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**REVISITING TRANSCENDENTALISM IN MODERN INDIAN  
CONTEXT**

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**Abstract**

Romanticism ushered a new source of knowledge that seemed to debunk the emphasis on reason, science and logic that characterized the Age of Enlightenment. This current of Romanticism reached the United States of America around 1820 at New England and it was whole heartedly accepted and even radicalized in the form of Transcendentalism. The proponents of this movement believed in going beyond the ordinary limits of thoughts and experience in several issues like Nature, Self-Reliance and Spiritualism. This paper aims to find the traits of Transcendentalism in the Post-Independence Indian writing in English and attempts rethinking of its applicability in the modern Indian context.

**Keywords-** *Transcendentalism, Romanticism, Nature, Self-Reliance, Spiritualism*

**Introduction**

As Romanticism started blossoming in Europe in the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth century, little its proponents like Blake, Gray, Wordsworth and Balzac knew that it will be embraced beyond the frontiers of Europe. Romanticism ushered a new source of knowledge that seemed to debunk the emphasis on reason, science and logic that characterized the Age of Enlightenment. This current of Romanticism reached the United States of America around 1820 at New England and it was whole heartedly accepted and

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even radicalized. The movement that timidly started in Europe in the form of Romanticism was now received and practiced in America in the form of Transcendentalism. The proponents of this movement believed in going beyond the ordinary limits of thoughts and experience in several issues like Nature, Self-Reliance and Spiritualism.

Nature and literature have always been in a close relationship. When history of Indian English Writing is examined we find that R.K. Narayan's depiction of the South Indian Localities, Culture and Environmental setting is a true setting of relationship between man and nature. All the novels of R.K. Narayan are set in Malgudi, a pure country of his mind. It is a typically South Indian town and in each novel we see it changing, growing, developing and becoming different. It grows from a small town or village in *Swami and Friends* to a big city in *The Vendor of Sweets*. The major landmarks however remain as conceived. The river Sarayu flows by its side, fringing Malgudi are Nalappa's Mango Grove, the Mempi Forest with tea estate on its hills. Underneath the seeming change there is the soul of the place that defies and embraces all change and is triumphantly and unalterably itself. Below are the lines from Iyengar which justify the same.

'All things pass and change, fashion changes, development takes place, but old landmarks, the river, the forest, the hills and the grove remain. Thus Narayan necessitates the presence and sustenance of nature making it an important part of our survival,' (Iyengar 98).

Nature along with spirituality influences and transforms the characters. The ruined temple and the flowing river transform criminal Raju into a saintly person. Under the salubrious influence of serene nature, Krishna in *The English Teacher* becomes so spiritual that he begins to communicate with the soul of Sushila, his dead wife. Jagan in the *Vendor of Sweets* on learning relation of Mali and Grace being sinful starts living in isolation. He seeks retreat in the peace and quietness of a garden across the river. The retreat transforms Jagan who almost renounces the world.

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Thus Malgudi in spite of discerning development and diffusing into city from a village sustains the physical nature, spiritual beliefs and independent existence of an individual. The nature and spirituality are found to be in harmony with the characters in the novels of R.K.Narayan. However this kind of ideal or an utopian town is difficult to be found in India which has been completely overshadowed with materialism, urbanization, industrialization and globalization. These postmodern aspects expose the most diminishing effect on our ecology and through it on our mind, body and soul.

One significant aspect of this age is man-animal conflict. The novel *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh deals with the Sundarbans, the only habitat where Royal Bengal tigers, with their dwindling number, continue to live in the wild. They are zealously protected by various international environmental groups who apply economic and diplomatic pressures on the Indian and Bangladeshi governments to maintain the tiger by military or police force. But in the name of tiger preservation human lives are threatened. The tigers routinely maul and kill the islanders and their cattle. Amitav Ghosh questions this human cost of wildlife preservation when he makes Kanai ask Piya, the American marine biologist, who exclaims horror at the killing of a tiger:

“Isn’t that a horror too—that we can feel the suffering of an animal but not of human beings?”(300-01)

Ghosh brings this debate between environmentalists and survivalists to a memorable climax. Hours before she was raped and killed by the criminals and gangsters deployed by the people’s government of West Bengal to unsettle and dislodge the settlers from Morichj bapi island, because they felt less unwanted, less of a burden there than anywhere else, Kusum told Birmal about her experience of the siege and asked:

Who are these people? I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them?’ (261)

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Ghosh argues that human lives are valued less than those of tigers. The settlers were forcibly driven out of the island. Scores were murdered. Although the novel focuses on certain issues of global concerns, it offers no easy solutions. Ghosh is more interested in people than in issues. This book is about the heroic struggle of the people of Sunderbans and their struggle for survival.

Kamala Markandaya through her mouthpiece Rukmani, the protagonist in the novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, presents a powerful criticism of Industrialism and its intrusion upon the placid rhythm and tranquil beauty of a village which is symbolic of rural India. The industrialization ruins Rukmini's family as well as her village. The encroachment of industry causes the decay of natural beauty, plays havoc with village economy, uproots a tenant-farmer and brings social degradation along with the loss of traditional and human values.

Rukmini says,

“But the change that now came into my life, into all our lives, blasting its way into our village, seemed wrought in the twinkling of an eye” (9).

The tannery spoils the natural beauty of the country side. The cool sequestered way of life in the village is invaded by the din and noise, filth and dust.

“Already my children hold their noses when they go by, and all is shouting and disturbance and crowds wherever you go. Even the birds have forgotten to sing or else their calls are lost to us” (29).

The industrialization does not promise secure, stable, comfortable and healthy habitat to every individual. Though some people progress and survive as a group, but most suffer and struggle as individuals. They get displaced from their village and exploitations never end. Rukmini's husband Nathan is a poor farmer. They have seven children, one daughter, Irwaddy and six sons. While nearing fourteen she is married but is returned by her husband because of infertility. Crops fail due to rain forcing Arjun and Thambi, their two sons to join the tannery. After some time, they are dismissed from work and are compelled to leave for



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Ceylonin search of livelihood. Back home Kunti falls ill and Irawaddy has no option but to sell her body to serve her ailing mother Kunti as Murugan too leaves for the city in search of work . Two children and Kunti die. Nathan is evicted from his land by the landlord. Rukmini and Nathan go to city to live with Murugan but he is to be found nowhere. They are forced to go on charity and take to petty jobs. Nathan is terribly old. He dies and Rukmini returns to village. Thus along with destruction of nature, industrialization brings displacement of family, and degradation and debasement of individuals. Thus the whole family is broken and displaced. They survive amidst hunger and illness with death regularly knocking at their doors.

One comes across similar theme in Anita Desai's novel *The Village by the Sea*. The novel portrays change in nature, virgin land and human life in the wake of industrialization a modern disease. The violation of the virgin soil and the resultant devastation of flora and fauna are only anticipated and have not yet occurred but they are terrible enough to threaten the farmers, the fishermen, and the shepherds living in the coastal belt of fourteen villages. Anita Desai captures the fortunes of Hari and his family living in the coastal village Thul, near Bombay in the wake of the changes that are ushering in through the advent of a large fertilizer complex in their village. Only the beginnings of industrialization are seen but Desai graphically portrays the dangers of such a change. The theme of change in the novel is also suggested by the idea of Biju's boat with diesel engines. Though the villagers underestimate this modern boat and ridicule his efforts he is able to save the life of fishermen during the storm using his boat. Desai suggests that change is the inevitable order of life. Some changes like industrialization of the rural society are bound to cause problems to the villagers but they must realize what cannot be cured must be endured. Human being must follow the examples of the birds and animals, which adapt themselves to changing situation.

Poverty, displacement, suffering of individuals, disestablishing families, destruction of environment, moral debasement and conflict is what has become the characteristic of the present modern society. No doubt that in the view of globalization development or change in

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economic perspectives cannot be ignored. But care should be taken that those who are involved in earning their livelihood through traditional means are given special attention and made an inseparable part of these modern developmental activities. Every individual should be beneficiary of it. There is a need to create a harmony between nature and human settlements. Man's life and nature are so interlinked that it is not possible for human being to separate themselves from its influence. Therefore they have no choice but to accept nature's bounty and adversity. Our irresponsible and short sighted actions can cause irreparable damages to nature. Is it suggestive that the transcendentalism of the early nineteenth century need to be rethought in this twentieth century?

### Conclusion

Certain aspects of Transcendentalism can be retained but the changes in the society which are inevitable for sustenance force human beings to continue with their surge to transcend ahead with the support of technology. What it feels to the readers' mind and to the scholars of literature is a matter of subjectivity and interpretation of contemporary literary studies. As far as the rethinking of transcendentalism is concerned, it is a cause of concern as nature and human life co-exist, there is no doubt a dire need to go back to the fundamentals of life's very emergence and existence.

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