

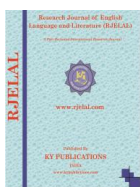


TRADITION AND INDIVIDUAL TALENT: CONTRASTING FACTORS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF TRANSCENDENTALISM

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Abstract

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was a great philosopher and transcendentalist of 19th century America. Most of his literary work has a strain of Transcendentalism. The essays of RW Emerson are spiritual and aphoristic by nature, albeit, different from English writer Francis Bacon. The writings of these essays paved the way for American Renaissance and heralded a new era in American Literature. Though most of the ancient literary writings have a message to society and its people, yet, the philosophical concern of these literary works is mostly ignored. Individualism and Non-conformity to the tradition are the hallmarks of his philosophy. Emerson advocated abhorrence to the tradition and instead believed in the contemporary thoughts generated by the individual. Individualism implied self-reliance and he firmly believed in the non-conformity with the social system and instead promoted totally independent thinking. There is an undercurrent of spirituality and divinity in most of his essays. The thoughts expressed in the essays of RW Emerson were not meant for ornamental purpose but for the reformation of society. However, his philosophy is not adorned throughout and some dissents are expressed, of course vaguely. The entire mankind has been besieged with evils and ills since the beginning of civilization. The hatred, anger, disregards to ethics, immorality, cruelty, corruption and degradation of human values all these evil aspects featured in the everyday life of a man. The paper envisages application of ideas to lead a contented and serene life.

Key Words: Self-Reliance, Non-Conformity, Tradition and Individualism.

In the history of American literature, Transcendentalism occupies an important place. Transcendentalism as a way of thought was most popularized by Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) in the nineteenth century America. It also heralded American Renaissance wherein most of the prominent writers emerged and promoted their independent philosophy. The next half of the nineteenth century America saw a sea of the

emerging writers who could affect the American society at large and paved the way for massive expression of opinions. Through the theory of Transcendentalism, there appeared on the scene another theory of individualism which celebrates individual as the sole centre of all the activities related to the mankind. The major proponent of Transcendentalism Ralph Waldo Emerson was widely respected as a lecturer and philosopher who

dwelt at length about various aspects of Transcendentalism in his essays published at regular intervals. The subject research paper would, in its earnest efforts, try to analyze how RW Emerson disregarded tradition and instead propagated contemporary ideals most beneficial to the mankind.

The theory of Transcendentalism was not native to America. Most of the critics expressed their opinions that the contribution of RW Emerson was not in original which amounted to borrowing from various sources. Imitation is an art and to promote his art, RW Emerson had no necessity to imitate his predecessors. He vehemently opposed the conformity to the previous tradition and social dogma. In the essay *Self-Reliance* he says, "Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist". (63) His extreme faith in not conforming to the tradition paved the way for individualism. The focus lies in the individual who is contemporary in thought and action and thereby becomes self-reliant in his own sphere. He understands the repercussions of being non-conformist but warns against the displeasure of the community in general and asks to be ready for it. In the essay *Self-Reliance* again he says that,

For non-conformity the world whips you with its displeasure. And therefore, a man must know how to estimate a sour face. The bystanders look askance on him in the public street or in the friend's parlour...but are put on and off as the wind blows and a newspaper directs. (Emerson 67)

The complete isolation from tradition and religious precepts of the past was somewhat derogatory for upholding rich culture and glory of the ancient masters. This was indicative of an unusual and uncommon faith in the contemporary thought though at the cost of total disrespect to the ancient learning. However, when individualism was the focal point of this thought, there was no single point of getting affected by the philosophy of bygone era. The abhorrence of the tradition which is the great repository of knowledge, may have somewhat limited the scope of his exposure to the great learning. It also amount to egoistic feeling and over sense of pride in one's wisdom. Past always

reverberates the present and reflections of it in the contemporary era ignites the mind of future generation. Limiting the past or bygone era through denial of courteous hearing would amount to great disregard to the forefathers and their wisdom.

The contention of RW Emerson in disregarding the contemporary thought and ancient wisdom most poignantly points out his firm faith in his individualism. It also promotes his yet another theory of Self-Reliance wherein everything comes from within. He solely relied on his intuition for emergence of new and innovative ideas. It is an agreeable fact that tradition and rituals played an important factor in the contemporary world and no sane civilization would ignore it at the cost of its enrichment. Though the man in the past may have seen the rising sun with his naked eyes and devoured the beauty of the sun in her verses, but such verses were no different from the modern man seeing the sun rising with his 'transparent eye ball'. The beauty of the sun ever remains majestic; however, no aberration occurs in the expression of beauty of these men though they tend to do it in different era. Individualism celebrates itself not only at the cost of past but at the cost of its future. The amalgamation of past and present creates a great sense of pride in its people for the rich heritage and culture of their own people.

The spiritualism is the hallmark of Transcendentalism and one can see many glimpses of powerful expression in the essay *Nature* (1836) which contains images full of analogous thought of existence of God in every nook and corner of the universe. A brief look at the literary background history of America before emergence of RW Emerson and his theory of Transcendentalism will succinctly point out the various influences which nurtured his thoughts to the full bloom. The nature is personified as God and everything fair occurs in it. His power of expression in describing the beauty of divinity was of high moral order. It greatly indicates his own purer mind to express the purity of the universe. He called the moments in nature as enchantments which have acquired the medicinal traits to sober and heal the agitated mind of the men. The company of men does not entail him any moments of pleasure, but the solitude in nature

always brings joy to his mind and he set out on his spiritual sojourn.

The major essays of RW Emerson deal with discarding the myth, tradition and orthodox philosophy. Calvinism and Unitarianism were prevalent before arrival of RW Emerson on the scene. Both of these theories were somewhat relegated back by the propounding theory of transcendentalism. When *Self-Reliance* and Individualism were taken up as a key factor for development, tradition and old theories lost their stature in the writings of RW Emerson. He was destined to be minister in the church but he left the pulpit due to ideological difference. His *Divinity School Address* earned him the name of 'infidel' because he vehemently opposed church and the traditional religious dogma. His contention of finding spiritual energy within found some takers and the concept of Transcendentalism took shape with further writings of his followers. Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau and Nathaniel Hawthorne along with AB Alcott further accelerated his philosophy albeit in a manner which is most acceptable.

The subsequent deliberation of thought in the writings of RW Emerson shows a trend where Puritanical and Unitarianism was a thing of the past. In any society its culture, roots, tradition and myth plays an important role. The Biblical society purely believed in the religious principles and upheld Christ as the savior of mankind. The myth revolves round the fact that the church protects the man from all evils and they need to be depending on it for their welfare. The theologians were dead against this philosophy and expressed surprise and awe over these arbitrary views. "The theologians discussed whether Emerson was a Christian or not, and some of them came to an extremely unfavorable conclusion, even labeling him atheist" (Hill 41).

What prompted RW Emerson to revolt against the established norm is to have firm belief and faith in oneself for its uprightness. That was also the other name of individualism. Although, the social scientists have different connotation for individualism, but RW Emerson, when he propounded the theory of transcendentalism, his

major concern was to imbibe the value individual and his inner soul. His notion of non-conformity came in practice where adherence to the contemporary orthodox hierarchy was considered as great impediment to the individualism. It provided revolutionary impetus to his ideas and there occurred a sort of aberration in his mainstream philosophy of thought. No sane thinker would afford to ignore rich tradition and heritage of the past just for the sake of individual celebration.

Calvinism and Unitarianism were two great forces when RW Emerson arose on the scene. His address to the Divinity School was most outrageous to the theologians when he disregarded the ancient scriptures. RW Emerson found middle way between the Puritanism and Unitarianism and in this attempt propounded an altogether different theory which circles around over-soul and intuition. The supremacy of the individual over religious scriptures and dogma made an independent thinking. However, his complete isolation from the past learning was boastful enough to invite ire from well established schools. The culture and tradition is a flowing stream since the ages and men have drunk the most divine water from it and made their thirst satisfied for the knowledge. The concept of *Over-Soul* and *Self-Reliance* celebrates individualism but at the cost of disinheritance of ancient sages and their learning.

Critics have opined his early revolutionary thoughts as youthful exuberance. The boastful individualism which he professed in his early stage soon waned with the passing of time and worldly experiences. In the later stage writings one can easily discern his inclination towards acquiescence and better adjustment with the society. It was a smooth transition from overtly dependence of over soul to acceptance of certain values gained from the experiences. In this connection Stephen E Whicher says,

If the keynote of his early thought is revolution that of his later thought is acquiescence and optimism. From an intense rebellion against the world in the name of the Soul, he moved to a relative acceptance of things as they are world and

Soul together from teaching them how to make the best of it. (Whicher 124-125).

However, he reconciled to the fact with wide exposure to the experiences and made peace with the past. His early essays and lectures were in rebellion with the society, tradition and culture well developed in the ages. His unwillingness to accept the old age tradition with its rich culture may be the outcome of his non-exposure to the real life situations experiences. However, with the passing age and situation encountered; it led his mind to desist from his over indulgence in Soul and instead accept the things as it falls on his way and gain optimism.

RW Emerson in his essay *Self-Reliance* strongly advocated relying on the intuition and over-soul for the external actions. The high moral order emanates from the purer mind which is the dwelling place of God. Non-conformity implies individualism and not surrendering one's values and beliefs before any authority. Both of these concepts of RW Emerson proved beneficial to the mankind as no human being need to depend on others for his bliss. The society and its members are ever ready harm the saner individual, therefore, man should safeguard himself from those external forces and trust god for any *Compensation*.

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