



ISSN Print: 2394-7500  
ISSN Online: 2394-5869  
Impact Factor: 3.4  
IJAR 2015; 1(3): 55-58  
www.allresearchjournal.com  
Received: 19-01-2015  
Accepted: 17-02-2015

**Muhammad Afsar Kayum**  
Senior Lecturer, Department of  
English Manarat International  
University Dhaka, Bangladesh.

## Egalitarianism in Whitman's poetry: A preamble

**Muhammad Afsar Kayum**

### Abstract

Whitman has been familiar as a nationalist than a truly egalitarian poet. Whitman was interested in American egalitarianism most. He was an ardent supporter of democracy, and saw both abolition and slavery as threats to the great American experiment. What's most shocking about his writing today is not that he loves men or describes "the body electric." What's stunning is his egalitarian sensibility. This was the ever-burning subject of his poetry. He squeezed it and articulated it in its all demonstration-fields, trees, animals, birds, farms, light, air, sea, men, women, and their politics and social transactions, factories, workshops, offices, stories, streets, critics, plains and the countryside. Whitman accepted these and many additional points as the fundamental parts of egalitarianism in America. Whitman foresaw egalitarianism not just as a political system but as a way of experiencing the world. Whitman tried to be egalitarian in both life and poetry. He imagined egalitarianism as a way of interpersonal communication and as a way for individuals to integrate their beliefs into their everyday lives.

**Keywords:** *American Egalitarianism, Egalitarian whim, Mystery of 'I', Religious Egalitarianism, Commonality*

### 1. Introduction

Whitman personifies the spirit of universal brotherhood and in this character launches with his 'omnivorous words'. He serves as the spokesman of ideal egalitarianism. The advent of Walt Whitman on the literary scene of America is deemed to have changed the entire scenario of poetry, not just in America, but as well almost throughout the world as, when and where his influence reached. Whitman's daringly innovative and revolutionary voice proved equally consequential and far reaching in aesthetics as well as poetics and social life. He was a poet filled with profoundly humane sensibility who wished to do away with the mutually antagonistic societal divisions based on community, caste, creed, color, race, sex and gender. He is creditable for the voice he has lent to the sentiments of the common masses and for the initiatives he has taken for a radical change in the contemporary socio-political system. Using "self and realized the elemental similitude of all peoples on earth. He realized spiritual oneness of all the human beings, besides the sameness of their predicaments and overall subsistence in the mortal/temporal world. Associating human values with spirituality, he defined the concept of freedom, equality and egalitarianism, all afresh. He advocated the theory of acceptance of the various differences, individual identities and inequality of all creations of Nature. He urged the masses to scan their own "selves" and accept all other individual selves as spiritually the same.

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

**Correspondence:**  
**Muhammad Afsar Kayum**  
Senior Lecturer, Department  
of English Manarat  
International University  
Dhaka, Bangladesh.

## 2. Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to find out the egalitarian views of Walt Whitman and his transcendental philosophy for social equality and fraternity. This work has also been dealt with the themes of Whitman which denotes his extreme egalitarian attitude.

## 3. Methodology and Literature Review

To complete the research study, stimulation came from the study of the poetry of Walt Whitman from different critical studies of English literature. The 'Keen Observation Method' was applied successfully for this research work. By using this method, the researcher goes through different literary articles, critical compositions, and websites to find interrelated study materials, in order to be acknowledged in the allied topics. The researcher also collected some poems of the poet and composed the research works in a convincing way after studying those. Based on the criticism of Whitman, a lot of critical essays and analysis were published in the shapes of different books and in many literary journals which are very useful as a supplementary material for further study of the researcher. Different critical books composed by— Dr. S. Sen, Coles, Cliffs, Ramji Lal etc. also remain obliging for the part of the study on poet's egalitarian attitude.

## 4. Definition

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

## 5. Discussion

### American Egalitarianism

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

Similar themes are developed in "One's-Self I Sing," Whitman commemorates the individual, "a simple separate person," but he also celebrates "the word Egalitarian, the word En-Masse." Thus the poem embraces the value of each person living within a egalitarian society, the American society. In the poem's last stanza, Whitman "sings" of life filled with "passion, pulse, and power." This life is a cheerful

one because it is "freest action formed under the laws divine." The inference is that a egalitarian government, founded upon the recognition of man's god-given rights, offers the freedom that makes life worth living.

## 5.2 Commemoration of Liberty and Fraternity and Equality

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

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

*I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,  
Nature without check with original energy.*

He must be free of the "creeds and schools" to think and act freely. 'Loafing' and reflecting on a stab of grass can lead to enormous endings on the equality and need of brotherhood in man. And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers,

*And that a Kelson of the creation is love.*

## 5.3 Egalitarian Whim

*Leaves of Grass* is considered as the 'Bible of Egalitarianism'. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is chant of egalitarianism. Section 24 of *Song of Myself* is an unequivocal proclamation of the poet's egalitarian whim.

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

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

*Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived  
thousands of years ago.*

*Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth*

(Song of Myself- Section 32)

The veneration of the personage is a significant event in Whitman's political philosophy. Nonetheless the phrase 'en masse' materializes repeatedly in the verses of Whitman. It is not to be deduced that he was an apostle of the socialistic set up of society. He was emphatically of the view that society should recognize the infinite worth of the individual. Whitman's ideal society is one where the individual is valid, because in such a society lay is loved. "He envisaged and exemplified a process of spiritualization which alone could save egalitarianism from moral disaster.

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

*A child said what is the grass fetching it to me with full  
hands.*

*How I could answer the child? I do not know what it is any  
more than he.*

Whitman was accepting this humblest of created things as a symbol of his stern and fanatical belief in egalitarianism in naming his book *Leaves of Grass*. His choice of a title is an emphatic assertion that the common humble things of the earth are fit subjects for poetry. This is somewhat unswerving a behavior in a poet whom the word 'equable'

was of infinite value. Whitman's ideal society is one where everyone is equal, where inequalities and social injustice do not exist. In one portion of *Song of Myself* Whitman expresses his admiration for animals. He claims he could turn and live with animals for a number of reasons, one of which is this:

*Not one is dissatisfied-not one is demented with the mania of owning things;*

*Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago;*

*Not one is respectable or industrious over the whole earth.*

In tendency of superb lyric Whitman sings of the worth of egalitarianism envisaging for American egalitarianism a luminous future. In "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood" he commends egalitarianism thus:

*Sail, sail, they best, ship of Democracy,*

*Of value is the freight, it's not the present only.*

*The past is also stored in thee,*

#### 5.4 Devotion to Egalitarianism

Whitman also wrote poems only for the sake of egalitarianism. The poem "For You O Democracy" exposes the matter how wonderfully he wrote on behalf of egalitarianism:

*Come I will make the continent indissoluble,*

*I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon,*

*I will make divine magnetic lands.*

*With the love of comrades*

*With the life-long love of comrades*

*I will plant companionship thick as tress along all the rivers  
Of America and along the shores of the great lakes, and all  
over the prairies*

*I will make inseparable cities with arms about each other's  
necks*

*By the manly love of comrades.*

*By the manly love of comrades*

*For you these from me, O Democracy, to serve you*

*For you, for you I am trilling these songs.*

The phrase "love of comrades", stirring again and again in the poetry of Whitman, underlines an essential principle in Whitman's political attitude that of mutual support and dependence among the members of an egalitarian society. In spite of fervent defending of the individual, Whitman already believed that there is security only in co-operation among friends.

#### 5.5 Viewpoints of Burroughs

In the words of Johan Burroughs (1867), "The reader, who would get at the spirit and meaning of 'Leaves of Grass', must remember that its animating principle, from first to last, is Egalitarianism. Yet it is never Whitman that speaks so much as it is Egalitarianism that speaks through him." It is to drive home to the reader that regarded all Americans alike, that he has given long catalogues of all kinds of people, high and low, diverse and numerous, of his country. In his lyric "I Hear America Singing", Whitman celebrates the mechanic, the carpenter, the mason, the boat-man, the deck-hand, the shoe-maker, the wood-cutter, and the plough boy.

*Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,*

*The day what belongs to the day- at night the*

*Party of young fellows, robust, friendly*

*Singing with open mounts their strong melodious songs.*

## 6. Findings

### 6.1 Religious Egalitarianism

Whitman talks about a religious egalitarianism in his essay 'Democratic Vistas' (1871). He did not talk about religion in government, but rather egalitarianism as religion. The concepts of individuality and equality—"whoever degrades another degrades me"—was innermost to Whitman's concentrated nationalism. Embracing our divergences is what makes America stunning. He wrote,

*This is the thought of identity — yours for you, whoever you are, as mine for me. . . . Creeds, conventions, fall away and become of no account before this simple idea.*

And the individual is ultimately dependable for carrying on the American ideal. In what sounds like an attitude borne of today's bestial political hostility, Whitman writes,

*But these savage, wolfish parties alarm me. Owning no law but their own will, more and more combative, less and less tolerant of the idea of ensemble and of equal brotherhood, the perfect equality of the States, the ever-overarching American ideas, it behooves you to convey yourself implicitly to no party, nor submit blindly to their dictators, but steadily hold yourself judge and master over all of them.* (hollowverse.com)

### 6.2 Orator of Egalitarianism

Whitman the representative poet of America is primarily the poetic orator of egalitarianism. True the English Romantic poets had been vigorous supporters of the egalitarian ideals, but where Whitman differed from them was in his more pragmatic, down to earth approach. His ideal of egalitarianism was no cal plane he visualized complete harmony between the individual and society; but above all, Whitman was what may be called a 'spiritual democrat' who saw in true egalitarianism possibilities of universal peace, toleration and brotherhood. The most authentic specimen of humanity was the common man, "the divine average", and Whitman as a poet was not interested in any special favors that he could not share with "all". While Whitman gave a defense of Egalitarianism in his prose treatise *Egalitarianism Vistas* which is an in-valuable commentary on his *Leaves of Grass*, the poems themselves illustrate, both in content and form, his ideal of egalitarianism.

### 6.3 Whitman's Mystery of 'I'

The 'I' in Whitman's poetry is not so much personal reference as a fusion of several characters, a composite character, who exists in no place other than in the poem, as James Miller observes. The 'I' is identical with the "Modern Man" of who sings it is the collective ego, a composite of the varied humanity of America. It signifies Whitman's acceptance of humanity as a whole- for the poet is a 'complete lover of the universe'. In *I Hear America Singing*, the voice of that nation is shown to be manifest in the mechanics the carpenter, the mason, the boatman, the deck-hand; in other words. in other words in the average Americans and it is with this common man that Whitman identifies himself. By celebrating himself he celebrates all. Indeed, in the 1872 Preface he could even conceive of the hero of his book as *Omni sexual*: "Leaves of Grass... is, in its

intentions the song of a great composite egalitarian individual, male or female” The ‘I’ of his poetry may be “a dramatization of a soldier on the battlefield, or of a comet rushing through the heavens. Whatever it is, the ‘I’ is always something more and something less than the historical Walt Whitman”. The ‘I’ is Everyman, a creature of contradictory impulses and instincts, both good and bad; the ‘I’ contradictory impulses and instincts both good and bad; the ‘I’ contains multitudes, embracing many minds and even many nations.

#### 6.4 Commonality through the Grass Symbol

The basic emotion in Whitman’s lyricism is a feeling of kinship with all creation, evidenced in the very title *Leaves of Grass*. The grass is the great symbol of egalitarianism in nature and it is by lying on it and observing it that the poet beings to reflect. By the end of *Song of Myself*, the poet departs bequeathing himself “to the dirt to grow from the grass I love”. If he is wanted again, “look for me under your bootsoles”. It is the spear of grass that enables the poet to understand the eternal cycle of life and death.

*The smallest sprout shows there is really no death.*

*All goes onward and outward..... and nothing collapses*

*And to die is different from what any supposed and luckier.*

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

*In all people I see myself- none more and not one barley corn less*

*And the good or bad I say of myself, I say of them.*

#### 6.5 Contemporary Event in Whitman’s Poetry

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

#### 7. Theme of Everyday Life

In his poetry, Whitman widened the possibilities of poetic diction by including slang, colloquialisms, and regional dialects, rather than employing the stiff, erudite language so often found in nineteenth-century verse. Similarly, he broadened the possibilities of subject matter by describing myriad people and places. Similar to Wordsworth, Whitman believed that everyday life and everyday people were fit subjects for poetry. Although much of Whitman’s work does not explicitly discuss politics, most of it implicitly deals with egalitarianism: it describes communities of people coming together, and it imagines many voices pouring into a unified whole. For Whitman, egalitarianism was an idea that could and should permeate the world beyond politics, making itself felt in the ways we think, speak, work, fight, and even make art. The symbols chosen by Whitman are from familiar life—grass, lilacs, stars, the sea, and the birds. Whitman believes in the common people for salvation of society. It is they who make a nation. The language is truly egalitarian for it often makes use of slang which Whitman felt to be the common man’s experiment with language.

#### 8. Conclusion

Walt Whitman’s egalitarianism is universal and pantheistic. The poet is straightforwardly led away from the political portion of egalitarianism towards transcendental, pantheistic egalitarianism. Whitman always admired the individual envisioned an egalitarian nation as an integrated whole composed of exclusive but identical individuals. *Song of Myself* opens in a triumphant paean to the individual: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself”. Elsewhere the speaker of that exuberant poem identifies himself as Walt Whitman and claims that, through him, the voices of many will speak. In this way, many individuals make up the individual egalitarianism, a single entity composed of myriad parts. Every voice and every part will carry the same weight within the single egalitarianism—and thus every voice and every individual is equally beautiful. Despite this pluralist view, Whitman still singled out specific individuals for praise in his poetry, particularly Abraham Lincoln. In 1865, Lincoln was assassinated, and Whitman began composing several elegies, including “O Captain! My Captain!” Whitman sees in egalitarianism the possibilities of universal peace, tolerance and brotherhood. The immense potentialities of the human being are given a chance to develop only in egalitarianism.

#### 9 References

1. Fausset Hugh Fanson. *Walt Whitman: Poet of Democracy* 1942.
2. Symonds A. *Walt Whitman: A Study*.
3. Quick dissolving tablets. (18.12.2014). Retrieved from: <http://hollowverse.com/walt-whitman> 1893.
4. Kaplan, Justin. *Walt Whitman: A Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979.
5. Loving, Jerome. (1999) *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself*. University of California Press.
6. Miller, James E., Jr. *Walt Whitman*. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc. 1962.
7. Selincourt, Basil De. (1914). *Walt Whitman : A Critical Study*
8. Burroughs, Johan. (1867) *Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person*; New Ed. (2013) HAFTAD: Engelska