

DEMONSTRATIONS OF DEMOCRACY IN WALT WHITMAN'S CONCEPT OF NATURE

By Bhoomika Kalley⁴⁴

Democracy forms the basic texture and the theme of American poet Walt Whitman's poetry. Incorporating both transcendentalism and realism in his poetry he rose to become the most influential poet of America. Due to his experimental style of writing and unconventional interpretations of American life his poems created a great deal of controversy in the poetic arena of his times. American democracy is an important theme that interested Whitman. Whitman was quite cautious of political upheavals throughout his life. He always supported the good egalitarian view of the races, and opposed the expansion of slavery.

In order to understand his poetry it becomes imperative to understand his vision of democracy, which is a recurring theme of his poetry. Democracy meant to him a self-governing society of free and responsible individuals. He firmly believed in the importance of the individual's development for the development of the country. This paper is an attempt to show this great poet's democratic ideas which are not confined to the political arena, but also become a synonym for Nature. Nature finds expression in all its manifestations and varieties in Whitman's poetry from fields, trees, plants, birds, animals, farms, the sea, to light and air, and men, women, and their social and political activities in factories, workshops, offices, streets, cities, plains and the countryside. Whitman identifies not only with man, but also with all living creatures. The sense of the oneness of all makes his democratic ideas ubiquitous and even pantheistic, for the basic emotion or idea that runs through his collection of poems, entitled *Leaves of Grass* that depicts a feeling of unity with all Nature.

Whitman accepted all objects of Nature as integral parts of democracy. The vast range of natural objects may be regarded as analogous to the great number of human beings, individuals in a democratic society. As in Nature, democracy is a self-governing society, where individuals are free, like Nature's manifested objects. Both in nature, and in democracy man is free to enjoy his individuality as a giver and receiver. Besides, there are some natural rights that equally belong to every man. All men are conscious of the fact that Nature treats all its inhabitants equally. Perhaps because of this, Nature has been respected and worshiped by all

⁴⁴ 2nd Year, BA.LLB (hons.) Nirma University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat

men since times unknown. Moreover, just as there is a law in democratic society, there is a natural law too. Both Nature and democracy allow freedom, but this does not mean that either can disregard law. The individual man may be important but he has to live in harmony with his companions. Both in democracy and in Nature every individual, while valuing his own freedom must respect the freedom, of others as a matter of duty. In Whitman's poetry, too, Nature and democracy are not separate themes but are intermingled with the sub themes of human dignity, Individualism, equality, progress, humanity and patriotism expressed variously in poems like "Song of Myself", "A Backward glance ov'r Travel'd Roads", "Thou Mother With Thy Equal Brood", "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking", "For You O Democracy", "By Blue Ontario's Shore" and group of poems, entitled " Drum Taps", "Memories of President Lincoln" and "Autumn Rivulets". Whitman, in fact seems to believe in Locke's explanation of democracy as being a product of Nature. Locke said that:

There was no clear definition of the natural law, there was no competent authority to interpret it, and there was none to effectively enforce it. Although the law of Nature was the law of reason yet variation of intelligence and conflict of interests made its application uncertain as everyone interpreted it to his own advantage. (qtd in Kapur 67)

Therefore, a necessity was felt for the presence of a definite law which resulted in a civil society brought into existence in the form of a government ensuring the enjoyment of these rights which Nature had promised to man. Similarly, democratic society that ensures man's natural right punishes any violations of its law. Whitman, however, does not deal with Nature's punishments, for he has always seen Nature as a symbol of freedom, equality, individuality, progress and unity, as in "Song of Myself", "I hear America Singing", "Passage To India", "Song of the Open Road", "For You O Democracy" and so on .

Whitman valorizes the Romantic concept of "noble savage" who wants to lead a life of primitive simplicity and restful happiness. Such a man is independent, free, contented, self sufficient, healthy, fearless and carefree in Nature, remote from all notions of virtue and vice. As he writes in "Song of Myself":

I celebrate myself and sing myself.
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
I loaf and invite my soul,
I lean and loaf at my ease (1-6)

The second line here makes it very clear that there is a close relationship between the individual self and the rest of society. Everybody should glorify and celebrate his self, for object of Nature belongs to him as well as to the others. The “I” of his poem becomes a symbol of all men, just as each individual is free but there is unity among all men (in democratic society). Thus he becomes a representative of American democracy. Thus Whitman writes about individuals in his poems, the individual suggests a group, and the group a multitude, each unit of which is as important as every other unit. The individual is all-important, but each individual personality is developed in such a way that all those personalities produce a harmonious and magnificent picture. Whitman’s poetry may indeed be called the poetic representation of the typical American, the Everyman with basic impulses instincts, who writes, “I contain multitudes” (“Song of Myself”1326). His sense of sympathy and fellow feeling makes him, celebrate common humanity.

Whitman’s anthology *Leaves of Grass*, is in itself an excellent example of Whitman’s democratic spirit and his faith in Nature. Through this title Whitman expresses his belief in democracy through the most common thing in Nature, grass., and shows that such a common thing could become a fit subject for poetry.

Whitman expressed his ideas about social justice and equality. In one section of “Song of Myself” he wishes to be a primitive man, sensualist. He wants to live amongst the animals and be one of them, because they are free, self contained and peaceful. Being in touch with the animals means a close relationship and faith in Nature and democracy, because in these two worlds man enjoys the freedom, equality and unity that animals enjoy in Nature. Whitman believes that animals are free of possessive instincts.

Not one is dissatisfied, no one is demented
with the mania of owing things;
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived
thousands of years ago;
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the
whole earth.(“Song of Myself”689-691)

Whitman’s use of “mania” psychiatrically means sickness, and “owing” indicates at man’s desire to possess material things. This clearly expresses that he considers such desires to be abnormal and unhealthy. Animals do not think about the need to bow to one another in respect, for they are all equal; there is no feeling of high and low among them because they are free from any social rules and regulations.

There is another example of his democratic spirit in the poem “I Hear America Singing”. In this poem he shows a vivid sense of the varied, multitudinous life of America. He sings of American men, from different walks of life, and gives a long list of all kinds of people; the mechanics, the carpenter, the boatman, the deckhand, the shoemaker, the wood cutter, the plough boy, mother, wife, girl and so on. This is truly democratic where each individual is important in the making of the nation. The people of America are healthy, hard-working and carefree; all are so different from one another, but they are united together in one nation: He writes in the poem “I Here America Singing”:

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 anticipates a brilliant future for American democracy. In the poem “Thou Mother With Thy Equal Brood”, his idea of democracy transcends national boundary, and he sees it everywhere. Whitman uses both the abstract (past, present) and concrete (ship) Nature images to suggest the permanent and eternal in Nature and democracy.

Sail thy best ship of Democracy,
Of value is thy freight tis not the Present only,
The past is also stored in thee.
Thou holdest not the venture of thyself alone, not
of the Western continent alone,
Earth’s resume entire floats on thy keel O! ship, is steadied
by thy spars. (47-51)

There is another poem, “For You O Democracy”, which is dedicated to democracy.

Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shows upon,
I will make divine magnetic lands,
With the love of comrades,
With the life long love of comrades.
I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers.(1-5)

Whitman uses the word “race” that suggests both the race of people and the race to run. Whitman perhaps, hopes to have a race of people, who would rise from the enjoyment of material things to make this world a better place, with the feeling of love compassion and brotherhood. he writes further:

For you these from me, O democracy, to serve
you ma femme!

For you for you I am trilling these songs. (10-11)

The word “ma femme”, here, suggests Whitman’s idea to see democracy as a woman. He is praising democracy as man praises his woman.

The phrase “love of comrades” recurs again and again in Whitman’s poetry, and reflects an important feature of his democratic philosophy -- that of mutual support and dependence among the members of a democratic society. He firmly believed that individuals are important, and that isolation is something unnatural for a human being, that there is security only in cooperation among friends. In the same way Nature also stands as a symbol of unity and cooperation. The same energy works through all the separate objects of Nature, and this energy becomes one when Nature is seen as one organic whole. In “Song of Myself”, he writes about what will become common heritage through freedom and progress:

And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his
own funeral drest in his shroud, (1272-1273).

And there is no trade or employment but the young
man following it may become a hero,
And there is no object so soft but it makes a hub for
the wheeled universe, (1274-1275)

Whitman’s democratic philosophy of equality does not see equality among men only. He does not discriminate between the two sexes, the male and the female, but gives equal importance to both. In a way, indeed the woman is more important because she is the mother of man. Whitman thus seems to share the traditional image of woman as Mother Nature, mother of this creation.

I am poet of the women the same as the men
And I say it is as great to be a woman
as to be a man,
And I say there is nothing greater than the
mother of men. (“Song of Myself” 425-427)

Whitman feels great sympathy and brotherhood for all, whether rich or poor, high or low, thief or prostitute. He not only sees evil and good as alike but acknowledges them to be alike. He believes that “everything is an essential part of Nature; therefore “everything which has the vitality to exist has the right to exist.”(qtd in Miller 217) This is where his poetry develops into

a kind of “universalism”. He grows from a basic human Nature, concern for the sensuously apprehensible to a deep concern for the sufferings and the problems of the others, from primitive in the company of Nature to feeling himself a member of not only one group or one nation, but one who belong to the whole of the universe. Like Wordsworth, Whitman also conceives of Nature as a living personality, and believed in a divine spirit persuading all objects of Nature. By his celebration of America that he was proud of, he is not merely a singer of material pleasures and possessions, but has evolved his self to a position where he feels deep love, compassion and fellow feeling for humanity at large. Whitman was always profoundly in sympathy with the nation to which he belonged. He always wanted his country to achieve greater and greater heights through living together in harmony. In poem after poem Whitman exhorts his countrymen to stay united. All the poems that were included in the “Calamus” group are a brilliant plea for unity and comradeship. The title “Calamus” is itself the name of a plant that symbolizes the mutual support gained from comradeship.

I will plant companionship thick as trees along
all the rivers of America and among the shores
of the great lakes and all over the prairies.

I will make irreparable cities with their arms about
each others necks.

By the love of comrades.

By the manly love of comrades.

(“For You O Democracy” 6-8)

He was not simply a theorist of democratic nature; during the Civil war he nursed wounded soldiers, with his own hands in the hospitals. His feelings were expressed in “Drum Taps” published in 1865, as in:

I sit by the restless all the dark night;
some are young, some suffer so much.

I recall the experiences sweet and sad.

(Many a soldiers loving arms about this
neck have crossed and rested.

Many a soldiers kiss dwells on there lips.)

(“The Wound Dresser”62-65)

There is another poem where Whitman wishes his country to rise and triumph over all the harsh memories of the Civil War and face the prospect of greatness ahead. In the poem “Thou mother with Thy equal Brood.”

The storm shall dash thy face, the murk of war
and worse than war shall cover the all over. (10)

Thus it observed that Whitman's idea of democracy is beyond its literal meaning. He understands and practices democracy with entirely new perspective, and makes it more meaningful by imparting it a comprehensive and thought provoking approach. Whitman rightly puts in the preface to the 1855 version of Leaves of Grass, "The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it." Like a responsible citizen he aptly understood the fundamental vital relationship between the poet and society.

