

WHITMAN'S "LEAVES OF GRASS": AN IRONY OF INCLUSIVENESS

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ABSTRACT: *Although some believe that Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" is inclusionary democratic poem, it additionally is exclusionary. Widely read as carrying the idea of inclusive democracy and nationalism, the critics like Betsy Erkkila defines him not only as an American but the world citizen in terms of his inclusive thoughts. But this claim of Whitman's inclusiveness is ironically lacking in the poem, "Leaves of Grass" and in the reality. Whitman sounds rather sentimental than real in the poem. Though he seems to celebrate democracy, his idea of nationalism has failed to give comparatively equal space to the minorities of immigrants, African-Americans and Native Americans. Moreover, in his efforts to appear inclusive he sounds exclusive that has given an imperial tone to the poem. This paper aims at showing the gap between the ideal notion of nationalism and the problem of excluding minor nationalities in the poem. This contrast of Whitman's ideal and the real will be discussed primarily with reference to the textual evidences and analysis with the ideas of critics. After some basic concepts of democracy and justice, the paper is to bring that issue into consideration.*

KEYWORDS: Democracy, Nationalism, Inclusiveness, Representation, Minorities, Imperial

INTRODUCTION

Democracy has become the most catching and controversial phrase for all. It is due to the subjective interpretation it has received in certain socio-economic condition of a place. In spite of the ideological distance even the Marxists school of thought prefers to use the word at least as the strategy to revolutionize the society in the age of capital democracy. So, regardless of the class, culture and location, democracy has a high value among all whereas the concept of democracy itself as a political system has turned dualistic due to some of its fundamental norms and their practices in real life situations. The issues of representation, participation, equality, social justice and then nationalism are presuppositions of democracy. When these universal standards are not met by the policy and practice of a nation, it turns to be a mere ideal which divides the notion of democracy into the poles of practical and ideal. From such a duality emerges the tone of irony of the word 'Democracy' itself. So, the judgment of the word is to be made in terms of the maximum participation and inclusion of the people in the main stream of a nation. In the absence of these basics, democracy appears as the brand of segregated democracy.

Equally debated and ear-loving word co-joining democracy is nationalism. They accompany in the sense that it aims at forming the sense collectivity in the people concerned. But it sounds more ideal since the collective participation has subjective, power- based parameters. It is so subjective a notion that it parallels to its most relevant variants of power. So, it always exists with two aspects of presence and absence. The notion of nationalism can always carries the binary sentiments since a nation comprises of the central and marginal poles of the people. The margin feels to have excluded by the central discourse of nationalism. The ownership of nationalism is directly proportionate to the participation or the representation of the people.

The more inclusive a democracy is the wider, real and stronger nationalism becomes. So, the entire discourse of nationalism is most vulnerable in the present day contest, too.

In this regard, the problem of inclusiveness and representation of the minorities has questioned Whitman's idea of nationalism in his largely acclaimed nationalistic poem "Leaves of Grass". As mentioned above his ideal imagination of nationalism and democracy lack the equal space for the non whites. As Anderson, in his book, *Imagined communities: Reflection on the origin and spread of nationalism*, defines: "an imagined political community [...] it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion". This idea of Anderson tells that nation and nationalism both are basically imagined categories. They are broader or rather abstract in terms of physical presence and participation of the all in the so called national activities. Still they go together with certain shared conceptual frameworks of their identities. He argues that nationalistic thought is an ideal not real since it cannot encompass multitudes of community members together at a time. It is merely a reflection upon the similar origin which differs in the same nation. At this point, the idea of uninationalism is quite exclusive and parochial as we see in "Leaves of Grass".

When Walt Whitman conceives the idea of nationalism in his poem "Leaves of Grass" (originally entitled "Song of Myself"), he sounds rather exclusive. The phrase 'Song of Myself' is suggestive of celebration of his own self. Though he talks even of the weeds including all flora and fauna, human beings, high and low class, rules and ruled, present and past, at the same time he puts himself at the center which ironically excludes others. The use of pronouns I, Me, My, in every line of the poem denotes his exclusive White self. He indirectly creates binary by othering others. In this sense, he seems envisioning American Empire as Nathanael opines, "Whitman imagines America as a continually expanding nation, consuming and enclosing new lands and the peoples, and takes American superiority for granted in all matters". It means that Whitman is enclosing others than including them to make them constituents of his nationalism. His project of America is more imaginative than descriptive. His colonial desire is explicit when he says in 25th Stanza of the poem: "My voice goes after what my eyes can't reach, with the twist of my tongue I encompass worlds, and the volumes of worlds". His far reaching voice and vision signify the present day American imperial policy. In the name of including far and wide justifying democracy he foresees and comes to justify the Imperial American nation in the preface of the poem: "the largest, wealthiest and proudest nation". This superlative superiority presupposes his inherent othering mentality in the poem. Moreover, his dictation in the very first stanza that "What I assume, you shall also assume" carries the meaning of his enclosing those others into his own self rather than including them with him.

The irony of inclusion can be further substantiated in the 10th Stanza of the poem: "The runaway slave came and stopt outside . . . I had him sit next me at table . . ." Though Whitman gave shelter, water and clothes to the slave but why did he make him sit next to his table. He should have let him sit and share his own. The gap between his saying and doing at this point mocks at the idea of inclusive democracy. Like the run way slaves, other minorities of immigrants, African Americans and Native Americans have not got the social justice in his imagined democracy. In this connection Besty's comment on Whitman in her anthology of *Whitman and American Studies* that: "a breaker of bounds: he is a female and male, farmer and factory worker, prostitute and slave, citizen of America and citizen of the world" can be countered with the 19th stanza where he uses the derogative words for the non whites "sighted, kept woman, sponger, thief, heavy-lipped slave, venerable." Although, he means to say that there will not be

any discrimination with anyone, he happened to utter such words for the blacks, which reflects his White mentality and irony of inclusiveness.

Similarly, in 15th stanza we can see the minimization of immigrants as Whitman says: "The group of newly come immigrant cover the wharf or levee". Here he categorizes the new comers as immigrants instead of saying new Americans. He further segregates them by allocating with the location of Wharf (landing place for ships) and levee (a border place). By describing 'wooly pâtre' in the sugar field and overseer (White) in saddle in the same section, Whitman seems nostalgic to slavery. In Stanza 38 he imagines for passing everywhere around. "I troop forth . . . supreme power . . . inlands and sea-coast we go, and we pass all boundary lines, our swift ordinances on their way over the whole earth." Here what sounds ironical is that as a democratic figure he happens to forget the justice and public consensus of those places while imagining for crossing the boundaries and imposing their dictation. In the cursory reading, his attempts are seen inclusive but they have imposing or enclosing mode which is against the spirit of democracy.

About such defects in Whitman's democracy and nationalism, an American scholar of Black studies, Nick Ford takes the reference of Whitman's own and says: "We have frequently printed the word democracy yet I can't too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps". As he said, the loss of the gist of democracy can be seen in the "Leaves of Grass". By the gist, he means inclusive participatory practices in practical democracy. He gives importance to religious, cultural, moral, social and aesthetic freedom and equality as to be the soul of Whitman's democracy which have mere official value in "Leaves of Grass".

The underlying exclusive self of Whitman can be further explained in Stanza 32 and 33. In Stanza 32 he says "I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placed and self-contained, I stand and look at them long and long." What does the poet mean by 'turn and live with the animals'? He may be meaning the blacks and other minorities of non-Whites by the words animals, placid, self-contained because he is likely to be influenced by the earlier racial hangover of the Whiteness. Likewise, the couplet in section 39 may suggest his othering perspective: "The friendly and flowing savage . . . is the waiting for civilizations". Here Whitman uses the word savage- civilization to dehumanizing Whites and mainly the blacks. This supports the theme of irony in his idea of inclusivity. The misery of non-representation of the minorities is explicit in the 6th couplet of 40th Stanza: "I do not ask who you are- that is not so important to me; you can do nothing; and be nothing, but what I will infold you". From these lines it is known that the poet stands so exclusive that he ignores others in his imagined nation. He devalues the roles of those in building the nation which is the evidence of irony in the poem.

In his book, *Pragmatic Whitman: Reimagining American Democracy*, Stephen Mac shows his disagreement with Whitman's democracy and nationalism: "Whitman's seemingly mawkish celebrations of the United States . . . (are) one of those problematic features of his works that teachers and critics read past or explain away". He suggests the need of reviewing since it is ignored by the teachers and critics. For him the celebration of nationalism by a White simply refers to White nationalism that is more exclusive. To him, presenting an image of democratic nationality is not a great thing because the conception of nationhood is an individual thing which is available to everyone in the world. In terms of inclusive nationalism in "Leaves of Grass" the idea of Mac is noteworthy. Our declaration of the irony of inclusiveness is justified in the 3rd couplet of 51st Stanza of "Leaves of Grass that notes: "Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself" The sense of acceptance of differences in his notion and nation

in the poem has been carried by the lines where there emerges the irony of inclusiveness. In spite of talking far and wide he seems to have failed in representing all.

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