

The Impact of Eastern Philosophy and Thought on American Poets

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Abstract

Many American poets of the 19th and 20th centuries were influenced by Eastern philosophy. Poets embraced oriental thought & spirituality. These themes are reflected in their poetry through symbolism, references and imagery. These poets find peace, solace and shelter in eastern philosophy. They searched immensely for the solution to their problems but found materialism and brokenness. T.S.Eliot, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau expressed their views which resonate with eastern philosophy and spirituality. T.S. Eliot found peace in the Upanishad and the teachings of the Bhagvad Gita. One should practice the triad Da Da Da as proposed by T.S. Eliot in his Magnum opus "The Waste Land".

Walt Whitman was not a preacher of the Hindu religion but his poetry echoes oriental philosophy and ideas like non-dualism, transcendentalism, self-reliance interconnectedness, universal soul and rejection of materialism. Whitman integrated oriental and Western thought.

These writers weave above mentioned themes in their verses. Henry David Thoreau wants to lead the life of a recluse through his essay Walden. Walden is the product of Henry David Thoreau's life experiments. He chooses life in the woods over materialism and wants other Americans to follow the same path. Gandhi was greatly influenced by Walden. In Walden, Thoreau advocates a life of simplicity and self-reliance. Walden is made into many chapters, each part describing one or the other aspects of simple and common life. Thoreau's ideas on life are divided into different chapters such as economy, life, reading, solitude, the village, the ponds and higher laws.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was an American poet and essayist and was one of the members of a group of New England idealists known as transcendentalists. He magically weaved God, nature and individuals into one whole. Emerson says that prayer is the disease of the soul as a creed is the disease of the intellect. He proposes that one should not pray to beg for worldly pleasures. He also puts forth that one should not travel as travel is not the food of the soul.

Keywords: Transcendentalism, Oriental thought, Mysticism, Eastern Philosophy, Interconnectedness

I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you,
And you must not be abased to the other. (Whitman 82-83)

In 19th century America there were several amazing writers. There were Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman and Washington Irving, Emily Dickinson. These writers excelled in poetry, short stories, novels and journalism to name a few. Walt Whitman was born in 1819 in Long Island. His forefathers were Dutch and English. The Whitman family moved to Brooklyn in the early years, due to this Walt Whitman was heavily influenced by the humble and rustic life of the countryside. The impact of village life on Walt Whitman can be seen in almost all his poetry. In this way, he resonates with another greatest English Poet of nature William Wordsworth who is also known as the high priest of nature.

Smile O Voluptuous cool -braeath'd earth!
Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!
Earth of departed sunset-earth of the mountains misty -topt!
Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue!
---Smile,for your lover comes. (Whitman 438-445)

In two-stanza fourteen line poem “On the Beach At Night Alone” Whitman implies the themes of life, time and existence. Through this poem, Walt Whitman wants to convey that a single person who is standing all alone on the Beach at the time of night is connected to the supreme and wider universe. Human beings and all planets of the solar system, stars and other heavenly bodies are interconnected with each other. They are part of the same existence.

A vast similitude interlocks all,
All speheres ,grown ,ungrown,small.
Large ,suns, moons, planets,
All distances of place however wide
All distances of time ,all in animate forms... (Whitman4-7)

Like William Wordsworth, Walt Whitman also in his young age was a mystic and a daydreamer. He loved his country very much. He expressed his views and emotions on politics in his several poems. He was a loner, not at all a family man. He was a socially unconventional person. He was a highly emotional person and he expressed his thoughts in his masterpiece “Leaves Of Grass”. This was Whitman’s Letter to the World that earned him recognition as the father of free verse. Gradually after ditching political journalism, Whitman became self-expressive and transcendentalist. His spiritual connection was very strong. The very first edition of “Leaves of Grass” contains twelve poems such as “Song of Myself”. This poem marks the inception of his career as an American poet. In the first poem of “Song Of Myself”, the author celebrates himself. This poem is the key to understand Walt Whitman. The poet is also hailed as the singing god of the United States of America.

“Song of Myself” is a magnum opus. It is a collection of 52 poems. These poems are composed in free verse and are loosely connected. Walt Whitman feels as if he is one with the universe, and feels a state of equilibrium. Through his work he promotes individualism. The poet observes that the soul is as great as anything outside of it. Furthermore, he finds a connection between poetry and science, natural and supernatural.

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (Whitman 1-3)

Walt Whitman, the American poet is said to be a prophetic poet. He teaches people to live a simple life but with higher thinking. Through his writings, the poet endorses brotherhood and fraternity to his fellow Americans. He advised them to be humble, hardworking and magnanimous. Walt Whitman, the democratic poet, professes that the soul has equal importance. One should not avoid or neglect the body. Soul and outer self {body} are interconnected with the universe. Walt Whitman's ancestors were radical humanists. His father Walter Whitman was a staunch individualist. From his maternal side, he was a Quaker, Quakerism which guided man to live by the light of his soul. Whitman was greatly influenced by Quakerism, transcendentalism, democratic ideals, mysticism, Individualism, humanistic radical ideas, the physical environment, and the oriental philosophy of the East.

Walt Whitman, like Emily Dickinson, talks about death in many of his poems. Emily Dickinson, another celebrated American poet of the 19th century, divulges the subject of death in a number of her poems. However, death is not always portrayed as a grim or fearful concept but it is often narrated as a transition. Her poems like Walt Whitman touch on themes of immortality, the fleeting nature of life.

Some of her poems related to death include 'Because I could not stop for death', 'I heard a fly buzz' 'when I died and the last night that she lived'. These poems are deep in the very core and ask profound and existential questions about mortality, immortality, eternity & death.

Because I could not stop for death
He kindly stopped for me
The carriage held but just ourselves-And immortality. (Dickinson1-4)

The poem 'Out of the cradle endlessly rocking' is a recollection of Whitman's childhood memories. The poem depicts death and loss of loved ones. In this poem, the poet pictures two birds that traveled from Alabama and made their nest near the shore of the Paumanok Sea. One day she-bird lost its track mid-way and died therefore, she did not return to her nest. Here in this poem poet Whitman is the mouthpiece of the grief-stricken he-bird which is mourning the death of his mate. Throughout the poem, he-bird laments over the loss of she-bird.

Hither my love!
Here I am with this just-sustained note I announce myself to you,
This gentle call is for you my love, for you. (Whitman 111-114)

Further in the poems he-bird recalls the happy days of their togetherness and becomes nostalgic about the past.

O past! O happy life! O songs of joy
In the air, in the woods, over fields,

Loved! Loved! Loved! Loved! Loved!
But my mate no more, no more with me!
We two together no more. (Whitman 125-129)

Like Indian philosophy and thought, Walt Whitman opines that death is not the end of life rather it is the beginning of a new afterlife. For him, death is as important as life and religion is. In Indian scripture Bhagavad Gita Lord Krishna teaches Arjuna that one should take death with a positive attitude and open mind. Death is just a transition from one life to another. As a human changes worn-out clothes and adorns himself or herself in new ones, in the same way, death is like casting off an old, worn-out, sick body and entering into a new and healthy one. In Indian philosophy, death is just another hardware upgrade.

Another lament song by Walt Whitman is on the sudden demise of Abraham Lincoln. It is very pathetic & moving. The pathos of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” is heart-wrenching. The bard has the idea that death is not the end of the world, it is just as a travel or moving from one world to another. He is also sure about the fact that one cannot avoid it as it is an eternal truth. Here we find certain similarities between Indian philosophy & Walt Whitman.

Death is certain for one who has been born, and rebirth is inevitable for one who has died. Therefore, one should not lament over the inevitable. Walt Whitman like his contemporaries inspired by Indian thought specifically by Hindu & Buddhist scriptures. Other writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Christopher Isherwood and J.D. Salinger were also influenced by oriental thought and Indian philosophy. In one of his works, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that Bhagavad Gita is an empire of thought and in its philosophical teachings, Krishna has all the attributes of the full-fledged monotheistic deity of the Upanisadic absolute.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American poet was also an essayist and a transcendentalist. He was profoundly influenced by Indian philosophy, spirituality and thought. Being a transcendentalist Emerson showcased the importance of intuition and connection between the individual soul (aatmn) and universal soul (Brahma). His philosophy echoes Indian thought especially Advaita and Vedanta as it proposes that non-dualism means there is no difference between individual self and ultimate reality. His essay ‘Self-Reliance’ proposes the notion that an individual can find a connection with ultimate reality by looking inward at one’s self. Emerson’s poem ‘Brahma’ is about the powers of the God Brahma. In this poem Brahma is omnipresent and omni-powerful, for him, there is no difference between shadow & sunlight. For Him, shame and fame are also similar. Furthermore, Emerson establishes the superiority of lord Brahma over every god like the god of fire and the god of war. He says that human beings must search for Him rather than going after other heavenly gods. A devotee should turn His back on other gods and bow down to God Brahma only.

They reckon ill who leave me out
When me they fly,
I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
I am the hymn the brahmin sings, (Emerson 9-12)

Ralph Waldo Emerson was chiefly interested in Krishna's teachings and One can find mentions of Bhagavad Gita scattered all over his journals and letters. Emerson and Thoreau both fondly extract quotes from the translations by Charles Wilkins- 1785 "The Bhagvat-Geeta or Dialogues of Kreeshna and Arjoon" (1785).

Henry David Thoreau explored the discipline of living in a natural habitat as a way leading toward self-knowledge and self-reliance. Around the mid-19th century Bhagavad Gita was the most popular scripture in America. Thoreau gives a commentary on the Gita in "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack River".

In the chapter "Monday" he appreciates the commitment of Hindus to their traditional values. Further, he references Bhagavad Gita at multiple places in his work and he is of the opinion that action is always better than inaction. For Thoreau, the essay Walden was a kind of spiritual retreat. In this essay, he withdraws himself from all the illusions of worldly bondages and tries to understand the real purpose of life. He gives time to his soul to get healed from within.

T.S. Eliot, like other luminaries, was also influenced by Indic philosophy, oriental thought and Vedic literature including Upanishads & Bhagavad Gita. T.S. Eliot was highly interested in Eastern philosophy from his early days. He was inclined towards Patanjali metaphysics, Asian philosophy, and Buddhist studies.

T.S. Eliot studied Sanskrit texts during his time at Harvard University. Eliot liked the teachings of Bhagavad Gita especially Lord Krishna's views on ethics, duty and self-reliance. The spiritual nature of Indian philosophy also impacted Eliot's poetry as he exposed the truth and hollowness of the materialist mindset of the Western world. His masterpiece "The Waste Land" is a long poem divided into five sections. The poem is about brokenness, loss, uncontrolled passions, psychological & emotional collapse, terror, futility and the isolation of the twentieth century.

Thunder is rumbling in the Ganges further it proposes the solutions to the never-ending problems. The solution to this waste land lies in Upanishad. Eliot extracted the message from the sacred book Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata." (Eliot 433) is an answer to all the questions of this world.

DA---- Datta -Giver

DA----Dayadhvam-Understanding

DA-Damyata-Self control

"The Waste Land" ends with chanting of "Shantih Shantih Shantih".(Eliot 434)

In the Dry Salvages of Four Quartets by T.S. Eliot, one can also find traces of Indian oriental philosophy. In the Dry Salvages, Eliot invokes Krishna to discuss the need to follow the heavenly path. Here in this poem one can also find the references of Bhagavad Gita- a part of the greatest epic Mahabharata.

Walt Whitman has a deep reverence for art for life's sake rather than art for art's sake. Ontological poet Whitman thinks that poetry contains various types of knowledge and it is the sacred duty of a poet to apply it for the good and betterment of people. Walt Whitman the American poet does not want to be known for the musical element in his poetry but rather he wants to be recognized as the poet who propagated wisdom. The fundamental idea of romantic philosophy is that the natural world is an analogy to the spiritual world. In Indian culture, there has been religious and spiritual significance of nature. Nature is considered an incarnation of God Himself. In India Nature has been worshiped from the Indus Valley civilization till date. The sun, moon, stars, rivers, mountains, trees, and herbs are all worshiped wholeheartedly in every household. In Indian culture, fasting begins with sunrise and ends with sunset or with the arrival of the moon. In yoga, Surya namaskar is considered beneficial for health. As Heine puts forth that God manifests Himself in plants, animals and man.

Here in the poem "Song of Myself", Walt Whitman uses the term soul instead of God.

I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
And I have said that the is not more than the soul"(Whitman 1270-1271)

But in another poem "Song of Myself", he sees & hears God in every atom

'In the faces of man and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass, I find letters from God dropt in the street, and everyone in sign'd by God's name...' (Whitman 1286-1287)

Furthermore, he adds that he has an inclination towards 'self'. He has always been a celebrated individualist. He gives so much importance to personal freedom, self-expression and individualist thought.

'Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy
Whatever I touch or am touch'd from,
The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,
This head more than churches, bible and all the creeds.'" (Whitman 524-526)

Walt Whitman believes in the philosophy of transmigration of the soul, the Upanishadic cyclic nature of time and existence, the birth-rebirth cycle, and life after death. These approaches are accepted by various sects like Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism.

Oriental philosophy and eastern thought impacted the life of Americans at the time of American Renaissance. Romanticism of Europe made its way into America. Ralph Waldo Emerson was the harbinger of the American Renaissance. The term Romanticism and Renaissance was interchangeable. Romanticism came as a reaction to rigidity of rules, new classism, reason and intellect. It gives importance to feelings emotions, self-expression etc. During this period Americans dig deep to search for their Identity and existence.

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