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DROPS OF NECTAR FROM *THE GITA* IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICAN  
LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The existence of our life is the result of divine vibration of the Omnipotent, Omniscient and Omnipresent in the form of soul within us. *The Gita* is charismatic philosophy which deals with the divinity of man. A man who is aware of the philosophy of *The Gita* is aware of himself. *The Gita* unfolds our own secrets of the immense latent and competence which is generally enclosed, or fogged under the fever of the world. It is considered that the transcendentalism had its roots in the Romanticism, the post-Kantian idealism, and Indian Hindu religious philosophy. It emphasized the importance of the individual conscience, and the value of intuition in matters of moral guidance. Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman contributed very much for the glorification of the self through their literatures. The transcendentalists contributed immense for the enlightenment of man's life on the earth. Our life is mysterious: the impact of self-trust is wonderful. Unquestionably, *The Gita* is an enormous treasure of self-knowledge. Man is divine, and within man is the Whole that is soul, a part of the Over-Soul. The writers like Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman of the nineteenth century American renaissance have been quoting, directly, or indirectly from *The Gita* to make their transcendentalism more powerful and influential for the guidance of the people. Their transcendental philosophy is disclosing of the secrets of soul which makes aware man to his own potential that is divine. Thus the impact of *The Vedas*, *The Gita*, *The Vishnu Purana*, *The Katha Upanishad*, and a number of other eastern sacred streams is very important in the nineteenth century American literature. There are drops of nectar from *The Gita* in the Nineteenth Century American Literature of the transcendentalists.

**KEYWORDS:** *The Gita*, Transcendentalism, Divinity, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Philosophy.

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**INTRODUCTION**

*The Gita*: Voice of God; is a treasure of the pearls which makes our life Blissful, Fruitful and Beautiful undercurrent of the divine vibration of the Omnipotent, Omniscient and Omnipresent. A man who is aware of the philosophy of *The Gita* is cognizant of himself. For it unfolds our own secrets of the colossal potential and competence which is generally roofed, or fogged up by the fever of the materialism of our day-to-day life. *The Gita* is the sun of the day which provides a vigorous life to the populace of the world and makes visible which is invisible in the darkness of the night, and it also fulfills the purpose of the moon among the glimmer of the starry-nights that is so much beautiful and serene as we forget our worries after gazing the divinity of its glimpse. That an individual is potentially divine, and has power enough to do what he dares and determines; is one of the lessons of *The Gita*. This body is material and the soul is spiritual; the first is for some certain period and the latter has unlimited period of time; body is fond of senses and mind is close to the thoughts of man; feelings and emotions are the subject of human heart but the contemplation is possible only by a stable mind; inferior is body and there is superiority in the spirit of man but both of them are closely related to each other because here is a preestablished harmony. The Transcendentalism is a current of thoughts of the nineteenth century New England (America) which accepts the superiority of the spiritual or metaphysical over material or temporal. Three major exponents of the movement, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) and Walt Whitman (1819-1892) contributed immense to spread the nectar of *The Gita* through their literatures. The impact of *The Vedas*, *The Gita*, *The Vishnu Purana*, *The Katha Upanishad*, and a number of other eastern religious and philosophical streams is paramount in the nineteenth century American literature. There are drops of nectar from *The Gita* in the American Literature. The present research paper will throw light on the influence of *The Gita* on the American transcendentalists of the nineteenth century.

**TRANSCENDENTALISM**

The Transcendentalism was a multifaceted-movement that flourished from 1835 to 1860 as a spiritual, philosophical and literary movement. It is considered that it had its roots in the Romanticism, the post-Kantian idealism, and Indian Hindu religious philosophy. It emphasized the role and importance of the individual conscience, and the value of intuition in matters of moral guidance and inspirations. R. W. Emerson, H. D. Thoreau, W. Whitman, Bronson Alcott and Nathaniel Hawthorne contributed very much for the glorification of the self through their literatures. Originally, the word 'transcendental' means going beyond human knowledge and into a spiritual realm, and the term 'transcendentalism' means the exaltation of the spiritual in a general sense over the material, and immanence of the divine in all creation. The Transcendentalism is a complex, mystic, and also a distinct-movement. Therefore, it is not easy to define for several reasons. It encompassed complex philosophical and religious ideas. The transcendentalists were men of philosophical thinking. They organized a club for their philosophical discussions. The philosophers advocated the importance of the spiritual insight. They opined on a metaphysical justification for the ideal liberty of individual. If everybody is guided by their spiritual insight, then the worldly authority—political or religious; is superfluous. Basically, it began as a revolt against the general state of culture and society and in particular, the state of intellectualism at Harvard. Among transcendentalists' core beliefs was an ideal spiritual state that transcends the physical and empirical and is only realized through the doctrines of established religions. Emerson asserts:

The Transcendentalist adopts the whole connection of spiritual doctrine. He believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy.<sup>1</sup>

The great thinkers have divided mankind into two sects—Materialists and Idealists. The first class is based on the materialistic experience and the second class is based on the consciousness of the self. The first accepts the data of the senses and the second perceives that the senses are not final; and there is a transcendental philosophy above all.

**EMERSON**

The transcendentalists contributed immense for the enlightenment of man's life on the earth. First of all, moving towards the works of Emerson, this may be said that he always fed the plant of spirituality

in America with the nectar of the wisdom of the Indian religious texts like *The Gita*. Exploring the works of Emerson is just like trying to find out pearl from the never ending treasure of Lord. Emerson's essays, e.g., *The Transcendentalist*, *Nature*, *The American Scholar*, *Self-Reliance*, *The Over-Soul* and *The Method of Nature*; and poems, e.g., *Rhodora*, *Each and All*, *Brahma* and so on are the best examples of his works on the transcendental themes that make aware man to himself, his soul, glory, power, potential, conscience, and affinity with God. Emerson is more a prophet than a poet or essayist. As a spiritual thinker, the writer contributed very much for the spiritual progress.

The *American Scholar* (1837) has been called the Nation's Intellectual Declaration of the Independence. The speech marked the beginning of a new cultural epoch for America. The essay was originally the Phi Beta Kappa Society address. It is indeed an exposition about man thinking. The transcendentalist has tried his best to give a memorandum of divinity to us that we are the children of God, and we should attempt to search out the Maker's goal of giving us life in a form of human beings and not any other type of creature of the universe. He asserts:

...the gods, in the beginning, divided Man into men, that he might be more helpful to himself; just as the hand was divided into fingers, the better to answer its end.<sup>2</sup>

For the thinker, man is invisible and he is one and all. Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer but he is all. Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer and soldier. But modern society has chained him terribly and has divided him. Emerson has emphasized on the maxims like: "Know thyself" and "Study nature". The concept of the divinity in man is deep rooted in the philosophy of the philosopher. He opines:

The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul.<sup>3</sup>

*Self-Reliance* is the fullest and the finest expression of the theme of moral and intellectual independence. Emerson reveals to the individual to ignore accepted beliefs, popular opinion, and social pressure and to rely on his conscience—his scrupulous sense of what is true and what is good. The preacher has preached the lessons like: "pre-established harmony", "Leave your theory", "self-helping man", "secret of fortune is joy in our hands", "Insist on yourself", "never imitate", "Every great man is a unique", and "obey thy heart". The thinker urges for self-realization. Emerson concludes:

"Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles."<sup>4</sup>

*The Over-Soul* is a highly philosophical essay on the theme of The Super Power of Universe. The philosophy of oneness is the centre of interest of the essay. It centers round the doctrine of self-trust. The *Over-Soul* is beauty, love, wisdom and power. Emerson appears to have arrived at an awareness of this through his own experiences of spiritual conflict and illumination. Man is a part of the Whole and each and every thing of the universe consists in the *Over-Soul*. The transcendentalist asserts:

We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE.<sup>5</sup>

Impact of *The Gita* is one of the major currents on the poetry of Emerson. Everything is product of the *Over-Soul*. Whole is the *Over-Soul*, and Soul is a part of the Whole. Our mortal body is for some certain period but there is eternity of Soul. There is no killer or killed here on earth because of the eternity and divinity of the powerful Soul of man that actually is heavenly, and bears the stamp of God. In the teeny-weeny lyrical monologue, *Brahma*, the poet has expressed his own sense and realization of the concept of Soul, and it is very similar to the philosophy of *The Gita*. This is *Brahma* of Hindu religious thought of India in His eternity:

"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."<sup>6</sup>

*The Gita* unfolds that the whole universe is the creation of God. Divinity pervades all. Nothing is possible without creator. No one can kill anyone without the plan of God. There is an eternal law and order in the

universe controlled by the Supreme Authority of the Universe. Due to ignorance we consider ourselves as a creator, doer and powerful but the reality is that nothing happens without the permission, or consent of Brahma. The mentioned stanza is very close to the philosophy of *The Gita*:

The soul is never born nor dies; nor does it exist on coming into being. For it is unborn, eternal, everlasting and primeval; even though the body is slain, the soul is not.<sup>7</sup>

Emerson presented the transcendental unity of the many and the One. This conception finds a poetic expression in the most characteristic poem, *Each and All*. Emerson provides many examples before us to make it clear that there is unity in all. Nothing is beautiful and complete alone. We are interconnected to one another by charisma. Emerson enumerates:

“All are needed by each one; Nothing is fair or good alone.”<sup>8</sup>

### THOREAU

Thoreau always yearned for the growth of the plant of spiritualism in the barren hearts of the West. The sterile tendency of the people in the West can only be made pungent with the treasure of Indian religious texts. He affirms the transcendentalism with great assurance and confirms that intuition is only a way by which we can uplift ourselves from the suffering of the worldly life created by the ignorance or misunderstanding. He dignified the pre-eminence of the spiritual over the material by impressive maxims of his writings. His philosophy has the impact of *The Gita*, *The Vishnu Purana*, *The Vedas*, *The Manu Smriti*, *The Hitopadesa*, the Teachings of *Buddha* and so on. He contends with the spiritual power of the Nature. Through his works, he displayed the innate attributes of the nature around this universe. Thoreau considers nature as an everlasting source of power and happiness. He termed nature as without any beginning and as a power which never ends. This power of nature resembles man's own spirit and shows a path for the solution of all his discords. Thoreau is of the view that nature is such a divine place where not only a man receives instructions but his soul also gets freedom for its realization. Nature tends man to procure divinity, to value it and to preserve it. It helps the man to transpose his extraordinary features. In close communion with nature, man learns the principle of justice, co-operation, compassion and realization of the self. The transcendentalist tried his best to make free the people from the worldly predicament and led them towards the world of spirituality under the current of the Omnipotent. This American saint had been trying to save the people from the holocaust emerged by ruthless, impious and dolt as they relied on the voluptuous and luxurious worldly life. He was a transcendentalist in practice and not in theory only. He applied the philosophy of the transcendentalism in an individual way during his life in America and put his personal stamp on those higher principles and translated them into action.

Thoreau experimented throughout his life but most especially during those days at *Walden Pond*. He was the champion of liberty and true to the self as he lived and died in the spirituality of his life but his philosophy has universal appeal. The transcendentalist accepted the need of the spiritual-awakening for the harmony of the lives of the people and disfavored the present materialistic philosophy of life that is based on the pleasures of the senses and not on the realization of the divinity of the Soul.

Civil Disobedience discloses the secret of the philosophy of the transcendentalist. The essay unfolds the principle of the passive resistance and the moral superiority of an individual conscience over the governmental law. The individual is more important than that of the state; therefore, the people should not accept any rule of the government that appears immoral, or unnatural. An individual has power to change the whole course of the history because he is superior to any worldly authority; hence, an individual is more important than that of the state. To the government of America, Thoreau writes:

It has not the vitality and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will.<sup>9</sup>

The transcendental philosophy of the immortality of the soul and the concept of the civil disobedience of Thoreau are based on the dictates of conscience. The essay reveals that there is a higher law which is superior to the law of the land and this is the law of the conscience, the law of inner-voice or the law of the Over-Soul. When there is a conflict between the law of the land and this higher law, one must obey the higher law and violate the law of the land. Thoreau condemns the state and praises an individual saying that the state never intentionally confronts a man's sense, intellectual or moral; but only his body, his senses. Thoreau explicates:

I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion. Let us see who is the strongest. What force has a multitude? They only can force me who obey a higher law than I...There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly.<sup>10</sup>

As we know that the transcendentalist is a bitter critic of the modern materialistic society, has condemned very much the collecting of wealth. Like Ruskin of England, the American transcendentalist has advocated that a man's real wealth is not there in his pocket but is there in his character and conscience. Such character that is characterized by goodness only has an infinite source of mirth. Wealth is the matter of great importance and it is all for the ignorant those have not recognized divinity of the self and are in search of the meaning in the meaninglessness and the happiness in the immeasurable pain. In the same essay, the spiritualist writes:

No wealth can buy the requisite leisure, freedom, and independence which are the capital in this profession. It comes only by the grace of God.<sup>11</sup>

As it is there in the essays like the Civil Disobedience, the Slavery in Massachusetts, Walking and so on; the Life without Principle is not exceptional and it also unfolds the truth of the self that is the most powerful and important in the life of man. A righteous man who is always in the connection of God is a great force and no one—even the whole world; cannot bend him. The community has no bribe that will tempt a wise man. Thoreau explicates:

You may raise money enough to tunnel a mountain, but you cannot raise money enough to hire a man who is minding his own business.<sup>12</sup>

Man is above law and the government because he made this law and order of the government. An individual is superior to law and system and a determined soul can change the whole scenario of the country by his divine-force of the self. In the same essay, Thoreau reveals:

The law will never make men free; it is men who have got to make the law free.<sup>13</sup>

It is obvious by the writings of Thoreau that he had deep faith in the existence of soul. He accepted the presence of soul—of a primordial energy within human body. Whether we are conscious of it or not; whether we perceive it or feel it, or go through none of these two sensations, then also the soul remains inert in our body. It watches everything in a calm and composed way. When the game of life gets over, it proceeds to other destinations. But a human being can bring about a new life in his soul when he realizes the potential of the soul. In the *Walden*, Thoreau declares his deep faith in *The Gita*:

"In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the *Bhagvat Geeta*,..."<sup>14</sup>

Thoreau, an American saint, is of the view that outward property is worthless-material, momentary and of trivial importance but the remarkable is the inward treasure because it is a medium of communication between the people and the Supreme Being and it also liberate the people from the chain of the worldly life of pain and suffering. Thus the philosopher has advocated his spiritual philosophy in the eternal lines of the masterpiece, *Walden*.

#### WHITMAN

Whitman also believes that every person is guided by an inner light and that is why the transcendentalist has composed very much on the glory of the soul. The writings of the spiritualist are the meeting point of the East and the West. Apart from his national and domestic activities, he was familiar with the Bible as well as the Hindu scriptures and we have the strain of Asia and Europe in the writings of his. His writings reflected his intellectual curiosity and wholeheartedness to incorporate the best works—both of Europe and Asia. He was one of the three pioneers of the American transcendentalism. The landmark of Whitman's poetic career is the *Leaves of Grass*.

Once a time Whitman himself declared that it is a job of the poet "to indicate the path between reality and the soul". But it is striking that Whitman appreciated the physiognomy—the external object; for its own sake as well as for its symbolic value. When he wrote "I am the poet of the body and I am the poet of the soul", he meant to say that he regarded each with equal veneration. Whitman found a multiplicity of wonders

to celebrate in his poetry, and like Emerson he saw all objects and persons interrelated with each other. He was, therefore, able to move comfortably in a poem, from the self to a bean in its pod and to God. Whitman begins and ends with his self—"my body and my soul." Whitman's celebration of self was a celebration of his fellow men—and of the people at large. One's Self I Sing, Song of Myself, Passage to India, Pioneers! O Pioneers!, Song of the Open Road, A Hand-Mirror and so on are some of the best examples of his writing on the theme of wholeness and the glorification of the self.

The spiritualist sings the glory of the self and would like to make it clear that we all are one and the oneness is there in the whole. In the Song of Myself, Whitman asserts:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself, And what I assume you shall assume, For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."<sup>15</sup>

The transcendentalist states the theme of the transcendentalism and proudly exclaims: "I celebrate myself". The "I" used throughout the piece has a dual significance. It refers to Whitman, the common individual in general. In this second sense "I" has a universal application, and the poet imagines a complete identity between himself and others. There is an amalgamation and fusing of the individual and the universal spirits. The writer is confident that the beliefs and ideals held by him are also held by other people. Thus for the transcendentalist, personal becomes the universal. Every atom that has gone into the making of the rest of the humanity belongs to him. Whitman emphasizes the essential oneness of all the spirits.

The paradoxical and the mystical notions of the spiritualist have its own charm and we may observe in the same piece as the poet writes:

"I have said that the soul is not more than the body, And I have said that the body is not more than the soul, And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is,..."<sup>16</sup>

That we are the creation of the Supreme Being and this spirit of His is in everyone is confirmed by the spiritual philosopher. The concept of *The Gita* is there in the philosophy of the piece of the poet. The poet confirms his point of view:

"I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least, ...  
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then,  
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass,..."<sup>17</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Man is man because of the divine spark, soul; he is corpse without this spirit of man. He has brain, eyes, ears, nose and other limbs but without the presence of the divine power of the Over-Soul, a body cannot work: brain cannot think, eyes are useless as nothing can be seen, worthless is the nose that cannot take and give the life-force air; the whole body is absurd, if soul is not present in the body. Man is teacher, lecturer, and professor; labourer, manager, and landlord; peon, clerk, and officer and many more but these positions in the worldly life is secured by him under current of the realization of the self. He is great and he is small: according to his concept about himself, his recognition of his capacity and power. It is very amazing that a man has no room to survive here and the other has possession enough to set up a city, or country. The whole life is mysterious as the impact of realization, devotion, determination, self-trust and deep zeal is wonderful: all of sudden we can change the worse into the best by the power of the self. Undoubtedly, *The Gita* is a great treasure of knowledge of the divinity of man that is directly, or indirectly, followed by the writers like Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman of the nineteenth century American renaissance. Their transcendental philosophy is disclosing of the secrets of soul which makes aware man to his own potential that is divine, metaphysical and the most powerful. Thus the collision of *the Vedas*, *The Gita*, *the Vishnu Purana*, *the Katha Upanishad*, and a number of other eastern sacred and truth-seeking streams is vital in the nineteenth century American literature. Thus there are drops of nectar from *The Gita* in the Nineteenth Century American Literature of the transcendentalists. On the whole, the present research paper throws light on the influence of *The Gita* in the American literature of the nineteenth century.

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