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DEMOCRATIC VISION IN MARGARET WALKER'S "FOR MY PEOPLE" AND WALT  
WHITMAN'S "SONG OF THE OPEN ROAD": A COMPARITIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Democracy seeks to promote equality among the masses, harmony and justice, for the common good of the people. Every society and individual has his or her own vision of democracy, which is mostly dependent on the social, economic and cultural backgrounds of the people of that country or nation. Poets and writers express these ideas which are reflected in their works. Yet how do poets or literary works portray the vision for a society? Unlike political bureaucrats and leaders, how is the vision of the poet different from that of the vision of a political leader? This paper focuses on two different sets of poets, namely, Margaret walker, an African American poet and Walt Whitman, an American writer. Both the writers have written splendid pieces of works and have sought to inspire people with their poetry and most importantly their vision of how a society should be like and have thrown light on many aspects of life in general. Their ideas have gone through and beyond the hearts of the people for their visionary approach. This paper discusses Margaret Walker's poem "For my People" and Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" to analyze their ideas, similarities and differences in relation to their vision about democracy in these poems.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Vision, bureaucrat, African-American, Margaret Walker, Walt Whitman

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INTRODUCTION

"Democracy means nothing if people are not able to work the democracy for the common good." -Chandra Bhushan

**MARGARET WALKER'S FOR MY PEOPLE:** Starting right from the title of the poem, "For my people", Margaret Walker leaves no ambiguity. She starts the poem with the line, "For my people", which is very simple, direct and clear. On the other hand, Whitman's title of the poem has some ambiguity, in the sense that, by the first reading of the title, one cannot easily comprehend whether Whitman is referring metaphorically to a common goal or talking about some road in the literal sense. This creates a sense of anticipation in the minds of the readers and generates interest. It becomes very essential to understand the historical context and background

for these poems in order to understand what the poets have to say. Margaret walker, as is seen is fully aware of her people's social conditions and thus wishes to highlight their social problems and urges them the courage to be bold and strong. The structure of her poem is quite simple and in a layman's language. She gives precedence to what she says rather than how she says, which is in sharp contrast with Whitman, who uses both language and style as an instrument to inspire the readers to think for themselves.

Margaret Walker's poem is a chronicle of the everyday and often mundane aspects of hard labor and the simple pleasures of her people. In each paragraph of her poem, she refers to different sets of people that constitute her own people who share common problems, joys and sufferings. In the first stanza, she says,

"For my people everywhere singing their slave songs  
repeatedly: their dirges and their ditties and their blues  
and jubilees, praying their prayers nightly to an  
unknown god, bending their knees humbly to an  
unseen power;..."

In these lines one gets to know something about slavery and the futility of her people bending down to an unknown God for worship. Here, Walker seems to be solemn, though she inculcates in the readers anticipation to what she has got to say next. In the ensuing stanzas as well, Walker describes the common joys and sufferings of the people. She uses simple descriptive techniques to convey the most general of things. Her lines reflect compassion for her people as she addresses them personally. Her tone is empathetic and beckoning. She addresses her schoolmates, people who toil for the land, the common people, young boys and girls, people who are killed and that of people who try to change the society for better. She addresses all these people with much personal understanding and knowledge of her people's suffering and past. At the end, she breaks the ice by saying that

"Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a  
bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second  
generation full of courage issue forth; let a people  
loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of  
healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing  
in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs  
be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now  
rise and take control."

The above lines portray Walker's democratic vision and the climax of her poem. African-Americans have known to be the victims of oppression for a long time. Their long years of suffering at the hands of the Whites due to race, color and gender is heart breaking. Due to the continuous brutality meted out towards them, they have remained inferiors and had no place among others in society. Therefore, here Walker takes an opportunity to let her people rise and face whatever comes with a bold face. She desperately seeks for peace as a primary concern for her people as she says, "Let a bloody peace be written..." Then, she goes on to inspire her people with words of encouragement by saying that, there be another generation of people where men are courageous in their hearts. She beseeches her people not to be inferiors like the yesteryears and says that courage itself is not enough but being strong to fight for the people is the need of the hour. She imagines a world where all people come together, as she addresses different people to rise and fight. She says that, in the future she seeks to see freedom in the minds, hearts of their people and country. Walker's unpunctuated adjuncts and participles without the use of commas at the end of each line shows the poet's urgency and earnestness in encouraging her people to be determined to do what they would like to do. The vision she has for her country and the dream, she nourishes for her people is genuine and true. Walker does not seek a perfect life for her people but a life where there is freedom in mind, thoughts and actions and also peace among people and between nations. She uses simple language to convey her feelings and her democratic vision is without a doubt appreciable and justified.

### WALT WHITMAN'S "SONG OF THE OPEN ROAD"

On the other hand, Walt Whitman's vision in *"Song of the Open Road"* for his people too is splendid. His poems are filled with imageries of messages he wishes to convey to his people. In his poem, Whitman uses road as a metaphor for people where different castes, religions and gender travel a path that is unbiased and open. In each of his stanza, he says something new and his examples are note worthy. Though he uses simple language, he uses them metaphorically. In his poem, Whitman presents a utopian kind of society with a democratic space where people can come together without any discrimination.

In other words, Whitman metaphorically imagines a road that is open. That is, open to different sets of people let it be the diseased, the physician, the beggar, rich and the poor. This presents the vision for his people in America where all are united, under one roof. Whitman seems to be trouble-free as he takes to the open road. He says, *"Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road"*. This is the vision Whitman anticipates for his people in the future where they would be free to take whatever path they wish, to create something new. Here, the open road could even signify new life. When something goes wrong, Whitman tells that, one can start over again afresh. For Whitman too, the road is a space for gathering poetry as he mentions. Further, Whitman conveys a wonderful message by saying that, throughout life, everyone encounters problems that may not always have an easy way out. Sometimes these paths involve other people who have other expectations but the most important thing to do is stay true to oneself. The line, *"I think whatever I shall meet on the road I shall like, and whoever beholds me shall like me, I think whoever I see must be happy"* justifies this. These wonderful lines speak the truth of everyone's lives. In life, many people try to fit into tradition and as a result, they forget themselves and fail miserably. Similar to the truth of the line, Whitman indirectly says that, in a democratic society differences are bound to prevail. But being sincere to oneself and not harming others will go a long way in the progress of the nation. Whitman says that once one steps into the open road, one has all the time by their side. Therefore, he rightly says that, it becomes his or her decision whether to take this path. He also says *"I ask not good fortune, I myself am good fortune"* by which Whitman means that when he walks on this road, he doesn't want luck but because he is carefree and cheerful, that is his luck. Whitman's sense of poetry is totally positive and amazing. Furthermore, another important element of the poem is freedom. Being free means being able to do anything one wants to do. It means having no troubles whatsoever and wanting nothing except to relax which means this poem also exemplifies relaxation. Perhaps, Whitman is trying to say that, relaxation is somewhat like freedom. But, having relaxation is being calm, showing no signs of stress. Thus, having both freedom and relaxation takes the troubles from a person. When a person takes the open road, it involves making more choices and one has to use what one learnt and apply it to the choices to be made. By doing this, Whitman says one can expect to get better results. Also, Whitman addresses to immaterial objects such as air, hills etc in the poem which shows him laying importance even to the natural things by personifying them. He sees them too as living and breathing beings and part of the human democratic society. Also, the readers feel that, by making the call of Allons! That is let's go, Whitman, gives opportunity for the American citizens to rise with strong hearts to revolutionize the world with kind hearts and wise minds. This call of Whitman is an exhortation to join Whitman on the road. While for him the journey is the source of poetry, he sees it as something larger, as a way of life. The poetry is secondary. As he says, *"I and mine do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes, / we convince by our presence."* Perhaps, what Whitman is trying to say is that what is at stake is therefore more fundamental and more universal than literature. Thus, in the poem, the road becomes a symbol for a democratic and a vital society.

### CONCLUSION

Both Margaret Walker and Walt Whitman are great poets for the representation of their vision of society in their poems. Though Walker's structure of her poetry is simple without much use of poetic devices, the background under which she wrote her poetry and the context in which she wished to convey her feelings is important. Her poem is more like the need of the hour than a choice or of will. She, being a well educated poet, wrote at a time when lynching, oppression and suppression of Blacks were rampant and the atrocities against women a common place. She wrote at a time inspiring her people, when women were discouraged from writing. That too, Walker writes about social and democratic equality among the masses and this was

something rare in the women writers of yesteryears. Unlike thinking and writing about domestic issues related to women which past women writers mostly concentrated upon in their writings, Walker wrote about the issues affecting the nation, thus distinguishing herself from the rest. It is noteworthy that Walker wrote in a language that is not her own. She used English, a global language to appeal to the people. Walker is a poet of change. She induces her people to change for the better or to face the consequences. She appeals to her people that past is past and that change comes from within and being bold is what will change their lives for the better in the future. On the other hand, Whitman's use of anecdotes in the poem is very amazing in the sense that, his words have the required effect. Moreover, Whitman has a divine sense of looking beyond the material and the real. His language is ornamental, decorative and has certain grandeur in itself. Yet, more than the language, his way of conveying his message and the message itself which is metaphorical and larger than life which is reflected is very appreciable. The one instrument which Whitman has to his advantage in comparison to Walker is his language, his own mother tongue, because of which he is able to convey his poetry effectively, while Walker cannot certainly excel him in his skills of language at least in this poem. Whitman's poetry is genuine in its feelings and thoughts and his determination to do something is reflected in his poetry. His poetry is not just words, but the very thoughts of a great poet. In Whitman, one sees not only a poet, but also a great philosopher and a visionary. His democratic vision of society is based on principles of freedom, equality and harmony among the masses. Yet, Walker is great in her own way in terms of being close to the people while writing her poem. Belonging to the 'colored' community, she tends to feel much empathy for her people and her democratic vision of her society lies in her people enjoying harmony and freedom. These are the basic similarities between the two poets. They yearn for the basic rights of their citizens. Another point to note is that, while Whitman belongs to a developed progressing country, Walker belongs to a socially and politically backward economy. Thus, Walker has a cause in her poetry, while Whitman's poem is more of a distant yet mystical narration. His words and vision present a world that is beautiful and congenial for all of its citizens to stay and belong without difficulties.

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