

THE CONCEPT OF NATIONAL LITERATURE IN EMERSON'S “THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR”

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Emerson's address “The American Scholar” embodies the concepts of national literature. Therefore it is important to consider briefly the concept of nation and nationalism before discussing the issue of national literature. For “Nationalism is the pathology of modern developmental history... it belonged with ‘kinship’ and ‘religion’ rather than with liberalism” (Anderson.5) There were three features, which restricted the emergence of national literature in America. The first was concerned with practical problems of publication. The second problem was language, which represents the country. Without a national language there is no hope to bring forth national literature. The third element of the literary situation was the education of able Americans in Europe who were interested in improving education in the United States. The close of the era of successful national liberation movements in the United States contributed many different elements out of which American nationalism was born. The strengthening of the federal government by George Washington and by Hamilton provided the concept of a ‘nation’ instead of a congeries of loosely related states. By slackening the chains of dependence upon Britain, the nationalist movement strengthened American national self-reliance. The ‘nation’ thus become something capable of being consciously aspired to rather than slowly frame of vision.

Emerson had a prophetic vision and was quite ahead of his age in forestalling the future of his country. He knows it very well that political independence without cultural independence doesn't mean anything. Culture is an inextricable part of the mind, so long it is in bondage, no independence can ever be effectively realized. The desire for this spirit is seen everywhere in ‘American Scholar’. It is because of this, Wendell Holmes rightly called “The American Scholar”, “Our intellectual declaration of independence” (Brooks XV). It is intellectual in the sense of exhorting young scholar to form their own opinions.

Emerson wanted that the American literature should voice forth the hopes and aspiration of this mighty resurgent nation. Hence, he exhorts his countrymen to stop imitating foreign models. In one of his most celebrated essays, “self-Reliance”, he writes: “Imitation is suicide” (Brooks 146) No national literature is ever produced by blind copying. National literature should be like a star, which shines upon the sky and emits its light to give inspiration to other to develop their own literature, just as one candle lights to another. This was the need of American when Emerson started his career as a pastor of Boston church. At one place in the essay Emerson says, “the millions around us that are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests” (Brooks 45)

In “The American scholar” we find, on one hand, the exploration of the nature of scholarship and on the other, the repudiation of the conventional approach to it. The essay is a strong plea for inculcating originality and Emerson is original in the sense that he has not taken his morality ready-made either from the catholic or from the protestant church but read his own meaning in them. Even in a statement of such casual appearance, “every generation must write

its own books” (Brooks49), his originality is evident .It is closer to Rabindranath Tagore’s opinion that a nation should not be a rag picker from other’s dustbin.

Emerson point out that in order to facilitate the work of society, man is divided into parts ‘ he is a professor ,an engineer, a sailor, a priest, a scholar are a producer. But, what is more important is that, in all these things he ought to remain a man .Man is indivisible, he is one and all. The integrity of individual’s personality must remain unencroached upon by system, institutions or society. The tendency of our society is to break the individual into parts, and it was against this tendency that Emerson raised his voice .He feels that society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.

In the delegation of function of society says Emerson, “The scholar has been delegated intellect”. In the right stage, he is “man thinking”; in the degenerate state a mere thinker or still worst, the parrot of the other men’s thinking. Here an important question arises as to who is a scholar or what is “Man Thinking”? A “man Thinking is one whom “nature solicits with all her placid, all her monitory pictures; him the past instructs; him the future invites (Brooks 46). It means a scholar is not an ordinary man but is one who is bestowed with all the gifts of nature, who is inspired by the past that is his great predecessors and who always, try to foresee the possibility and bring new approaches to brighten the future generation.

According to Emerson no great literature is ever a possibility without an acute sense of scholarship .Scholars are torch- bearer of a nation they in fact , are the mind of a nation , without them no national literature is even remotely be possible scholars never work in isolation; they are the part of the society . Not only are they influenced by social ethos, but they also give orientation to it. Speaking about American Scholars, Emerson mention three things – Nature, Past and Action – That play important part in moldings the mind of a scholar.

Emerson’s originality and his ability to transform the tradition, is best illustrated here when he traces the impact of ‘Nature’ on the scholars mind. Nature, no doubt, moulds the mind of the scholar; but what is more important? The scholar also stamps his own vision upon it. Let him (scholar) open out his soul to nature, and then the influences of nature will flow into him and would mould his soul .The scholar and the nature, according to Emerson , are one and the same thing; one is seal, the other is print, only that much of nature he knows that he has made his own. Nature is always presents in his life. Emerson believed in the concept of one universal soul pulsating through nature and the soul of a scholar is a part of it. This intuitional awareness of nature vibrating with the rhythm of almighty is actually Emerson’s modification of philosophy of German Transcendentalist. Nature says many things to a scholar and scholar is not only aware of its cosmic significance coming to human being in various shapes, but also capable of transmitting it to others. In the context of national literature this is very important while the virgin soil of America was waiting for its exploration, the American writers, instead of singing its glories were looking for inspiration to other countries. The consciousness gradually grows upon Emerson that the valleys, the rivers, the dense forest, in fact the whole landscape of America must become the part of literature. This idea of Emerson gave inspiration to many writers; Mark Twain’s *Learning the River* is a case of point.

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Another great influence on the mind of a scholar is that of the past. In this context Emerson speaks about books. Through books the mind of a scholar is connected with the mind that lived sometime ago. Thus books are records of immortal truths discovered by the scholars of the past. But no work of art is absolutely perfect. A poet or a writer observes things around him and through powerful imagination, transmutes life into truth. This truth is not free from the conventional elements; rather it is alloyed with them.

Books are for the leisure of a scholar and only tools of learning therefore ‘Man Thinking’ must not be subordinated by books. The scholar, according to Emerson, is himself a system. Hence, he should never become a satellite of any book. Instead of writing on other’s concept or ideas, one should create and write his own mind. Books serve as precious lamp to a scholar rekindling a flame of thought in darkness. The true scholar – if he is to grow into “Man Thinking”-instead of becoming the slave of books, makes right use of them. In this context Emerson says:

Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given; forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote these books. (Brooks 49)

The theory of books according to Emerson is “noble”. Here he gives us a subtle analysis of the process of making books that ultimately crystallizes into making of literature. “Life”, he says, “is a quarry”(Crawford 203), that is to say, the raw materials of literature are to be found in life. Every great artist has his own attitude towards life and he imposes order over the raw material by stamping his own vision upon them.

Emerson says that reading and writing ought to be cultivated as an art. It must be creative. Creativeness can only be developed through hard work. One must be an inventor to read well; when the mind is draced by labour and invention, the pages of whatever book we read becomes luminous”. (Brooks 51)

Emerson insisted more vigorously than ever before on the importance of ‘action’. People generally believe that a scholar can only think and is unable to do any manual work. He is someone who is cut-off from the main stream. But this is a wrong concept. According to Emerson, a real scholar participates fully in life, his thinking, his ideas, his experience must take form of action because action is the raw material out of which the intellect moulds its splendid product.

“Action”, says Emerson, “is preamble of thought; through which it passes from unconscious to conscious” (Brooks 53). In order to attain the consciousness in life, Emerson exhorts the scholar not to avoid manual labour. His duty is not only to roam in the kingdom of books but also become a part of humanity. Thought in itself means nothing unless concertized through action in the life of a scholar. Therefore, action is most necessary aspect of a scholar.

Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. Without it he is not yet man. Without it thought can never ripen into truth. (Brooks 53).

There can be no scholar without heroic mind and the formulation of heroic mind is done through struggle, sharing not only pain and suffering of society but also playing his part in its elevation. This idea can aptly be illustrated through Emerson’s poem –nation’s strength:

Not gold, but only man can make

a nation great and strong.
Men who for truth and honor's sake
Stand fast and suffer long.
Brave men who work while other
Sleep who dare, while others fly.
They build a nation's pillars deep
And lift them to the sky.

After discussing the major influences on the scholar, Emerson precedes towards his duties and responsibilities. The function of a scholar is also the upliftment of society; and the upliftment of society requires courage on the part of a scholar. "God", says Emerson, "does not make his work manifest through coward". Therefore, the scholar should not be scared of anything; for a real scholar, completely, obliterates the fear of any type –including the fear of God in conventional sense from his life.

Emerson suggests the young scholars to consider them not an ordinary person but the embodiment of Divine –spirit they are the creators on whom depend the entire world. They are not helpless and weak but mighty creatures of the living world. Emerson also exhorts scholar to be away from the domination of any reactionary doctrine of the church. They must be brave enough to raise their voice against a wrong concept or a custom and must investigate the matter because blind acceptance of anything is not a scholarly approach.

Emerson says ,” we have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe”,(Brooks62) but now the need is to develop confidence and to produce a literature that would declare and illustrate that America is also independent as far as her literature and culture are concerned Emersons ends his address- The American Scholar –by giving a clarion call for National Literature:

We shall walk on our own feet;
We will work with our own hand
We will speak our own minds....
A nation of men will for the first
Time exist, because each believes
Himself inspired by the Divine soul
Which also inspires all men (brooks 63)

It can be fairly concluded that Emerson, Tagore, and Carlyle established new trends in national literature which are unavoidably significant. The trio believed in the significance of having national literature and in the concept of originality in literary creation which proved fruitful for the scholar of other nations too. Emerson's works have been an evergreen example for this magnificent trend. The America of today and the great writers of nation owe a debt of gratitude to Emerson. His magnum opus essay "The American Scholar" has proved to be a rich source for the concept of National Literature.

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