

Ralph Waldo Emerson's Literary Works: A Reflection of Hindu Philosophy

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Abstract

The researcher explores how Emerson blends the East and the West in his literary works. In order to observe the influence of Eastern philosophy in his works, some of his representative literary texts like The Poet, The Over-Soul, Nature and Illusion are analyzed in detail. Emerson embodies the notion of Karma, Over-Soul and Pantheism in his texts. He browses through the Vedas, the Gita and the Upanishads, Eastern philosophical texts and ultimately encompasses their essence in his works. He also advocates the notion of Transcendentalism, going beyond the nature, together with Hinduism.

Key Words: Hinduism, Pantheism, Karma, Transcendentalism, Over-Soul

Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American transcendental writer, composes his literary works based on Eastern philosophy (Hinduism). His writing on Nature, largely influenced by Rigvedic literature, derives from oriental Vedic sources. Edward Wagenknecht writes: "Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American transcendentalist poet and essayist gets drawn towards oriental texts because of his childhood learning. As a result, his major works stand on the ground of Rigvedic nature literature and Hinduism" (22).

Emerson's essay, "The Poet," is the reflection of Rigvedic philosophy. One of the Easter poets, Ralph L. Rusk comments: "Emerson's effusive essay 'The Poet' provides a compendium of Romantic ideas about poetry. In particular, it recalls the comments on Coleridge and Carlyle on symbolism, Emerson was obviously well read in occult philosophy" (79). Emerson's "The Poet" shows its connection with the Usha Shukta of Rigveda where poets act as revolutionary figures. In Shukta, Usha starts a new life, develops new thinking and bears new responsibility. And similarly, the Ratri has been accepted as a junior sister of Usha which symbolically stands as a time-space limitation. At the time of Ratri too, the poets act as source of knowledge and new spiritual vision for revolution. They embody extra ordinary mind and most of them are revolutionary ones:

O poet! A new nobility is conferred in groves and pastures, and not in castles or by the sword-blade any longer. The conditions are hard, but equal. Thou shalt leave the world, and know the muse only. Thou shalt not know any longer the times, customs, graces, politics, or opinions of man, but shalt take all from the muse. For the time of towns is tolled from the world by funereal chimes, but in nature the universal hours are counted by succeeding tribes of animals and plants, and by growth of joy on joy. God wills also that thou abdicate a manifold and duplex life, and that thou be content that others speak for thee. (qtd. in Adams 556)

For Emerson, East stands for the sunrise newness and truth. He advocates the Easter notion of Pantheism:

What a benefit if a rule could be given whereby the mind could at any moment itself, & find the sun....But the truest state of mind, rested in, becomes false. Thought is the manna which can not be stored. It will be sour if kept, & tomorrow must be gathered a new. Perpetually must we East ourselves, or we get into irrecoverable error, starting from the plainest truth & keeping as we think

the straightest road of logic. It is by magnifying God that men become Pantheists; it is by piously personifying him, that they become idolaters. (qtd. in Grossman 81)

Emerson advocates the concept of “The one in the many, the man in the one”, the Hindu principle enunciated in the Bhagvad Gita. In Sanskrit, the word “Brahma” or “Brahman” means “The Supreme, second to none.” Emerson has introduced Hindu vision of philosophy to American nation. The philosophy believes that we are always reborn into this world each time we die, the sole theme of Brahma. He adds new dimension to American poetry writing trend. He never writes poetry for recreation rather for society. Peter B. High writes that “Emerson’s poetry is often criticized as being awkward and unmusical, but poetry for Emerson does not always have to produce pleasant sound and harsh sounds can be used to surprise the air” (45).

Emerson, in his essay ‘Illusions,’ celebrates Hindu theology: “The highest object of their religion was to restore that bond by which their own self (atman) was linked to the eternal Self (Paramatman) . . . clouded and obscured by the magical illusions of reality . . . the so-called Maia or Creation” (qtd. in Cabot 59). At the fortieth chapter, the final hymn of Yajurveda is “Kham Brahma”. This chapter attempts to cover the detailed explanation of Hiranyagarva Sukta of Rigveda. At the Rigvedic age, “Brahma” was to be understood as Hiranyagarva, Prajapati and Birat Purush etc. Brahma is supposed to be in its holy existence. All the creatures, plants and non-living things get their shape and have continuity because of the wish of Brahma. The poem asserts that spirit neither kills nor is killed by any force. It is not born or dies at any time: “If the red slayer thinks he slays, /Or if the slain thinks he is slain,/ They know not well the subtle way/I keep, and pass, and turn again./Far or forgot to me is near” (qtd. in High 28).

Emerson acknowledges the power of nature and glorifies its supremacy. His famous poem “The Snow Storm” reflects human limitation before nature. He presents nature as a designer and Man as learner. ‘The Snow Storm’ indicates the importance of nature. The thunder announces the snowfall on the earth and stands as a communicating agent. And this snow fall covers the hills and the towns and makes unique design there. Human activities are limited at the same moment. No one is master over nature and nature has set mankind limited. Consequently, mankind has to surrender to it one way or the other. Nature allows Man to do some limited activities.

Emerson believes that Nature, a great artist, covers hills, towns, farmyards and the river with the white coat (snow). For him, the snow storm acts as the master of the hills in the night whereas it melts away the following morning with the rising Sun. Human creates art by imitating the nature. Thus, nature is superior to human art as it receives its material from her. Emerson’s “The Snowstorm” shows the divine power of Nature:

Announced by all the trumpets of the sky,
Arrives the snow, and, driving o’er the field,
Seems nowhere to alight: the white air
Hides hills and woods, the river, and the heaven,
And veils the farmhouse at the garden’s end.
The sled and traveler stopped, the courier’s feet
Delayed, all friends hut out, the housemates sit
Around the radiant fireplace, enclosed

In a tumultuous privacy of storm.
Speeding, the myriad-handed, his wild work
So fanciful, so savage, nought cares he
For number or proportion.
And when his hours are numbered, and the world
Is all his own, retiring, as he were not,
Leaves, when the Sun appears, astonished Art
To mimic in slow structures, stone by stone,
Built in an age, the mad wind's night-work,
The frolic architecture of the snow. (qtd. in Ferguson 158-159)

Emerson, the principal spokesman for transcendentalism, influences the religious, aesthetic, philosophical and ethical movement of his day by giving pragmatic touch upon them. He blends ancient classical humanism with oriental metaphysics to introduce a new brand of literary trend. He finds connection between Plato's ideas and Eastern philosophy. Emerson understands that like ancient Greek philosophers, the Hindus believe in the transmigration of souls from body through successive lifetimes. Being influenced from Eastern philosophy, Emerson becomes more liberal than his contemporaries. He is not confined to the notion of Christianity rather expands his domain of knowledge. Having absorbed this cohering grain of wisdom in the Indian resources, he read as an undergraduate, the generation of what Walt Whitman calls New World Metaphysics and asserts:

Meanwhile, Plato in Egypt and in eastern pilgrimages, imbibed the idea of one Deity, in which all things are absorbed. The unity of Asia and the detail of Europe; the infinitude of the Asiatic soul and the defining, result-loving, machine-making, surface-seeking, opera-going Europe, -Plato came to join, and by contact to enhance the energy of each. The excellence of Europe and Asia are in his brain. Metaphysics and natural philosophy expressed the genius of Europe; he subtracts the religion of Asia, as the base (qtd. in Grossman 143).

We can observe a strong influence of the Vedas and non-dualism in Emerson's later writings. The term nondual refers to a *Advaita* a Sanskrit term (Meaning: not two). It believes that things always remain as inseparable single entity. Emerson's concept of "The Over-Soul" explains the notion of non-dualism:

We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence, the universal beauty to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world peace by peace, as the Sun, the Moon, the animal, the tree but the whole of which there are shining parts, is the soul. Shining parts is the soul. (Emerson 3)

Emerson derives the concept of Over-Soul from Rigveda. The Rigveda believes that human soul ultimately blends with divine soul by attaining equal status with nature and God. In the first Mandala of the Rigveda (Sukta 22,23), Lord Vishnu is worshiped for his wonderful and courageous deed as an extra-ordinary super-personality with the source of Vishnu Sukta (22,23). From Rigveda, the second chapter of Manusmriti is systematically developed. A well known phrase "Narawai Aya"

is the concept of process of formulating or transmigrating ordinary people into the form of “Great Narayan”. (Sarswati and Vidyalkar 56). The attainment of Narayan completely liberates human being from all worldly constraints. It is believed that every human being can obtain the position equivalent to Narayan. All the Nar (People) are, therefore, the form of Narayan. Emerson’s writing reveals the of Vedic vision of ‘Nar-Narayan’:

It is the old revelation, that perfect beauty is perfect goodness, it is the development of the wonderful congruities of the moral law of human nature. Let me enumerate a few of the remarkable properties of that nature. A man contains all that is needful to his government within himself. He is made of law unto himself. All real good or evil that can befall him must be from himself. He is not to live to the future as described to him, but to live the real future by living to the real present. The highest revelation is that God is in every man. (qtd. in Grossman 156-157) Emerson borrows the Hindu notion of Maya, illusion and advocates for its futility. He suggests that the reality does not exist in phenomenal world. The phenomenal world is the manifestation of ideal world. So, one should not be disillusioned by what he or she does or sees on the Earth:

The true way of consider things are this: Truth says, Give yourself no manner of anxiety about events, about the consequences of actions. They are really of no importance to us. They have another Director, controller, guide. The whole object of the universe to us is the formation of character. If you think you came into being for the purpose of taking an important part in the administration of events, to guard a province of the moral creation from ruin, and that its salvation hangs on the success of your single arm, you have wholly mistaken your business (*The Heart of Emerson’s Journals* 39).

Emerson, being influenced by the law of Karma, asserts that we cannot separate means from its ends. He further explains that one cannot distinguish seed from fruit: “Punishment is a fruit that unsuspected ripens with the flower of the pleaser which concealed it, cause and effect, means and ends, seed and fruit, can’t be served for the effect already blooms in the cause, the end pre-exists in the means, the fruit in the seed” (qtd. in Wicher and Milton 149).

Emerson incorporates some Hindu principles and quotes from scriptures in their original form. His direct use of such scripture in his literary works, reflects his deep inclination towards Hinduism and preservation of Hindu philosophy in its original state: “First or last you must pay your entire debt, persons or events may stand for a time between you and justice, but it is only a postponement. You must pay at last your own debt” (qtd. in Myersomn 102). We can observe same trends adopted by Emerson in his Nature: “Then canst not gather what thou dost not sow; as thou dost plant the trees, so will it grows. Whatever the act of a man commits, whatever his state of mind, of that the recompense must be received in corresponding body” (Myersomn 103). Swami Pramananda’s argument further validates Emerson’s deep interest in Eastern philosophy: “There can be no doubt that Emerson was deeply interested in Eastern philosophy. In his writings we find many direct and indirect references to Oriental teachings. He was a devout student of Bhagavad-Gita and the Upanishads, and often quoted or used stories from them” (12-13).

We observe the fusion of the East and the West in his literary works. However, his deep regard and interest upon Eastern philosophy, particularly Hinduism, broadens his understanding and adds new dynamics to the English literature. His literary works bridge the gap between Man and God, just opposite of the Christian notion. Emerson promotes the concept of Pantheism in the Western literary world. He introduces the Hindu texts—the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Bhagvad Gita to the West.

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