for the farmer to harvest.

It is expedient to state here that these poets use distinct imagery which set them out from their contemporaries. It is also of paramount significance to state that new metaphors were

created to illuminate the voices based on the poets' divergence of cultures. The work was based on Marxist literary criticism with recourse to realism because the poems under analysis were realistically expressing the views of Americans as well as Africans.

To say, both Whitman and Soyinka are deeply concerned with the social problems like slavery, racial discrimination and oppression, economic inequality and unjust social hierarchies. Even though these poets have not explicitly adhered to Marxist ideology in their lives, their poems reflect some of the important concepts of Marxism. A close reading of the selected poems has revealed that the poets wanted to question and overthrow the exploitative symptoms which resulted in social inequality.

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