

Emerson's Appeal for Indian Thoughts

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Abstract: *The first group of American thinkers who seriously examined non-Western spiritual traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism was the Transcendentalists. The prominent members of this group included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, and Elizabeth Peabody. In general, the Transcendentalists argued for a non-dogmatic and more universalistic perspective of life and the world. As the intellectual guru of this group, Emerson "represented the best in the spiritual explorer" (Moore 74). Unlike most of his predecessors and contemporaries, he was sensitive to and passionate about non-Western spiritual traditions and philosophies. Today, the sources of Emerson's knowledge and inspiration are of particular interest to the critics and researchers of comparative literature. In this article Emerson's passion for Indian thought with specific reference to Brahma, the Bhagavad Gita, and the laws of karma is explored.*

Keywords: Transcendentalism, Emerson, Indian Thought, Brahma, Bhagavad Gita, Karma.

I. INTRODUCTION

Transcendentalism, or American Transcendentalism, was a multi-faceted movement. It introduced freethinking in religion, intuitive idealism in philosophy, individualism in literature, new spirit in social reforms, and new optimism in peoples' mind. This New England movement flourished in a period between 1830 – 1860.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was America's poet prophet. He is remembered primarily for his endeavour to elevate the spiritual landscape of the American psyche. Emerson was born in 1803 in Boston, USA. He lost his father when he was only eight and was raised by his mother. Emerson lived his whole life in Massachusetts and became the leading member of a group known as Transcendentalists. His beliefs and ideas may be summarized by one of his own sentences: "Can anyone doubt that if the noblest saint among the Buddhists, and noblest Mahometan, the highest Stoic of Athens, the purest and wisest Christian, Manu in India, Confucius in China, Spinoza in Holland, could somewhere meet and converse together, they would find themselves of one religion?" Transcendentalism was the first successful American movement that influenced America's religion, philosophy, literature, and attitude toward life.

Main Thrust

Transcendentalism was the first American intellectual movement that showed true interests in Eastern philosophy. Emerson started to read about Indian philosophy and mythology in The Edinburgh Review between 1820 and 1825. His interest in Indian thought grew when he was a young Harvard graduate, and it continued until the end of his writing career. We see its evidence in many of his essays, poems, letters, and journal entries. For example, the concept of Brahma plays a central role in his works and ideas. He is also very much interested in the Bhagavad Gita. Some of his essays such as "Self-Reliance" deal with a theme that is very much similar to the concept of karma. Through a discussion of Brahma, the Bhagavad Gita, and the laws of karma, I explore how Emerson was deeply influenced by the Indian philosophical and religious thought.

The Indian concept of Brahma had great influence on Emerson. Brahma is the god of creation, and one of the Hindu trinities—others being Visnu, the preserver and saviour of the world, and Siva, the destroyer or dissolver of the world. Emerson was so influenced by the concept of Brahma that he named one of his short poems "Brahma". In this poem, Emerson dwells on the power of Maya and how it deceives us. In addition to this poem, he talks about Maya several times





in his journals. For example, he responds to the idea of Maya in the following entry: “The illusion that strikes me most as the masterpiece of Maya, is, the timidity with which we assert our moral sentiment.

We are made of it, the world is built by it, things endure as they share it, all beauty, all health, all intelligence exist by it; yet it is the last thing we dare utter, we shrink to speak it, or to range ourselves on its side” (Journals XV 243). He fully agrees with the concept of Maya and believes that the whole world is made of it. He quotes from the Veda, a sacred text of the Aryans, that “the world is born of Maya. However, the concepts of Maya are not always clear-cut. Maya, as it literally means magic, has puzzled many scholars. As seen in the poem “Brahma,” Brahma is “the doubter and the doubt.” For this, it may seem to be a fruitless endeavour to understand the divine Maya. Likewise, Emerson is sometimes perplexed by the power of Maya. 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, and of quality, thou art distinct from that product of Maya which has no real existence” (Journals XVI 31). It is a dream-like effort to comprehend and embody the mystery of Maya because it has no real existence. The way Maya works seems to be contradictory at times because we have to unite ourselves with Maya, and at the same time, we have to remain distinct from it.

Emerson is simultaneously inspired and perplexed by the concept of Maya. In addition to Emerson’s journals, we see the presence of Maya in many of his essays. For example, in “Illusions,” he claims that we dwell in a kingdom of illusions. With an analogy of sick men in hospital, Emerson describes the condition of human life: “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 writes that we cannot be sure about what we see and perceive of. We see things through filter glass—optical illusions—and we cannot know if what we see is real. If our life is a dream, there is no end to this dream. Another problem of our experience is our subjectiveness, as we are always trapped in it. The meaning and nature of everything depend on the eyes that see it. 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”. He understands how difficult it is to penetrate this illusion as Lord Krishna in the Upanishads 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” (qtd. in Herman 191). This perplexity pushes Emerson toward the following conclusion: Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion. Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them, they prove to be many coloured lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus. From the mountain you see the mountain. We animate what we can, and we see only what we animate. Thus, Emerson’s writing suggest that he was highly influenced by the concept of Maya.

Emerson was particularly struck by the teachings of Bhagavad Gita, “the first of books,” as he once called it. He wrote about the Gita that “In England the Understanding rules & materialistic truth, the becoming, the fit, the discreet, the brave, the advantageous but they could not produce such a book as the Bhagavat Geeta” (Journals X, 503). The Gita is an ancient Sanskrit text comprising of verses embellished with many literary devices such as allegory, metaphor, and allusion. It is a record of conversations between Bhagavan or God, in the form of Krishna, and Arjuna, a human. Arjuna is a ksatriya warrior of the Pandava family and Krishna is his cousin and the driver of his chariot. In the battle field, Arjuna sees many of his relatives in the opposing force and, being overcome by pity, he refuses to fight. Krishna then tries to make him realize the importance of fighting. He also reminds him of his obligation to follow his dharma or duty and to ignore his personal feelings. Krishna sends this message to the mankind through Arjuna, as does Christ through his twelve disciples. This idea resonates with Emerson’s emphasis on intuition and conscience. In the essay “Over-Soul,” he writes that we, as individual souls, are part the Greater or Over-Soul. We do not have to go to church to be united with the Over-Soul because our intuition can illuminate our spiritual world like the flashes of light. Here, Emerson seems to be influenced by the teachings of the Upanisad and the Gita that nirguna higher Brahman, or what Emerson calls the Over-Soul, is manifested through human beings. Thus, Emerson’s letters along with his essays and journals indicate that the Bhagavad Gita was a great source of knowledge and inspiration for him.



Another Indian philosophical concept that had tremendous influence on Emerson is karma. In Sanskrit, karma means action or work. In the Upanisadic and Vedic traditions, karma signifies “the results or consequences of action” and, more distinctively, “the unwanted, to be avoided at all costs results or fruits of action.” The results of disobedience bring future suffering and pain. The Vedas, the Upanisads, and the Bhagabad Gita all mention that disobeyers must face grave consequences. Therefore, it is the self that chooses the form it wants to be. 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. Emerson’s notion of self-reliance is very close to the karmic laws. We can choose whatever we want to be; everything is determined by our action or karma. We have freedom of choice and we can achieve the godly qualities that we already have within ourselves; or, we can choose to be devilish by our own karma. Nonetheless, Emerson continues to be perplexed by the riddle of two-sidedness of things. In one of his bleak statements, he writes that “There is a crack in everything God has made” (174). He uses the term “polarity” to describe this unevenness in nature. He goes on to claim 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). Earlier, we have noticed Emerson’s belief that a union of our individual soul and the Over-Soul is the way of mukti (freedom from this material world and sufferings). This belief resonates perfectly with the concepts of Brahma and atman, but his observation of dualism in “Compensation” paralyzes his faith. Because of this dualism and polarity in nature, the union between the individual soul and the Over-Soul becomes difficult. In short, although much of Emerson’s thought and writing corresponds with Indian philosophy and mythology, we see a difference when he thinks that nature is full of dualism, and that this dualism hinders the union between the individual soul and the Over-Soul.

II. CONCLUSION

Despite a little bit of contradiction, much of Emerson’s belief is aligned with the Indian philosophical and religious thought. Three basic concepts of Brahma, namely, formed and formless Brahma, Atman, and Maya, exerted much influence on Emerson’s writings. His essay “The Over-Soul” and poem “Brahma” illustrate the idea of formed and formless Brahma, whereas his “Divinity School Address” deals with the concept of atman—the impersonal god found in every human being. Maya, which denotes a magical power by which the Creator reveals Himself and the mystery of His creation, is probably the most influential Indian concept for Emerson. In his poem “Maia,” essays “Illusions” and “Experience,” and several journal entries, Emerson talks about Maya. In addition, the Bhagavad Gita, an account of conversations between Krishna and Arjuna, is another great source of knowledge and inspiration for Emerson. Throughout his journals, he praises this book and claims that Europe was not able to produce a book like Gita. Finally, the Indian philosophical concept of karma—work or actions by which peoples’ fate is determined—is also dominant in Emerson’s writings. The laws of karma emphasize the actions of individuals and freedom of choice. In “The Conduct of Life” and “Self-Reliance,” Emerson exploits the concept of karma, and urges his readers to be responsible for their own deeds. Thus, the Indian philosophical and religious concepts and teachings had a great influence on Emerson’s intellectual works. By exploring and utilizing Indian spiritual beliefs and philosophical traditions, Emerson paved the way for his successors who continued to dig into the richness of ancient texts such as the Upanisads and the Gita. Therefore, with regard to Emerson’s contribution to American scholars’ growing interest in Indian thought, Dale Riepe is convincingly right when he says that “there has been a continuous concern for Indian thought in the United States since Emerson’s early years”.

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