

“Manly Love” in Walt Whitman’s “Calamus” Poems

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Abstract: Whitman’s Calamus poems capture the situation of homosexuals in 19th century’s America. The ambiguity of language creates much controversy but one with an affirmative attempt can unfurl the non-heterosexual characteristics of the poems. The necessity of comradeship is mainly mooted in all the Calamus poems but the strong emotional attachment between two men often surpasses the limits of friendship and brotherly relation. In fact, the poet’s reference to “manly love” or “athletic love” furnishes spectacular sensuous imageries and eroticism. Since, the homosexual disposition of the poet caused his anxiety and unrest of desire, much of his personal emotions; feelings had been reflected in Calamus poems. The poems also have the urge of democracy significantly connected to Andre Jackson’s presidency.

Keywords: Calamus, manly love, athletic love, comrades, democracy

Psychologists, sexologists define and determine sexualities after the diagnosis of the patients and the patients invariably are prescribed to compulsory medical treatment, psychotherapy and even surgery. The deterministic method of medical science is different from the determinism of literature because literature retains a space of probability and expectations and it in fact nurtures an individualistic determinism or determinism of a particular group which is variable, contestable, and dismissible to others. For instance, the *Calamus* poems of Walt Whitman suggest comradeship; “adhesiveness” among men but a few critics in a variety of reading; have gone beyond emotional attachments and they locate homosexual impulses in the poems. Since, the writings of Whitman applaud sexual love from first to last; it seems eroticism should remain as an integral part of the *Calamus* poems. The idea of “self-realization”, “self-expression”, and “self-reliance” was elemental to American Transcendentalism and Whitman as its ardent practitioner had perfectly used his intuitive realization of male-male love in the *Calamus* poems. Since, homosexuality was then an unspeakable fact and beyond human comprehension, Whitman dealt it carefully and with great literary artistry. The critics’ notion of justifying homosexuality more positively and directly in the *Calamus* poems might be another attempt of determinism but the productions of more determinism unravel the complex and hidden part of the texts. In fact, the intellectual labour of literary critics is often exercised by their preconceived determinism or particular interest to an ideology. Many others take neutral position to attend the flexibility and balance of ideas but they also are politically determinist and their determinisms lie in ambiguity, uncertainty, unpredictability, instability and in aesthetic models. But I am disinterested to create a commonplace with neutral stratagem I rather examine homosexuality affirmatively in the *Calamas* poems.

Whitman’s notebook is a rich source of his vision about homosexuality and the book comprises sexual repression, oppression, inequality, and most importantly the poet’s constant pain and deprivation in persecution of homosexuals. Indeed, the intolerant attitude of his nation towards homosexuals reflects in his attempted resolution "TO GIVE UP ABSOLUTELY & for good, from this present hour, this FEVERISH, FLUCTUATING, useless undignified pursuit of 164" (the code he used to refer his lover, Peter Doyle).

The homosexual theme in Walt Whitman's works is when discussed positively or deterministically, the *Calamus* poems come to be an instant privilege for the critics to discover the beginning of modern homosexual literature. The poet has used calamus plant as a metaphor for the intimate relation between men and also for its mythological association with failed same-sex love of two young men Kalamos and Karpos. The calamus plant also known as "sweet flag" grow mainly at the margin of valley ponds in the North and Middle Atlantic states. The plants are around three-foot height with phallus-shaped bloom and slender leaves which the poet symbolically features with man's body.

The spectacular failure of *Calamus* poems is that Whitman's popular readers avoid the homosexual impulses which seem unspeakable for them and also the negation from his culture to understand them liberally. Since the poems explicate the situation of homosexuals in America before late 19th century, they hardly were emphasised the way the author intended to be and except only accepting the homophobic slurs of the time, the readers determined the poems simply celebrating the friendship between men. But we should keep in mind that the *Calamus* poem shared the time with the larger historical development when the social philosophers and scientists like Darwin, Marx had revolutionized thoughts to a great extent. In supporting the continuous effort of the transcendentalists for an authentic identity, the self-directed *Calamus* poems deconstruct all the established thoughts around personality and sexuality to become the most fitting device for modern "homosexual sensibility".

In the *Calamus* poem "Here the Frailest Leaves of me", Whitman expresses "Here I shade and hide my thoughts, I myself do not expose them, / And yet they expose me more than all my other poems." Through these lines the poet urges his readers to sense his secret homosexual desire, consternation and closet of souls. "In Paths Untrodden" gives the deep insight into the poet's thought and in the poem, the poet wishes to travel "untrodden" paths which were once denied by him because he was disciplined with "all the standards" and "conformities" imposed upon him. But now he explores the "unpublished" or unrevealed "standards" which may be are deconstructive and against the norms. Indeed, the untrodden paths can be a metaphor for unexplored and undetermined human behaviour. Since, the calamus plants grow in secluded spaces, alongside the pond; they can be representative to the marginal position of homosexuals. The poet says he is no more afraid after reaching a secluded spot where the calamus plants grow rather is free to "respond" than anywhere else. He is "No longer abash'd" to express himself; indeed he is determined to tell the secrets of his "nights and days". His stance for self-affirmation fits with the terminology "coming out" of modern gay liberation. In the poem, the poet at the age of forty-one could resolve his restrained identity, unsettled individual self through "manly attachment", "types of athletic love" and through "the need of comrades". "That the soul of man I speak for, feeds, rejoices/ in comrades;" inaugurates an unpublished "standard" providing a clue for non-traditional love affairs. The metaphor of "manly attachment" and "athletic love" dominate in several *Calamus* poems like "To the East and To the West," "I Dream'd in a Dream," "I Hear It was Charged Against Me," and, perhaps the most famous of all "For You O Democracy".

In "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing" the poet personifies an Oak tree standing alone in Louisiana and further attempts to compare himself with the tree. The poet describes

the tree; apparently “rude”, “unbending”, and “lusty” which reminds him of his own personality. But while comparing his situation with the tree, he expresses his dissatisfaction without companionship and also his inability to enjoy life alone as the tree does. He breaks off a twig from the tree and twines around it a little moss, carries them at home and places in sight of his room not in a purpose to remember his friends who shared his life but as a “token” that makes him think of “manly love”. “The Shadow of My Likeness” expresses the cravings of “livelihood”, “chattering”, “chaffering” of the poet but the poet hardly get the chance to earn them because he says “How often I find myself standing and looking at it where it/ flits,”. He undergoes an identity crisis. But in the last two lines of the poem, he himself solves his problem by stating that he can only determine his true self while he is amid his lovers.

In “Scented Herbage of My Breast” the poet uses the word “herbage” as a metaphor for his feeling, ideas and thoughts set deep inside of his heart but now they are waiting to come out without shame and fear. In the middle of the poem, Whitman rejects the leaves he had been using as symbol, expressing them as now another form of camouflage: “Grow up taller sweet leaves that I may see! grow up out of my/ breast!/ Spring away from the conceal'd heart there!/ Do not fold yourself so in your pink-tinged roots timid leaves!/ Do not remain down there so ashamed, herbage of my breast!/ Come I am determin'd to unbare this broad breast of mine, I have/ long enough stifled and choked; Emblematic and capricious blades I leave you, now you serve me not,/ I will say what I have to say by itself.” The “Scented Herbage” associates with the idea of death that stops all the freedoms of expression/ revelation. (“Indeed O death, I think now these leaves mean precisely the same as you mean”). Whitman’s obsession with death is due to his repressive homosexuality and a sense of failure to sustain his true self in that situation. But an alternative reading explains that the poet embraces “death” in a hope of rebirth which might enable him to start a new relationship with society. He wishes that his sense of love and comradeship will achieve “immortal reverberation” and set an example for the lovers throughout the states. The poet’s use of “slender” leaves can be indicative to many things such as the Calamus plant, the hair on the breast, the pages of the book of poems, the grass on the grave, flat chest of men. The poet wonders if his leaves will be “discovered” by others. (“O I don’t know whether many passing by will discover you or / inhale your faint odor, but I believe a few will;”) The poet’s desire of non-conformity is to inspire his followers to be “different” and in the poem “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in hand” the poet asks “Who would sign himself a candidate of my affections?”. Indeed he urges his followers to reject “past theory” of their lives and all “conformity” thrust upon them. He wishes to enjoy time with his true comrade on a high hill, sailing at sea or at the sea-beach or in a quiet Island and further expresses his desire: “here to put your lips upon mine I permit you,/ With the comrade's long-dwelling kiss or the new husband's kiss,/For I am the new husband and I am the comrade,”. Through mental and physical love of comrades the poet wishes to achieve a transcendent level of knowledge, higher consciousness, deeper understanding and spiritual development of the cosmic world. (“And thus touching you would I silently sleep and be carried/ eternally.”)

"As I Lay with My Head in Your Lap Camerado" provides an instant picture of male homosexual love apparently in an unfriendly, unsympathetic world, where Whitman figuratively uses "death" as a radical protest against established “standards”. Here he tells his

"camerado" that "my words are weapons full of danger, full of death,/ For I confront peace, security, and all the settled laws, to unsettle them," and persuades him "onward with me . . . without the least idea of what is our destination,/ Or whether we shall be victorious, or utterly quell'd and defeated." Whitman brilliantly intertwines homosexuality with the radical idea of democracy to refer the political value of Jacksonian Age of his youth. "For You O democracy" celebrates "manly love" and the strength of life-long companionship of comrades that can transform America as a truly democratic land. "In Paths Untrodden" Whitman's emphasis on the democracy of homosexuals is evident when he calls his lover his "perfect equal" in "Among the multitude" and this expression relates with gay liberation which later argues the same that is the equality of the lovers of same-sex. In fact the homosexual model of love can be threatening to heterosexual partnership where the partners are indoctrinated with the idea of polarity and gender dichotomy.

"We Two Boys together Clinging" is often viewed by critics as a poem of homosexual love and the title of the poem aptly preserves the tone for it. Whitman indulges the masculinist tradition of America which always pictures men as robust, sturdy, tough, athletic and commanding like the two young men expressed in the poem. They are "Power enjoying . . ./ Arm'd and fearless, . . ./ No law less than ourselves owning, sailing, soldiering, thieving, threatening,/ . . . ease scorning, . . . feebleness chasing". Some other critics completely ignore the homosexual theme of the poem; instead they highlight the powerful fraternity and brotherhood between the two young men during the civil war. But in both interpretations masculinity has been celebrated through the so called manly activities like "excursions making", "sailing, soldiering, thieving, threatening..." The word "threatening" can have an alternative explanation. The intense emotion and love of the duo can be "threatening" to the foundation of heterosexual relation. Whitman may also replicate here the loving warrior of companionship of early literature and Greek tradition like Achilles and Patroclus, the Sacred Band of Thebes, Roland and Oliver, Greek military figures Epaminondas and Caphisodorus, Aristogiton and Harmodius and the Spartan tradition of military heroism. The personality of the young men evaluates the gradations of masculinities and they as if counter the wrong idea about gay identity of some cultures which make us believe that male homosexuals are somehow not the member of his own sex and therefore are effeminate by nature. Like Whitman, many other American writes glorify masculinity in their works but the articulation of *Calamus* poems is more than brotherly attachment. The opening two lines "WE two boys together clinging./ One the other never leaving," and the activities like "elbow stretching", "finger clutching" permeate erotic romance.

In the beginning of the poem "When I Heard at the Close of the day" the poet is downhearted and cheerless even after receiving acclamation "in the capitol" and after all his plans being accomplished. The next six lines inform that the speaker is wandering alone over the beach, relishing the isolated nature, "inhaling the ripe breath of autumn", having "undressing bathed" and is waiting eagerly for his lover who arrives to him on the third day. The language which Whitman uses for his lover ("my dear friend my lover was on his way coming") echoes an impetuous passion for long-awaited meet up, and here he has dropped the word "comradeship" and humbly used "friend" with no hint of military love or anything as

such. The activities of the speaker are deeply sensual ("rose at dawn . . . refresh'd, singing, inhaling the ripe breath of autumn, . . . undressing bathed, laughing with the cool waters") and the poet's literary artistry preserves the intuition of homosexual love in the above-mentioned lines which imply more than the narrow sexual love for homosexual identity. Whitman also creates a bond between the speaker and the natural world by using the technique of "pathetic fallacy". The nature reacts upon the emotions of the speaker who is now celebrating natural love with someone of his same-sex. The advent of the speaker's lover is the main source of his happiness which he shares with the nature ("the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands as directed to me whispering to congratulate me"). Sensuality is an inseparable part of the speaker's emotional attachment and the reference to the speaker's "health" and that he is well "nourish'd" intensifies the mood. Homosexuality is oppositional to patriarchal definition of nature which faiths upon physical reproduction instead of personal pleasure. But an aesthetic integration between the nature and the human beings enables the poet to defend the homosexuals as natural and equal to human beings. The poem ends with the speaker lying next to his sleeping lover. Whitman's use of the classic sexual symbol in rolling "waters" and the line "all was still I heard the waters rolls slowly, continually up the shores" suggests the lovers have just made love. In the last few lines we feel the determination of the lovers to create an unconventional relation with the power of love: "For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover/ in the cool night,/ In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined/ toward me,/ And his arm lay lightly around my breast—and that night I was/ happy."

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