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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE INFLUENCE OF THE BHAGAVADGITA ON AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

Present paper focuses on the study of American literary writers who have been influenced by the teachings of the *Bhagavadgita*. Wilkins's translation of the *Bhagavadgita* gave a new direction of thinking to the literary writers in the world. Emerson, Thoreau, Walt Whitman and Robert Frost in American literature expressed their acquaintance with the *Gita*, the *Upanishads* and Oriental philosophy. These Transcendental writers interested in the concept of "selfhood" found in Hindu scriptures a well elaborated doctrine of self. Hindu scriptures tell us that the central core of one's self (antaratman) is identifiable with the cosmic whole (Brahma).

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Introduction:-

Dr. Radhakrishnan holds the view that "Upanishads are final phase of human learning." There is hardly any problem, duality, in this world that does not find its solution in it. So, it will not be an exaggeration to say that all knowledge that exists in cosmos is expressed in the *Shrimadbhagavadgita*. It is a book that digs at the root of all human problems which have caused innumerable sufferings to men and women in our own age in the form of modern diseases like tension, hyper-tension, blood-pressure, anxiety, nausea etc. The problem of modern man manifested in the *Bhagavadgitalies* in his wrong pattern of thinking and way of living. The teachings of the *Bagvadgita* guide usto follow the right path to live a happy and peaceful life. Materialistic way of life has converted man into a machine and a robot. Man has surrendered to the corrupting forces of society e.g. selfishness, ego, pride, ambition, sycophancy, greed, opportunism, lust and greed etc.

Our own sages (rishi-muni) by renouncing their physical comforts selected a life of penance to know the truth. Living a life of close touch with nature, they devoted their existence in the pursuit of "jnana" (knowledge) and found that "moksha" (salvation) can be attained through spiritual perfection. The representative of the Asiatic consciousness has never been isolated from the Western continent in spite of several geographical, linguistic and racial barriers. It would be interesting to trace the influence of Indian philosophic thought on American literature. The spiritual message of India to the remotest parts of the world has been manifested through *Bhagavadgita*. It has been translated into seventy eight world languages; the *Gita* is only second to the *Bible* in its popularity and has assumed a position of universal appeal. It gives a message of hope, consolation, peace and above all of divinity within us to humanity at large. It works to solve the problems of life; it teaches as how to win over anger, anxiety and fear. Aldous Huxley is apt in stating: "The Geeta is one of the clearest and most comprehensive summaries of the perennial philosophy ever to have been done. Hence its enduring value is not only for Indians, but for all mankind..... the Bhagavadgeeta is perhaps the most systematic spiritual statement of the perennial Philosophy."¹

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At the behest of Sir Warren Hastings, the then Governor General of India, Sir Charles Wilkins translated the **Bhagavadgita** first into English in 1785. Its effect was that its teachings sank deep into the Western psyche. It was translated later on almost all the languages of the Western world. Influence of the Bhagvadgita on Walt Whitman who wrote *Leaves of Grass* was very deep. John Townsend Trowbridge went to the extent of saying: "I want no other God than Walt Whitman; I want no other Bible than *Leaves of Grass*. ...Influence does not mean an outward feeling but it is a psychological process which brings metamorphosis of being into the firm of becoming."²

Ralph Waldo Emerson was the first American to pioneer the serious exploration of Indian philosophy, and as his own teachings grew over them, Indian philosophy profoundly influenced the course of that growth. He was fascinated with Indian ideas and followed many of them in his writings which, however, reflect his own moods, impulses and spiritual experiences. He turned to them as a religious psychologist, not a metaphysician. He employed many of the cardinal doctrines of the Vedanta as an expression of his own belief, and this very feature is the most interesting feature of Emerson's Orientalism.

Concepts similar to this cardinal doctrine of Vedanta appear in the writings of Transcendentalists. The striking parallels between Transcendentalist writings and Oriental thoughts make it clear that philosophical contents of all religions in the world are one. Emerson holds the view that the "conception of fundamental unity", the "ecstasy" of losing "all being in one being", finds its highest expression "chiefly in the Indian Scriptures, in the *Vedas*, the *Bhagavadgita* and the *Vishnu Purana*."

The *Gita* was Emerson's spiritual mentor, he regarded it as trans-national book: "I owed a magnificent day to the *Bhagavadgita*. It was the first of the books; it was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questioning exercised us."³

The metaphysical and moral views embodied in the *Gita* find reflection in the works of Emerson. They propagatethat Supreme Being permeates the world. The doctrine of transmigration of soul, the doctrine of 'Karma', the concept of equality of all living beings find expression in his essays like '*History*', '*Self-Reliance*', '*Compensation*', '*The Over-Soul*', and his poems like '*Brahma*' and '*The Rhedora*' etc. Emerson's letter to Max Muller written in 1873 reveals his interest in the Indian Scriptures and Orientalism, "All my interest in the Aryan is old reading of Marsh's *Manu*, Wilkins's *Bhagavadgita*, Burnouf's *Bhagavat Purana* and Wilson's *Vishnu Purana*.....I remember I owed my first taste for this fruit to cousin's sketch, in his first lectures, of the Dialogue between Krishna and Arjun, and I still prize the first chapters of that *Bhagavadgita* as wonderful."⁴

Like a Vedanti Ralph Waldo Emerson believes that crime and punishment grow out of one stem. In his essay *Compensation* he writes: "Punishment is a fruit that unsuspected ripens within the flower of pleasure which concealed it, cause and effect, means and ends, seed and fruit, cannot be served for the effect already blooms in the cause, the end pre exists in the means, the fruit in the seed."⁵

A close study of Thoreau's life reveals that he adopted ideas and the essence of Hindu religion to become a 'yogi'. He wrote in a letter to a friend : "Free in this world as the birds in the air, disengaged from every kind of chains, those who has practiced yoga gather in Brahma the certain fruit of their works.....The yogi ,absorbed in contemplation ,contributes in the degree of creation.....Divine forms traverse him.... and.....,united to the nature which is proper to him, he goes, he acts as animating original matterTo extent, and at rare interval, even I am a yogi."⁶

He understood the meaning of the term as the one who apprehends the 'pure self' which can progress towards the enlightenment. The same concept is of true yogi is defined in the *Gita*, "When the disciplined mind is established in the self alone, liberated from all desires then he is said to be harmonized (in yoga)."⁷ The *Bhagavadgita* which Thoreau read with admiration and understanding teaches the three fold path of salvation— through action , through knowledge and through devotion. The path chosen by Thoreau is the path of knowledge. Thoreau is like the Hindu sages who sought salvation through unaided self knowledge.

Emerson's response to Indian philosophy was mainly intellectual; Whitman mainly spiritual, Thoreau was mainly practical. He made sincere efforts at moulding his life according to the dictates of the ripe wisdom of ancient India. Henry David Thoreau showed an attitude of love and reverence towards Hindu system of life. He called himself 'a

modern Hindoo'He accepted essentially Hindu view "that truth has many sides and that dogmatism is the negation of truth."⁸

Thoreau after reading Dharma Shastra and the *Bhagavadgita* is of the view that the 'New Testament' is remarkable for its pure morality, the Vedic scriptures are marked for its pure intellectuality but cannot transport the reader like the *Gita* in a bigger purer or rarer region of thought. The *Bhagavadgita's* sanity and sublimity have impressed the minds even of soldiers and merchants. Thoreau believes in the doctrine of 'Karma-Yoga', the yoga of action. He emphasized on duty and believed in the teaching of the *Gita* that one should do his allotted work without expectations and action is better than inaction. He believes in the potentiality of work for salvation, asserts that the work should not be done with immediate material end in view. The *Gita's* precept of emancipation from desires finds its reflection in Thoreau's 'Doctrine of Simplicity': "I love to see anything that implies a simpler mode of life and a greater nearness to the earth."⁹

Walt Whitman was greatly influenced by the Indian Philosophy. To him, India is the source and treasure house of all mysticism, metaphysics and Philosophy. He was also influenced by Hindu and Buddhist thought in his concept of man, self, soul and immortality. His quest for spiritual truth led him to the East particularly to the great scriptures of India. Whitman found comfort in the *Bhagavadgita* and the effect was in such a way that the body of his poems exudes this impact. In 'Song of Myself', and 'Passage to India' he acknowledges his indebtedness and inspiration to India. *Leaves of Grass* is full of allusions to 'The Epics of Asia' and 'The Elder'. India emerged from him as an integral symbol of man's quest for the infinite.

Whitman's role was that of a prophet who expresses his views and delivered the message to his countrymen and the world at large. The aim and purpose of his poems was to lift the countrymen from the mire of updated superstitions and ideas and place them under the sunshine of modern, healthy and vigorous outlook of life. He writes very vividly in the 'Passage to India' that India is like the elder brother guiding the younger (America) into religions unknown: "O Thou transcendent,/ Nameless, the fibre and breath,/ Light of the light, shedding forth universe, thou centre of them/Thou mightier centre of true, the good, the loving,/ Thou moral, spiritual fountain, affection's source, Thou reservoir."¹⁰

Whitman celebrates in his "Passage to India" the progress of the human soul conquering the earth, but he believes that it must not stop there; it must seek God through the Universe, until it finds Him, and "Nature and Man shall be disjoined and diffused no more." There he says: "Bathe me O God in thee, mounting to thee,/ I and my soul to range in range of thee."¹¹

Whitman was a transcendentalist which carries palpable overtones from the *Bhagavadgita*. In 'Song of Myself' we clearly hear the echoes of Lord Krishna as in the *Bhagavadgita*:

"With music strong I come, with my cornets and my drums,
I play not marches for accepted victors only,
I play marches for conquer'd and slain persons."¹

Whitman realizes in the immortality of the soul and this fact appears in his poem *Leaves of Grass* as a motif and gives a new touch, a new flavour to every verse. Whitman's rhapsodic optimism, his never ending love for humanity, his quest for the unknown, the sublime finds in this fact tremendous satisfaction

Whitman has a firm belief in 'rebirth'. In the poem, "Old-Ireland", he expresses his views which are fully influenced by the philosophy of the *Gita*. The body is merely an outfit, garb, apparel that is sported for sometime by the soul and then changed. The *Bhagavadgita* speaks of life or lives as pilgrimages for the salvation and release of the soul. In many of his poems, he deals with death and accepts it as a gateway to spiritual progression. Death to him is a welcoming stage as it opens door to new life. The rebirth is governed by the law of karma. Whitman's love for India was deep and lasting. India is a guiding spirit to him. The influence of the *Bhagavadgita* on Whitman is immense and he finds in it a chiseled countenance of spiritual perfection.

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