

## DEMOCRATIC VEHEMENCE IN THE POETRY OF WHITMAN

Vijay Bhushan

Associate Professor, Faculty of Arts & Humanities, Kalinga University, Naya Raipur, Chhattisgarh

### Abstract

Whitman was centrally concerned with the American experimentation in democracy and its influence to fabricate “out of many, one,” even at as enormous cost as the Civil War and the irresolute reconstruction. Whitman is perhaps America’s first democratic poet. The free verse he espouses in his work reflects a newly adapted and accessible poetic language. His overarching themes—the individual, the nation, the body, the soul, and everyday life and work—mirror the primary values of America’s naissance. Then and now, his poetry is for everyone.

**Key Words:** *Common People, Democracy, Everyone, Humanity, Individual, Liberty.*

### Introduction

Whitman himself claimed to be the poet-prophet of democracy and as such he is best comprehended. Canby calls him a Jeffersonian democrat, an idealist, a violent patriot, a humanitarian, a reformer, an ardent defender of progress, and a fighter for democracy “Who knows that democracy has to be fought for.” There is sagacity in this statement and the best line of approach to Whitman is to regard him the poet-prophet of democracy. As Whitman asserts later in the preface to *Leaves of Grass*:

*“The genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors ... but always most in the common people.”*

### Whitman’s notion of Democracy

Wordsworth’s concept of democracy as propounded in the “Prelude” remains the ideal dream of a visionary. Even Shelley’s view of democracy remains at best an abstract ideal. However, we cannot dismiss Whitman’s concept of democracy as an idle dream. His “Democratic Vistas” was sort of modern Bible for the English liberals of the first decade of the twentieth century. The “Democratic Vistas” is surely a permanent statement not only of the ideal of liberal democracy but of its fundamental principles, which, if it violates, it ceases to be democracy. Whitman therefore celebrates in his work the numerous kinds of individuals that make up a society as well as the tensions that bring individuals together in a multicolored community. In “I Sing of America,” he writes,

*“I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,  
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,  
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,  
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,*

*The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deck-hand singing on the steamboat deck*

...

*The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing,  
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else ...”*

## **Whitman, America and Democracy**

Whitman acknowledged America with democracy, so his poetry about the former became the poetry about the latter simultaneously. He said that he would “report all heroism from an American point of view.” However, there is nothing narrowly nationalistic or parochial in his concept of America. When Whitman talks of the particular places in America, he is following Goethe’s poetical axiom that the universal is the particular. The universal of which these states were the particulars in Whitman’s poetry is democracy, and all over the world the democrats, in Whitman’s atypical and thoughtful sense of the word, that is those who believe that a self-governing society of free and responsible individuals offers the only way of corporate progress towards the good, have had no complicatedness in concerning Whitman’s America as the city of their own soul. Whitman contemplation of democracy as the order of nature; it was, in fact, universal law. It embraced every conceivable situation of life for mankind. Its excuse was love extending in universal justice around the world. In Christian terms it was the kingdom of Heaven upon earth.

Whitman asserts, “Of these States the poet is the equable man.” The equable person is one who both sees and acts justly. The poet does this well than the politician because, Whitman says:

*“[The poet] bestows on every object or quality its fit proportion, neither  
more nor less,*

*He is the arbiter of the diverse, he is the key,*

*He is the equalizer of his age and land,*

*He supplies what wants supplying, he checks what wants checking,*

*In peace out of him speaks the spirit of peace, large, rich, thrifty,*

*building populous towns, encouraging agriculture, arts,*

*commerce, lighting the study of man, the soul, health,*

*immortality, government ....*

*He judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling round a*

*helpless thing,*

*As he sees the farthest he has the most faith ...*

*He sees eternity in men and women, he does not see men and*

*women as dreams or dots.”*

## **Democracy not mere Political Doctrine**

For Whitman democracy was not more political doctrine. By democracy Whitman meant liberty. It embraced liberty not only from the dictatorship of literary overlords. Whitman said:

*“The genius of all foreign literature is clipped and cut small compared to our genius, and essentially insulting to our usage, and to the organic compact of these states.”*

Whitman knew that great works were possible only when the writers were no longer tied to the apron strings of Aristotle. The rules of the ancient masters were no longer relevant to his time. *“The air was too strong”* indeed for the continuance of traditional forms and models.

## **Whitman and the Self-esteem of Common Man**

In the ‘Preface to the Lyrical Ballads’ Wordsworth said: “The poet is a man speaking to men” Whitman seemed to have the same conviction about the role of a poet. He believed that the age of the kings, queens and feudal lords had vanished for good. The new heroes were the ordinary citizens of common professions. Whitman believed in the dignity of common man, and for him all men were equal and every profession equally honorable. There was no superman; all were supermen, the representative of the human being who is the basic standard of all humanity. The most genuine specimen of true humanity was the common man, “the Illustrious everyone”, the “divine average.”

The common man has the same blessedness about him as the supreme power. In his own words there is a *“nimbus of gold-colored light”* around every man. He said, *“If anything is sacred, human body is sacred.”* In his poetry he sings the praises of the holiness of every human being. As he looked around him he saw everywhere low morals, poor health, bad manners, yet he obdurately believed that the masses of people were basically good. Then and now, his poetry is for everyone. As Whitman asserts later in the preface to *Leaves of Grass*:

*“The genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors ... but always most in the common people.”*

His experience in the Civil War had justified his faith in the “unnamed, unknown rank and file”, in the face of “hopelessness, mismanagement, defeat.” He said:

*“Democracy is not so much a political system as a grand experiment for the development of the individual. Political democracy as it exists and practically works in America, with all its threatening evils, supplies a training school for making first class men.”*

## **Progress of Civilization and Democracy**

The great clue to the cyclical progress of civilization was not to be found in the great libraries of the world, nor in the ingenuous theories propounded by illustrious philosophers and historians; it to be found in the democratic set-up of society. Whitman, further, believed in the equality of all men. For him the sole criterion of judging a work of art was how much it contributed to the cause of common humanity. He does not search antiquity for heroic men and beautiful women; his own abundant vitality makes all the life which surrounds him a source of completest joy; "what is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me....not asking the sky to come down to my good-will; scattering it freely forever." Let a few passages illustrate Whitman's joyous sympathy with men:—

*"I have perceiv'd that to be with those I like  
is enough,  
To stop in company with the rest at evening  
is enough,  
To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breath-  
ing, laughing flesh is enough,  
To pass among them, or touch any one, or rest  
my arm ever so lightly round his or her  
neck for a moment—what is this, then?"*

## **Whitman the Poet of all men**

With his innate faith in democratic principles and equality of all men in the American society, whose representative he claimed to be, Whitman took upon himself the task of singing for all men and women. The "Song of Myself" does not merely elaborate Whitman's own self but sings about the self of every other human being. He says:

*"I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume, you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me good belongs to you."*

Whitman identifies himself with good and bad people, low and high, noble and ignoble alike. He sings of evil and good alike, feeling that everything which has the vitality to exist has therein the right to exist.

In this growth of America, comradeship, which Whitman looks upon as a sure growth from seed already lying in the soil, he believes the most substantial hope and safety of the States will be found. In it he sees a power capable of counterbalancing the materialism, the selfishness, the vulgarity of

American democracy—a power capable of spiritualizing the lives of American men. Many, Whitman is aware, will regard this assurance of his as a dream; but such loving comradeship seems to him implied in the very existence of a democracy, "without which it will be incomplete, in vain, and incapable of perpetuating itself."

### **Leaves of Grass as a Chronicle of Democracy**

Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" is a legend of democracy. In the 1855 Preface to it Whitman said: "The United States themselves are the greatest poem." In this poem, the common man, the archetypal poet is the hero:

*"One's self I sing, a simple separate person,  
You utter the word democratic, the word en masse."*

The hero of this epic democracy embodies the spirit of expansion. This spirit of expansion has nothing to do with imperialism and territorial aggrandizement; it means being one with the rest of the world.

*"The big doors of the country barn stand open  
and ready;  
The dried grass of the harvest-time loads the  
slow-drawn wagon;  
The clear light plays on the brown grey and  
green intertinged;  
The armfuls are pack'd to the sagging mow.  
I am there, I help, I came stretch'd atop of the  
load;  
I felt its soft jolts, one leg reclined on the  
other;  
I jump from the cross-beams, and seize the clo-  
ver and timothy,  
And roll head over heels, and tangle my hair  
full of wisps."*

### **Democracy and Religion**

Middleton Murry thinks that Whitman's unique contribution to the cause of democracy lies in the fact that he founded democracy on religious grounds. In "Democratic Vistas" he says that

democracy in the development in the further field of social organization, and material opportunity, of the message of Christ that the nature of the individual's soul is not transcendent that it sets all men on common level. Democracy is the implementation of the equality of souls proclaimed by Christ.

### **Whitman's Poetry Democratic**

Not only are the themes and ideas of Whitman are democratic, but his verse is also democratic. It is democratic in the sense that it is simple and unpretentious. Whitman defies all the traditional devices of prosody and rhythmic structure. The simplest of language is used by Whitman to make it comprehensible to the generality of readers. He does not put faith in Coleridge's dictum that poetry is best words in the best order. He uses common words in common order. He believed in the poetic devices as being hindrance between the writer and his reader. He wants to establish relations with everyone and makes poetry his medium. Whoever reads his poetry touches a man, says Whitman.

### **Conclusion**

Whitman wanted to make poetry democratic in every respect and he enunciated his own theory of poetry and what a poet should be. He believed that a poet is an ordinary man and not a man distinct from others as the earliest poets and critics thought. He does not talk of complicated, subtle and very philosophical experience. He is a poet of common things treated in a simple manner. In thought as well as in execution Whitman remains a poet of democracy.

### **References**

Simonson, Peter : A Rhetoric for Polytheistic Democracy: Walt Whitman's "Poet of Many in One", *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, Penn State University Press, Volume 36, Number 4, 2003, pp. 353-375, 10.1353/par.2004.0006

Pannapacker, William and Crumbley, Paul : *Whitman and Dickinson*, American Literary Scholarship, Duke University Press, 2008 , pp. 67-89.

Schmidt, Bernard: "Whitman and American Personalistic Philosophy." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 7 (Spring 1990), 180-190. <https://doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1260> Folsom University of Iowa, [ed-folsom@uiowa.edu](mailto:ed-folsom@uiowa.edu)/ Iowa research online.