Chapter I

Introduction

Poetry has been a subject of special interest for me since teenage. I find it most eloquent and effective medium of expression. Poetry is a language of the soul. So I take study of poetry as self-elevating experience. My mentor and guide Dr. Indira Nityanandam granted me the vision and thus my research topic “Humanism as Reflected in the Poems of Rabindranath Tagore and Walt Whitman” has turned into the dream fulfilled. During the course of time I have realized that it is really sensible to undertake a cross cultural examination of such classics.

This research study aims to provide scholars of literature and literary criticism a unique outlook. Literary criticism and literature constitute two sides of a coin. Both are co-related just like breathing is essential to living and primary matter to substantial form. It is very interesting to probe into philosophy, literature and culture to define Humanism because it has changed its meanings and forms with the change in time. Whitman is a cosmic poet who has penned poems on subjects ranging from ‘leaves’ to stars. Tagore too is a myriad-minded man who has composed over a thousand poems on numerous topics. This is indeed a crowded area of study that no volume of this size can suffice without certain degree of simplification. So study has been concentrated on Humanism as reflected in the selected poems of Rabindranath Tagore and Walt Whitman.
Humanism is a cultural movement that promoted the study of the humanities—the languages, literature, and history of ancient Greece and Rome. Humanist scholars used the works of ancient authors as models in writing, scholarship, and all aspects of life. The movement began in Italy in the 1300s and eventually spread throughout Europe. It had a great impact on many areas of Renaissance culture, including literature, education, law, and the arts. Humanism is also a philosophy of life inspired by humanity and guided by reason. It provides the basis for a fulfilling and ethical life. Humanist philosophies have arisen separately in many different cultures over many thousands of years. Whether or not they use the term Humanism, hundreds of millions of people around the world agree with the humanist philosophy of living a happy and productive life based on reason and compassion.

Humanists make sense of the world using reason, experience and shared human values. Many Humanists see no convincing evidence for gods, the supernatural, or life after death. Humanists believe that moral values are properly founded on human empathy and scientific understanding. Humanists consider we must make the most of this life for ourselves, each other, and our world. The second chapter of this thesis has examined the evolution of ‘Humanism’ from a God-negating theory to the theory celebrating of ‘Self’ (Humanity). Humanism is one of the most ancient and yet surviving theory. It has stood the test of time and continued to hold its currency and relevance even after some centuries. If it is applied judiciously, it can bring out the subtleties and complexities of a work of art and thus enhance our sense of pleasure. As a theory focusing chiefly on human welfare Humanism is very relevant today.
Recent history has amply justified the relevance of Humanism. Science and technology have brought into close contact peoples following differing economic and political systems. Different religious groups which were formerly geographically separated live today in close proximity and must learn to accommodate one another if the world is not to go up in flames. If these differences are allowed to lead to conflict, the results are bound to be disastrous for all. These differences should not be suppressed but given their proper place in a larger whole. Humanism pleads for co-operation and not competition among different ideals. Humanism as the foundation of the principle of co-existence of different ideologies is being increasingly recognized and offers today the only hope for the survival of man.

Moreover, no literary theory is static. Every literary theory keeps evolving in the literary world. Humanism sprouted with the rejection of traditional concept of God, worship and supernaturalism and then acquired many forms with reference to culture, literature, philosophy etc. The purpose of this study is to trace Humanism in the selected poems of Tagore and Whitman which exalts human dignity to the highest altar without being atheistic.

The main purpose of the study is to examine the affinity of thought which is generally found among the great literary artists belonging to various cultures, languages and ideologies. The intention of the study is to show how they express the same sensibility when they create a piece of art. When Post–war literatures are filled with pains, sufferings, violence, absurdity, marginalization etc. the present study aims to focus on the literature of hope which may provide remedy to the modern man’s anxieties. The common factor of the study is to find out how the poets
speak for the common man of their country. The present study probes into their views on Life and Death, their attitude to God and Man and their treatment of body and soul. The study also provides deep insight into the cosmic consciousness they possess. It is also very interesting to know how they use symbols like earth, sea, bird and light in their unique way. The major focus of the study is on how the poets deal with man’s relation to man, nature and God. This will certainly open out new avenues for the scholars of various literatures to forge or to bring about a global outlook and start examining literature in a new perspective, especially, not from a culture or region point of view but as an independent discipline itself with a global outlook.

The thesis has been design according to the guidelines provided in the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers Seventh Edition. In order to examine the poems systematically the chapters have been divided accordingly. The second Chapter summarizes Humanism in the light of Occidental and the Oriental School of thoughts. It explores different dimensions of and approach to the theory of Humanism. The focal point is the relevance of such an ancient theory in the present era. It has also been very interesting to probe into the poetical works of Tagore and Whitman in the light of Humanism in the succeeding chapters. Tagore and Walt Whitman, both sing for the unity of Nature and Man. They try to discover deep human significance in the world. They sing for glorification of the trivial, advancement of science and spiritual significance in the commonplace activities of life.

The third chapter discusses Rabindranath Tagore’s poems to reveal how the world becomes a nest for all. The third chapter has discussed how Tagore helps his countrymen to put self-respect and patriotism at the
highest, and teaches them to keep the window open on the wide world and shows by personal example that to be a true Indian is also to be a true world-citizen. The study also reflects on a depiction of mutual relationship of the Trinity: Man, God and Nature. It may be interesting to note Tagore as an enthusiast of the common man and how Man’s anxieties dealt with in Tagore’s poetry. The study reveals that it would be a mistake to equate Tagore’s love of man with European Renaissance Humanism, which no doubt influenced him. The third chapter summarizes how Tagore transcends the narrow type of nationalism and stands firm for the spiritual fellowship of all men where the world becomes a single nest यत्र विश्वं भित्येकनीडम्। (Yajurveda 32-8)

Fourth Chapter examines the celebration of ‘Self’ in Walt Whitman’s Poetry. It details a mystical saga of the self with all phenomenal existence. The fourth chapter examines Whitman’s observations about life and death, about man’s spiritual and material predicament on the earth and life beyond the physical reality which gives unique outlook to his Humanism. Whitman’s humanistic views lay stress on the personal experience of God and direct contact with the creative spirit; it implies a communion of the soul with God.

The Thesis concludes with multiple findings that Humanism reflected in the poems of Tagore and Whitman in its broad universal outlook transcends all narrow barriers and domestic walls. Their positive patriotism paves the way for fellowship and unity among all. They love and celebrate every man. They do not aspire for heaven because God is present on earth in the form of friend, mother and beloved.