

THE ETHOS OF LIBERTY AND THE COMMON MAN: TRACING FREEDOM, EQUALITY, AND DEMOCRACY IN WALT WHITMAN'S VISION

¹Shyama Tiwari, ²Dr. Tushti Sharma

¹Research Scholar, ²Supervisor

¹⁻² Department of English, Malwanchal University, Indore (M.P)

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Abstract:

This paper explores the intricate web of freedom, equality, and democracy as envisioned by Walt Whitman, one of America's most iconic poets and a fervent advocate for democratic ideals. Through an in-depth analysis of his seminal work, *Leaves of Grass*, along with his prose writings, notably *Democratic Vistas*, this study aims to unravel how Whitman's oeuvre serves as a dynamic canvas portraying the ethos of liberty and the intrinsic worth of the common man. Drawing upon historical, philosophical, and literary perspectives, the paper delves into Whitman's conception of democracy, deeply rooted in the Greek tradition yet profoundly resonant with the American democratic experiment. Whitman's engagement with the socio-political discourses of his time, including his critique of institutional corruptions and his championing of individual rights and spiritual democracy, is examined to shed light on his visionary attempt to reconcile the ideals of freedom and equality with the realities of a burgeoning America. By juxtaposing Whitman's poetic and philosophical musings with the democratic tenets espoused by thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus, and Thucydides, the paper elucidates the poet's belief in the transformative power of democracy to cultivate a society of fully realized individuals. Furthermore, Whitman's advocacy for a spiritual democracy, transcending mere political governance to encompass a profound connection among all beings, is highlighted as the cornerstone of his democratic vision. This study not only contributes to the scholarly discourse on Whitman's political and social thought but also illuminates the enduring relevance of his democratic ideals in contemporary discussions on liberty, equality, and the human condition.

Keywords: Walt Whitman, democracy, freedom, equality, *Leaves of Grass*, *Democratic Vistas*, spiritual democracy, American poetry, social philosophy, Greek tradition.

INTRODUCTION

Origin and Development

Over the last hundred years, the term "democracy" has taken on a very charged connotation. There seems to be no logic behind why some people have been using the phrase to describe their preferred system while others have been denying it to their opponents. According to Macmillan, "diverse systems have been claimed as democratic of one sort or another" (338). But everyone agrees that being a government of the people or a popular self-governance is what democracy is all about.

The Greek Origin

Derived from the ancient Greek words "demos" (the downtrodden) and "kartos" (rule of power), the English term "democracy" emerged. Thus, it represented the rule of the downtrodden over the well-off in their view. "This is still the language used by those who link the working class to democracy and the proletariat to the general populace (Macmillan 338).

Democracy as a political system emerged at Athens, Greece, in the sixth and fourth century B.C., and flourished there. There was a big difference between the contemporary system of representative government and the direct democracy practiced by the Athenians. It was the responsibility of every citizen to have a voice in the assembly's policymaking and to serve indefinitely. So the Athenians got themselves entangled in the process of creating a decent society. From ancient Athens to the present day, the democratic ideal of citizen participation has served as a guiding principle for democracies across the world. This kind of active participation, in Whitman's view, is crucial because it helps individuals develop their character and their sensitivity to societal issues. Considering the level of social engagement and participation among Americans at his time, Whitman believed that American democracy was in its early stages. He states in his article titled "Democratic Vistas":

"Assuming Democracy to be at present in its embryo condition, and that the only large and satisfactory justification of it resides in the future, mainly through the copious production of perfect characters among the people, and through the advent of a sane and pervading

religiousness, it is with regard to the atmosphere and spaciousness fit for such characters ... that I continue the present statement ... leaving it to those who come after me to do much better" (LG 486).

Whitman elevates the en-masse, or ordinary man, to the position of president by introducing his preferred ideas of equality and divine individualism via this idea of active engagement in democracy.

It has already been stated that the Athenians adhered to the conventional wisdom of direct democracy, which is characterised by a people ruling themselves. In this way, every single citizen might have a direct hand in shaping public policy. After an equal opportunity exchange of ideas, a democratic choice was reached when the majority of those involved reached a consensus by voting. Thus, the Athenian democracy was characterised by a feeling of equal opportunity. Republican democracy, as practiced now, is an improvement upon the original democratic system developed by the ancient Athenians. Now that the people have the power to pick their representatives, democracy has evolved into a kind of representative government. So, it's safe to conclude that contemporary democracies are basically just that: democracies run by and for the people.

But keep in mind that the early historians Herodotus and Thucydides had an impact on the great ancient thinkers Plato and Aristotle. In his first substantial book, Herodotus outlined three distinct political systems: democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy. Democracy is characterised by a shared authority structure, in contrast to monarchies and aristocracies, where a small number of people have ultimate power. Herodotus favoured democracy above the other two systems of governance because it was based on three indivisible principles: the equal application of laws, the equal administration of laws, and the equal freedom of speech.

The waning of Athens' once-great democracy is chronicled by Thucydides, the Peloponnesian war historian. A "government by the many instead of a few" (Leslie 16), he says, is democracy's defining feature. One of democracy's defining characteristics, he says, is that it gives even the impoverished a voice in government. Whitman extols this aspect of democracy in his "Democratic Vistas" speech, praising it as "this, as matters now stand in our civilised world is the only scheme worth working from, as warranting results like those of Nature's laws, reliable, once established, to carry on themselves" (LG 472). The democratic ideals of liberty and equality, in Plato's view, make it impossible to achieve the prerequisites of unity. The accusation that Plato is hostile to democracy is, from a contemporary perspective, the

most grave one levied against him. The three types of governance that Herodotus identified—monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy—were all recognised by Plato. The last word on the triple categorization, however, came from Aristotle. "It is not only the many who rule in a democracy, but it is also the poor of whom the many consist" (Leslie 20), which is why Aristotle believed that democracy was the ideal form of governance. Aristotle and Whitman's views on democracy are very similar here. Even Aristotle concedes that impoverished people must take part in democratic governance in order for it to function, and he says that the best way to teach people to regard themselves as rulers is to pay them to do so. When Whitman spoke about the goal of a democratic government—that is, to teach its citizens to govern themselves—he emphasised the need of self-respect as well.

"I say the mission of government, henceforth, in civilized lands, is not repression alone, and not authority alone, not even of law, nor by that favorite standard of the eminent writer, the rule of the best men, the born heroes and captains of the race ... but higher than the height arbitrary rule, to train communities through all their grades, beginning with individuals and ending there again, to rule themselves" (LG 475-76).

The idea that the poor should have a voice in voting and establishing a democratic government to aid in the nation's development is something that Whitman absorbed from Aristotle. They would feel respected and valued by being actively involved in this. It is made very apparent by Whitman in his "Democratic Vistas":

"To be a voter with the rest is not so much ...But to become an enfranchised man, and now, impediments removed, to stand and start without humiliation, and equal with the rest; to commence, or have the road cleared to commence, the grand experiment of development, whose end...may be the forming of full-grown man and woman—that is some thing" (LG 476).

There have been different perspectives on democracy's development from Plato to Aristotle. The political theories of the 17th and 18th century thinkers are very similar to Whitman's democratic theory.

Kinds of Democracy and Whitman's Ideas of Democracy

As a political system, democracy has a strong and pervasive connotation. Democracy, however, may take many forms; some examples are economic, spiritual, political, social, and ethnic democracies. Democracy and a radical kind of American individualism, according to Whitman's political thought, are inseparable and intrinsically linked. Actually, Whitman has a positive

impression of American democracy because of this unique bond. Liberty, self-respect, and equality are inseparable in Whitman's democratic vision. Freedom, equality, and uniqueness can only be achieved via political liberty. In "Preface, 1855," Whitman discusses the concept of political liberty and states:

"...it is the dialect of common sense. It is the speech of the proud and melancholy races and of all who aspire. It is the chosentongue to express growth, faith, self-esteem, freedom, justice, equality, friendliness, amplitude, prudence, decision and courage" (LG 458).

Whitman identifies democracy with the ideals of liberty and equality that highlight the value of each person—the ideal, unrestricted human being. To him, democracy is like a great equaliser; it just levels the playing field. He argues that the idea of uniqueness, which is what makes a person unique, is tied to the idea of democracy as a leveller. Individualism and personalism, according to Whitman, are bolstered by this ideal of equality and freedom. His position is laid forth in "Democratic Vistas":

"For to democracy, the leveler, the unyielding principle of the average, is surly join'd another principle equally unyielding, closely tracking the first, indispensable to it, opposite, (as the sexes are opposite,) and whose existence, confronting and ever modifying the other, often clashing, paradoxical, yet neither of highest evil with out other, ... This second principle is individuality, the pride and centripetal isolation of a human being in himself—identity—personalism. Whatever the name, its acceptance and thorough infusion through the organization of political commonality now shooting Aurora-like about the world, are of utmost importance, as the principle itself is needed for very life's sake. It forms, in a sort, or is to form, the compensating balance-wheel of the successful working machinery of aggregate America". (LG 485).

Inspiringly expressing Whitman's thoughts, the book focuses on the idea of equality and the inherent value of every individual. Whitman beautifully proclaims the glory of man's all-encompassing freedom while also stressing the significance of equality. In fact, according to Whitman, freedom and equality are essential components of a democratic society. He boldly states that the role of a poet is to advocate for and promote equality. Any person or thing may be given the proper place and position by a poet. Both his age and his land make him an equaliser. He writes: "By Blue Ontario's Shore" in his poetry.

"Of these States the poet is the equable man,

He is the arbiter of the diverse, he is the key,

He is the equalizer of his age and land,

For the great Idea, the idea of perfect and free individuals,

For that, the bard walks in advance, leader of leaders.

The attitude of him cheers up slaves and

horrifies foreign despots" (LG 273-74).

Whitman thinks that an individual's grandeur lies in their limitless freedom, which, when fostered in an ideal setting, would serve as a counterbalance to society's shortcomings. He claims in "A Backward Glance" that he writes poetry to encourage this kind of uniqueness.

I have allow'd the stress of my poems from beginning to end to bear upon American individuality and to assist it—not only because that is a great lesson in Nature, amid all her generalizing laws, but as counterpoise to the leveling tendencies of Democracy—and for other reasons (LG. 555).

Whitman's Social Philosophy and Faith in Democracy

In shaping his ideas on social philosophy and democracy, Whitman was profoundly impacted by the Revolutions in France and the United States. He supported Dickenson's critique of American democracy in an editorial he wrote for Aurora in 1842. Complacency and a sense of superiority would impede the advancement of democracy, hence he agreed with Dickenson that there can be no social norm that encourages people to become complacent. Whitman has said something along these lines in "A Backward Glance": "Democracy has been so retarded and jeopardised by powerful personalities that its first instincts are fain to clip, conform, bring in stragglers, and reduce everything to a dead level" (LG 555).

Institutions and structures that Whitman saw as being in opposition to the principles of equality and democracy were not shy about receiving his scathing criticism. He said that both the law-made and voluntary societies were antithetical to democracy in its purest form. This bold statement is made by him in "Democratic Vistas":

"For my part, I would alarm and caution even the political and business reader, and to the utmost extent, against the prevailing delusion that the establishment of free political institutions, and plentiful intellectual smartness, with general good order, physical plenty, industry, &c., (desirable and precious advantages as they all are,) do themselves, determine and yield to our experiment of democracy the fruitage of success. Society, in these State, is canker'd, crude, superstitious, and rotten.

Political, or law-made society is, and private or voluntary society, is also. In any vigor, 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” (LG 466-467).

He had ill will towards the church because of its teachings and actions that he believed encouraged social inequity. As an example, in March 1846 he attacked the church publicly in the Brooklyn Eagle for what he saw as its uplifting features—comfortable seats, beautiful decorations, and the very nature of the architecture—that led people to feel complacent and satisfied with themselves. Obviously, Whitman understood and acknowledged the role that Christianity had in society's development. Additionally, he said up front that there is no religion that compares to Christianity. He held the view that Christian teachings reawakened latent human virtue. Although Whitman's belief in democracy was bolstered by his realisation that Christianity was a socially powerful theological idea, he was forthright in his criticism of the church's deviations from the genuine spirit of Christianity.

Culture and Democracy

Whitman was able to delve into the new era's interpretations of literary nationalism and cultural democracy via his affiliation with the *Galaxy*, a New York weekly. He came to consider democratic aesthetic theory as a result of his literary association with the prolific *Galaxy* writer and cultural critic Eugene Benson (1839–1908). Whitman argues that the American Civil War demonstrated the indisputable merit of political democracy in his article "Democracy" published in *The Galaxy* in December 1867. He uses the titles "Bard of America and Bard of Democracy" to introduce himself. When the first two parts of "Democratic Vistas," "Democracy" and "Personalism," were published by the *Galaxy* later on, they helped Whitman reassert his renown while also spreading his strong vision of American literary nationalism and political and cultural democracy. According to Edward F. Grier, "Whitman's position as a *Galaxy* author was important to his personal fortunes and his literary reputation" (qtd in *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 189, henceforth referred to as *WWQR*). Indeed, in Whitman's view, the *Galaxy* was the preeminent publication in the years after to the Civil War.

To achieve the most advanced form of democracy, Whitman believed that the America he knew needed new leaders, a different culture, and new people. New forms of individualism, which Whitman called "Personalism," were something he was looking forward to. The societal disease of conformity, which he believed was limiting the growth of democracy in the United States, was something he thought this individualism

might cure. To him, the only way for the United States to achieve greatness was to rid itself of the last vestiges of the aristocratic European culture that had spread like a weed here. He had no doubt that the egalitarian democratic ideal was in odds with this type of European culture. In the name of uniformity, it stunts the development of strong and courageous people, lowering them to a level where they are just average. In questioning the impact of European aristocratic culture, he poses the following question:

“...are not the processes of culture rapidly creating a class of supercilious infidels who believe in nothing? Shall a man lose himself in countless masses of adjustments ... that the simply good and healthy and brave parts of him are reduced and clipp'd away, like the bordering of box in a garden?” (LG 488).

Refined aristocratic culture, which Whitman said undermines democracy by placing people only in comparison to one another, is something Whitman strongly opposed.

“Refined aristocratic culture distracts democrats from themselves, persuades them to judge themselves only in reference to others, and thus subjects them to the worst kind of social conformity. Whitman is concerned that a culture such as this will prevent Americans from achieving literary greatness and thus the development of the spiritual democracy which he desires” (Goldhammer 41).

One may argue that he adhered to the anti-democratic school of thought that had its roots in Plato's belief that the United States was a victim of the conformity that its egalitarian ideals fostered. He held the view that the vast majority of democracies stifle their people's greatness and elevate them to a middle-class condition. An anti-democratic kind of democratic culture exists, according to George Kateb's "Walt Whitman and the Culture of Democracy," which explains Whitman's contradictory view by stating that it limits the uniformity that equality produces.

Whitman's Vision of Political and Cultural Democracy

Democracy, in Whitman's view, is deeply pragmatic. It is not at all an idealistic philosophical system. It blends in with all the practical facts. Therefore, the political, social, and cultural currents of his day permeate his notion of democracy. A cultural shift is occurring in the psychological maturation of American society and democracy as a whole, and it is bearing the weight of people's political engagement and societal concerns. Whitman, with a strong sense of social obligation, assumed the roles of democratic poet and bard of America. An American poet, in his view, should be prepared to serve society with a cosmic perspective and a spirit of

compassion. He states so explicitly in "Preface, 1855":

"The American bards shall be marked for generosity and affection and for encouraging competitors...They shall be Kosmos...without monopoly or secrecy...glad to pass anything to anyone... hungry for equals night and day... the American bard shall delineate no class of persons nor one or two out of the strata of interests nor love most nor truth most nor the soul most nor the body most... and not be for the eastern states more than the western or the northern states more than the southern" (LG 449).

Politics and *Leaves of Grass*

Politics and Whitman's engagement in them are common topics of conversation. A sociological analysis sheds light on his poetic and prophetic development against the backdrop of the American national image. He attacked the corrupt government like a responsible poet-prophet. "Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States," he writes in "Democratic Vistas," expressing his violent response to one such event. It seems that true faith has departed from us" (LG 467). "The spectacle is appalling," he says harshly, expressing his wrath at the haughty attitude of the authorities who spread distrust and suspicion. All around us, hypocrisy permeates our lives. Men do not believe in women, and women do not believe in men. In literature, a contemptuous air of superiority prevails" (LG 467). Concerned with the extraordinary level of corruption in American politics during the 1850s, Whitman penned these agitated remarks while boiling with moral outrage. According to Dutton, Whitman's concern about the shockingly low level of social and political morals in the United States in 1856 grew as he became more immersed in American life as a poet (24). He bemoaned the fact that democracy was on the verge of collapse due to widespread societal corruption, hypocrisy, and adultery. He wrote "By Blue Ontario's Shore" to vent his worry about the political corruption that undermined American democracy, which had a profound effect on his sensibilities:

"A Phantom gigantic superb, with stern visage accosted me,

Chant me the poem, it said, that comes from the soul of America, chant me the carol of victory,

And strike up the marches of Liberated, marches more powerful yet,

And sing me before you go the song of the throes of Democracy.

(Democracy, the destin'd conqueror, yet treacherous lip-smiles everywhere, and death and infidelity at every step.)" (LG 268).

Whitman may have avoided getting his hands dirty with politics, but he was always perceptive to the world around him. The poet's style has evolved in response to these experiences. The democratic poetics of Walt Whitman and the republicanism of Jefferson and Jackson have been linked by academics like Betsy Erkkila and Newton Arvin. As stated in Greenspan's work (66). When it came time for Whitman to respond to the shifting political situations, particularly between 1846 and 1855, his literary style changed significantly. Whitman, as a literary representative of his time, adopted a very different tone from 1846 to 1855 in reaction to the changing political atmosphere.

The political climate of the United States in the early 1850s had an impact on Whitman's democratic views. Sectional disputes over slavery led to the 1854 dissolution of the Whig Party, and Whitman's Democratic Party was riven with internal turmoil. Once a loyal party politician who had revered the presidency, Whitman began to look down on the three residencies that preceded Lincoln with shame and disdain as he reacted against social disorders and the incompetence of authorities, especially against the soft-spine compromises on the slavery issue. He started to believe that he was selected to stir up trouble in the nation. "A heroic person walks at his ease through and out of that custom, precedent, or authority that suits him not" (LG 449), he said in the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*.

He saw firsthand the social corruption at the top and the harsh truth of the misery that lay underneath it. After that, Whitman started writing about his emotions. He used harsh language to describe his disgust with the rulers' societal corruption in his 1855 Preface prepared note. Whitman thought that poets could do more than everyone else to help the United States become a more refined country.

"Of all the nations with veins full of poetical stuff, the United States will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest" (LG 444). This means that the country has a greater need for poets. The duty of a poet, to address such societal issues and provide a remedy to the catastrophe, was not avoided by Whitman. In his knowledge and articulation of the poet-prophet's vocation, he rescued the common man's cause and cleansed society of its pollution. In his paper titled "Politics and Poetry: *Leaves of Grass* and the Social Crisis of the 1850s," David S. Reynolds makes the following remarks:

"Many of the things we commonly associate with Whitman's poetry—its air of defiance, its radical

egalitarianism, its unabashed individualism, its almost – Jingoistic Americanism – had been largely absent from his apprentice writings and appeared in his work only as social condition worsened to the degree that he took on a self-appointed cultural rescue mission” (Greenspan 66).

The poet, in Whitman's view, should act as a judge and, if necessary, use force to reform society and provide for its needs. In defining the poet's function and goal, he states in the "1855 Preface" to *Leaves of Grass*:

“He is the arbiter of the diverse and he is the key. He is the equalizer of his age and land ... he supplies what wants supplying and checks what wants checking. ... If the time becomes slothful and heavy he knows how to arouse it. ...he can make every word he speaks draw blood”. (LG 444).

Instead of killing him, the crumbling societal forces inspired him to believe more in the common people and the transformative potential of poetry and the populist poet. One who is not a great artist may be just as holy and flawless as the greatest artist. The poet freely uses the ability to demolish or shape, but never attacks, as he said in "Preface, 1855" (LG 445).

The growing corruption in government also troubled Whitman, as did the slavery problem. Still, he persisted in his reformist and activist zeal. Because of his realistic outlook, he saw that evil has a purpose. In his view, hardships often provide the ideal setting for shaping character. In his book "Democratic Vistas," he states:

“Political democracy, as it exists and practically works in America, with all its threatening evils, supplies a training-school for making first class men. It is life's gymnasium, not of good only, but of all. We try often though we fall back often. ... Not for nothing does evil play its part among us. Judging from the main portions of the history of the world, so far, justice is always in jeopardy, peace walks amid hourly pitfalls, and of slavery, misery, meanness, the craft of tyrants and the credulity of the populace, in some of their protean forms, no voice can at any timesay, they are not” (LG 480).

Even while political democracy can not in and of itself provide an environment of perfect harmony and peace, Whitman believed that it did have the ability to mould daring and fearless people into citizens who are worthy of a genuine democracy. This conviction allowed him to hold on to the possibility of a democratically formed new American culture. That is how, despite corruption and other societal ills like slavery, he was able to go on with his reform efforts. We encounter a guy with real-life social aspects in *Leaves of Grass*. He propels us ahead strongly to solid societal concerns with his unique

tone, which combines raw boldness with nonchalance. A particularly brazen section of "Democratic Vistas" is when he lays out the social crisis and the government's role in fixing it:

The ordinary people in all their broken, imperfection may be seen by me; they are a collection of examples of the uneducated, the credulous, the unsuitable, the uncouth, the talented, and the very poor and lowly. We hold the belief that the true purpose of political and all forms of government is not just to govern and suppress disorder, but also to foster development, open up cultivation, encourage the potential for all good and masculine growth, and to fulfil the inherent pride and respect in every individual (LG 475).

On certain instances, he may be rather unpleasant and repulsive, according to his critics, yet his remarks are so sincere that they capture our attention and make us like him.

“He disturbs our classifications. He attracts us; repels us; excites our curiosity, wonder, admiration, love, or, our extreme repugnance. He does anything except leave us indifferent. However we feel towards him, we cannot despise him” (Marx 59).

The works of Walt Whitman reveal the deeply felt sentiments of an inventive genius confronted with a world where democracy holds the key to solving its problems, if not entirely. Whitman wrote and lived his life as a deserving democratic with this goal in mind. Whitman demonstrated the increasing number of his readers and the organic spread of his ideas grounded in solid social philosophy via the subsequent editions of his work. We may not hold Whitman in high esteem as an artistic role model, but there can be no question that he was the first representative democracy from the Americas. More than just a creative, Whitman was a real person who, like a poet, enjoyed spending time in outdoors. In his view, an artist's true creative impulses are violated when they reject nature. Justice and equality, in his view, exist in nature at all times. According to him, he can see his spirit mirrored in the natural world. This introspection taught him that men and women are equal and beautiful in their own right. He maintains that women possess every trait associated with men. "Children of Adam" features his vocals:

“The female contains all the qualities and tempers them,

She is in her place and moves with perfect balance,

She is all things duly veil'd, she is both passive and active,

She is to conceive daughters as well as sons,

and sons as well as daughters.

As I see my soul reflected in Nature,

*As I see through a mist one withinexpressible
completeness,*

*The male is not less the soul nor more, he too is in his
place,*

He too is all qualities, he is action andpower” (LG 81).

It is reasonable to suppose that Whitman derived the ideal of equality, which he believed should underpin a democratic society, from this conviction. He sings the following in "Starting from Paumanok":

“I am the credulous man of qualities ages,races,

I advance from the people in their ownspirit,

Here is what sings unrestricted faith.

*Omnes! Omnes! Let others ignore whatthey may” (LG
16).*

Equality and Spiritual Democracy

It would be a stretch to call Whitman a religious person in the traditional sense. But he brought the sacred spirit into his work, making it more religious than secular. Grasses' Leaves. He states in the "Preface, 1872":

“When I commenced, years ago, elaborating the plan of my poems, and continued turning over that plan, and shifting it in my mind through many years...one deep purpose underlay the others, and has underlain it and its execution ever since—and that has been the religious purpose. Amid many changes, and a formulation taking shape from what I at first supposed, this basic purpose has never been departed from in the composition of my verses” (LG 519).

We see Whitman's heavenly prophetic voice intertwined with that of a social reformer championing the common man's divine cause. Assuming Whitman's spiritual component to democracy is correct, we may understand his position that spiritual democracy protects both social and political democracies. The following comment is made by V.N. Dhavale in his book *Walt Whitman*:

“We hear at least two distinct voices in Whitman’s poetry – the voice of the passionate mystic or visionary connecting everything with the “soul” and the

voice of the shrewd social and political reformer preoccupied with the apparently new discovery of Democracy: the voice of the spiritual perfectionist bringing divinessages, and the voice of the “average” man concerned with the practical affairs of life” (Dhavele 33).

Collective decision-making, in his view, was fundamental to a democratic government, and he believed that only democratic people who had a deep spiritual connection with one another could encourage others to do the same. Spiritual democracy, in his view, was essential for the success of political and social democracies. This view develops out of the firm idea that every man is created equal in the sight of God. From a heavenly and spiritual perspective, there is equality between the good and the bad, between the president and the common farmer, between the master and the servant, and between the northerner and the southerner, even though there may be social and economic inequality in real life. Whitman assumes equality even in his offhand comments; he marvels at the millions' equality and laments the lack of poetry of full faith and equality for these boiling democratic multitudes:

“Think of the United States today—the facts of these thirty-eightor forty empires solder’d in one sixty or seventy millions of equals, with their lives, their passions their future—these incalculable, modern, American, seething multitudes around us, ofwhich we are inseparable parts! ... It is certain that a poetry of absolute faith and equality for the use of the democratic masses never was” (LG 549).

Whitman says that he thinks this equality and unity are brought about by the boundless nature of the human spirit. Literary works, he argues, have the power to reveal this aspect of the human spirit. He hopes that future literary works will address the lack of works that convey the boundless grandeur of the human spirit. The human spirit had never previously been able to experience poetry with "cosmic and dynamic features of magnitude and limitlessness" (LG 549). The infinite potential of the human spirit transforms him into something like to a spiritual philosopher. According to Clark, a more democratic social and political system may be brought about by this spiritual philosophy:

Since Whitman believed that every man had a divine soul, he is more accurately referred to as the poet of spiritual equality. ... The only rational objective is spiritual democracy, hence his concern for the ordinary man must be predicated on his faith that the poet-prophet would impart this knowledge. At that point, in the far future, spiritual democracy may pave the way for a more robust political and social democracy. (Smith 159).

Political and social democracy supported Whitman's spiritual democracy since he loved people and had a strong social conscience. To rephrase, Whitman's spiritual humanism was the rock upon which his democratic vision rested. His interest in political and social democracy was limited to the extent that they contributed to the establishment of a spiritual democracy, which he aimed to create in accordance with his role as a lover of all people (Clark 168). In his view, the nation's guiding light across the highways of time and its fortitude in the face of evil's waning were the teachings of great spiritual leaders. In his book "Democratic Vistas," he states:

"For us along the great highways of time, those monuments stand —those forms of majesty and beauty. For us those beacons burn through all the nights. Unknown Egyptians, graving hieroglyphs; Hindus, with hymn and apothegm and endless epic; Hebrew prophet, with spirituality, as in flashes of lightning, conscience like red-hot iron, plaintive songs and screams of vengeance for tyrannies and enslavement; Christ, with bent head, brooding love and peace, like a dove" (LG 498).

Whitman addressed both the abstract concept of spiritual democracy and the real, tangible issues that people face today. On rare occasions, he may have prioritised the spiritual dimension of democracy above the other. The importance of spiritual development, he says explicitly, is paramount. It would be the crowning growth, according to him. His goal as a poet is to help the country spiritually develop, and he explains why in "A Backward glance O'er Travel'd Roads":

"One main genesis-motive of the 'Leaves' was my conviction (just as strong to-day as ever) that the crowning growth of the United States is to be spiritual and heroic. To help start and favor that growth—or even to call attention to it, or the need of it—is the beginning, middle and final purpose of the poems" (LG 557).

Actually, Whitman's fascination with the average man stems from his spiritual democracy, which is based on his faith in the divine soul. He has sufficient spiritual essence to back his theory of spiritual democracy, which is based on his fundamental trust in the fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man, which consistently supports his charismatic dissemination of the spirit of equality. Whitman obviously took part of this eastern spiritual energy with him.

Even though Whitman's poetry has only been translated into a handful of Indian languages, there is a striking similarity between Vedic philosophy and Whitman's own thoughts. Leaves of Grass has been

compared to the Bhagavad-Gita and other Hindu texts by some of his detractors. Emerson, who welcomed Whitman at the beginning of his great career when Leaves of Grass was first published in 1855, half-jokingly compared it to a blend of the Bhagavad-Gita and the New York Herald (Sachithanandan 2).

Many other commentators and scholars have also noted the remarkable resemblance between Indian philosophy and Leaves of Grass. Orientalism scholar Edward Carpenter, early American Transcendentalist Arthur Christy, and 1930s Whitman-Gita comparative scholar Dorothy Mercer have all discovered striking similarities between Indian scriptures and Leaves of Grass. As a result, Whitman has thrown in every argument he could think of to back up his spiritual democracy-based idea of equality.

In considering Whitman's democratic principles in light of his social sensibilities, one must not lose sight of the fact that Whitman based his views on liberty, equality, and fraternity on his spiritual democracy. He integrated the political principles of brotherhood, equality, and liberty with a spiritual philosophy grounded in the idea that all things are interconnected and equal. In his poetry, he conveys the concept of the fundamental unity or oneness of all things by embracing the theory of the self; the poet's self functions as a unifying force. A poet of the body and the soul, he proclaims in "Song of Myself" (LG 40). Many allusions to Whitman's spiritual democracy may be found in this poem. The universe of impressions, hidden under the surface of things, was not lost on him. As a fundamental aspect of human nature, he was also acutely aware of man's spiritual essence. In the moving poem "Specimen Days," he describes how he saw a spiritual quality of innocence and innocence-like loveliness in the wounded warriors. He states:

"Every now and then, in hospital or camp, there are beings I meet —specimens of unworldliness, disinterestedness, and animal purity and heroism—perhaps some unconscious Indianian, or from Ohio or Tennessee—on whose birth the calmness of heaven seems to have descended, and whose gradual growing up, whatever the circumstances of work-life or change, or hardship, or small or no education that attended it, the power of a strange spiritual sweetness, fiber and inward health, have also attended. Something veil'd and abstracted is often a part of the manners of these beings. I have met them I say, seldom in the Army, in Camp, and in the hospitals" (LG.601).

Whitman, who advocated for social sensitivity in both poetry and prose, created a political and spiritual democracy and lived an exemplary life of love and service, demonstrating both in his writing and poetry. That is

succinctly shown by his extended tenure as a camp and hospital wound dressing. He likely found the inspiration and fortitude to live a life of service in his spiritual beliefs. According to Sachichanandan, Whitman created two distinct forms of democracy: political and spiritual. While both forms of democracy are complementary, Whitman's political form relies on the spiritual form for its continued existence (77). Many times in his works, Whitman has laid forth his view of the spiritual hierarchy of existence. Poets, he writes in the preface to poems published in 1855, have a responsibility to reveal the value and proportion of all things by establishing a connection between the material world and the human experience.

"Of all mankind the greatest poet is the equable man. Not in him but off from him things are grotesque or eccentric or fail of their sanity. Nothing out of its place is good and nothing in its place is bad. He bestows on every object or quality its fit proportions neither more nor less". (LG 444).

Poets have an obligation to elevate the transcendent value of natural objects, to get under the surface of things, and to prove, on a spiritual level, that everything is interconnected. All things are equal and have their place in this grand scheme of things, and the poet becomes an equaliser of his time and place by demonstrating this. Therefore, it may be said that Whitman established a spiritual democracy predicated on the two tenets of universal brotherhood and equality.

No Whitman biographer has disputed the author's assertion that *Leaves of Grass* is an examination of spiritual democracy. They have also taken Whitman's "Democratic Vistas" essay at face value as an explanation of how democracy works in practice. To others, it serves as a companion to *Leaves of Grass*. There were updates to *Leaves of Grass* with each successive printing. However, the book's central message—the worth and liberty of the American citizen—remains unchanged. *Leaves of Grass*, according to Whitman, is written to "promote the spirit of democracy in America" by painting an honest and impartial image of the country. Perhaps this is short, perhaps it indicates all I have tried to do, he adds. "*Leaves of Grass* is, or seeks to be simply a faithful and doubtful and self-will'd record" (LG 547), considering the nineteenth century and the United States and what they provide as area and points of view.

According to Whitman scholars, "Comerado, this is no book,/ Who touches this touches a man" (LG 391) should be read as the author's autobiography. According to this reading, Whitman was a great democrat and a prophet. Whitman unquestionably played a part—that of the universalist who loves humanity and, more specifically, the ordinary man. It is true that Whitman's

declaration of trust in democracy was unified throughout the book by his conviction in the inherent unity of all people. In *Leaves of Grass*, the main idea was to hold everyone and treat them equally.

The boundless and heavenly essence of the person was a guiding principle for Whitman's trust in American democracy. In order to preserve this limitless value in body and spirit, he thought it was his responsibility to help every man. Because of this feeling of responsibility, American poet Walt Whitman dove headfirst into the camps to care for the injured troops. As a result of his horrific battle experience, Whitman had a change of heart. That gave his idea of democracy a more transcendent quality, if you will. From a psychoanalytical perspective, it is clear that the poet's experience in the war must have stimulated his unconscious mind and planted the seed of spiritual awakening. He would have reached the position of religious spiritualism regardless of whether he had experienced combat, since "it is clear that the spiritual germ was already actively stirring in his mind" (Smuts 104). His poetry took on a more human tone and quality as a consequence of the spiritual awakening he had as a direct result of his own suffering during the war. When he travels to a spiritual world, he loses touch with himself and becomes one with the universe. He aimed for his poetry to be profound meditations on the afterlife and the soul:

"I will make the poems of materials, for I think they are to be the most spiritual poems,

And I will make the poems of my body and of mortality,

For I think I shall then supply myself with the poems of my soul and of immortality" (LG 15).

The mystic in Whitman experiences life's splendours when he or she discovers the self inside and in the environment. In the first lines of "Song of Myself," Whitman declares, "I CELEBRATE myself, and sing myself / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (LG 23), illustrating how his self-expansion reaches a point where it might include the whole world.

No struggle or friction exists between the person and the cosmos in a spiritual democracy in which the cosmic self and the individual self combine. This allows Whitman to assert that everyone will accept his assumptions. Using a selection of images, Whitman constructs his spiritual democracy from the vantage point of his universal selfhood. He embraces the vulgar, the inconsequential, and the trivial in a cosmic hug because he thinks it's degrading to disparage another person is degrading himself.

"Whoever degrades another degrades me,

And whatever is done or said returns at last to me,

*Through me the afflatus surging and surging, through
me the current and index" (LG 43).*

Whitman discovers a sense of spiritual community among the downtrodden and the downtrodden-hearted, as well as in the big and little things. This is his spiritual democracy, which longs for unity and equality behind the veneer of political democracy. Thus, his political democracy, which is based on spiritual democracy, welcomes an endless number of people. This isn't just an American thing; it's a global thing. He says it straight in "Salut au Monde":

"Within me latitude widens, longitude lengthens,

*Asia, Africa, Europe, are to the east – Americas
provided for in the West,*

*Stretch 'd in due time within me the midnight sun just
rises above the horizon and sinks again,*

*Within me zones, seas, cataracts, forests, volcanoes,
groups, Malaysia, Polynesia, and the great West Indian
islands" (LG 110).*

We find in these lines an extension and widening of the spiritual democracy of "Song of Myself".

CONCLUSION:

Walt Whitman's literary and philosophical legacy offers a rich tapestry of thought on the principles of freedom, equality, and democracy. His work, deeply embedded in the fabric of American identity and the broader human experience, transcends the confines of his era to speak to the universal quest for dignity and self-realization. Whitman envisioned democracy not merely as a form of government but as a way of life, an ethos that champions the infinite worth of every individual and the spiritual bonds that unite all existence. His poetic and prose writings, characterized by their unbounded faith in humanity and their bold critique of societal shortcomings, reflect a nuanced understanding of democracy as an ongoing project, ever-evolving and fraught with challenges yet imbued with the potential for profound human flourishing. In dissecting Whitman's conception of freedom, equality, and democracy, this paper underscores the poet's role as a visionary thinker whose ideas continue to inspire and provoke reflection on the essence of democratic life and the realization of a more just and equitable world. Whitman's work, thus, stands as a beacon of hope and a call to action, urging us to envision and

strive toward a society that truly embodies the democratic ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternal love.

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