

INFLUENCE OF INDIAN RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL TEXTS ON AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM

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Abstract : American transcendentalists like R.W. Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, and Elizabeth Peabody were greatly influenced by ancient Indian religious and cultural discourse contained in seminal texts like Vedas, Upanishad, Vishnu Purana, Bhagvat Gita, Katha Upanishda, Mahabharata and Ramayana. Moreover the moral, spiritual and reformist ideas of Indian leaders like Swami Vivekananda, Raja Rammohan Roy, Sri Aurobindo, Tagore and Gandhi stimulated the American writers to dwell deep into Indian philosophical texts. It appears that Transcendentalism is the first attempt of American thinkers to look for free thinking, rationality and non-dogmatic approach not only in religious matter but also beyond it in social and cultural domain. Indian philosophical thought which is in itself a multi-faceted concept encompasses varied contradictory strands in its fold embracing criticism, argumentation and diverse voices with a celebratory tone. The foundational proximity between both the philosophical discourses remains instrumental in making the American writers use Indian texts as a source of reference for their literary works. The transcendentalists as a result employed Indian philosophical concepts of Maya, Karma, Brahma and Aatma etc in a dominant way in their literary corpus. The present paper aims at exploring the American literary discourse of transcendentalists especially that of Emerson for finding Indian religious overtone in the conceptual frame work of Transcendentalism.

Keywords : Transcendentalism, Indian philosophical discourse, Maya, Karma, Brahma

1.0 Introduction

Transcendentalism, a multi-faceted movement, springs from the works of R.W. Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, Elizabeth Peabody, Orestes Brownson, George Ripley and Theodore Parker. Inspired by reformation in British society, it talks about free thinking in religion, individualism in literature and introduces reforms in American social and cultural domain. Religious reforms necessitate the vehement rejection of Christian dogmas, rituals, various creeds and orthodox interpretation of scriptures. It advocates direct relationship with God without any mediator. Almost all the transcendentalists in one way or other try to introduce reforms in the area of women's rights, children's aid, prison and education. Emerson, in "The Transcendentalist," defines Transcendentalism as "What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism." The present study evaluates three transcendentalists Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman in context of their indebtedness to Indian philosophy and culture in development of Transcendentalism.

2.0 Emerson And Indian Thought

The Indian concept of Brahma has a deep influence on Emerson. Brahma, one of the Gods of trinity others being Vishnu and Shiva is a God of creation. He is supposed to have two forms: para and apara. Para indicates formed entity while apara is formless. According to Upanishdas formed is unreal whereas formless is real. While elaborating both the forms, Brhadaranyaka Upanisad elucidates "Truly, there are two aspects of Brahman, the formed and the formless, the mortal and the immortal, the unmoving and moving, the existent and that which is beyond existence" (Herman, 107). His poem "Brahma" has a strong resemblance with the description of God in Bhagvad Gita. Lord Krishna while motivating and convincing Arjuna for war affirms that no body can kill or gets killed in the war. It is He who is killer and killed. The same sermon gets reflected in these lines:

If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways I keep,

and pass, and turn again.
Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the same;
The vanished gods to me appear;
And one to me are shame and fame.
They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.

The poem almost reproduces the vastness of God as enshrined in Bhagvad Gita. It states that nothing happens with the desire of man. Everything is decided and run by the supreme soul. Further as per the ideals of Indian thought, he tries to establish the supremacy of man over lords in getting the proximity with God. Emerson says:

The strong gods pine for my abode,
And pine in vain the sacred Seven;
But thou, meek lover of the good!
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven. (665)

The poem in the above said quote clearly delineates the difference between gods and men. Whereas Gods try in vain to find His abode, man who is inherently good can find Him. In the "Divinity School Address" he says:

The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul. These laws execute themselves. They are out of time, out of space, and not subject to circumstance. Thus, in the soul of man there is a justice whose retributions are instant and entire. He who does a good deed, is instantly ennobled himself....If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice. (131)

Hindu philosophy outlines that mortal Brahma as human being enters into immortal or formless Brahma and thus gets united with God. This feat is even impossible for Gods. This supremacy gets established just due to the fact that man gets involved in good deeds. Thus significance of goodness, morality and moral virtues is strongly established here.

The soul or atman is the basic philosophical concept of Indian thought. It is elaborated in the best way in the "Shirimad Bhagvad Gita" where it is characterised as immortal and eternal which can not be destroyed like energy. It just changes body after latter's death as we change clothes. It is similar to the Christian notion of Light, Christ, or Spirit, as seen in St. Paul's words, Galatians 2:20, "[I]t is not I who live but Christ that liveth in me" (Herman, 110). We see this conception of atman in Emerson's "Divinity School Address," in which he says that:

Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul....He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world. He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, "I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or, see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think." (134)

He considers Jesus Christ as prophet who has sublime divinity like any other individual. In this way, he teaches the spiritual feeling that we are one of His creatures and the presence of atman imparts oneness to each and every creature.

Emerson creates the concept of over-soul which seems to be synonymous of Hindu concept of Parm-*aatman*. Salvation is attained when *aatman* of an individual gets merged with Parm-*aatman*. Over-soul is the God himself which is the sole goal of a devotee. Further Emerson discards the role of any mediator in forming the relationship of God and devotee. This relationship is sacred and organic and no agency like church or any agent has any role to play in this relationship. By this philosophic stand, he takes away the concept of God from church or any agency spreading superstitions. In "The Over-Soul," Emerson states "the Maker of all things and all persons stands behind us and casts his dread omniscience through us over things" (217). Over-soul is an eternal soul and emphasizes the unity and oneness in the universe.

Maya as per Hindu philosophy is the mysterious power of God with which He creates this world. Sometimes it is supposed to be the nature (Prakriti) with which the creator has created the beings. It is very difficult for a mortal to understand the dynamics of maya. It is only in the power of God to understand it except only those beings who completely surrender to the will of God. Lord Krishna in the Upanisads says, "This divine maya of Mine, made of the gunas, is difficult to penetrate. But those who take refuge in Me alone, they penetrate this illusion" (Herman, 191). Emerson is fascinated by the concept of Maya more by its mysterious nature. On the deceiving power of maya, he comments in his poem "Maia:" as

Illusion works impenetrable,
Weaving webs innumerable,
Her gay pictures never fail,
Crowds each on other,
Veil on veil,

Charmer who will be believed By Man who thirsts to be deceived. (Emerson, 432)

He fully agrees with the conception that this world is made from Maya by God. He quotes from the Veda, a sacred text of the Aryans, "the world is born of Maya" (Journals XVI 33). Maya to Emerson as to many other scholars too is a complicated concept. This difficulty in comprehension of this concept is revealed many times in his articles and essays. Referring to Indian mythology, he writes,

"Brahma said, No, it is not thy true form, that which man sees with his organs made to seize different objects, for thou who art the asylum of knowledge. Of substance, & of quality, thou art distinct from that product of Maya which has no real existence" (Journals XVI 31).

The logical or empirical methods diagnosing Maya have always failed. The nature of Maya is so complex that we have to get united with it but with the feeling of detachment. As Emerson mentions, "Adore, in order to escape from existence, him who can annihilate it, & whose feet are adorable; he who unites himself, whilst remains distinct from it, to Maya, which is his energy endowed with qualities" (Journals XVI 32).

In his famous essay "Illusions," he claims that we dwell in a kingdom of illusions. He takes the analogy of sick men to describe the human existence as "We change only from bed to bed, from one folly to another; it cannot signify much what becomes of such castaways, wailing, stupid, comatose creatures, lifted from bed to bed, from the nothing of life to the nothing of death" (384).

In his essay "Experience," Emerson expresses his views in consonance with Adi Shankracharya observations that this world is an illusion. Even if someone tries to understand it, his vision is dimmed by his own subjectivity of experience. Realizing the endlessness of illusion, Emerson concludes that "Nature does not like to be observed, and likes that we should be her fools and playmates" (269).

Emerson is highly influenced by the Indian philosophical concept of Karma. Karma etymologically means action or deed of anyone. The basic law of Karma in Indian philosophy signifies that evil deeds would bring evil results and likewise good deeds would be rewarded in a good way whether in this life or next one. The law of karma, as mentioned in the Brhadaranyaka Upanisad IV.4.6 is "This is what happens to the man who desires. To whatever his mind is attached, the self becomes that in the next life. Achieving that end, it returns again to this world" (Herman, 131).

The quote links action with desire. The desire is considered as the root cause of unhappiness. So it is regarded as a synonymous with evil deeds which deserve to be punished. The moral objective of the karma law is to force an individual to do good deeds by linking the action and result as cause effect relationship. The law works automatically without the interference of God. It further implies that doctrine of free will is emphasized here. It is in the hands of an individual to be rewarded or punished as per his actions which are taken by free will. Franklin Edgerton comments on this automatic karmic law:

"It is man's relation to propriety or morality, dharma, which alone determines. For more than two thousand years, it appears that almost all Hindus have regarded transmigration, determined by "karma," as an axiomatic fact. 'By good deed one becomes what is good; by evil deed, evil'" (Herman, 132).

In line with this conception of the karmic laws, Emerson emphasizes the good deeds of people. In "Self-Reliance,"

he urges his readers not to depend on good luck. He also believes that we should not take any piece of good fortune as a good omen. He concludes that:

A political victory, a rise of rents, the recovery of your sick or the return of your absent friend, or some other favorable event raises your spirits, and you think good days are preparing for you. Do not believe it. Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles (164).

Based on the free will theory of karma, Emerson creates his notion of Self-reliance. This doctrine postulates the freedom of choice. But problem Emerson faces is that of categorisation of evil and good. The things are not always in black and white. He is confused in evaluating the deeds as he sees many sides of it and often in contradicting meaning. Sometimes he is confused in the operation of free will and fate. But in "**The Conduct of Life**," he insists on virtue of necessity. He recognizes the value of suspending all contradictions and confusion even in case of free will and fate. He comments, "**If we must accept Fate we are not less compelled to affirm liberty.**" In one of his bleak statements, he utters, "There is a crack in everything God has made" (174). He uses the term "polarity" and claims that "Polarity, or action and reaction, we meet in every part of nature; in darkness and light; in heat and cold....An inevitable dualism bisects nature, so that each thing is a half" (168). But, still he asks rhetorically: "How shall a man escape from his ancestors?" Ancestors here correspond to nature which brings both disasters and bliss. There is no short answer to this question, as Emerson argues in "Compensation" that "To empty here, you must condense there." In the same essay, he seems to criticise the Indian mythology and thought for latter's too much insistence of moral values. He recognizes the moral values of "the Indian mythology [which] ends in the same ethics; and it would seem impossible for any fable to be invented and get any currency which was not moral" (174).

3.0 Thoreau And Indian Thought

Indian philosophical concepts find expression in literary corpus of Thoreau. The reflections of Buddhism can be traced in his article 'The Preaching of Buddha'. He frequently mentions orientalist like Colebrooke, Hodgson and Wilkins in the prefaces to the selections which further exhibits his interest in Indian thought and reflections. He translated a story, "The Transmigration of seven Brahmans" which is Indian in theme and structure. Praising Bhagavad Gita he writes

I would say to the readers of scriptures, if they wish for a good book to read the Bhagavad Gita known to have been written more than four thousand years ago it matters not whether three or four or when it deserves to be read with reverence even by Yankees, as a part of the sacred writings of a devout people. (9)

He was quick in grasping the subtleties of Indian philosophy. From sacred Gita, he understands the percept of detachment. He also considers desires to be the root cause of all sufferings. He also believes that a person should behave as per his true nature. He should not be an imposter and lead an honest life in which there is no gap between his saying and doing. He expresses his sentiments in his journals as:

"The man who, having abandoned all lusts of the flesh, Walketh without inordinate desires, unassuming, and free from pride, obtaineth happiness. The wise man.... seeketh for that which is homogenous to his own nature".

Indian philosophy particularly of detachment drove his interest into yoga. He considers yoga to be a medium to achieve the supreme divine bliss. He writes in a letter to a friend :

"Free in this world as the buds in the air, disengaged from every kind of chains, those who have practiced the yoga gather in Brahma the certain fruit of their works The yogi, absorbed in contemplation, contributes in his degree to creation Divine forms traverse him

He was very much influenced by the seminal Hindu book "Laws of Manu". He is specifically impressed by its tone and dignity of expression. Its sublime presentation, diction and theme provide divine taste to this sacred text. He confided his observations in his **journal** as:

I cannot read a sentence in the book of the Hindoos without being elevated as upon the table land of the

ghaunts. It has such a rhythm as the winds of desert, such a tide as the Ganges and seems as superior to criticism as the Himmaleh mounts. Even at this later hour unworn by time, with a native and inherent dignity it wears the English dress as indifferently as the Sanskrit. The great tone is of such fibre and such severe tension that no time nor accident can relax it (Journal 1-P.266).

Hindu way of life not only influenced his literary output but had an effect on his life also. He was overwhelmed by the importance given to tolerance, sacrifice, contentment, adjustment and other virtues preached in Indian culture and philosophy. Thoreau practiced these virtue in his life and preached the same through his literature. Thoreau says in "Walden",

Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrance to the elevation of mankind "and adds that with respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor (*Walden - Economy* 115).

Thoreau lived Indian philosophy through his literature and life. His insistence on humanism, welfare of world and dignity of individual is foregrounded in Indian philosophy.

4.0 Whitman And Indian Thought

Among the American transcendentalists, Whitman's affinity with Indian philosophy cannot be ignored. Traces of Indian thoughts can be found in his poetry especially in his songs. Indian thinkers like Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo and Tagore noticed and appreciated the clues of Indian thought in his poetry. Aurobindo states that Whitman stature is like that of a saint who has grown on vedantic and upanishadic line of thought. Tagore finds him incomparable when it comes to catching the "oriental spirit of mysticism" (*Chari*,396). Malcom Cowly, a renowned critic analysed the songs and found that the layered text exhibits the presence of vedantic and upanishadic elements especially in the mystic nature. The mysticism of songs through its suggestive imagery reflects the message of Bhagvad Gita. The concept of self propounded by Whitman resonates with Viraat Swarup of Lord Krishna showing present past and future visions symbolizing various dimensions of individual self. T. R. Rajsekhraiah in his book "Roots of Whitman's Grass" finds vedantic roots in Whitman's 'Leaves of Grass'. Whitman himself well versed in Indian philosophical and literary texts through their various translations was doubtful about the impact of Indian thoughts in his poetry. When asked directly by Thoreau on this aspect, he denied any Indian impact on his poetry directly or otherwise. But later on, in 'A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads' in 1988, he accepted that "the ancient Hindoo poems" proved to be the "embryonic facts" of Leaves of Grass. His famous poem '**Passage to India**' takes India central to its philosophical conception. The poem represents the greatness of past emanating through spiritual outpouring of elemental thoughts. This thematic conception has close resemblance with vedas and upadishadic thought which even Whitman can not deny who otherwise is reluctant in accepting oriental impact in his poetry.

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