



## "REVERSE-ORIENTALISM" AS COUNTER-CRITIQUE: EMERSON AND INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

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### ABSTRACT

The hypothesis of Orientalism, as propounded by Edward Said, says that the East is the construction of the West. For ages the Occident has projected the Orient as dark, savage and primitive –something as the *Other*. This paper would offer an argument on how the works of Emerson, the poet-prophet of America, can be read as a counter-critique of Orientalism. The paper would include some of his works that embody the quintessence of Indian philosophy. As a transcendentalist, Emerson's whole endeavour was to elevate the spiritual landscape of the American psyche immersed in the quagmire of materialism. He felt that Indian philosophy can be a panacea to the ills of the West. Emerson has unhesitatingly and profusely made use of the ideas of the *Bhagbat Gita*, the *Upanishads*, the *Vedas* and so on in his works. Thus, the Orient that was colonized and subalternized as dark and non-enlightened is apotheosized by Emerson as a perennial source of light and enlightenment for the so-called self-proclaimed civilized Colonizers. Here, Emerson appears to be felicitating decolonization. Thus, this paper will be an attempt to view Emerson as a writer of Reverse-Orientalism.

**KEYWORDS:** Orientalism; Occident; Counter-Critique; Subalternized; Decolonization.

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Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) has identified an age-old Western cultural practice that considers the East as the *Other* and subordinate to the West. The West has fabricated a distorted image of the oriental society, culture and its people. This part of the world is considered uncivilized, underdeveloped and it can be studied, presented and reproduced by the West. Against this conventional colonial trend were some intellectuals who felt that the oriental religion and culture could be the proper guide to the Occident. Moral and spiritual elevation can be possible only through the embracing of the ideas and philosophy of the East.

In America rose a group of thinkers who turned to the East. This group, called the Transcendentalists, included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, George Ripley, F.H. Hedge, Amos Bronson Alcott, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Orestes Brownson. Around 1836 a group of intellectuals "with high moral aim" started discussing about philosophy, literature and theology in Emerson's study in Concord. They founded an association called Mr. Hedges club, on July 20, 1836. Later it came to be known as the New English transcendentalists. Emerson was the leading proponent of this school that emphasized on free

thinking in religion and rejected the religious creeds, rituals and the literal interpretations of the scriptures. Instead it attempted to form a pure connection between God and the universe. Emerson reacted against the religious customs and in his "Divinity School Address" declared that "when the pulpit is usurped by a formalist, then is the worshiper defrauded and disconsolate. We shrink as soon as the prayers begin, which do not uplift, but smite and offend us...It seemed strange that the people should come to church"(138-139). Orestes Brownson defines transcendentalism as "the recognition in man of the capacity of knowing truth intuitively". Emerson had a genuine interest in the Oriental philosophy. His passion for Indian philosophy grew when he was studying as a graduate student in Harvard University. Emerson studied the articles about Indian myth and religion in the borrowed copies of the Edinburgh Review between 1820-25. Emerson studied Heeren's "India" and William Jones "To Narayana, "Hindu Mythology and Mathematics", Vyasa' Ramayana. Emerson read Victor Cousin's *Cours de philosophie* that gave him his first taste of *Bhagbadgita* the work that made a lasting impact on Emerson. The concept of *Brahma* had huge influence in his works. Emerson had written a poem named *Brahma*. In this poem Emerson says,

"If the red slayer thinks he slays,  
Or if the slain think he is slain,  
They know not well the subtle ways  
I keep, and pass, and turn again."

Three concepts crucial to understanding *Brahma* are *Para* and *Apara Brahma*, *Atman* and *Maya*. *Para Brahma* is formed and the *Apara Brahma* is formless. In the *Upanishads* the *Para Brahma* is said to be unreal and the formless *Apara Brahma* is considered real. One is mortal and the latter is immortal. Mortal *Brahma* resides in human beings and wants to be one with the immortal *Brahma*. This idea has found expression in Emerson's "The Divinity School Address". Here 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 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)

Emerson held that the formed and the formless *Brahma* can merge together only if one follows the way of good deeds and justice. Emerson was immensely influenced by the *Bhagbadgita*. Once he called this book "the first of books" (Buell 178). In *Gita* Krishna says, "For whenever there is decaying of *Dharma*, and a rising up of *Adharma*, then I send Myself forth" (Herman 146). This idea is manifest in Emerson's idea of intuition and conscience. Emerson's idea of the Over-Soul shows a very strong influence of the *Bhagbadgita*. William Torrey Harris and John Smith Harrison felt that *Bhagbadgita* was the prototype on which Emerson based his idea of Over-Soul. In the essay "Over-Soul" Emerson writes that we as individual souls are part of the Greater or Over-soul. We do not need to go to church to be blended with the Over-Soul because our intuition can enlighten our spiritual universe like the flashes of light. Here Emerson seems to be evoking the concepts of the *Gita* that *Nirguna* (higher) *Brahma* or Over-soul exerts itself through the human beings.

Another concept that made great impact on Emerson's works is the concept of *Maya*. A.L. Harman says that *Maya* is the means by which *Nirguna*, or higher *Brahma* is enabled to manifest itself as *Saguna*, or lower *Brahma*. The concept of *Maya* is expressed in Emerson's poem "Maia" where he writes,

"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)

In many of his journals Emerson dwells on this idea. He writes,

"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 'tis the last thing we dare utter, we shrink to speak it, or to range ourselves on its side" (Journal XV 243).

He quotes from the Veda that "the world is born of *Maya*". (Journal XVI 33) Emerson writes, "Adore, in order to escape from it, to *Maya*, which is his energy endowed with qualities" (journal XVI 32). In some of his essays Emerson seems to be occupied with the idea of *Maya*. In "Illusions", he said,

"In the kingdom of illusion life is a dream, in the language of the ancients- 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 see things through the filter glass. We don't know whether what we see is real or not. Emerson writes, "Nature does not like to be observed and likes that we should be her fools and playmates". (269) Emerson echoes the *Upanishads* when he says,

"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-colored 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. (269)

Another philosophic idea that had great influence on Emerson is *Karma*. *Karma* implies "the results or consequences of action". In "Self-Reliance" he urges the readers not to depend on luck but on good deeds. He mentions,

"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)

Emerson words echo the karmic laws. We can choose what we want to be. Everything is determined by our actions. Emerson believes that the union between the individual soul and the Over-Soul is the path of *Mukti* or emancipations from the worldly traps. This reflects the influence of the concept of *Brahma* and *Atman*. Emerson found in the *Vedanta* an answer to his search for the absolute, as illustrated in the Chandogya-Upanishad in the conversation between Svetaketu and his father. Emerson writes, "Hindoo theology [teaches]....supreme good is to be attained ...by perception of the real and unreal....and thus arriving at the contemporary of the one eternal Life. Truth is the principle and the moral of the Hindoo theology, - as against *Maya*".

Emerson's concern with Indian philosophy was seen as aberration by many American philosophers. Charles Sanders Peirce expressed his disgust against Emerson's passion for the "monstrous mysticism of the East". William Torrey Harris was also against this. But Emerson found Indian thought an antidote to the engulfing American materialism. He turned for spiritual sustenance to the East which has been neglected and looked down upon for ages as uncivilized and barbaric. Emerson realized that the eastern philosophy, especially Indian thoughts can show the way towards spiritual emancipation to the so-called 'White' people who are now plunged in the filth of materialism. His works have attempted to reverse the colonial notion about the Orient. Emerson's deep attachment with and reverence for the Indian thought and philosophy can be summarized by a statement made by Protap Chander Mozoomdar shortly after Emerson's death in 1882, in "Emerson as seen from India". He pointed out, "Yes, Emerson had all the wisdom and spirituality of the *Brahmans*....in whomsoever the eternal *Brahma* breathed his unquenchable fire, he was the *Brahman*. And in that sense Emerson was the best of *Brahmans*."

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