

# Integrated Democracy as a Weapon of Interpersonal Skill in Walt Whitman's Poetry

Md. Shah Alam Chowdhury\*

Associate Professor, Department of English  
Dhaka International University, Bangladesh

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**Abstract:** American democracy draws Whitman attraction most. This was the ever-burning theme of his poetry. He embraced it and expressed it in its all manifestation-fields, trees, animals, birds, farms, light, air, sea, men, women, and their politics and social transactions, factories, workshops, offices, stories, streets, critics, plains, the countryside and what not. Whitman considered these and many more items as the integral parts of democracy in America. Whitman envisioned democracy not just as a political system but as a way of experiencing the world. In the early nineteenth century, people still harbored many doubts about whether the United States could survive as a country and about whether democracy could thrive as a political system. Whitman tried to remove all kinds of confusion regarding this issue. Whitman tried to be democratic in both life and poetry. He imagined democracy as a way of interpersonal interaction and as a way for individuals to integrate their beliefs into their everyday lives.

## Introduction

Whitman has been remarked democracy more of a nationalist than a truly democratic poet. True, he confesses to “chant America the mistress” and visualizes modern America as the center of science and democracy, to be the true hero of his poetry. Edward Dowden feels that his feeling for individual personality overmasters his pantheistic tendency towards the oneness of all. But if he sings of America, it is precisely because he associates the nation with democracy. In this connection one cannot help noting what he says in the poem *The Sleepers* where “the sleepers” of different kinds and nations are united with one another by the bond of spiritual love. It would be most apt to endorse the opinion of John Burroughs : “The reader who would get at the spirit and meaning of *Leaves of Grass* must remember that its animating principle from first to last, is Democracy, that it is a work conceived and carried forward in the spirit of the genius of humanity, that is now in full career in the new world- and that all things character- stoically American (trades, tools, occupations, productions, characters, scenes) therefore have their places in it. It is intended to be a completed mirror of the times in which the life of the poet fell, and to show one master personality accepting, absorbing all and rising superior to it, namely the poet himself (Price, 2004). Yet it is never Whitman that speaks so much as it is Democracy that speaks through him. He personifies the spirit of Universal brotherhood and in this character launches with his ‘omnivorous words’. He serves as the spokesman of ideal democracy. The current study aimed to find out the Whitman's ideas, thoughts and philosophy vividly with reference to his major literary works.

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\* Founder & CEO, Bangladesh Center for Research and Planning (BCRP), [www.bcrpbd.com](http://www.bcrpbd.com)

## **Methodology**

The study adopted a content analysis method on the secondary data base. For completing this study, the researcher has gone through a good number of journals, articles, newspaper, web content, research reports, original documentary and many more. Both exclusion and inclusion criteria were followed to adjust with the overall objective of the study.

## **Background**

Walt Whitman appeared at a time when British liberal thought had such excellent spokesmen as Carlyle, Arnold, Ruskin and Morris. Whitman seemed to combine all their influences and bring forth something radically new. He was soon accepted as a great supporter of radicalism. To the liberals of the late Nineteenth century and the early Twentieth century, Walt Whitman has been indisputably a prophet, and a political seer. This is seen in the fact that more than any other American or English poet, Whitman has sung rhapsodic praises of Democracy hailing it in ecstatic terms.

Whitman's book 'Democratic Vistas' (1871) is a permanent statement not only of the ideal of liberal democracy but also its fundamental principles. Though there has been much talk recently on the term a clear idea. Democracy meant to him a self-governing society of free and responsible individuals. Whitman once defined democracy in the following way: "Democracy is not so much a political system as a grand experiment for the development of the individuals. Political democracy, as it exists and practically works in America, with all its threatening evils, supplies a training school for making first-class men."

## **Glorification of Individual**

A significant actor in Whitman's political philosophy is his glorification of the individual. Though the phrase "en masse" appears repeatedly in the poems of Whitman it is not to be deduced that he was an apostle of the socialistic set up of society. He was emphatically of the view that society should recognize the infinite worth of the individual. Whitman's ideal society is one where the individual is valid, because in such a society lay is loved. "He envisaged and exemplified a process of spiritualization which alone could save democracy from moral disaster.

The title of Whitman's book of verse, 'Leaves of Grass', is in itself an excellent evidence of the democratic spirit of the poet. In his poem "Song of Myself" Whitman writes:

*A child said what is the grass fetching it to me with full hands.  
How I could answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.*

But it is clear that in naming his book 'Leaves of Grass' Whitman was accepting this humblest of created things as a symbol of his fierce and passionate belief in democracy. His choice of a title is an emphatic assertion that the common humble things of the earth are fit subjects for poetry. This is quite consistent a behaviour in a poet whom the word 'equable' was of infinite value. Whitman's ideal society is one where everyone is equal, where inequalities and social injustice do not exist. In one portion of 'Song of Myself' Whitman expresses his admiration for animals. He claims he could turn and live with animals for a number of reasons, one of which is this:

*Not one is dissatisfied-not one is demented with the mania of owning things;  
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago;  
Not one is respectable or industrious over the whole earth.*

In the words of Johan Burroughs, "The reader, who would get at the spirit and meaning of 'Leaves of Grass', must remember that its animating principle, from first to last, is Democracy..... Yet it is never Whitman that speaks so much as it is Democracy that speaks through him." It is to drive home

to the reader that regarded all Americans alike, that he has given long catalogues of all kinds of people, high and low, diverse and numerous, of his country. In his lyric "I Hear America Singing", Whitman celebrates the mechanic, the carpenter, the mason, the boat-man, the deck-hand, the shoe-maker, the wood-cutter, and the plough boy.

*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 mounts their strong melodious songs.*

In tones of exquisite lyric Whitman sings of the worth of Democracy envisaging for American democracy a brilliant future. In "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood" he extols democracy thus:

*Sail, sail, they best, ship of Democracy,  
Of value is the freight, its not the present only.  
The past is also stored in thee,  
Thou holdest not the venture of the self alone, not of  
Western continent alone,  
Earth's resume entire floats on thy keel! O ship, is steadied by the sparts.*

*With thee Time voyages in trust, the antecedent nations  
Sink or swim with thee.  
Wars, thou bear'st the other continents,  
Theirs, theirs as much as thine, the destination-part*

One of his short poems is dedicated to Democracy. "For You O Democracy" runs thus:

*Come I will make the continent indissoluble,  
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone 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 tress along all the rivers  
Of America and along the shores of the great lakes, and all over the prairies  
I will make inseparable cities with arms about each other's necks  
By the manly love of comrades.  
By the manly love of comrades  
For you these from me, O Democracy, to serve you  
For you, for you I am trilling these songs.*

The phrase "love of comrades", occurring again and again in the poetry of Whitman, underlines an important tenet in Whitman's political philosophy that of mutual support and dependence among the members of a democratic society. In spite of zealous upholding of the individual, Whitman already believed that there is security only in co-operation among friends.

### **En-Masse**

The En-Masse. -of the modern age appeals to the poet more than any other word. He says En-Masse stands for everyone. The entire mankind is one, and all men and women are equal. There is no disparity between people belonging to different caste, color, or creed. Whitman is the poet of En-

Masse. Whitman's poetry had a great influence in Europe as well as in America. This influence quickened every current of contemporary art. Whitman has been acclaimed by a great and growing public. He has been hailed as prophet, as pioneer as rebel, as fiery humanity not only in America, but in England and throughout Europe. The whole scheme of *Leaves Grass* is inclusive rather than exclusive; its form is elemental, dynamic and free. Walt Whitman is the democratic ideas of the poet. He says-

Endless unfolding of words of ages!

And mine a word of the modern, the word En-Masse.

### **American Democracy**

Two of Whitman's poems especially emphasize his love for America, her democratic form of government, and the freedom American citizens enjoy. They are "One's-Self I Sing" and "I Hear America Singing."

In "One's-Self I Sing," Whitman celebrates the individual, "a simple separate person," but he also celebrates "the word Democratic, the word En-Masse." Thus, the poem embraces the value of each person living within a democratic society, the American society. In the poem's last stanza, Whitman "sings" of life filled with "passion, pulse, and power." This life is a cheerful one because it is "freest action formed under the laws divine." The inference is that a democratic government, founded upon the recognition of man's god-given rights, offers the freedom that makes life worth living.

Similar themes are developed in "I Hear America Singing." In Whitman's poem, the country "sings," suggesting happiness and celebration. "Singing" then becomes a metaphor for doing the work one chooses to do and in which one finds happiness. Using the catalog technique, Whitman lists the kinds of ordinary Americans who make a good life for themselves: a carpenter, a mason, a boatman, a shoemaker, a woodcutter, and mechanics. Also included in Whitman's catalog are women, the homemakers--a mother, a young wife, and a girl. The idea of the goodness of American freedom is developed in each person's being able to pursue "what belongs to him or her and to none else."

Whitman the representative poet of America is primarily the poetic spokesman of Democracy. True the English Romantic poets had been vigorous supporters of the democratic ideals, but where Whitman differed from them was in his more pragmatic, down to earth approach (Wallace, 2007).

### **‘I’**

The "I" in Whitman's poetry is not so much personal reference as a fusion of several characters, a composite character, who exists in no place other than in the poem, as James Miller observes. The "I" is identical with the "Modern Man" of who sings it is the collective ego, a composite of the varied humanity of America. It signifies Whitman's acceptance of humanity as a whole- for the poet is a 'complete lover of the universe'.

### **Celebration of liberty and fraternity and equality**

As a prophet of democracy, Whitman manifests in his poetry the basic ideals of democracy liberty of the individual fraternity or brotherhood and equality all based on the basic belief in the dignity of the human being. He sings of the need to be free and self-reliant, to break off from dead conventions. It is only when he is "free" in the true sense of the term that the individual will be able to understand the truth of the universe. Thus, he says:

*I loafe and invite my soul ....*

*I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,*

*Nature without check with original energy.*

He must be free of the "creeds and schools" to think and act freely. 'Loafing' and reflecting on a spear of grass can lead to great conclusions on the equality and need of brotherhood in man.

*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 .....*

### **Grass**

The significance of the grass symbol, in Whitman's poetry the poet's sense of identity is not confined to the other human beings, it extends to all created objects of the universe. His democracy is universal and pantheistic. As Schyberg observes, "Whitman is directly led away from the political aspect of democracy towards transcendental, pantheistic democracy. The basic emotion in Whitman's lyricism is a feeling of kinship with all creation, evidenced in the very title *Leaves of Grass*". The grass is the great symbol of democracy in nature and it is by lying on it and observing it that the poet beings to reflect (Price, 2004). By the end of *Song of Myself*, the poet departs bequeathing himself "to the dirt to grow from the grass I love". If he is wanted again, "look for me under your bootsoles". It is the spear of grass that enables the poet to understand the eternal cycle of life and death.

*The smallest sprout shows there is really no death.  
All goes onward and outward.... and nothing collapses  
And to die is different from what any supposed and luckier.*

Grass expresses commonality most suitably. Whitman approaches democracy from a new angle. His democracy faith is related to his conception of the mystical self. He believes that democracy must yield spiritual results. He takes recourse to metaphysical doctrine to discuss the material world of Undoubtedly the concept of equality had its origin in the surface world of American democracy, where it had been an ideal since the Declaration of Independence. But Whitman considers equality to be much more than a political ideal; with him it is an eternal fact in the real-world o unlimited personalities:

*In all people I see myself- none more and not one barley corn less  
And the good or bad I say of myself; I say of them.*

### **Democratic Impulse in Poetic Technique**

Not only in his ideas is Whitman democratic, but his poetic technique too reflects his democratic impulse. It is significant that he rejects the conventional forms of poetry which he felt to be associated with its feudalistic and aristocratic past. His freedom with poetic form reflects his advocacy of freedom for the human soul. The free flow of words, the lines of uneven length, all express the sense of development inherent in democracy (Mack, 2002).

Another important aspect of style is the use of catalogues practically all of Whitman's poems reflects this tendency to catalogue persons or things. Selection seems forbidden to him. He had to itemize every detail, place and name of American life. If he names one race of mankind, the name of all other races presses into his page; if he mentions one trade or occupation all other trades and occupations follow. The "en-masse" does not stand for a formless bulk but for a concourse of individuals. The symbols chosen by Whitman are from familiar life- grass, lilacs, stars, the sea, the birds. The language is truly democratic for it often makes use of slang which Whitman felt to be the common man's experiment with language.

Whitman believes in the common people for salvation of society. It is they who make a nation. One does not countervail another....." He opposed institutionalized religion and suggested new religion of humanity. He upheld: "There will soon be no more priests. Their work is done .... A new order shall arise and they shall be the priests of man and every man shall be his own priest. The churches built under their umbrage shall be the churches of men and women. Through the divinity of

themselves shall the kosmos and the new breed of poets be interpreters of men and women and of all events and things .....

It is not without reason that *Leaves of Grass* is considered the “Bible of Democracy”. Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* is chant of democracy. Section 24 of *Song of Myself* is an explicit statement of the poet’s democratic impulse.

..... I give the sign of democracy .....

Through him “many long dumb voices” will find expression. If he feels he could live with animals it is because-

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*- Section 32)

### **Subjects to Poetry**

In his poetry, Whitman widened the possibilities of poetic diction by including slang, colloquialisms, and regional dialects, rather than employing the stiff, erudite language so often found in nineteenth-century verse. Similarly, he broadened the possibilities of subject matter by describing myriad people and places. Like William Wordsworth, Whitman believed that everyday life and everyday people were fit subjects for poetry. Although much of Whitman’s work does not explicitly discuss politics, most of it implicitly deals with democracy: it describes communities of people coming together, and it imagines many voices pouring into a unified whole. For Whitman, democracy was an idea that could and should permeate the world beyond politics, making itself felt in the ways we think, speak, work, fight, and even make art.

Whitman’s poetry reflects the vitality and growth of the early United States. During the nineteenth century, America expanded at a tremendous rate, and its growth and potential seemed limitless. But sectionalism and the violence of the Civil War threatened to break apart and destroy the boundless possibilities of the United States. As a way of dealing with both the population growth and the massive deaths during the Civil War, Whitman focused on the life cycles of individuals: people are born, they age and reproduce, and they die. Such poems as “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” imagine death as an integral part of life. The speaker of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” realizes that flowers die in the winter, but they rebloom in the springtime, and he vows to mourn his fallen friends every year just as new buds are appearing. Describing the life cycle of nature helped Whitman contextualize the severe injuries and trauma he witnessed during the Civil War—linking death to life helped give the deaths of so many soldiers meaning (Grier, 1984).

### **Conclusion**

Throughout his poetry, Whitman praised the individual. He imagined a democratic nation as a unified whole composed of unique but equal individuals. “*Song of Myself*” opens in a triumphant paean to the individual: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself”. Elsewhere the speaker of that exuberant poem identifies himself as Walt Whitman and claims that, through him, the voices of many will speak. In this way, many individuals make up the individual democracy, a single entity composed of myriad parts. Every voice and every part will carry the same weight within the single democracy—and thus every voice and every individual are equally beautiful. Despite this pluralist view, Whitman still singled out specific individuals for praise in his poetry, particularly Abraham Lincoln. In 1865, Lincoln was assassinated, and Whitman began composing several elegies, including “O Captain! My Captain!” Whitman sees in democracy the possibilities of universal peace, tolerance and brotherhood. The immense potentialities of the human being are given a chance to develop only in a democracy.

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