

DEMOCRATIC SPIRIT IN WHITMAN'S POETRY

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Abstract:-

Among poets, Walt Whitman, the poet-prophet is undoubtedly the greatest champion of democracy. Many of English romantic poets were staunch supporter of democracy but Whitman's approach to democracy was much more vivid and realistic. Whitman uses "I" refer not only to himself, but to a larger "I" that includes the reader and humanity in general. According to him the grass is the great symbol of democracy in nature and it is by lying on it and observing it that the poet sings. The grass grows in all places. It grows among the black as well as the white, in broad as well as narrow zones. This is very suggestive of the democratic spirit which the poet always emphasizes. The democratic poet does not celebrate an individual hero. Nor does he celebrate himself. The 'I' in Whitman's poem has never been so much a personal references but it is a fusion of several characters, a composite character, who are not existing in any place other than in the poem. Whitman has a sense of identity with man. He has a sense of identity with all living creatures. This sense of "oneness of all" makes his democracy universal and pantheistic. The poet has pity for older nations of Europe and Asia. He is proud of his American nationality. The American nation visualized as the leader of humanity, is the true hero of his poetry. However, Whitman's democracy is spiritual. In, Whitman's Introduction to Leaves of Grass, (page. 5 of 1855 edition) he writes: "The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The poet expresses the very spirit of attachment of the Americans to freedom. He visualized democratic America and its people expressing the spirit of democratic America just as the epics of Homer and Virgil express the spirit of their ancient Greece and Rome. This paper attempts to explore the democratic undercurrent in Whitman's Poetry.

Among poets, Walt Whitman, the poet-prophet is undoubtedly the greatest champion of democracy. Many of English romantic poets were staunch supporter of democracy but Whitman's approach to democracy was much more vivid and realistic. His ideal of democracy was not visionary's dream but he visualized complete harmony between the individual and society. He applied democratic theme with free verse form in the "Song of Myself." He celebrates unity of all life and people in this poem. He embraces diversity of territory, geography, culture, conviction sexuality and belief in his poetry. His ideals are -- good health, soul and the love of nature. In the

opening lines of “Song of Myself,” Whitman’s faith and trust in democratic values appear so strong that he sings:

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

Whitman uses “I” refer not only to himself, but to a larger “I” that includes the reader and humanity in general. Equality for all man is also described in the lines. Whitman visioned possibilities of universal peace and brotherhood in democratic system of government. So he may be rightly called spiritual democrat. En-masse, the divine average was the most authentic specimen of humanity to Whitman. As a poet he is not interested in any speciality that he can’t share with “all.” According to him the grass is the great symbol of democracy in nature and it is by lying on it and observing it that the poet sings.

“I loafe and invite my soul
I lean and loafe at my ease
Observing a spear of summer grass.”

The grass grows in all places. It grows among the black as well as the white, in broad as well as narrow zones. This is very suggestive of the democratic spirit which the poet always emphasizes. “The poem, “Song of Myself,” is hardly at all concerned with American nationalism, political democracy, contemporary progress, or other social themes that are commonly associated with Whitman’s work.”¹ Whitman is a born democrat and he believes in the dignity and equality of men and women. Every profession is equally honorable and respectable to him. Men of every class are interesting to Whitman. But no individual is pre-eminently interesting to him. “His sketches of individual men and women, through wonderfully vivid and precise, are none of them longer than a page; each single figure passes rapidly out of sight, and a stream of other figures of men and women succeeds. Even in Lincoln’s Burial Hymn he has only a word to say of ‘the larger sweet soul that has gone.’”² There can be no signal person or character the subject of Whitman’s songs. Though we find individual reference, it is merely suggestive of a group and group a multitude, each unit of which is as interesting as every other unit. Every unit possesses equal claims to recognition. Men and women are seen ‘en-masse,’ and the mass is viewed not from a distance, but close at hand, where it is felt to be a concourse of individuals. To Whitman individual is all important and he is not to be sacrificed even for the good of society. Every individual personality should be developed, so that all these personalities, like the colors in a painting, many produce a harmonious and magnificent picture. “A faith in the inherent dignity and nobility of the common is the very root and basis of Whitman’s

democracy.”³

The democratic poet does not celebrate an individual hero. Nor does he celebrate himself. Whitman sings, ‘I celebrate myself,’ and the longest poem in *Leaves of Grass* is named after his own name. However, the poet does not celebrate himself throughout the poem but this self-celebration is celebration of himself as a man and an American. Manhood and in particular American manhood is the real subject of Whitman’s poetry. “Another point explained by Indian conceptions is the sort of democracy Whitman was preaching in “*Song of Myself*.” What he preaches throughout the poem is not political but religious democracy, such as was practiced by the early Christians.”⁴

The ‘I’ in Whitman’s poem has never been so much a personal reference but it is a fusion of several characters, a composite character, who are not existing in any place other than in the poem. Whitman once suggested in one of his reviews of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*: “Other poets celebrate great events, personages, romances, wars, loves, passions, the victories and power of their country, or some real or imagined incident. This poet (Whitman) celebrates natural propensities in himself, and that is the way he celebrates all.”⁵

The ‘I’ in Whitman’s poem may be a dramatization of the typical American, or the cosmic poet, a dramatization of a soldier on the battlefield or of a comet rushing through the heavens. The ‘I’ in Whitman poetry is Everyman, a creature of contradictory impulses and instincts, both good and bad. The poet contains multitudes and he embraces multiple minds and multiple nations.

Whitman has a sense of identity with man. He has a sense of identity with all living creatures. This sense of “oneness of all” makes his democracy universal and pantheistic. Schyberg, a Danish critic writes, “Whitman is directly led away from the political aspect of democracy towards transcendental, pantheistic democracy, which was always the poet’s main subject.” The basic emotion in Whitman’s poetry is a feeling of kinship with all creation. In the “*Leaves of Grass*,” the grass is the great democratic symbol in nature and it is by lying on it and observing a spear of summer grass that the whole great motif is set in motion. The poem adheres firmly to that motif throughout the poem.

Whitman finds even in the remote corner of the human throng and in every paradox of existence, for kinship:

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then..... I contradict myself:

I am large.... I contain multitudes.

He contains multitudes as he embraces many minds and many nations of the world. His democracy is ideal and universal as he personifies the spirit of universal brotherhood. Whitman believed that modern America is the center of science and democracy just as in the past Europe was

the centre of feudalism, and Asia that of myth and fable. He feels superior for America as he writes,

I chant America the mistress

I chant a greater supremacy.

The poet has pity for older nations of Europe and Asia. He is proud of his American nationality. The American nation visualized as the leader of humanity, is the true hero of his poetry. However, Whitman's democracy is spiritual. He is a spiritual democrat for he sees in democracy the possibilities of universal brotherhood, peace and tolerance. The human soul has immense possibilities of good in it and these possibilities are brought out fully only in a democracy. Whitman writes, "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." To Whitman's mind society could improve and purify itself through democracy. The individuals are constantly tested, exercised and stimulated to grow stronger and better in the struggle. This faith in the regeneration of humanity through democracy runs in the Leaves of Grass, and makes it, 'As Bible of democracy,' in the true sense of the word. One can't say Whitman as mere idealist or mere theorist of democracy, rather his democracy is practical. During the civil war he merely did not see the wounded and suffering soldiers, but he nursed with his own hands the wounded and suffering soldiers in the Washington hospitals. He also worked as a psychological nurse to the suffering and wounded soldiers. He dressed the wounds with his own hands, with his powerful presence soothed and sustained and nourished America's suffering soldiers -- hundreds of them, thousands, ten thousands... by day and night, for weeks, months and years:

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 soldier's loving arms about this neck have crossed and rested.

Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.

Whitman once said, "I have a feeling of something in me, in the Leaves that is vital – that may live: something not exactly mine but always spoken through me: something not owed to my ego but having a race quality, fitting in with the struggle of democracy in our time to free itself from the clutter of the past."

One's self I sing, a simple separate person,

Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.

The poet does not sing his self, but one's self. The poet is a person and The Leaves presents a series of personae. This self is 'separate' but it is always merging with others. He has been a citizen of a democracy where he preserves his identity. The democratic man holds to the inviolable integrity

of the self and also to the collection of all men. He admitted in 1847: “I can not understand the mystery, but I am always conscious of myself as two. The two are – “my soul and I.” We wrote the editorials, I wrote the letters, and soul wrote the poems.”⁶ He called himself as a folk poet who in a moment of illumination gained the belief that he was to be “the prophet of democracy.” He is a poet who is putting aside all his commitments to tradition and conformity. But he did not express what was truly poetic about life in the middle 19th century America. He spoke out boldly in his own free idiom of life and in his own voice. He started with an uncritical acceptance of life, and gradually he turned into his consciousness through his senses and insight. Then he turned outward through love and friendliness to the democratic masses.

According to Whitman the whole cosmos is beautiful. Nothing is trivial to him in the whole universe. Everything can be the subject of his poetry. He emphasizes the word “En-Masse”:

“Endless unfolding of words of Ages!

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

These lines explore his democratic ideas in his poetry. Since time immemorial many words have been used but “En-Masse” appeals to the poet more than any other word. It stands for all humanity, for all significant or insignificant things, for entire mankind. All men and women are equal for him. There is no disparity between men belonging to different color or creed. “Whitman is democratic not only in his ideas but also in his poetic technique. In his poetic style democratic impulse is reflected. It is significant that he rejects the conventional forms of poetry which he felt to be aristocratic past. His freedom with poetic form reflects his advocacy of freedom for human soul. The free flow of words, the lines of uneven length, all express the sense of development inherent democracy.”⁷

It has been remarked, Whitman is more nationalistic than a truly democratic poet. He confesses that he sings of America. But if he sings of America, it becomes he associates the nation with democracy. Animating principle of Leaves of Grass from first to last is democracy. Frequent emphasis has been put on unity, equality and human dignity in “Song of Myself” which reveals Whitman’s democratic principle or impulse.

In, Whitman’s Introduction to Leaves of Grass, (page. 5 of 1855 edition) he writes: “The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem..... Other states indicate themselves in their deputies.....but 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. Their manners speech dress friendship -- the freshness and candor of their physiognomy – the picturesque looseness of their

carriage.... their deathless attachment to freedom.... their good temper and openhandedness – the terrible significance of their elections – the president’s taking off his hat to them not they to him – these too are unrhymed poetry.”⁸

The poet expresses the very spirit of attachment of the Americans to freedom. He visualized democratic America and its people expressing the spirit of democratic America just as the epics of Homer and Virgil express the spirit of their ancient Greece and Rome. The recurring tendency of his poems is to become series of person and things. If he mentions one race of mankind the names of all other races press into his page; if he names one trade or occupation, all other trades and occupations follow. A long procession of living forms passes before him; each several form, interestingly watched for a moment, is then dismissed. The mass is viewed not from a distance, but close at hand, where it is felt to be a concourse of individuals. The democratic spirit runs through Whitman’s poetry and therefore he may rightly be called the “voice of democracy.” He dreamt to establish a world-wide institution of the dear love of comrades and his *Leaves of Grass* is an embodiment of that dream.

Conclusion:-

At the end it is to be concluded that in “*Leaves of Grass*”, Whitman emerges as the champion of equality and democracy. He has a profound faith in democracy because this political form of government respects the individual. According to Whitman the genius of America is well expressed in the common people, not in the legislature or in its churches or courts. He believed that it is the common folk who have sheer attachment to freedom of the nation. He believed that the source of evil in the society lay not in human nature but in oppressive social and religion institutions.

References:-

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