

Juxtaposing Ayn Rand's 'The Fountain Head' and Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself'

Mallika Singh*

Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India

Abstract: Walt Whitman and Ayn Rand, both have ushered in novelty in their own ways and have carved a niche for themselves in the corpus of American literature. Alice O'Connor, known by her pen name, Ayn Rand (1905-1982), was a writer and philosopher who was born and educated in Russia but later moved to the United States. Walt Whitman (1819-1882) was a poet, essayist and a journalist who was associated both with transcendentalism and realism. The paper aims to draw parallels between 'Song of Myself' written by the poet prophet of democracy, Walt Whitman, which represents the core of his poetic vision and Ayn Rand's magnum opus 'The Fountainhead' - her novel of ideas. Both the writers have a chiseled sense of individualism from which stem other similitudes between their works like advocating innovation and originality over traditions, their non conformist attitude, non adherence to established institutions and celebration of positivity and happiness.

Keywords: Individualism, egoistic, first handers, second handers, unconventionalality, optimism.

1. Introduction

Ayn Rand with her 'The Fountainhead', 'Atlas Shrugged' and 'Anthem', and Walt Whitman with his 'Leaves of Grass', both, make it to one of the most influential authors/poets in the American literary history. The concept of individualism has been the soul of Whitman's poetry. He is one of the most egotistical poets ever, with his 'I' being so pronounced in his 'Song of Myself'. "The sense of independence, exploration, individuality, and democracy equates Whitman and America." Likewise Rand championed individualism which is at the heart of her philosophy - 'objectivism'. She described it as a philosophy for living on Earth. Objectivism rejects any form of determinism. The crux is that every man is an end in himself, not a means to the end of others. He must live for his own sake, neither sacrifice himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself. The achievement of his own happiness should be the highest moral purpose of his life.

Both Rand and Whitman are egoistic. In his 'Song of Myself', Whitman claims "I am august" and unabashedly confesses "I celebrate myself/and what I assume you shall assume/For every atom belonging to me as good belong to you". "Here Whitman concerns himself, primarily with his idea of the self, his identification of the self with others, and finally his relationship with the elements of nature and the universe."

Most of his sentences begin with an all-powerful 'I'. Rand goes a step ahead and gives meaning to man's ego. Her writings posit that man's ego is the fountainhead of all human progress. Whitman celebrates the 'I', while Rand glorifies it. Howard Roark, the protagonist of 'The Fountainhead' emphatically claims while blasting a building, "I don't work with collectives. I don't consult, I don't cooperate, I don't collaborate..... My work (should be) done my way. A private, personal, selfish motivation. That's the only way I function. That's all I am."

This ego leads both Rand and Whitman to draw a line between the first handers and the second handers. This is one of the foremost palpable similarities between Walt Whitman and Ayn Rand. Rand uses the phrase 'second handers' quite repetitively in her novel. In fact the first working title of the novel was 'Second Hand Lives'. The second handers are described as leeches on the souls of others. Dominique Francon insinuates "People want nothing but mirrors around them. To reflect them while they're reflecting too.. Reflection of reflections and echoes of echoes. No beginning and no end. No center and no purpose." Howard Roark, who embodies what Rand believed to be the ideal man, believes "that man, the unsubmissive and first, stands in the opening chapter of every legend mankind has recorded about its beginning." "Tore Boeckmann sees The Fountainhead as a romantic novel not only because the author presents man as a being who possesses volition but also because she tries to actualize man at his highest potential."

Whitman, an innovator, similarly, in 'Song of Myself' emphasizes:

"Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?....."

You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left)

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand."

Their unconventionalality and extolling the virtues of originality, bring Rand and Whitman to the same ground once again in the context of abandoning institutionalization. Whitman keeps "creeds and schools in abeyance" while he writes his poem so that his thoughts flow freely and originally without any fences. To him "wisdom is not finally tested in

*Corresponding author: mallikasingh1994@gmail.com

schools... wisdom is of the soul, is not susceptible to proof, is its own proof". Howard Roark of 'The Fountainhead' is expelled from the architecture department of Stanton Institute of Technology for being a non-conformist and later emerges as the best architect in town. Peter Keating, the bright student, on the other hand, enjoys a short lived glory, only to have a ruined career later. "Rand portrays the consequences of choices people make without independent thinking by tracing the career of Peter Keating which begins with flourish but ends in failure. Rand brands individualists like Roark as "first-handers" and contrasts their approach with "second-handers" like Peter Keating whose prime concern and motive are other people." Even in terms of religion, both Rand and Whitman do not owe any allegiance to an institutionalized religion. Rand is an atheist through and through and to Whitman God is only an elder brother.

Robust optimism too brings Rand and Whitman together. To Whitman, "The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me, /The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue." Rand too suggests that with the right will, courage and determination, the result is bound to be positive. Howard Roark epitomizes these values. "With respect to his relationships with people, at work, or with respect to handling critical situations, he seems to possess a certain attitude that makes him immune to pain and open to joy." Thrown out of his institute, having faced failures and rejections he has to work in a quarry all over again, the woman he loved married first his greatest enemy and then a second hander, he faces a trial, but in the end stands triumphant. Not only does he achieve the zenith of success as an architect, but also is united with the love of his life Dominique Francon. Dominique too has to endure many trials and tribulations before finally re uniting with Roark and to get to live with him the first hand life they both always dreamt of living. "Ayn Rand in her

novel, *The Fountainhead*, chooses to tell the success story of an architect, Howard Roark, who, in spite of the challenges that threaten his progress at work, is in a constant state of euphoria." Rand is a firm believer that one "could not have reached this white serenity except as the sum of all the colours" and that "the men of unborrowed vision went ahead. They fought, they suffered and they paid. But they won."

Notwithstanding their similarities, Rand and Whitman also have a few dissimilarities. Rand emphasizes reason and rationality above all else while Whitman lays equal stress on both reason and intuition. Rand advocates capitalism- a laissez faire economy while Whitman is anti-materialism altogether. Rand's sense of man's ego is highly individualistic and is superior to collectivism whereas to Whitman, the 'concept of self' is 'both individual and universal'- "For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."

Both broke fresh ground. Rand and Whitman are best explained in the words of Roark, "I stand at the end of no tradition. I may perhaps, stand at the beginning of one."

2. Conclusion

This paper presented an overview of Juxtaposing Ayn Rand's 'The Fountainhead' and Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself'.

References

- [1] Aurang Zeb, Khamsa Qasim, "Exploration of Concept of I in Walt Whitman's Song of Myself", *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 39-52, May 2015
- [2] Ayn Rand, "The Fountainhead", USA, Signet
- [3] Manjari Johri, "Expression of Self in Walt Whitman's Song of Myself", impact: *International Journal of Research in Humanities, Art and Literature*, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 49-54, March 2016,
- [4] poetryfoundation.org
- [5] Sugeetha K and Harini Jayaraman, "Happiness: A Journey rather than a Destination in Ayn Rand's 'The Fountainhead'", *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2018