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EGALITARIANISM IN WHITMAN'S POETRY

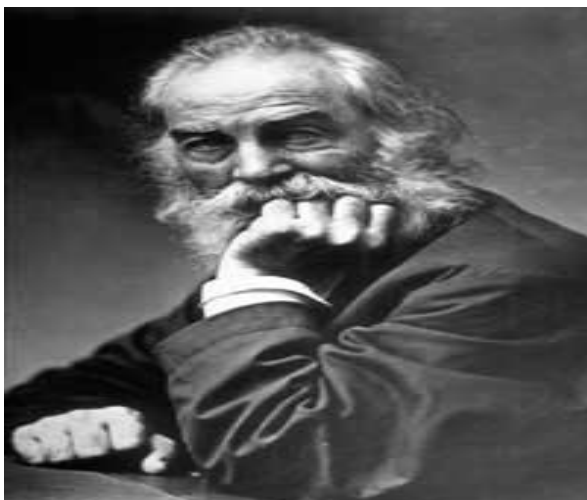


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ABSTRACT

Whitman has commonly been perceived as one of the few American writers who transcended the racial attitudes of his time. He is a great prophet who is celebrating ethnic and racial diversity and embodying egalitarian ideals. What's stunning is his egalitarian sensibility. This was the most important subject of his poetry. He discussed and described it in almost all natural things and human beings. The fields discussed are trees, animals, birds, air, sea, men, women, their politics, their relations, offices, streets, critics, plains and countryside. Whitman foresaw egalitarianism not just as a political system but as a way of experiencing the world. He tried to be egalitarian in both his life and poetry. He imagined egalitarianism as the way of interpersonal communication.

KEYWORDS: *American egalitarianism, egalitarian whim, celebration of self, commonality.*



INTRODUCTION :

"No man", says Walter Raleigh "can walk around save on his own shadow." Some might walk otherwise but Whitman does not, will not. His poetry is a complete record of his hopes and fears, urges and dejections. But surely, the man, we touch is not Whitman, it is the "En-masse" that we touch; it is the "divine average" that we touch. It is, above all, America's proud, noble and ambitious people that we touch, that Whitman touches. Rightly hailed as "an authentic spokesman for the tendencies of

his country" he is the unquestioned, the unexcelled poet of America's persons and America's comprehensive interests. America is, as we can well see, the true hero of his poetry: In his *A Broadway Pageant*, he says

I chant America the mistress,
I chant a greater supremacy,

Whitman's poetry presented egalitarian views of the races. Although his attitude of the races as well as his attitude in life reflected many of the racial prejudices common to the nineteenth century America and his opposition to slavery was not necessarily based on belief in the equality of races per se. As a prophet of egalitarianism, Whitman manifests in his poetry the basic ideals of egalitarian

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 and to break off from the dead conventions also.

Methodology and Review of Literature

The poetry of Walt Whitman from different critical studies of English literature has been studied to complete the research. By using observation method, the researcher went through different literary articles, critical compositions and websites to find interrelated study materials. The researcher collected some poems of Walt Whitman and composed the research work in a convincing way after studying those.

DISCUSSION

American Egalitarianism

Whitman, the representative poet of America, is primarily the poetic orator of egalitarianism. True the English Romantic poets had been vigorous supporters of the egalitarian ideas, but where Whitman differed from them was in his more pragmatic, down to earth approach. Wordsworth has rooted for common man and common themes. Whitman took Wordsworth's creed of democracy and commonness to its inevitable conclusion and excluded nothing from the orbit of his poetry, his sympathy, his love.

Whitman's poems especially accentuate his love for America, his egalitarian form of government, and also the freedom which American citizens enjoy. The most important two such poems are "One's Self I Sing" and "I Hear America Singing." In Whitman's poem, the country "sings", suggests the happiness and celebration. The word "Singing" then becomes a metaphor for doing the work one chooses to do and in which one finds happiness. Whitman's poetry is full of unforgettable pictures of American people and American vignettes. The blacksmith, the negro butcher, the farmer ploughing his fields, the mother sewing her children's clothes, the prostitute, the pioneer and all such move in a motley across his pages. The whole of America is a big poetry, sweet, soulful poetry. And Whitman is the poet of these poems, the life and death of Americans, average Americans all Americans. In his poem *The Mystic Trumpeter*, Whitman says:

A reborn race appears – a perfect world, all joy!
Women and men in wisdom innocence and health – all joy!
.....
The ocean fill'd with joy – the atmosphere all joy!
Joy! Joy! in freedom, worship, love! Joy in the ecstasy of life!

Whitman's love and care for his country is evident in the fact that he took the Civil War as a fight between his own sons. Whitman's Americanness is visible in his language also. His vocabulary, drawn from the common man's speech and his rhythms, symbolic of the nation's large, big size breathe the great currents of a living, vibrant nation. His poetry is truly brave and American. "Song of Myself" – and this is the true of all of his poetry – is the song of an American in praise of America.

Egalitarian Whim

Leaves of Grass is considered as the "Bible of Egalitarianism." Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is in itself a chant of egalitarianism.

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)

The veneration of personage is a significant event in Whitman's political philosophy. Nonetheless the phrase 'en-masse' materializes repeatedly in the verses of Whitman. He was emphatically of the view that society should recognize the infinite worth to the individual.

The title of Whitman's book of verse, *Leaves of Grass*, is in itself an excellent evidence of the egalitarian 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.
(Section – 6)

Whitman's choice of a title is an emphatic assertion that the common humble things of the earth are fit subjects for poetry. Whitman's ideal society is one where everyone is equal. This is the society where inequalities and social injustice do not exist.

Whitman's Celebration of Self

Whitman's celebration of "Self" was a celebration of his fellow man and of the "people" at large. He saw democracy as the form of society which would allow the fullest and freest development for each man's self. The "I" in Whitman's poetry symbolizes man in his universality. His "egotistical" utterances are the expressions of the universality of the self. This self cries and rejoices with everyone, with everything living or non-living. Whitman's poetry is rightly called the Bible of Democracy, the New Bible. It is so because it consecrates the individual. It celebrates life. "I was the man, I suffered, I was there," Whitman says. He does not really lose himself in the invisible, unhearable aery regions of Shelley, does not become an ineffective angel beating his wings in the void.

In *I Hear America Singing*, the voice of that nation is shown to be manifest in the mechanics, the carpenter, the mason, the boatman; in other words, in the average Americans and it is with this common man that Whitman identifies himself. By celebrating himself, he celebrates not only himself but each and every person of America. In *Song of Myself* (section 1), Whitman celebrates 'self' in the following lines:

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

Commonality through the Grass Symbol

The grass is the great symbol of egalitarianism in nature and it is by lying on it and observing it that the poet brings to reflect. The grass symbolizes a universal likeness or democracy amongst everyone. The grass grows everywhere and under every person. This shows Whitman's philosophy that everyone is equal and nature is a form of democracy. As nature doesn't judge so Whitman doesn't judge.

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic

(*Song of Myself*, section 6)

It is the spear of grass that enables the poet to understand the eternal cycle of life and death. Grass expresses commonality most suitably. Whitman approaches egalitarianism from a new angle. He considers equality to be much more than a political ideal; with him it is an eternal fact in the real world of unlimited personalities.

CONCLUSION

Walt Whitman's egalitarianism is universal. For Whitman, egalitarianism was an idea that could permeate the world beyond politics and also make it felt in the same ways as we think, speak, work, fight and even make art. The poet always admired the individual envisioned an egalitarian nation as an integrated whole composed of exclusive but identical individuals. *Song of Myself* opens in a triumphant hymn to the individual: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself." Every voice and every part will carry the same weight within the single egalitarianism and thus every voice and every individual is equally beautiful. In egalitarianism, Whitman sees the possibilities of universal peace, tolerance and brotherhood. The great potentialities of the human being are given a chance to develop only in egalitarianism.

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