



**Indo-American Transactions: Emersonian and Whitmanesque Engagement with Indian
Thought**

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Abstract:

This paper deals with American interest in Indian philosophical and literary thought with a view to work out Indo-American transactions through Emerson's pioneering engagement with Vedantic and Upnishadic thought. To illustrate my point, I will analyze Emerson's 1841 essay titled 'Over-Soul', which as a concept, remarkably approximates the Hindu conception of Brahman in more ways than one. It will be followed by an appreciation of his 1857 poem, 'Brahma' that deals with illusory (*mayavic*) nature of this world and divinity indwelling each form/ aspect of being. Thereafter, I will deal with Whitman's acknowledgement—howsoever superficial as he had more knowledge about the orient than he “pretended” to (Yu 62)—of significance of India, which he views as a “spiritual fountain” of “primal thought” representing the “infinite greatness of the past” (Whitman, 345-353) in his poem 'Passage to India' (1871). For him, India signifies point of “wisdom's birth” characterized by a “clear freshness” to which he craves to return. Despite the fact that Whitman transcends his frame of reference, terming it as “Passage to more than India” as he seeks to explore mysteries of earth, sky, fathomless sea, clouds, rains, day and night (353), India may be identified as a significant trans-Atlantic referent in the 19th century American literary imagination and philosophical thought.

Key words: Indo-American Transactions, Indian Thought, Emerson, Whitman, Vedantic and Upnishadic Thought

Indo-American philosophical and literary transactions may be traced back to early years of America's coming into existence as Huston Smith in his Foreword to Philip Goldberg's *American Veda* observes: “Early translations of Vedic texts found their way to America in the opening decades of the country's existence and influenced Jefferson, Adams, Emerson and



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Thoreau” (Goldberg xvi). Nevertheless, this flow of “Vedantic influences” did not stop there as it found its “way back to India through the lens of American perspective” (xv), and thus effecting two-way exchange of philosophical and spiritual thought. The transnational exchange of ideas from East to West, in fact, began with the “ancient Greeks” and “moved quietly through the age of exploration when Europeans were too busy extracting resources from newly discovered lands to learn much from their sages and seers.” It was in the early nineteenth century that the British scholars translated India’s sacred texts that “reached American shores and fell into the hands of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman” (Goldberg 7-8). Wai Chee Dimock too affirms transnational exchange of ideas in her book *Through Other Continents* as she underscores the fact that epic tradition in Sanskrit alongside Indian civilization (among others such as Chinese, Egyptian and West African) profoundly influenced American literature over a long period of time in history which she terms as “deep time.”

This paper underscores American interest in Indian philosophical and literary thought to work out Indo-American transactions through Emerson’s pioneering engagement with Vedantic and Upanishadic thought. To illustrate my point, I will analyze Emerson’s 1841 essay on ‘Over-Soul’—a concept which remarkably approximates the Hindu conception of Brahman in more ways than one, followed by appreciation of his 1857 poem, ‘Brahma’ that deals with illusory (*mayavic*) nature of this world and divinity indwelling each form/ aspect of being. Thereafter, I will deal with Whitman’s acknowledgement—however superficial as he had more knowledge about the orient than he “pretended” to (Yu 62)—of significance of India, which he views as a “spiritual fountain” of “primal thought” representing the “infinite greatness of the past” (Whitman 345-353) in his poem ‘Passage to India’ (1871). For him, India signifies point of “wisdom’s birth” characterized by a “clear freshness” to which he craves to return. Despite the fact that Whitman transcends his frame of reference, terming it as “Passage to more than India” as he seeks to explore mysteries of earth, sky, fathomless sea, clouds, rains, day and night (353), India may be identified as a significant trans-Atlantic referent in the 19th century American literary imagination and philosophical thought.



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Before graduating from Harvard, Ralph Waldo Emerson had acquired enough knowledge about religious and spiritual practices in India (Oldmeadow), and the core belief that manifest world has emanated from divine source and the ultimate goal of life is to be able to find inherent unity with its source which is divine, the notion of *maya* which sees multiplicity of material forms as illusion obscuring that unitiveness/ oneness, alongside the transmigration of souls through the cycle of birth-death-rebirth (Goldberg 31). The influence thus was huge as it shaped Emerson's creative consciousness. For instance, his 1846 poem 'Hamatreya' is based on an excerpt from *Vishnu Purana* and his essay on 'Immortality' recounts story of Yama from *Kath Upanishad* toward the end. The opening lines of the poem 'Brahma' derive from almost identical passages in *Kath Upanishad* and *Bhagwad Gita*. According to Goldberg, the borrowings are not "aesthetic embellishments but central to Emerson's worldview" (34).

In addition to expounding on principles of Transcendentalism, Emerson's 1836 essay 'Nature' also emphasizes that individual soul and spirit of the universe (later postulated as "Over-Soul" in the essay of the same title) are one. Emerson writes in Chapter VII from *Nature*: "The world proceeds from the same spirit as the body of man. It is a remoter and inferior incarnation of God, a projection of God in the unconscious." This view is identical with Vedantic precept equating *Atman* (individual soul) with *Brahma* (the Over-soul/ Cosmic soul). In his 1841 essay, 'The Over-Soul,' Emerson envisions Over-soul as "The supreme Critic...that Unity...that common heart...that overpowering reality.... the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE...the whole...is the soul." Such conceptualization besides ideas propounded in works of Plato, Plutarch and particularly neoplatonist philosopher, Plotinus also evidences heavy Vedantic influence.

The epigraph by Henry More clearly sums up Emerson's fundamental belief that behind each individual soul, there is the soul of God, which he later conceptualizes as universal spirit realizable only through moral actions. He also discusses it vis-à-vis society thereby elaborating the process through which it can be revealed to us and also exemplifying toward the end as to



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how Over-Soul manifests in individual beings. Emerson thus writes that soul is immense, infinite compared to human ego which is finite and that each individual soul is connected and is part of the Over-Soul (God). In a sense, he envisions Over-Soul as a metaphysical foundation of all else and also as universal force that “circumscribes all things... contradicts all experience... [and] abolishes time and space.” Emerson’s apperception of Over-Soul, in fact is, mystical as the distinction between the seer and the seen dissolves resulting in an experience of oneness.

The unitive vision that goes beyond all contradictions may have its basis in neoplatonic tradition, nevertheless, its Vedantic (particularly Advaita /non-dual) connection is hard to deny owing to the fact that Emerson was steeped in essence of the *Bhagvad Gita* and the *Vedas* (Pradhan). The implications of the Vedic concept of *Paramatma* [*param* (supreme)+*atma* (soul)] are in fine consonance with Emerson’s conceptualization of the Over-Soul. Diana Eck’s observation sums it up precisely as she sees Indian Upnishadic perspectives and transcendentalist doctrine blending in Emerson making us conscious of one universal spirit that underlies the world of phenomenal multiplicity.

As stated, Emerson’s poem ‘Brahma’ written in 1856 was influenced by *Kath Upnishad*, a sacred text of India. Particularly the opening lines of the poem (“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”) directly echoes the verse 19 of chapter 2 of the *Gita* which says: “He who considers the individual self as a slayer, or he who thinks that the individual self is slain , neither of these know the truth, for Self slays not, neither is It slain” (qtd in Goldberg 353). Vedantic notion of Brahma signifying the Absolute is distinctly unique as it does not refer to some divine being/ person; its implications actually go beyond all describable/ discernible categories.

Emersonian postulation of universal spirit/ Over-Soul approximates Brahman signifying the essence of the universe. Emerson assumes the persona of Brahma (God of Creation) and talks about His attributes as Brahman (the essence of everything in the universe). In *Taittiriya Upanishad* Brahma has been described as “*Satyam jnanam anantam brahma.*” It implies that Brahma is Truth, Knowledge and Infinitude. The concluding stanza of the poem wherein the poet



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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”, clearly alludes to what Lord Krishna says in the eighteenth chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*: “Abandoning all religious duties, seek me as thy refuge. I will deliver thee from all sin.” The poet-speaker who assumes the persona of Brahma tells the reader that what appear to be opposites—a warrior and his enemy, remoteness and nearness, shadow and sunlight, alongside shame and fame—are really Him. Brahma’s great power is further described in the third stanza, where the spirit states that it comprehends yet transcends everything—both “the doubter and the doubt,” the subject and object, and matter and mind.

The poem begins by examining the commonsensical view that the spirit ends with one’s death and effectively suggests that even when the body is destroyed, the spirit will appear again in a different form—a perception which alludes to the *Gita* wherein chapter 2, verse 22 describes death as simple discarding of a worn-out garment for a new one. When the body becomes diseased and old, the ever-lasting soul forsakes it for a new disguise: “Death is but a change of attire in an uninterrupted continuity of immortality” (Yoganada, 218).

Thus Emerson’s transcendentalist vision is deeply steeped in Vedantic Indian thought. There are remarkable points of convergence between the neoplatonist traditions that Emerson represents and the Vedantic and Upanishadic thought that he could imbibe and internalize.

Walt Whitman has had special affinity with India. His songs in particular have been largely appreciated, and strong affinities with *Bhagvad Gita* and Vedantic and Upanishadic thought have been found in view of the mystical nature of his chants. Great thinkers and philosophers like Vivekanand, Tagore and Aurobindo have appreciated Whitman’s poetry and thought. Tagore in particular observed that Whitman is incomparable when it comes to catching the “oriental spirit of mysticism” (Chari 396). For anyone who is steeped in Indian thought and is well-versed with the *Gita* would assume that Whitman’s concept of the Self as delineated in ‘Song of Myself’ is an echo of Lord Krishna’s postulation of the concept of *Viraat* (the Cosmic Self) of which the



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individual, worldly and the contingent self is a part. Aurobindo observes that in Whitman he could see a seer of old time—one who is established in Vedantic and Upanishadic lore.

Despite modernist, futuristic curve of his famous poem, ‘Passage to India,’ Whitman’s frame of reference has India as its central referent signifying a “spiritual fountain” of “primal thought” as it represents “infinite greatness of the past” emanating through Sanskrit in the Vedas and Vedantic thought which he cannot be assumed to be unaware of being Emerson’s acolyte. He transcends the central point of reference called “India” and thus commenting on the finitude of all that he adulates as well as enumerates at the very outset such as “great achievements of communication—the opening of Suez canal, the junction of the Union and Central Pacific transcontinental railroads , and the laying of the Atlantic and Pacific cables” (Moon 345). Eventually he exhorts his soul to voyage not *to*, but *through* the “seas of God” never to stop and thus sail farther and farther. Despite the fact that Whitman transcends his frame of reference, terming it as “Passage to more than India” as he seeks to explore mysteries of earth, sky, fathomless sea, clouds, rains, day and night, India could be identified as a significant trans-Atlantic referent in the 19th century American literary imagination and philosophical thought as evidenced more concretely and substantively by Emerson and Thoreau. In this regard, Whitman was clever to the extent of feigning ignorance about oriental slant of his poetry when asked by Thoreau and later acknowledging that in ‘A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads’ in 1988 that “the ancient Hindoo poems” were among the “embryonic facts” of *Leaves of Grass*.

Such hints about Whitman’s indebtedness to Indian thought may seem superficial, nevertheless, its influence on his profoundly receptive mind shall ever be hard to deny. One may not agree with T. R. Rajsekhraiah who in his book, *Roots of Whitman’s Grass* traces the source of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* back to Indian Vedantic thought; scholars like Malcom Cowley make more sense when he suggests that ‘Song of Myself’ can be best understood vis-à-vis mystical philosophies of the world and particularly those expounded in the *Bhagwad Gita* and the *Upanishads*.



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Summing up, it can be said that the 19th century literary imagination benefited immensely from Indian thought—a fact accepted and acknowledged by the great trio comprising Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman. However, the Vedantic thought, after blending with and benefitting the American transcendentalist thought later made its way back to India and thus influencing profoundly, even transforming sizeable number of Indians, which is growing with each passing day. Likewise in the United States today Vedantic premise—“Truth is One and the Wise call it by many names”—is “widely accepted” if not followed “literally” (Goldberg, 12).

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