

## The Psychological Dimensions of Walt Whitman's Cosmic Self: From Personal Identity to Universal Brotherhood

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### ABSTRACT

Persons with revolutionary ideas, constructive and creative genius are rare almost in all climes and in all ages. They are never satisfied with the existing social, political and religious systems. For those, who are never willing to be cramped by the stranglehold of customs in their social views, by the monopoly of any particular form of government in their political choices, and, by the orthodox priesthood of any particular religion in their religious creed--- democracy is the best choice. Whitman was a man who disapproved of the monarchical form of government and looked upon democracy as his political ideal. He was, in fact, democracy incarnate.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, En-masse, Altruistic



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### BACKGROUND

Walt Whitman has exquisitely introduced himself as “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos, Disorderly, fleshy and sensual... eating, drinking and breeding, No sentimentalist.... No stander above men or women or apart from them... no more modest than immodest.” (Song of Myself). His position in literature is that of a rebel, who became revolutionary, not just for fashion’s sake, but, to make America free from its conventional grooves. He was never satisfied with the existing religious, political and social systems. He was the one who condemned the monarchical form of government and was a hardcore democrat in his ideas. His Leaves of Grass has been hailed as the epic of democracy. The following view bears testimony to it:

“If indeed the various parts of Leaves demanded a single word to sum up and characterize them, ...especially the moral, aesthetic and philosophical departments.”<sup>1</sup>

The term democracy, when applied to the writings, views and attitudes of Whitman, has wider connotations. He strikes a note on the keyboard of democracy, bridging the gulf between narrow patriotism and wider nationalism and thereby extending it to cosmopolitanism.

Fired by the quest for social justice and truth, he reaches a plane, transcending the barriers and boundaries of countries, cultures and centuries. Thus his concept of democracy is applicable to different walks of life. Whitman as a democrat implies a Jeffersonian, an idealist, a patriot, a humanitarian, a reformer, a nationalist and a cosmopolitan figure.

Whitman wrote frequently about democracy and America, hence he has been considered a great national poet and a poet of democracy. In him we find a pioneer, energetically forging ahead in a vast land of tremendous potentialities, striving to establish a new society founded on the pillars of liberty, equality and fraternity.

It is well known that Whitman was born and brought up in a family of democrats. It was a time “when to be a democrat meant specifically to vote for the rights of man and for the power of the masses against the vested interests.”<sup>2</sup> Thus Whitman introduced himself as the proudest celebrant of the cause of masses, both as an uncritical glorifier of individualism and as an advocate pleading the general welfare of the group.

He emphatically declared at the very outset of his Leaves of Grass that ‘democracy’ and ‘masses’ were the fountain head of his poetic inspiration: “One’s self I sing, a simple separate person, yet utter the word Democratic, the word en-masse.”<sup>3</sup>

It is rather paradoxical with him that he celebrates both the individual and the group. The leading idea behind it is the concept of grandeur and supremacy of the individual. The ‘I’ of his poems represents the different types of persons and professionals from the different walks of life. This same individualistic persona ‘I’, when viewed with the ensemble of the world, represents ‘en-masse’. Being a true democrat Whitman believes in the power of people which is equally shared by single, separate person ‘I’; and also by the masses in group. So, Whitman’s concept of democracy is not to be defined as the rule of majority which may become tyrannical but it has to be defined as one which includes

the possibilities of individual self-development without any superficial restraints.

Whitman's concept of America democracy was not limited to the field of politics only. Although he had full faith in the potentialities of common men, and his democratic outlook had a typical colour of its own, yet, it had traditional moorings. The fundamental democratic outlook includes the principle of freedom, the principle of equality and cooperative efforts for common good. His poems fulfil a promise of defining America itself as a democracy, "I heard that you ask' for something to prove/ this puzzle of the New World,/ And to define America, her athletic democracy,"<sup>4</sup>

His poetry is an attempt to describe and define America Democracy and thereby to solve the mysterious puzzle of the New World. He confidently says that the reader will get in his poems whatever he expected of the literature in Democracy. His poems reveal his democratic fervour. His democracy is the personal expression of those hopes for man and the new life which had been abroad since the founding of Republic.

In the wide spectrum of democratic splendour, Whitman placed the individual at the centre. The spirit of individualism is the quintessence of American democracy as conceived by Whitman. Hence, democracy for him, is something more than a form of government. Its main object is to build a prosperous world and to liberate and preserve the individual. He does not rate 'old institutions, arts, libraries' higher than the individuals. He says, "We consider Bibles and religions divine -- I do...it is you who give the life."<sup>5</sup>

All the institutions are meant for the welfare of individuals. It is the individual who decides their utility and worth. Whitman does not discard them totally but holds them relatively subordinate to individuals. According to him, democracy was the surest safeguard and guarantee against individual value.

Its ultimate purpose was to protect and cultivate the highest spiritual value found in the individual soul. His sterling faith in the survival of the individual is expressed in these lines, "My foot is tenon'd and mortised in granite,... amplitude of time."<sup>6</sup>

For him, individual is immortal and has transcended himself beyond this world which is subject to decay and destruction and which is bound by the concept of time and space. Such profound belief in the intrinsic worth of the individual stems from the faith in the eternity of spirit underlying all appearances, phenomena, transitions of birth and death, development and dissolution. And it is the height of his individualistic affirmation that he says, "Underneath all, individuals,...to you."<sup>7</sup>

Thus the contractual basis of democracy becomes a 'compact altogether with individuals'. This new compact promotes the willing fusion of the multitudes.

But this fusion demands the preservation of personal equality and personal freedom.

The individual will is not to be sacrificed at the altar of community or society. Every social institution, rather the whole universe, exists for promoting the good of individuals.

Closely allied to his faith in the power and potential of individual is his belief in the fundamental oneness of mankind. So, equality of all, underlies his recognition of unity behind all apparent differences of personality. Whitman propagates democratic idealism based on the divinity and solidarity of man. It was possible only because of his concept of 'divine average'. It reflects his belief that there is nothing more divine than the human soul. The spark of divinity shines alike in all things, hence all are equal. It is because of this spark of divinity, there is enough scope for mutual love, cooperation and feeling of brotherhood. The opinion of Roger Asselineau in this respect is that "Leaves of Grass represents universal brotherhood of all living things permeated in all places an time by same immortal burning force."<sup>8</sup>

Here the critic mentions an 'immortal burning force' which permeates all things. This force is the force of divine spark what Whitman calls 'divine average'. It enables all animate and inanimate objects pulsate with the same breath. Even the word 'En-Masse' as used by Whitman, corresponds to his phrase 'the divine average' or ever the most precious among the common.

An exact light is thrown upon it by the lines, "I speak the password primeval-- I give the sign...same terms."<sup>9</sup>

The emphasis here is on the absolute quality of heritage possessed by every man and woman in this life. It also implies that there is nothing beautiful or noble which may not be discovered in the simplest human being.

Such recognition of divinity in all things is the secret of his democratic spirit. It endows every object, presented to his senses, with beauty and divinity. Therefore, Whitman, the loud celebrant of the upsurge of masses and individuals, exults, "I believe a leaf of grass is no less...oeuvre of the highest."<sup>10</sup>

Whitman hails all the objects, however, small and ordinary, as something supreme. A small blade of grass, a grain of sand or the pismire or the tree-toad all are equally significant because the same thread of divine spark permeates them.

Besides this, Whitman perceives the dignity of all occupations however humble, and grace inherent in each kind of labour well-performed. While describing various occupations he observes, "Is it you that thought the President greater...less immortal?"<sup>11</sup>

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According to Whitman, no occupation is low or humble. The President, the rich men are equal to ordinary mechanics or other professionals. Such equality is based on his belief that there can be any number of Supremes. What makes Whitman a truly democratic poet is, his fundamental innocence and sense of brotherhood. In the scheme of things everything contributes to the total unity, "And I will thread a thread...as any."<sup>12</sup>

This threading a thread means the continual bond of unity and oneness of things. This unity is the result of ultimate equality of things.

Whitman also accorded due place to liberty in his democratic creed.

For him equality, fraternity and liberty were not mere political slogans but deep seated urges. Freedom for Whitman had profound implications. He said, "Here take this gift,...of my soul."<sup>13</sup>

Whitman had the great gift of being born a free individual. He knew the price of it. He wanted it to be handed over to some worthy and powerful person so that it could be well preserved. He wished the whole of his race to enjoy this gift.

Whitman advocated freedom in all walks of life. On the physical plane he wanted his countrymen to be free from the control of any other race or nation, on psychological plane he pleaded for mental emancipation and urged the people to come out of their narrow intellectual grooves. On metaphysical plane he preached the masses to give up the pernicious hold of orthodox and dogmatic religion. On literary plane he advocated the freedom of letters.

The term freedom is not merely a political slogan and shibboleth for Whitman. Liberty is the boon for every democracy. Hence it should be preserved. His message and caution for the states is, "Resist much, obey little,...resumes its liberty."<sup>14</sup>

He can guess that once any person or nation surrenders to anything, he can never assume its basic state of freedom. Therefore, rebellious resistance to anything wrong is preferable to servile obedience.

Whitman has also been called the forerunner of a more real and more political freedom. He is ever ready to be an ardent supporter of this holy cause. He does not want to lose his filial bonds, "Liberty, let others despair of you – I never/ despair of you."<sup>15</sup>

He has the typical patriotic courage to withstand any oppression. He will never 'despair liberty' and all his efforts would be directed in the preservation of this great idea and holy cause.

The slave issue gave Whitman occasions to exercise his potential to liberate the slaves which were treated as most subhuman creatures. Whitman did not glorify the

wars in general but he participated personally in the one to eradicate and abolish slavery. It means he fought for the one which involved democratic ideal- his ideal, the cause of freedom which he had always placed above everything else.

Whitman carved out his own peculiar image by interpreting the term freedom into an entirely different manner.

His greatest contribution in this respect lies in his concept of freedom applied even to the matters of religion. He alone faithfully and passionately, explored the moral and religious bases of democracy from which answer to religious problems could be sought. The main substance of his discovery is that true democracy can be secured only on the foundation of its own appropriate and necessary religion. He said, "I write not hymns...men and women."<sup>16</sup>

Hence his new religion, instead of being a matter of fasts and feasts, was meant for the welfare of the masses. His was a new theology which brought forward the man, "The new theologies bring forward man...Gods is the world."<sup>17</sup>

Whitman explored the altruistic basis of religion. He placed man at the centre. He believed that the divine in nature and humanity is everywhere, if we can penetrate the husk and reach the essence of things, which is divine. He was keen to preach this new type of religion because he was aware of the fact that the Christian theological religion would not meet the demands of the developed soul in a democracy.

Therefore he transcended it and fulfilled the need for new impersonal religious doctrine, a doctrine of the soul, a religion which sought redemption not in the church, but in the soul.

In the preface to 1872 Edition of *Leaves of Grass* he said, "The people of America must begin to learn that Religion is something far, far different from what they supposed. It is indeed too important to the power and perpetuity of the New World to be consigned any longer to Churches, old or new, Catholic or Protestant- Saint this or Saint that .... It must be consigned henceforth to democratic enmasse, and to literature. It must enter into the poems of nation. It must make the nation."<sup>18</sup>

Here he preaches and interprets religion according to the new gospel of democracy. It is a religion in which the importance of churches or priests, saints etc. is relegated to the background and masses become supreme. He believes in the religion as a sturdy confidence in the universal well being. Even the principles of this type of new religion are healthy enough to make the nation. Such belief in the validity of religious individualism paves the way for democratic sense of freedom in the sphere of spirituality. It was his great achievement which vitally renewed the religious revelation on which the justification and existence of democracy depends.

Economic concept of freedom is also reflected in his conversation with Horace Traubel, "I am for free trade because I am for anything which will break down barriers between peoples: I want to see the countries all wide open." 19

According to Whitman, even financial matters require a freedom of their own, so he recommends free trade. This will enable the persons of different countries to come together and thus break the barriers down. He upholds the principle of laissez faire in every sphere. Whitman's democratic outlook has liberty, equality and brotherhood as basic principles.

In striving to achieve the goal of democratic social order, Whitman believed in the transforming power of love in humanity and in life. He played the role of those poet-prophets who were to guide democracy in realizing the perfection of life. His *Democratic Vistas* is a fine statement not only of the ideal of liberal "Democratic Vistas" is a fine statement not only of the ideal of liberal democracy but also of its fundamental principles. Here "he presents himself as a marvellous type unforgettable, the standard of a race; cell of the American Democracy and prototype of the world democracy." 20

The special quality of this prose essay is that herein Whitman does not become a mindless celebrant of democracy, but, his vituperation and satire are directed against certain issues.

#### HE SAYS:

".... With unprecedented materialistic advancement--society, in these States, is cankered, crude, superstitious and rotten. Political, or law-made society is, and private, or voluntary society is also. In any vigour, the element of the moral conscience, the most important, the verteber to State or man, seems to me either entirely lacking or seriously enfeebled or ungrown." 21

The views of Whitman have realism. He is not fascinated by the democracy as a Utopian ideal only. Even the plague spots of democracy he does not ignore or overlook. His awareness of the evils rampant in democracy and his looking for their solution renders his democratic ideal pragmatic and earthbound. Even the lack of moral conscience among the people makes the society all the more hollow.

He saw underserving leaders thriving in the name of democracy and quite frankly he exposed their ugly tricks, "The cushions of Congress are nothing but filth...both disunionists." 22

The politicians who are not interested in the unity of the country are not leaders fit for democracy, but they are the foes of the masses. They are like a disease that would mar the fresh enthusiastic vigour of the people. Continuing with the same idea he said, "What the so called democrats...most horrible disease." 23.

Thus, amidst all the widening horizons in the realm of materialistic advancements, Whitman could guess unbearable rotting inside. And in order to improve the lot of the social organization he tried his best so that democracy may not remain merely a sham.

Therefore, the democratic fervour of Whitman with his new interpretations, inventions of the vast West, the spirit of revolution, the influence of Jefferson and Jackson, remains unexampled in the history of the world. And Thoreau's compliment is quite consistent with the overall image of Whitman -- "he is democracy."

Nationalism of Whitman is no less remarkable. He believed that no nation can survive if the people belonging to it are not prepared to make sacrifices for its welfare. No country can flourish if its citizens do not have a deep love and no nation can blossom if people do not willingly lay down their lives in its service.

Whitman himself exhibited such qualities and reflected his love for nation in his poetry. This love for nation was to culminate in American totality. He was the first poet to give his nation a certain focal character. Although Emerson also had this feeling but it was Whitman whose nationalism becomes more pronounced through his poems, "A nation announcing itself,...behaviour." 24

It was the new nationalism that he declared his nation to have grown on the foundations of the past. It was all inclusive and the races of America were to be demarcated by their typical decent behaviour. Continuing with the psychology of his countrymen he said, "America, curious...sound." 25

Despite its anchorage in the past and its contacts with the foreign nations, America had come to develop a unique character of its own.

Whitman had no doubt that the destiny of his nation was to be more glorious in achievements than any other in the history. Thus Whitman's national dream was not very provincial. He was tremendously stirred by the revolutions of 1848 in Europe. He realized that such feuds could achieve no practical results and in the light of this experience he developed his own patriotic fondness. The poem "Resurgemus" shows his patriotic zeal, "God't was delicious...throats of kings." 26

His happiness over the end of kingship and feudalism reveals his revolting ideas against tyranny that leapt forth like lightning. The event of the resurgence of nationalistic movement started when the kings were expected to subdue to the power of people. The hold of the multitudes has been expressed here as a grip upon the throat of kings. And for a rebel of Whitman's type it was a 'delicious' happening.

Whitman used patriotism as a means to achieve his nationalistic goal. With him, patriotism was a sort of religion and he conceived of it as essentially a new religion. He felt the need of it as at that time America,



the young country, was so loosely held together that a stress of more unifying power was required.

Whitman began his patriotism in his reverence for patriotic heroes whose heroism consisted in the fact that they had at cost to themselves, won for the colonists, the right to do as they pleased.

His keen sense of patriotism and political awareness come to light in the lyric "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Herein he glorifies his wide, expanded and democratic land. He feels homesick towards his motherland and also reflects a pastoral picture. He refers to civil war and its consequences with the feelings of a humanist. He seems quite conscious of the burning problems of life. He says, "Amid the grass in...draped in black." 27

In fact, it is because of his love for the motherland and also for Lincoln, that enables Whitman to make a rich and poetical use of the fact that Lincoln was killed in the spring time: lilac- blooming- time. He also adapts details of the actual journey of the train bearing Lincoln's dead body.

He also describes the long panoramas of vision that his 'unclosed eyes' saw, "And I saw askant the armies,...remain'd suffer'd." 28

As a humanist, he did not keep his eyes shut to the tragic spectacle caused by war. Despite his remorse for such events that led to the disunity of his nation, his rebellious soul was not cowed down. Quite realistically he declared, "I will make a song of the organic...dissatisfied faces." 29

Whitman's vision of his nation is that of prosperity and unity. In order to cherish it, he does not even hesitate to hurl curses on infidels and traitors. He wants to lay bare the 'countless dissatisfied faces' which wants reveal the actual condition of the States. A momentary note of depression comes to the heart of the poet to see all this, but immediately his love America becomes a compensation for it, "O dear lands: O death:...irrepressible love." 30

It is his selfless love for nation without any private, vested interests which becomes the cementing factor against a disintegrating force. With an 'all credulous' spirit he shows his optimism, "I am all credulous, I am the child of commonalty,...unrestricted faith." 31

He is one of the masses and a child of commonalty and whatever is for the good of people, his songs express that with unbound faith. Because of this type of love and his free, frank fearless temperament he cannot afford missing a lively description of his native place. He captures the soul of Paumanok and life in America, "Resounding Niagara, resounding Mississippi...the sun." 32

The poet is fascinated by the beauty of his birth- place. He exults over the pulsating life that is there in America.

The vocalizing and resounding rivers and falls with vast extending panorama of mountains enthrall him. The life in America as he feels and is convinced is characterized with, "Victory... modern reports." 33

Such rich and prosperous is the America of his dreams. And thus his complete surrender to this sacred land and his reverence for its prestigious image knows no bounds. He dedicates his 'leaves' to his motherland", "Take my leaves America:...perpetuate them." 34

Here the poet takes it for granted that there is a blood-and-flesh relationship between his nation and his poems. Hence, he wishes his chants to be appreciated and assimilated everywhere alike.

His unshakable confidence in the superiority of native land reaches its climax in the poem "Manhatta", "The beautiful city: The city of hurried...with them." 35

The beautiful image of his native town reflects his vaunting patriotic fervour. The description resembles the lines of Shakespear's description of England in the play Richard II. The same abundant praise of the nation is also felt in the poem

"Leaf", "A promise to Indiana Nebraska, Westward." 36

It is in the light of Westward movement also that we can analyse his nationalism. Having roamed about the different states of America he ultimately believes that he belongs Westward. Thus his patriotic feeling enabled him to attain the goal of nationalism.

Seeing such patriotic zeal of Whitman, some of his readers connected his singing with "immoderate chauvinism." Dispersing the clouds of such doubts Chase has given a solution, "But by now our traditional sense of cultural inferiority...Americanism." 37

Here the critic means to say that Whitman's is understood as a pioneer of aggressive chauvinism during his times in no way an appropriate valuation of Whitman. What the readers considered to be his 'vaunting Americanism' is a wrong and unjust dictum today.

In the final analysis, Whitman's nationalism was not like the narrow Natzism of Hitler's Germany, nor it was the imperialism of Britain, nor the totalitarian and authoritarian socialism of the Soviet Russia. One can say that it was pure nationalism devoid of and bellicose patriotism and jingoism. Whitman was not prepared to give any perverted slogan of 'My country, right or wrong.' His nationalism was individualistic and altruistic. It was a feeling of nationalism in context of internationalism. Thinking in terms or some via-media his nationalism was a potent and efficacious legacy for achieving a sense of universal brotherhood.

When we think in terms of international brotherhood, the feeling of nationalism has to be transcended and attuned to the development of such a citizenship where the whole world becomes one family. The implications the term 'cosmopolitanism' are similar, and particularly when the term is applied with respect to Whitman, it means a feeling in which all barriers of caste, creed, colour and nationality yield place to a broader vision of universal amity.

Whitman was imbued with cosmic consciousness. As such, he was perceptive enough to foresee that, if nationalism degenerated into narrow limits, the world would be a debris of discordant units. He preconceived that unless the people living in distant regions and lands were brought together, every happening in any part of the world is sure to cast its unhealthy influence throughout the world. So he tried to preach cosmopolitanism by fusing the apparent extremes of nationalism and internationalism. In his personality we discover that--"The cosmic poet and the national poet would seem logically to be at opposite extremes of the literary spectrum but Whitman was more successful in fusing the two." 38

As a poet he endeavoured to harmonize the dichotomy between the concept of national vs cosmic.

His soul is large enough to embrace all, "My copious soul...friendship, for love." 39

Love, for Whitman, is not only a gift for any particular person, nation or globe but is a broader virtue. It's the 'Kelson of Creation' the great cementing force, and he joyous contentment that follows it is unaffable, "O the joy of my spirit: It is uncaged all time." 40

He feels extremely happy when he is able to embrace the whole of mankind with love. His love is not for some persons but it is a force that ever seeks to bind all nations, all men, of however distant lands into a feeling of brotherhood. It fuses, ties and aggregates, making the races, comrades, fraternizing all. This idea of cosmic similitude is also found in these lines, "A vast similitude interlocks...any globe." 41

The idea of intrinsic oneness of all creation, whether it be living beings or non-living planets, civilizations, is based on Whitman's cosmopolitan outlook only. As a comrade of all, Whitman seems to be a daring and reassuring figure to relate the individual to the nation, nation to cosmos and cosmos to god. The 'divine average' permeates all, leading to fundamental oneness. In the poem "To A Stranger" he says, "It seems to me there...be happy with them." 42

To him people people of different nations are equal because they have same virtues and vices, hopes and aspirations. The 'Kosmos' of Whitman's poems connotes the individual human being expanded through the races and climates to be a symbolic representative of all mankind.

To conclude Whitman's cosmopolitanism involves an inclusiveness, an acceptance, a concept of world citizenship and universal brotherhood. It seeks to promote world spirit national and international parlance.

Suffused with a rebellious hue the democracy for Whitman becomes a pattern for cosmic democracy. And Whitman's democracy, nationalism and cosmopolitanism epitomize an optimistic, orbic and cosmic America, this America is devoted to "a strong fibred joyousness and faith, and the sense of health al-fresco."43

As for his democracy, it has global influence "Soviet critics have for decades, honoured the poet as a high priest of democratic idealism and as a saint of the revolution of 1917."44

His nationalism is a feeling of healthy emulation and his cosmopolitanism places Whitman amongst the time honoured poets of the world.

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