



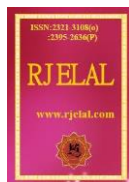
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EMERSON'S TRANSCENDENTALISM: A REFLECTION OF BHAGAVAD GITA; FROM SELF- REALISATION TO SALVATION

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Abstract

Transcendentalism is a literary and philosophical movement of the early nineteenth century. Among the chief proponents of American Transcendentalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson is widely regarded as the father of the movement. The Transcendentalism movement is acknowledged as having infused Eastern and Western philosophies altogether. American transcendentalism refers to a set of ideas by which we make our life better by lifting ourselves above the conflicts and apprehensiveness that weigh on our souls. This knowledge comes through intuition, imagination and common sense not through logic or reasoning. The writers and philosophers of this movement were loosely bound together with a common thread of idealism. They believed in the essential unity of all creation, the innate goodness of humanity and experience for the revelation of the deepest truths. The concepts of 'Over- Soul', 'Self-Reliance' and 'Transcendentalism' appear in a single book, known as '*The Bhagavad Gita*'. During the end of the eighteenth century, '*The Bhagavad Gita*', hold the attention of the Western scholars, intellectuals and philosophers. It created widespread excitement among English Orientalists, German Romantics and American Transcendentalists. Emerson was considered the first great American who studied intensely and completely the available philosophic literature from India. Emerson came under the influence of Hindu concepts during his Harvard days. He studied Gita, Upanishads, Vishnu, Vedas and Eastern philosophy, which is reflected in his works. Emerson revolted against tradition and orthodox Christianity as it was expressed in his day by the Calvinistic faith of New England. He believed that traditional religion is a hindrance in men's personal revelation and in discovery of truth. Emerson would persuade all to give up their religious traditions and live by the moral sentiments alone as these sentiments are incorruptible and will not be eradicated. Transcendentalism is primarily an intellectual movement, while Indian philosophy is about spirituality. Therefore, Transcendentalism is a journey of intellectualism to spiritualism. The paper aims to put forth Eastern and Western philosophies altogether with reference to 'Transcendentalism' by Emerson and Thoreau.

Key Words: Transcendentalism, Philosophy, Over-Soul, Spirituality, Intellectual, Self-Realisation.

Transcendentalism is a literary and philosophical movement of the early nineteenth century. The movement began in New England around 1836 and flourished for ten years until 1846. Transcendentalism is basically a philosophy that formulates a very simple idea of how men and women equally know themselves and the world around them, that 'Transcends' or goes beyond the physical world. Those who practice these ideas not as a religious belief but as a way to understand life in terms of philosophy are known as 'Transcendentalists'. Among the chief proponents of American Transcendentalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson is widely regarded as the father of the movement. He was born at Boston in 1803 into a distinguished family of New England. He was rightly observed by his peers and contemporaries as the primary philosophical exponent of American Transcendentalism as Barna asserts, "At the forefront of this movement was Ralph Waldo Emerson. Himself a former Unitarian minister, Emerson was and still is viewed as the highest profile member of the "Transcendental Club", that was responsible for the re-thinking of American spirituality" (60). The Transcendentalism movement is acknowledged as having infused Eastern and Western philosophies altogether and Emerson is acknowledged by modern day scholars as the greatest writer of East and West. He turned towards Eastern philosophy very early in his life, when he was in teens. His Aunt Mary Moody inspired him to study Oriental philosophy. The influence of *Bhagavad Gita* can be seen explicitly when he says, "I owed a magnificent day to the *Bhagavad Gita*. It was the first of books ; it was as if the an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same question which exercise us" (9-10). The *Bhagavad Gita* is capable of imparting knowledge, lessons of philosophy, religion and ethics. The book is acclaimed worldwide as its teachings are practical and universal. It shows every human being the path to live a better life in all times. American transcendentalism refers to a set of ideas by which we make our life better by lifting ourselves above the conflicts and apprehensiveness

that weigh on our souls. This knowledge comes through intuition, imagination and common sense not through logic or reasoning. The writers and philosophers of this movement were loosely bound together with a common thread of idealism. They believed in the essential unity of all creation, the innate goodness of humanity and experience for the revelation of the deepest truths. The concepts of 'Over-Soul', 'Self-Reliance' and 'Transcendentalism', Non-Conformity appear in a single book, known as '*The Bhagavad Gita*'. During the end of the eighteenth century, '*The Bhagavad Gita*', hold the attention of the Western scholars, intellectuals and philosophers. The influence of *The Bhagavad Gita* began to spread far and beyond East due to its translations into English and other European languages. In 1785, the Gita became the first Sanskrit work to be translated into English by Wilkins. It created widespread excitement among English Orientalists, German Romantics and American Transcendentalists. Emerson along with Frederick Henry Hedge and George Ripley founded an informal group in order to discuss the current topics in philosophy and theology. After seven years, it grew into a large group. Later, the group came to be known as 'Transcendental Club'. The most interesting and important member of the club by far was Henry David Thoreau, who tried to put Transcendentalism into practice. Emerson was considered the first great American who studied intensely and completely the available philosophic literature from India. Emerson came under the influence of Hindu concepts during his Harvard days. He studied Gita, Upanishads, Vishnu, Vedas, Manu and Eastern philosophy, which is reflected in his works. Emerson borrowed the titles of his poems and essays directly from Hindu scriptures. His literary works are a direct reflection of Hindu philosophy in the matter of form as well as in the content. Initially, Transcendentalism was a religious movement, but later it turned into an intellectual movement as the religion of the day was set forth by the Puritan settlers. Emerson and other transcendentalists felt that Unitarianism had become increasingly conservative and these Transcendentalists wanted to explore a new way of life that associate man with his self and with the

universe. Most of his ideas are quite similar to the concepts of Hinduism. Emerson is known as the 'Brahman' of the West. Many Hindu religious scholars appreciate Emerson for his interest and devotion in Oriental philosophy. Emerson revolted against tradition and orthodox Christianity as it was expressed in his day by the Calvinistic faith of New England. Emerson denied and opposed the fundamental Christian doctrine that only Jesus, the only son of God is endowed with the divine authority and power to redeem humanity. He considered biblical miracles to be misleading and stated that, "While Jesus was a great man, he was not God; Historical Christianity has turned Jesus into a Demi God, as the Orientals or the Greek would describe Osiris or Apollo" (161). He believed that traditional religion is a hindrance in men's personal revelation and in discovery of truth. Emerson would persuade all to give up their religious traditions and live by the moral sentiments alone as these sentiments are incorruptible and will not be eradicated. Robinson states, "Calvinist doctrine included the idea of the inherent corruption of human nature and the concept of salvation coming only by the discretion of God himself" (14). Transcendentalism is primarily an intellectual movement, while Indian philosophy is about spirituality. Therefore, Transcendentalism is a journey of intellectualism to spiritualism. All the writings of Emerson are suffused with Oriental philosophy. Emerson weaved Indian philosophy into the fabric of his scholarly writing as if it were his own. Herambachandra Maitra states, "Emerson appeals to the Oriental mind. He translates into the language of modern culture what was uttered by the sages of ancient India in the loftiest strains. He breathes a new life into our old faith, and he assures its stability and progress by incorporating with it truths revealed or brought into prominence by the wilder intellectual and ethical outlook of the modern world".

Transcendentalists created an American ideology where imagination was better than reason, practical wisdom was better than theory, and action was better than contemplation. They had firm belief that all this is possible to achieve because human could transcend limits and reach unknown heights. Indian philosophy is based on the same ideology of

reason and action. In Bhagavad Gita Shree Krishna emphasized on karmyog or the yog of action throughout his preaching to Arjun. He explains to Arjun that nobody can remain without action. Every human being is bound to act and to work diligently in order to fulfill their responsibilities externally, without attaching them internally. Action does not mean pleasure of senses, but to accept one's responsibility in this cycle. To fulfill our responsibility is moral action. The very idea of moral action is propounded by Emerson in his essay '*The Transcendentalist*.' The knowledge of self and execute higher responsibilities of the soul should be the chief concern of an enlightened man. They must not abandon their social duties, as it may create dissatisfaction in the minds of the common man who look up to them for inspiration. Therefore, the wise continue to work without any personal motive for the betterment of society and mankind.

Transcendentalism was the first successful American moment that influenced the country's religion, philosophy, literature, and attitude towards life. The concept of Brahma and the laws of Karma explore how Emerson was deeply influenced by the Indian philosophical and religious thought. George Ripley defines Transcendentalism as, "The supremacy of mind over matter" (Boller 34-35). Emerson believes that humans can achieve the immortality of God by good deed and justice. This is the only way to unite with God. Emerson strongly rejected historical Christianity. He opines that like Jesus Christ any individual can attain divinity because all human being share the same divine self. He believes that the relationship between the Over-Soul and the individual is one fold. There is no place for any person or institution such as priest or church. In his essay, *Self-Reliance*, he describes the Over-Soul as the Eternal One. Over – Soul is not some external force, but in fact, it lies within us as a part of our individual soul. Our intuition and imagination are the key forces to be united with the Over- Soul. Here Emerson seems to be influenced by the teachings of Upanishad and the *Gita* that Over- Soul is manifested through human beings not by Supreme Laws. Emerson's reading of Victor Cousin's first volume, *Cours de Philosophie* in 1828, was mainly significant as it was the book which

developed Emerson's first taste for the *Bhagavad Gita*. Thus Emerson's poems, essays, letters and journals explicitly indicate that the *Bhagavad Gita* was a great source of knowledge and inspiration for him. The Over-Soul is a definite borrowing from Hinduism (The phrase over-soul itself is a literal translation of the Sanskrit Paramatma which is its analogue). There is no doubt that his essay 'The Over-Soul' is a very good exposition of this concept by a Western mind. This Over-Soul, this aboriginal 'Self' is to Emerson synonymous with man's instincts or intuition which is but Emerson's own Super Ego. He found in Hindu scriptures especially in the *Bhagavad -Gita* and the Upanishads a way of expounding social and moral values which proved his own points concerning Morality and Will. Emerson described the ultimate goal of Transcendentalism when he said, "We will walk on our feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds ...A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men".

American Transcendentalism was shaped and influenced by British romantics. The Romantic movement paved the way for Transcendentalism through which the literary men of America drew a life of self-reliance and a view of life which came from Oriental philosophy. Transcendentalists chiefly discussed the idea of self or selfhood which is mentioned in sacred scriptures of Hinduism. The word 'Transcendental' is used multifariously in English translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* by various scholars, saints and authors. Emerson, not only preached the significance of Hindu philosophy, but also inspired the youth to read Hindu scriptures. He spent most of his time in analysis of the Hindu laws of *Karma*. The philosophy of *Karma* holds the view that all men suffer and enjoy is the harvest of his own actions from previous existence. Our *Karma* in previous life will determine whether we will suffer or enjoy in this world. This idea of transmigration is also adopted by Walt Whitman in his poetry. With the discovery of Indian philosophical and spiritual concepts, Emerson opened the door for those who wanted to explore the ancient texts like *Gita* and Upanishads. His ideas about morality, sin, freedom,

non-conformity, self-reliance, over soul, suffering, fate, and destiny were stimulated by Hinduism. In a letter to Max Muller, Emerson wrote: "All my interest is in Marsh's *Manu*, then Wilkins' *Bhagavad Gita*, Burnouf's *Bhagvad Purana* and Wilson's *Vishnu Purana*, yes, and few other translations. I remember, I owed my first taste for this fruit to Cousin's sketch, in his first lecture, of the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna and I still prize the first chapter of the *Bhagvad* as wonderful".(4) In that stream Emerson, Thoreau and Walt Whitman were immersed. They took a sudden turn from the mechanical world to the good old Oriental philosophy. It was intuition or insight which made them pass through the land of 'Rishis', full of legends. They went back to the *Laws of Manu*, *Bhagavad-Gita* and *Katha Upanishad*.

Emerson was the first writer of America who went through the Oriental philosophy. He was a man of great moral strength and integrity. Although, Emerson was a great thinker, many of his ideas were influenced by other intellectual scholars and philosophies such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Romanticism, Chinese philosophy, Persian philosophy, German idealism and Kantian philosophy. He was in search of a great source for man's spiritual nature which turned him to the literature of the East. He says of the Vedas:

"It is sublime as heat and night breathless ocean. It contains every Religious sentiment, all the grand ethics which visit in turn each novel and poetic mind and nothing is easier than to separate what must have been the primeval inspiration from the endless ceremonial nonsense which caricatures and contradicts through every chapter. It is of no use to put away the book; if I trust myself in the words or in boat up on the pond, nature makes a Brahmin of me presently. Eternal necessity, eternal compensation, unfathomable power, unbroken silence- this is her creed"(Narasimhaiah 244).

Emerson was influenced by the religious aspect of 'rebirth' in Hindu philosophy. In one of his journals he has written that after reading the Oriental philosophy he came to know about the secret of the world. He realized that the soul is immortal and it appears again into a new body after a short period of retirement. He was a keen observer of the secret

of the world that drew him on Oriental wisdom. He also stated that there is no birth again if we realized oneness with God. In his essay, 'The Transcendentalist' Emerson focuses on morality. He says that Transcendentalism is at its best if it is guided and nurtured by morality. Moral actions are not governed by any principle or theory; rather they are spontaneous response to the feeling of one's individual potentiality along with one's natural love of the good. The primary purpose of Transcendentalists is to view the world as inherently moral and idealistic and they attempted to develop it in the image of what they loved. But their theory created a painful rift between their idealism and the actual events, actions and emotions faced by them in their mundane lives.

Another prominent member of the Transcendentalism movement was Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau's philosophy of Transcendentalism was more practical than Emerson. One of the chief features of the 19th century America was the discovery of Indian thought. It was Thoreau who made himself into an Indian 'Yogi'. Thoreau's reading of Oriental philosophy lead him to become a 'Yogi'. It was the spiritual influence that moved him much. In his Journal he wrote:

"I cannot read a sentence in the book of the Hindoos without being elevated up on the tableland of the Ghauts ...The impression which those sublime sentences made on me last night has awakened me before any cockcrowing ...The simple life here in described confers on us a degree of freedom even in perusalwants so easily and gracefully satisfied that they seem like a more refined pleasure and repleteness." (266). Thoreau along with other 'Transcendental' writers knew direct and immediate experience over traditional religious doctrine and received truths. Like, Emerson, Thoreau also rejected the popular religious doctrines of his own culture to be independent from the clutches of worldly affairs. Thoreau's experience to Walden Pond gave him the realization of divine and mystic love of nature. There he felt the discipline of living in nature as a road leading toward self-knowledge and spiritual realization. In his spiritual autobiography he explicitly says. "In the morning I bathe my intellect in

the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita*, In comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial...The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges".(264). Walden was for Thoreau a spiritual journey where he struggles to peep into himself and his existence and to attain freedom from the terrible bondage of life's compelling forces. In Indian context it was the journey of a Yogi who practice spiritual discipline to attain salvation R.W. Emerson states: "The first thing we have to say respecting what are called new views here in New England, at the present time, is that they are not new, but the very oldest of thoughts cast into the mould of these new times" (8). Both Emerson and the *Bhagavad Gita* consider 'New Views' thus to be only the oldest thoughts cast into new times. Transcendentalism is the ultimate and the highest goal of human life. A person who walks on the path of Bhakti (KarmYoga) would never regress backward into materialism. Emerson's 'idealism' imbibes these concepts of *Karm Yoga* of the *Bhagavad Gita* in his poems, essays and letters. Emerson believed that mind is the only reality and other things are mere a good and bad reflection of it. One must act according to his/her own convictions. The mind can both be friend and enemy of the conditioned soul. Those who has conquered the mind attained to the status of Brahman. Our mind is the true reflection of our inward and outward behavior. The Yogi teaches that the mind itself has a higher state of existence, beyond reason, a highly conscious state, and when the mind reaches to that higher states, then this knowledge beyond reasoning, comes to man.

Conclusion

The influence which the ancient books of the East exerted on American writers did not stop with Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman. The influence of Oriental philosophy is quite obvious in T.S.Eliot. Towards the end of the *The Waste Land* "Datta", "Dayadhvam", "Damyata" from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* are woven into the poem. The poet seems to suggest that this is the only means of salvation for the modern civilization. He concludes it in a most dramatic with the Sanskrit words: "Shantih, Shantih, Shantih." When we turn to the

most popular novel of Earnest Hemingway and Herman Melville, we come to see the symbolism that they have made use of from *Bhagavad Gita and the Vedas*. Emerson developed and planted Vedic concepts in Western culture thus transforming it from within. *Bhagavad Gita* is a part of modern America and Western Civilization down the flow of time and it will continue to illuminate the future generations of East and West.

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