Isaac Sequira Memorial Lecture
Nature in Whitman: Whitman in Nature

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At one level, the title of the lecture points toward nature imagery, symbolism and metaphors as employed in Whitman's poetic universe; at another, it implies his creative consciousness as immersed, invested, and embedded in nature to an extent that it emerges as an internalised doctrine of his poetic creed. Both these levels co-exist as these are co-dependent as well as symbiotic in several ways. Right from the beginning of his poetic career, Whitman's engagement with nature had been intense as well as non-conventional. 'Intense' because of his bold endeavour to deal with nature in its unrestrained aspect having an "original" (26) energy-charge as evident in "Song of Myself," and 'non-conventional' as his first edition of *Leaves of Grass* which was published in 1855 demonstrates a poetic praxis markedly distinct from his contemporaries such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Emily Dickinson in America and also the English Romantics.

Nature for Whitman was not just a physical landscape, earth, water, air, and ether, but also a living spirit, a propulsion behind the universe, a cosmic rhythm, and the aspirational core of humanity signified by "One's-Self," singular as well as democratic in the sense of 'collective' "En-Masse" (Moon 3). In her book on *A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson, and the Natural World* (2014), Christine Gerhardt distinguishes Whitman's "expansive" poetic "vision" (comprising earth, grass, sea, birds, etc.) resonating in terms of "America's democratic inclusiveness" from that of Dickinson whose "lyric meditations, natural phenomena constitute key metaphors for life and death, for a new religion, and for the power of the creative imagination" (1). Martin K. Doudna, however, observes that "Whitman sees natural facts as inherently symbolic of spiritual facts" *a la* Ralph Waldo Emerson whose essay on "Nature" (1844), and a poem namely "Song of Nature" published in his book titled *Poems* (1847) left a lasting imprint on Whitman's evolving poetic consciousness.

Whitman was extremely conscious of his poetic stance, which rather than having a lofty ambition was focussed on singing "of inherent qualities in man, indifferent whether right or wrong" in "Of My Poems" (592), and thus determining that issues concerning indecency and ethico-moral considerations would be dealt with candour and forthrightness. He states this in an unsigned review of his own poems in 1855 published in the *Brooklyn Daily Times*. Talking about the efficacy of his poems, Whitman writes that the effects that his poems have on readers are "no effects of artists or the arts, but effects of the original eye or arm, or the actual atmosphere, or tree, or bird. You may feel the unconscious teaching of a fine brute, but will never feel the artificial teaching of a fine writer or speaker" (793).

Whitman juxtaposes himself with those poets who portray "great events, personages, wars, loves, passions" and thereby positions himself as the poet who celebrates "natural propensities in himself" in a non-conclusive manner and "that is the way he celebrates all" (794). Without alluding to other poets/writers, he emerges as the one who cannot offer "others" but himself, "[o]f pure American breed, large and lusty" (794) through his poems—be that in the form of poetic content or style. Whitman's fine, brute-like poetic demeanour corroborates his "barbaric yawp" in "Song of Myself" (77), which refuses to be tamed or translated. Interestingly, in Section 52, this fine brute's yawp/ "gab" is complained against by a swooping, spotted hawk who also accuses him of his foot-loose, fancy-free "loitering;" nevertheless, he becomes one with the "air," "the runaway sun" and "eddies" (794).

In *Democratic Vistas* (1871), Whitman writes about "variety and freedom" being "the greatest lessons of Nature through the universe" (757), and toward the end, envisions nature as a "complete, actual poem" that exists "calmly in the divine scheme containing all . . . careless of the criticism of a day, or these endless and wordy chatterers" (772). The nature is not 'calm' in the passive, static sense as he can feel the "pulsations in all matter, all spirit, throbbing forever" (772-73). Moreover, in *Specimen Days* (1882) containing notes and essays written at various points in his life, Whitman merges in Nature, which he realizes as "open, voiceless, mystic, far removed, yet palpable, [and]

eloquent" (780). Later he advocates that the "Sweet, sane, still Nakedness in Nature" needs to be experienced not just visually or cerebrally, but "through the whole corporeal body" (781).

Nature being the mainstay of his poetic praxis, Whitman engages with her in a variety of ways. For instance, while celebrating love or mystical union in Section 5 of "Song of Myself," Whitman is out in the open inviting thus: "Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat" to later recall an unusually "transparent summer morning" when he experiences love which is "kelson of the creation" followed by an instantaneous dawning of "peace and knowledge" (29) that is beyond all arguments. To quote from the text:

> Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge
>
> that pass all the argument of the earth,
>
> And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
>
> And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
>
> And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the
>
> women my sisters and lovers,
>
> And that a kelson of the creation is love,
>
> And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,
>
> And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
>
> And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd stones, elder,
>
> mullein and poke-weed. (Whitman 30)

This newly dawned wisdom has God as his "promise" and "brother" along with women as lovers and sisters. The bond, in fact, emanates from love. However, that is not all as there are innumerable stiff/ limp leaves scattered in the fields along with little insects like "brown ants" along with moss, stones, mullein, poke-weed, etc. inseparable from the expanded ambit of love that has enveloped him. Interestingly, Nature in her diverse manifestations surrounds him as love emerges as a great integrating and unifying force. Whitman also suggests that every aspect of creation howsoever trivial or miniscule, is equally crucial and hence cannot be ignored.

In the sixth section of "Song of Myself," the central symbol is "grass." Whitman makes a conjecture with conviction that it is the "flag of my disposition" or "the handkerchief of Lord." Later, the grass ceases to be a literal referent and becomes a "uniform hieroglyphic" and thereby assumes the form of a "child" and a "babe of vegetation." It also signifies the beautiful "uncut hair of graves" (30). Contemplating over "grass" further, Whitman experiences deathlessness when he writes: "The smallest sprout shows there is really no death, / And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it . . ." (31). Hence the "grass" becomes instrumental in making Whitman experience the prevalence of a subtle and deeper process in human life characterized by eternity. At the time of the realization of the fact of the endlessness of one's life, man deems himself luckier to have died: "All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses, / And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier" (31). Like "grass," "leaves" too are suggestive of a diverse range of experiences such as love, sympathy, sex, pain, misery, compassion, detachment, carnality, 'cosmicality,' spirituality, 'mysticality,' emotionality, kindness, and empathy. Whitman's poetic vision being inclusive, it recoils neither from the sacred nor the profane, neither from the subtle nor the gross. Another remarkable aspect of Whitman's use of "leaves" as a symbol is its dynamic character. The ever-changing hues of his "leaves" have a powerful bearing on the contexts and milieus that these evoke. On the one hand, the "leaves" signify American democracy and its ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, but on the other, they stand for Whitman's pantheism, cosmic vision, and his belief in transcendentalism.

As such, *Leaves of Grass*, as it evolved over a period of thirty-seven years starting from 1855 when the first edition was published containing only twelve poems, until 1892 when it had grown both in size and stature as a "compendious final work" (Moon xxi), is loaded with symbolic implications and portrays a variety of landscapes, seascapes, and skyscapes along with varied mindscapes (or abstract 'scapes'/spaces) representing the magnitude and infinitude of evolution at several levels such as psychological, spiritual, mystical, philosophical, and transcendental.

The first of the SEA-DRIFT poems, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" is rich in imagery. This poem traces the growth of a boy into man. The cradle symbolizes momentum as well as childhood. "Endless Rocking" signifies the growth of the child into a man and it also stands for various trials and tribulations that one has to undergo in life. The central image in the poem is that of the sea. It is also used in two other poems entitled "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" and "Starting from Paumanok." In "Starting from Paumanok," Whitman alludes to "Western Sea" and "Eastern Sea" which stand for the formative Western and Oriental influences on Whitman. As the waves sweep the shores of the sea; similarly, his verses are also drenched by the multifarious influences. In sincere acknowledgement, Whitman writes:

> See, on the one side the Western Sea and on the other the
>
> Eastern Sea, how they advance and retreat upon my
>
> poems as upon their own shores. (24-25)

In fact, the sea is "the fierce old mother" in "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," however, in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," Whitman views sea as "some old crone rocking the cradle" (212). He portrays two birds who are "two feather'd guests from Alabama" and the subsequent death of the female bird baffles the keenly observant boy who keeps "cautiously peering" (207) and faces the cruel fact of death. He needs "the clew" (211) to resolve the mystery of death and the old crone (the sea) provides it while rocking the cradle. It signifies motherhood, birth, life and also deathlessness. Prior to this, the poet hears the sea clearly whispering about death, but it is rocking the cradle at the end, which signifies rebirth and regeneration. Thus, we may see how Whitman employs images of "the bird" and "the sea" to endow the boy with a mature understanding of life.

Norman Foerster views Whitman's poetic trajectory from the perspective of his mystical experience of "surpassing peace and knowledge" in "Song of Myself" and how he lived the rest of his life under that spell obeying an "interior command" which would guide his path vis-à-vis representation and theorisation of nature and the notion of democracy. He further observes that Whitman remained "passionately devoted" to the land "surrounding his birth-place" (Foerster 2). His

interminable bond with Long Island was akin to that of Thoreau with Walden. His poetic canvas widens as he evolves as a poet, as a man with an extraordinary capacity to feel through experiencing—an aspect that Foerster underscores when he observes that the "primary importance of sensuousness in his life and in his poetry seems to me unquestionable. His senses were unusually powerful and delicate. Virtually all the influences that led to his mystical awakening were, as we have seen, sensuous" (13).

In the poem, "To the Sun-Set Breeze," Whitman's closeness to nature along with its experience, absorption and assimilation transmute his perception and deepen his feeling about elements such as earth, air, water and space with an unusual simultaneity:

> I feel the sky, the prairies vast—I feel the mighty northern
>
> lakes,
>
> I feel the ocean and the forest—somehow, I feel the globe itself
>
> swift-swimming in space. . . (458)

The element of fire too is evident at a symbolic level as it is signified by "central urge in every atom" in the poem "A Persian Lesson" (464). It is also represented, even though symbolically, in another poem, "I Sing the Body Electric," through the "body electric" which has a sacred dimension as well: "If anything is sacred the human body is sacred" (Whitman 86-87). In fact, he realizes nature as an open space having endless "original energy" along with power to sooth, nourish, and elevate simultaneously:

> It seems indeed as if peace and nutriment from heaven subtly filter into me as I slowly hobble down these country lanes and across fields, in the good air—as I sit here in solitude with Nature—open, voiceless, mystic, far removed, yet palpable, eloquent Nature. I merge myself in the scene, in the perfect day. Hovering over the clear brook-water, I am sooth'd by its soft gurgle in one place, and the hoarser murmurs of its three-foot fall in another. (Whitman, "Complete" 104)

Whitman's treatment of Nature as "elements" (458), that is, earth, air, water and space basically happen to be the central concern in different editions of *Leaves of Grass* including the 1891-92 edition, and it has been evidenced through his title-page epigraph in the form of a poem duly signed by the poet. By "[t]allying [e]arth's soil, trees, winds, tumultuous waves," Whitman invites his "Soul" (which he claims to be "one" with his "Body") to pen verses for his "Body" called "Walt Whitman" (2). Whereas the element of fire too is present (literally as well as metaphorically as discussed) in his prose and poetic writings, space too has been envisioned as infinite vastness delineated as the fifth important element of the "Self" that he sings in Section 51 of "Song of Myself"— "I am large, I contain multitudes" (77).

In Section 33, however, Whitman crafts a different spatio-temporal frame to accommodate his vastly illimitable vision wherein "Space and Time" have been realized through an expanded consciousness of the Self and the Body that break free of all shackles, "ties and ballasts" to be able to rest his elbows in "sea-gaps," "skirt sierras," and spread palms to "cover continents" (57). Being "afoot" with his vision, Whitman lends a richly varied and diverse sense of detail in this section to thereby underscore his comprehension and profound assimilation of nature as well as life as a whole. Whitman's 'at-one-ment' with nature becomes evident when he witnesses himself everywhere—along the dry ravines, in the rivers, savannas, forests, deserts, and in places where panthers, bucks, rattlesnakes, alligators and black bears are found. Beholding himself atop mountains, he treads along the pathway in the grass. Being omnipresent, the poet's presence is felt where cattle graze, the quail whistles, human heart pulsates with life, and the bat flies. He is also visible in the sea, under the Niagara Falls, in the fields, among animals and birds, in cemeteries, orchards, and prairies (54). He ventures through voyaging to every port (56) alongside visiting "orchards of spheres" (55) to look at "quintillions ripen'd and . . . quintillions green" (57). This racy cataloguing on the poet's part in no way implies his separation from what he beholds or experiences; it is rather *becoming* (emphasis mine) the object of his description, experience or observation: "I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself / become the wounded person . . ." (58). His capacity to be at one with the sufferer,

makes Whitman a *Sahridaya*, which in Sanskrit aesthetics signifies someone who rather than feeling the pain of the other (Lakshmi), or sympathising with her/him, becomes the other. Whitman's cosmic vision also is akin to the notion of *Viraat* (Cosmic Form) also expounded as "Vision of Visions" (Yogananda 843) in the eleventh chapter of the *Gita* comprising every aspect of creation. In fact, Whitman's cosmic vision takes into account everything that is existent in the universe. Whitman's catalogue thus is infinite touching every aspect of creation including Nature such as the oceans, rivers, mountains, plains along with all the continents.

Thus, as discussed, Nature is germane to Whitman's poetic universe and contains five elements namely earth, air, water, ether/space, and fire also known as *panchbhoot* or *panchtatva* in Hinduism (Mani). Air, for instance, is an element that rejuvenates vital force creates "best persons," as Whitman writes: "Now I see the secret of the making of the best persons, / It is to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the earth" (129). In fact, he has passion "of growing outdoors" and hence, his preference for those who have tasted "oceans" and lived among the "woods" (36). Whitman is equally enamoured by the sky as well—be that the sky at twilight with its "haze" making him experience "nirwana" (447), or the one imagined as "heaven" into which the rain rises from the sea to eventually descend as "the Poem of the Earth" to "lave the drouths" along with "dust-layers of the globe" (444). As a matter of fact, each element of nature tends to converse in a deep, nuanced manner with the poet, who evolves as "the Answerer" answering queries including unanswerable ones as he now knows how "[e]very existence has its idiom and tongue" (142). Whitman's creative consciousness catalyses the abstract and the concrete, the material and the spiritual, the physical and the metaphysical culminating in a 'unitive' poetic vision.

The symbol of the sea is also a constant source of wonderment as well as realization of harsher realities of life for Whitman. In "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," the sea laves him all over with the "delicious word death" used five times in succession in the poem to underline its gravity (Whitman 211). Death being the firm fact of life, the poet has no business to stop as his voyage, his passage has to continue. And this is because a tender little sprout has endowed him with the realization

that "there is really no death" (31). Such metaphorical fusion and symbolic experimentation both challenge as well as cajole the reader to bid adieu to a conventional mode of exploring symbols of sea and nature in Whitman's poetry. David Kuebrich's observation seems pertinent at this juncture:

> With the sea representing the divine or the spiritual in Whitman's poetry, the land represents the natural world, and the shoreline becomes a meeting point between the two worlds and thus an appropriate location for spiritual perception and poetic inspiration. In various poems, for instance, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," "By Blue Ontario's Shore," "When I Heard at the Close of the Day," and "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," Whitman receives an important revelation at the seashore. (Kuebrich)

Thus, nature and sea are crucial as well as vital for Whitman's poetic praxis. Nevertheless, it does not stop there and lucidly suggests that the wicked, loathsome, and rough in the earth is directly proportional to the wicked, loathsome, and rough in man. Therefore, we can observe subtle as well as solid symbiotic layers in the poet's relationship with nature. Mountains, trees, fields and plants, creatures of earth, divisions of time, mornings, noons, afternoons, evenings and nights, along with the seasons of the year are veritable, animate, pulsating presences in Whitman's poetic schema having profound bearing on his intrinsic being connected inextricably with a diverse range of extrinsic/ manifest reality.

That is the reason why the loftiest of Whitman's claims about nature-man relationship and his metaphysical as well as mystical experiences tend to stay rooted as well as grounded to an unimaginable degree. Killingsworth rightly corroborates this point thus:

> But this metaphysical experience does not distract the senses away from the earth and the body; rather, it turns them toward the earth and the body's sensitive connection with it. The soul itself is linked to the earth; it is an environmental agent that overtakes the ordinary life of the inspired individual and makes everything strange and new.

Nevertheless, Whitman's poetic idiom by and large becomes mystical as the numinous/divine and the ephemeral co-exist in a harmonious 'unitiveness' also perceived as 'identity-in-

difference.' He becomes contradictions incarnate and thereby evidences that these could synchronise, howsoever intricately. This aspect of Whitman's poetry has been critiqued by Richard Volney Chase as well by terming it as "ruthless equalitarianism to conceive the All" (qtd. in Sharma 71). Despite the fact that Whitman has been questioned as a "consistent philosophical thinker," Diane Kepner claims that "he is giving us a 'theory of nature' (or a philosophy of Being) which answers to the demands that Emerson made for such a theory in 'Nature'" (1). Emerson, in fact, advocates a theory through "direct observation" rather than depending on tradition: "The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition . . . ?" (qtd. in Kepner 4).

Justin Kaplan also has a point when he writes that Emerson must have been "speaking to Whitman alone" while talking about the poet of America: "He is in the forest walks . . . he sits on the mosses of the mountain. . . When he lifts his great voice, men gather to him and forget all that is past. . . As he proceeds, I see their eyes sparkle . . ." (Kaplan 101). Emerson thus paves way, even though inadvertently, for Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Nevertheless, Whitman's steak of defiance comes to the fore in his 1851 Art Union talk wherein he underscores the fact that "the highest art" had to be "the most totally engaged" (Kaplan 168). And that was the reason why "the great old masters," culture, and tradition "appeared to him as repressive, barriers to self-transcendence, and the construction of 'a poem on the open principles of nature'" (Kaplan 169).

Massud Farzan views the poem, "A Persian Lesson" as a suitable summation of the entire poetic universe of Whitman. The poet himself seems to be the "greybeard sufi" who technically shared the fruition of his Sufic wisdom towards the end of his poetic career in 1891. Farzan looks at this poem as a "fitting coda for *Leaves of Grass*, not only because it presents a synthesis and recapitulation of the rest of the book, but also because of the marvelous sense of tranquility and wholeness it conveys" (582). The sermon is being delivered "In the fresh scent of the morning in the open air, / On the slope of a teeming Persian rose-garden, / Under an ancient chestnut-tree wide

spreading its branches" (464) in the midst of nature underscoring that fact that divinity operates as an invisible principle signified by "central urge" in every atom of the manifest as well as the unmanifest world.

Summing up, we can say that Whitman's poetic discourse on nature in relation to self and vice versa in the second half of the nineteenth century has a strong ecological and environmental aspect. It thus becomes extremely relevant in the crisis of contemporary context marked by issues such as abrogation of environment, ecological imbalance, global warming, hyper-materialism, hyper-consumerism, anthropocentrism, and utter disregard for indigenous ways of thinking and dealing with nature and the world around us. Christine Gerhardt rightly perceives Whitman's poetic praxis as "resonant with the development of a modern environmental consciousness in the history of American environmental literature." She further underscores his contribution to the poetic idiom that "brings nature as autonomous subject matter" (Gerhardt). Whitman's deep nature-centred aesthetic engagement helps him decode and depict most complex contours of nature as well as of his own self. Therefore, if we theorise landscape as a space or sphere, there is a whole variety of landscapes (including seascapes and skyscapes) in Whitman's poetic universe that coalesce with physical, philosophical, psycho-sexual, spiritual and mystical landscapes (in the sense of mindscapes), amply exemplifying nature as the core of his creative consciousness, and also the poet as profoundly merged and at one with nature.

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