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Research Article



Spiritual Idealism in the Works of Emerson: An Indian Approach

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Abstract

Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American author, endeavoured to establish new dimension of ideology by balancing the scientific materialism and conventional interpretation and beliefs in religious realm. In fact, his literary creation reveals his faith and inclination towards the ideology of spirit rather than to peep into the religious orthodoxy. He along with William James motivated New Thought Churches in America and dedicated himself in enhancing and extending the effect of the spiritual movements of the 1950's and 60's. He continued to illustrate the depth of spirituality through his speeches, poems and essays. For him, there is

an occult relation between man and the universe around him and in the wide expanse of nature, he could feel a liberation from the tyranny of things. A minute analysis of his works clarifies his penchant to stimulate the new generation to know about their own entity as well as, the adjacency of ultimate truth, and the realization of supremacy in natural phenomena. The present paper aims to present the compendious conceptions of Emerson about spirituality intermingled with idealism through the microscopic lens of Indian philosophy. This approach will highlight the need to have enough acumen and intrinsic potential to discover a new intellectual path in the realm of spiritual idealistic studies.

Keywords: Idealism, Spirituality, Indian philosophy, Spiritual Idealism, Transcendentalism, Vedanta, Upanishads, Self-Reliance, Brahman and Atman, Nature and Spirituality, Eastern Influence on Western Thought

“Standing on the bare ground -- my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space -- all means egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me. I am part or parcel of God.” (Atkinson 6)

Unlike Plato or Aristotle Emerson's calibre was endowed with bizarre pliability and with unique fancies full of numinous notions. He appears to relish the celestial entirety in literary cosmos. To him, literary macrocosm is quite appropriate to pour out spontaneous blissful thoughts emerged from the depth of the soul. De facto, “He was like a young god making experiments in creation: he blotched the work and always began on a new and better plan. Everyday he said, “Let there be light”, and every day the light was new. His sun like that of Heraclitus was different every morning” (Sastri 10). De facto, Emerson has imbibed the candid essence of the *Gita*, *Upanishad*, *Manu Vedas* and *Vishnu Puran* to a great extent and pours his enriched notions in his writings as poetry, essay and letters. In his essays particularly “Nature” (1836), “The American Scholar” (1837), “The Divinity School Address” (1838), “Self Reliance”, “Over-Soul”, the volume entitled “Representative Men” (1850) and in some enlightened poems like “Brahma, Each and All” etc., he emerges as the spiritual representative of mankind. In expressing such divine experience, he follows the universal voice lies in the depth of his heart. Of course, that inner voice is that of Supreme power. He dares to declare, “that nothing is of us or our works— that all is of God. Nature will not spare us the smallest leaf of laurel. . . The individual is always mistaken” (Atkinson 355). Thus, he breaks the myth of ‘*Aham brahmasmi*’

(I am God) pervading among human beings and seems to corroborate the spiritual truth revealed by the innate Hindi poet *Kabir* in *Sakhi*—

“Jab main tha tab Hari nahin, ab Hari hain main nahin
sab andhiyara mit gaya, jab deepak dekhyah mahin”

Emerson, as a seer, emphasises on authentic relation to the infinity. That's why his approach to nature is intuitive and artistic, not scientific or logical. In his essay “Nature”, he enthusiastically discusses the extramundane approach to the relationship between man and God. In fact, this bond is linked stoutly through nature only. To him, just to gaze the stars in tranquillity fills the man with cathartic feelings and makes him aware of the fact that his real existence is quite separate from materialistic world. Thus, he begins to perceive the “perpetual presence of the sublime” (Atkinson 5). Further he analyses dexterously and systematically the human inclination for nature which develops a man's insight into the hidden workings of the universe under the guidance of Supreme Power. He opines, “Never lose an opportunity of seeing anything beautiful for beauty is God's handwriting. . . Nature always wears the colours of the spirit” (Atkinson 7). His poetic heart remains always throbbing to reach prophetic and ethereal outcome of life. Like a philosopher, he does not aim at truth rather like a poet, he pines for divine beauty in nature, which not only embellishes the external world but also enlightens the inner cosmos. While depicting nature as Universal Being, he concludes, “The aspect of nature is devout. Like the figure of Jesus, she stands with blended head and hands folded upon the breast. The happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship” (Atkinson 34). As a crux of matter, Emerson is seer in the real sense as he peeps into the spiritual effect through umpteen natural phenomena and possesses obvious opinion that, “Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual facts. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind” (Atkinson 15). Emerson continues to ponder that Almighty has blessed human beings with the treasure of wisdom and spirituality which can even immortalize us, if used in the right direction. After the essay “Nature”, he heightens such transcendental views in his following speech “The American Scholar”. No doubt, some persons prove to be extraordinarily genius to pour out their thoughts into words and create literary aura around us. Such brainiacs also need some guidelines and counselling in order to enlighten their latent talent. In fact, crucial complexities and illusions of the world sometimes clad our talent of creativity and dexterity and we remain entangled in wasting the precious time. The critical moments in the life of *Arjun* were smoothened with the preaching of lord *Krishna* and became the source of the creation of the *Gita*, a comment on the world of action. Likewise, the traumatic experience of Milton is expressed in his “On His Blindness”, when his inner consciousness revealed the truth to him. For Emerson too, there is an occult relation between

man and the universe around him and in the wide expanse of nature, he could feel a liberation from the tyranny of things. The idea finds expression in Emersonian terminology in “Self Reliance”, “A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages” (Sastri, 81).

Thus, Emerson disapproves narrow and fragmentary reactions to life and pleads for the full man and also for the emancipation of the American. Nathaniel Hawthorne called him, “that everlasting rejector of all that is, and seeker of he knows not what” (Sastri 2). Emerson’s speech had stunning impact on the audience and it marked the beginning of a new culture epoch for America. He realises the possibilities for all the intellectuals to give up their mundane attitude towards life and fulfil the expectations of deity in true sense. Anticipating the favourable aura for literary creations, he expresses his penchant to evolve refined high thinking not only for his contemporaries but also for coming generations too. That’s why his essay “The American Scholar” contains valuable treasure to enrich the literary realm. For this, he has poured the rare formulae to inspire a scholar so that he may be a man of transcendent thinking. The motto of the scholar is to classify the facts and to find out the spiritual laws that determine them. He is related to the man of genius because “man hopes; genius creates” (Sastri 174). Emerson uses the term ‘genius’ in the Coleridgean sense of creative insight, another facet of Reason and the Imagination. To the scholar, he said, “Man thinking must not be subdued by his instrument. Books are for the scholar’s idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men’s transcripts of their readings” (Sastri 175). The intention of all these overstatements was to shock complacency into recognition that each dawn opens a new day. Emerson is of the view that the spirit of mankind is same in all individuals and this may also be called the spirit of God found in all persons on this earth. He compares this division with the division of fingers in hand to perform its function effectively. In Indian scripture too, all persons on this earth are said to be the part of a single being but he is not an ordinary person rather He is God who distributes himself among all living beings as it is said in *Shwetashwataropnishad*—

“Eko devah sarvbhuteshu guruh sarvvyapi sarvbhutantaratma” (6/11)

(God, who is one only, is hidden in all beings. He pervades all and He is the inner soul of all beings.)

As a matter of fact, literature cannot be produced independently rather it is created under certain influences received and experienced in this school of the world. The scholar becomes the university of wisdom in the true sense when he illuminates himself with creative capability and potential from Nature, Books and Action. For this, Emerson emphasises to be a “man thinking” and not to be a “mere thinker”. The first and foremost impression upon human mind

is that of “Nature”. Everyday every one of us are confronted with nature and perceives nothing particular in it except the blowing of the wind, growing of the grass and moon and stars as a consequence of the night, which are the usual routine natural phenomena. Usually, we look at it and ignore it but for a scholar, every natural occurrence and object has a different meaning. The scholar feels hypnotized towards those scenes and sights of nature and develops bizarre outlook to behold its beauty. With this outlook, he begins to relish the supreme authority of poetic cosmos. As it is said in *Agni purana*-

“*Apare kavyasansare kavirekah Prajapati*”

Yathavai rochte vishvam ,tathevam parivartate” (339/10)

(In the boundless world of poetry, *Prajapati (Brahma)* is the only one poet. He changes the universe as and when he thinks best.)

In this way, nature motivates and stimulates a scholarly mind to create literature in its praise. For example, many other have glanced upon daffodils but its sight inspired Wordsworth and resulted in the beautiful poem. In the same way, many people have been attracted by the melodious song of the “nightingale”, but it enriched the poetic heart of Keats with precious gems of thoughts and meaningful emotions. Emerson also feels nature to be eternal. It was, is and be forever. He calls it “web of God”— “There is never a beginning, there is never an end, to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself” (Sastri 172).

Here Emerson keeps himself distinct from English philosophy which believes in linear progress but like Indians, he seems to believe in circular progress where nothing begins or ends but the wheel goes on rotating continuously. We can support this view of Emerson that nature never begins or ends, with the picture of the rainbow by Wordsworth who depicts it as unchanging even after years have passed;

My heart leaps up when I behold,

A rainbow in the sky;

So was it when my life begins;

So is it now I am a man. (Rolfe 76)

Then Emerson compares nature to the soul which possesses the same trait of immortality. Physical dome dies with the passage of time but soul remains unchanged. In our Indian philosophy too, spirit of any man is said to be eternal as it is referred to in the *Gita*—

“*Na jayate mriyate va kadachinnayam bhutva bhavita va na bhuyah*

Ajo nityah shashwatoayam purano na hanyate hanyamane sharire” (2/20)

Emerson clarifies conspicuously a general conception that in young age, we come across many contradictory phases of life which may mar the charm of blissful jovialities. But all the

differences, afflictions, crisis and contrary facts seem to be disappeared when we have the insight to feel unity in them and finding that the root of all things is same. Only we need to develop that insight by which we can discover the essence of this philosophy. Certainly, the time comes when we recognise that the things which seem distant and opposite to each other apparently, are sprouted of the same point. Emerson's notion that all the world has been a "flower out from one stem" reminds us of Indian mythology where also the creation is said to be sprouted from the body of *Vishnu* in the shape of lotus flower on which sits *Brahma* and creates the world. At last, he assimilates the ancient and modern precepts. Consequently, the ancient doctrine "Know Thyself" by Socrates becomes similar to the romantic canon "Study Nature". This conception again goes parallel to Wordsworth's spiritual approach towards nature, which provides him—

... that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened: - that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently let us on-
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul: (Rolfé 52)

As a perfect preacher Emerson elaborates that an enlightened persona has to pass through umpteen experiences, various objects and intellectual works as the influence or inspiration to create something unique and memorable. He has to develop dexterity to alter mundane into extramundane and corporeal into ethereal experience. "The scholar of the first age received into him the world around; brooded thereon and gave it the new arrangement of his own mind and uttered it again" (Sastri 173).

Thus, he receives the events of life and turns them into the truth. The definition of truth is given as that was, is and be forever. Same happens with the books also as they can be the source to immortalise our existence. For example, Cleopatra, being recorded in Shakespearean play, speaks, thinks, sees and attracts us even now because the life of mortal Cleopatra becomes immortal through literature and therefore it can be said about her so confidently-

"Age cannot wither; nor custom stale
Her infinite variety." (Mowat 73)

Emerson as a shaper of the character, warns us to be dependent on bookish knowledge in toto, they can never create authentic creation and are called book worms. Now it is quite conspicuous here that we should not try to be Browning's "Grammarian" rather we should be cautious to imbibe from the books as Bacon hints by categorising them— "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few are to be chewed and digested" (Devraj 22). To Emerson, pros and cons of everything exist and it depends upon our own ability to judge what is right and wrong for us. He himself declares the right use of books— "They are for nothing but to inspire" (Sastri 174). Emerson contradicts the misconception among us about the reclusiveness of a man of letters and emphasizes that action (*karma*) is the thing which makes man a man in true sense. It is important to convert the thoughts into action. More positively we are told that if a man turns towards humanitarian reform, he is likely to lose his self-reliance because of the tyranny of the popular judgement and modes of action. He must explore and develop his own integrity. An intellectual personality begins to find out for he can convert the worldly pleasures into bliss. To be dynamic in idealism enhances the scholarly personality as well as intellectuality. In all spheres of life, we feel the need of action because through it we can relish a blissful life. Such conceptions of Emerson go parallel to the lines of *Ramcharitmanas*;

Karm pradhan vishwa rachi rakha

Jo jas kare so tas phal chakha (Ayodhya Kanda 218-219)

Emerson calls the world as the shadow of the soul or the expansion of one's own self. As much as a man is familiar of himself, he is acquainted with the world around him. There is also a proverb in Sanskrit—

"Sansarah atmavistratih"

(World is the expansion of the self)

Being fascinated by the attraction of the world, the people pierce the unknown regions and gains knowledge. As much as a man gathers experience, he illuminates his inner self darkened by the ignorance. Action works like gem in one's discourse for it is the backbone of language. To move thoughts, we need petrol of action. The process of converting experience into some creativity is similar to the process of making satin through mulberry leaf. Such production continues for all time without any check. A seeker of the self cannot restrain himself from seeking, finding and establishing unique ideals in the form of immortal works. As it is delineated in the *Gita*—

"na hi kashchitkshanmapi jatu tishthatyakarmkrit". (3 / 5)

(A man of action cannot remain devoid of action even for a moment)

Emerson opines that we should imprint new words in the book of our mind, which can be fumbled in the dictionary of the life because— “Life is our dictionary” (Sastri 178). Then why should a man thinking confine himself to the limited sources and not fish out the words from the direct and original source i.e., life? In fact, life is the best institute to provide knowledge. Shakespeare’s lines in *As You Like It* corroborate this notion -

“Find tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
sermons in stones and good in everything.” (Dusinberre 190)

Truly speaking, Emerson seems dexterous to pour out the universal paradigms for scholarly genius to create their own authentic literature and academia. His compendious conceptions highlight the need to have enough acumen and intrinsic potential to discover a new intellectual path and thus to reach in ethereal realm. In this reference Emerson points out one more necessary norm of spiritual ideology in term of “self-trust”. The requirement of the self-trust are freedom and bravery. Unlike a common man, a scholar should be free from negativity and courageous enough to bear patiently the criticism and severe opposition of others. Emerson believes that self-trust is sure to be converted into “God trust” ultimately. This can be happened only when that person remains always nearer to truth. If he’s right, he will meet success in every phase of life and usually he is right because he follows the guidance of his soul or inner voice. In this philosophy of casting out the fear and being free, we can find the glimpse of Rabindranath Tagore’s philosophy—

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high,
where knowledge is free,

Into that heaven of freedom, my father, let my country awake. (Paul 162)

His essay “Over soul” also centres round the doctrine of self- trust. Analysing minutely, we find that the theories of Universal Self, God, Soul have been delineated smoothly and convincingly by Emerson in essay after essay. Like the Hindu *Vedantee*, he utters- “The simplest person, who in his integrity worships God, becomes God; yet for ever and ever the influx of this better and Universal Self is new and unsearchable. It inspires awe and astonishment” (Sastri 177). His intention behind such preaching is to enable a man to know himself. He appears to have arrived at an awareness of his thought through his own experiences of spiritual conflict and illumination. As *Upanishads* declare, “by knowing the self, man knows all”, he clarifies this fact in his essay confidently that soul of God is within the soul of everyone as is distinctly mentioned in the *Gita*—

“*Ahmatma gudakesh sarvbhuta shayasthitah*
ahamapishcha madhyam cha bhutanamant eva cha” (10. 20)

(O Arjun, I am seated in the heart of all living entities. I am the beginning, middle and the end of all beings.)

When he reveals the truth that “Universe is represented in an atom, in a moment of time” (Sastri 119), we find the tinge of romanticism as Blake refers to in “Auguries of Innocence”—

To see the World in a Grain of Sand,
And Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour. (Erdman 987)

As per the pious *Vedantic* knowledge, Emerson proves to be true saint in elaborating various disciplines of spiritual life. To him Soul is beyond Time, Space and Nature. It has no concern even with the concept of New and Old. Hence “divine thought” is equally present through ‘all ages’. It remains playing with all these worldly approaches and compels us to ruminate about its being inside our corporeal substance. In a nutshell, he endeavours to exhibit that all the human beings as well as all materialistic objects are the incarnation of the Over soul. As a matter of fact, his conception of the over soul arises from a variety of sources. The chief source came from Indian scriptures and its classic expression results in his poem ‘*Brahma*’. *Brahma* is the Absolute in the *Upanishads* and in *Shankara’s Advait Vedanta*. This impersonal Absolute is identical with the soul of the individual. Emerson grasps from *Katha Upanishad*; “If the killer thinks he kills and if the killed man thinks he is killed, neither of these apprehends right. The Self kills not, nor is it killed” (1. 2. 19).

He is tempted to pour out the similar concept in his poem *Brahma* -
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. (Sastri 196)

The verse appears in the *Gita* also where lord *Krishna* delivers the same revelation of truth that soul is neither born nor even dies. It is indestructible, eternal and is not slain even when the body is slain.

Emerson has not used the word ‘God’ intentionally as God may be personal but *Brahma* is Infinite and Absolute, the supreme soul of the universe. He nurtures this transcendental notion with vital and meaningful paradoxes. The poem contrasts the relativity of human and temporal perception with the sublime harmony of the Spiritual Absolute. Here he reveals the ways to get salvation (*moksha*). The seeker of emancipation must find *Brahma* and not heaven. One who seeks heaven will have to be born again after the virtue he accumulated is over. But one who finds *Brahma* has eternal spiritual existence only.

As Emerson possesses a unique sense of inspiration and imagination, he beholds everywhere the manifestation of some spiritual laws of experience. In his works he seems hunger of imagination to go beyond the reaches of fields, seas, horizon and even heaven so that he can get the answers of ineffable and baffling questions pertaining to our own existence. And whatever he imbibes, he pours out to bless the humanity through his speeches, letters, essays, poems etc. Frankly speaking, the impact of Emerson is still felt substantially because his ideas don't vary from the secular beliefs of present day. He argues that moral values must be voluntarily adopted by individuals. It is not mere self-reliance that he preaches for he equates it with God-reliance. Such divine enthusiasm and moral spontaneity are unfortunately lacking in men today. For the generation stricken with monotonous and materialistic mentality, the preaching and evangelism of Emerson may prove to be morale booster for strengthening their spiritual immune system.

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