

RAMMOHUN ROY AND RALPH WALDO EMERSON: A STUDY IN TWO FACES OF NATIONALISM

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ABSTRACT

We are living in a society where we have been facing issues like lack of unity, intolerance every now and then. But it is quite interesting to note that long before today, Rammohun Roy and Ralph Waldo Emerson, two men of genius, representing two separate territories, have provided us vision to look the world with positivity and liberal views. As we come to know that Roy Literature was popular in America and must have a great deal of influence to mould a new nation whose consciousness is still in the process of moulding. Emerson, the prophet of transcendentalism, must have been motivated by Roy for establishing a common ground for human unity breaking all the boundaries. Thus, the present study will try to explore two faces of nationalism with their identical approach.

KEYWORDS: *Nationalism, Indian Renaissance, Transcendentalism, Reformer, Culture*

INTRODUCTION

Popularly known as Roy Literature in Europe and America in the nineteenth century, Rammohun Roy's writings had a great impact on the intellectuals who were interested in ancient Indian wisdom. Roy (1772 – 1833) is known to be the pioneer of the Indian renaissance in the nineteenth century and with his reforms and new ideas he wished to create India as a powerful nation, which would contribute to the unity of the world. It is curious that Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 – 1882) in America showed identical efforts in creating his nation, which would ultimately help in the harmony of the world. Emerson was strongly influenced by Rammohun's visional brand of nationalism which means building of one's own nation with a loving gesture to help humanity and with a view to creating a common ground for human unity.

The foundation of modern India that Rammohun laid was a great synthesis – a synthesis among the three conflicting cultures, three conflicting civilisations – the Hindu, the Muslim and the Christian. As a nationalist reformer, Rammohun had a three-fold mission. As a Hindu reformer, he gave a Unitarian reduction of the Hindu *Shastras* from *Vedanta* and the *Mahanirvana Tantra*. As a defender of the Muslim faith, he wrote the *Tuhfat-Ul-Muwahhiddin* and *Monozeatul Adiyani* which were polemical works. As a believer in Christian faith, he tried to provide a Unitarian version of the both old and new scriptures, which sometimes led to controversies with the Christian Missionaries. On the other hand he formulated the creed of what was called Neo-theophilanthropy – a new love of God and Man on positive and constructive notes.

Rammohun was in himself a Universalist and three nationalists in one. He was the first to evolve a concord and convergence among the three, thus ushering in the modern age, which is characterised by the evolution of a composite nationality and a synthetic civilisation in India. On the same line of convergence, and through the experiences of his universal personality, he saw in the clarity of this synthetic vision, the solution of larger problem of international culture and civilisation. Rammohun was one of the pioneer with the belief that human progress only lies in unification of nations with a sense of brotherhood evolving through rational synthesis of cultures and civilisations.

Rammohun Roy's interests ranged from the rights of women and the freedom of the press to English education, the revenue and judicial systems in India, religious toleration and the plight of the Indian peasantry. He wanted India to become a new and modern country by achieving as new integration of our traditional strength with new scientific disciplines from the West. Saumyendranath Tagore has rightly pointed out, "It was Rammohun Roy who laid the foundation of all modern movements for the amelioration and elevation of the people of India." (S. Tagore 101).

Like Rammohun, Emerson created the first liberating force in American culture. His "The American Scholar" (1837) meant to rouse the nation to original thinking. He criticises the then age when he says, "our age is bewailed as the age of Introversion. Must that needs be evil?... We cannot enjoy anything for hankering to know whereof the pleasure consists." (49). The scholar must free himself from all deceptions with the proper application of self-trust and self-realisation. The essay ends with a prophetic utterance regarding the great future that awaits the American nation: "A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men." (52)

Without Emerson, there would have been no Whitman in American Literature. Not only through his own writing, but the intellectual climate he provided for the upcoming writers such as Thoreau, Whitman and Emily Dickinson is simply incredible. The idea of liberty which is important for forming an ideal nation is strongly associated with Emerson's belief in the existence of a divine world, beyond and above the world of senses. The divine cannot be known by reason or rational analysis, but it can be felt and experienced by the spirit through intuition and thereby creating a oneness of God, Man and Nature which we long for.

The doctrines of transcendentalists stressed the worth of the individual, the dignity of the human soul. They taught the individual to rely on himself, on his own intuition, natural instincts and impulses, and not on any authority outside himself or on tradition, however sacred or old. Their teachings harmonised with the rise of democracy, the rise of romanticism and the revolt against Puritan Orthodoxy which was begun by the Unitarians lead by W.E. Channing, and carried by the transcendentalists to its natural conclusion.

In the introductory paragraph of "The Over-Soul", Emerson raises a series of questions:

We grant that human life is mean; but how did we find out that it was mean? What is the ground of this uneasiness of ours; of this old discontent? What is the universal sense of want and ignorance, but the fine innuendo by which the soul makes its enormous claim? Why do men feel that the natural history of man has never been written, but he is always leaving behind what you have said of him, and it become old, and books of metaphysics worthless? (152)

All these questions are addressed by Emerson in his appreciation of ‘over-soul’. The over-soul always inspires our thinking and our actions and is the source of all wisdom. It is the eternal spirit of the universe. It is the highest law and all achievement is made possible by obedience to this law. This sticking to the highest law is necessary for creating a sense of uniformity in this universe, which leads to a sense of nationalistic bonding among the common mass.

In “The American Scholar”, he called for a distinctive American renaissance in writing, dealing with American subjects. But like Rammohun’s, Emerson’s nationalism was expansive and inclusive. He was among the pioneers in America, who read the writings of Rammohun Roy and spread the Indian thoughts in American climate. He turned to India, and to the East in general, to create his own nation. In his poem ‘Brahma’ he says :

“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.”

(538)

The mysterious Brahma is the creator and destroyer of all things. His belief in the transmigration of the soul, his belief in fate, and in the essential unity of *Atma* and *Brahma*, and in *Maya* and *Karma* all show the influence of Hindu Philosophy. There is an effort to achieve a synthesis of the East and the West.

The purpose of studying Rammohun and Emerson as two faces of nationalism is to show how these two men of genius created their nations in almost identical ways. Rammohun had a rich cultural heritage. But the other one was virtually creating his nations out of nothing or out of a global tradition. Like, Emerson depended entirely on the *Vedanta* and the *Upanishads* to help the rising nation.

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