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“And Fired the Shot Heard Round the World”: Postcolonial Project in Emerson’s Transcendentalism

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Abstract:

This paper is concerned with a prominent American poet who lived in an important era in the nineteenth century. During this period, American nationhood and identity were shaped and articulated by both political institutions and cultural circles alike. It witnessed the transformation of the United States of America from colonies to empire—a dramatic shift from colonialism to postcolonialism where the cultural, social, and ideological roles and agents are altered. This paper analyzes how Emerson’s writings especially his poetry come to emulate what is going on in American social scene in the early and mid-nineteenth century. Emerson observes and feels the need of intellectuals and literary figures to enter the American life and put their imprints in it. He attempts to portray and illustrate through transcendental writings how American society and its people should enact the values and attitudes of the “New World” and how they are changed from “colonized” into “colonizer.” But by doing so, Emerson participates in articulating the postcolonial project the U.S. adopts.

Keywords

colonized, colonizer, Eurocentricity, postcolonialism, transcendentalism

Introduction

In the middle of the nineteenth century, American society inaugurated its new and unique identity as a "new" emerging nation. The United States of America found itself caught in a historic moment when ideology, slogans, and beliefs came together to establish the country that is known today. Many American literary figures, working within the frameworks and times of nineteenth-century settings, were either aware of the U.S. peculiar circumstances and the real dilemma resulting from postcolonial demands and requirements that the American found themselves overtly exposed to, or they were unaware of these sociopolitical factors, which led them to participate in the literary scene of that age. Emerson may typify a good example in this regard. Although he writes in the vein of romantic enterprise which sweeps almost both sides of the Atlantic, and updates it to his ideal notion of transcendentalism, his writings, prose and verse adhere to a postcolonial project. This project calls for U.S. and its unique expansion and identity regardless of its exploitative, imperialist nature. This paper tries to reread Emerson's writings as advanced, elaborate postcolonial discourse.

Ralf Waldo Emerson and Postcolonialism

Emerson (1803-82) lived and experienced an important period in American history. He is a poet, thinker, philosopher, and sage. Many critics call him the apostle of progress and optimism, inspiring the sense of individualism in many Americans (McMichael 444). His lifetime coincided with the gradual and steady transformation of the U. S. from colonized states under the domination of French and British empires to colonizer ones of their own control and leadership in which the United States began to take the lead of colonizing other territories and peoples. He contributed with his contemporaries in shaping and making the American nationhood and identity that we know today. He observed how the American society turned itself into a postcolonial one; confiscating new territories, enslaving Negro groups on a large scale, and inventing innovating technological means. In other words, American nationhood can be said to begin in this era. Through his emphasis, therefore, on individualism and self-reliance, Emerson hoped that the postcolonial American project (and expansion) in the second half of the nineteenth could see the light.

After three years of serving the Church as a Unitarian minister in Boston, Emerson left the U.S. for Europe. He met the British romantic poets, William Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge. The Romantic Movement swept the continent at that time and this influenced Emerson. Upon his return to the States, he began his lifelong career as a public lecturer. He brought the notion of transcendentalism: an elaborate version of romantic impulse. The core thread of this school is the intellectual vitality of the individual and the spiritual glamor of the universe. Other prominent figures of transcendentalism are Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Amos Bronson Alcott. Transcendentalism enables Emerson to articulate much of

his threads as it is the source of inspiration that he gains and believes to disseminate among Americans. Moreover, the movement emulates some of Emerson’s own beliefs. This is evident in the fact that in

the ideology of this Romantic Transcendentalism, America is a ‘New World’ with a unique historical opportunities to create an ideal society, to devise an order that surpasses the failed and weary feudalism of Europe. This new order will be cosmopolitan in the true, global sense of the term; its culture will be transpacific as well as transatlantic, incorporating indigenous and Oriental as well as European elements. This mission of the American artist, then, to document the experience and the vision of the New World. (Roberts16)

Emerson adopts this “mission” in his writings and therefore, views the American postcolonial enterprise with great deal of optimism and enthusiasm. That is why he tries in his poetry to provoke and encourage independent and self-estimated individuals who represent and embody intellectual and materialistic values and doctrines of the “New World.” This new world consists of “settler colonies,” to use a postcolonial term adopted from Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin (1998, 211). These authors direct the attention to some salient points that should be taken in full consideration—the settlers—who want to control and dominate the land and its resources, and who

constitute a radically distinct majority with regard to the indigenous inhabitants or where they have imposed a dominance through force of arms and political institutions. . . they act as the agent of that power, and their own identity depends in part, at least initially, on retaining their sense of difference from the ‘native’ population. In this sense they are simultaneously both colonized and colonizer. (212)

These ambivalent feelings and attitudes of being colonized and ultimately colonizer lead Emerson and his fellow citizens to exploit the merits of being colonizer; they adopt a new approach that could be seen as a postcolonial project that would insure them the needed identity and nationhood. Emerson highly stresses the vitality and significance of individuality because it creates, according to Emerson, the personality and at the same time introduces the person to the outer world. He wants, therefore, to prepare or make an American person to be a new Adam who can expand, enjoy, and dominate the others—land and people. Emerson speaks about postcolonial ideals he sees the U.S. typifies. He loads prose works with notions and visions he thinks required for the postcolonial American enterprise. The following section analyzes and rereads one of the prose works as postcolonial discourse that Emerson composes to

conceptualize the American postcolonial stance.

The American Scholar

This essay embodies Emerson's postcolonial ideals. It is the manifesto which reveals and exhibits Emerson's pivotal and central ideas. The essay then may be read as a strong, overt discourse that embodies Emerson's present and future plans for his country:

The scholar is that man who must take up into himself all the ability of the time, all the contributions of the past, all the hopes of the future. He must be an university of knowledges. If there be one lesson more than another which should pierce his ear, it is, The world is nothing, the man is all. (Emerson 118).

Emerson then makes it clear that the process of Americanization at least in literary circles and among elites should now start. Indeed, *The American Scholar* is called America's "intellectual Declaration of Independence," and demand for American independence of European domination in thought and art (Gray 134; Crawford 91). The essay, expresses some strong, laud, and acute opinions about how the U.S. should act (and react) in the new era and how its people should feel and enact the new American spirit. Moreover, the article belongs to American Renaissance that is in itself a postcolonial phenomenon (Paryz 16). Indeed, reading it carefully, this discourse contextualizes and at the same time juxtaposes dreams and ambitions Emerson holds for his country and the demands and obligations he sees the age enforces on such a nation that witnesses its transformation from colonies to empire, and here lies much of Emerson's energy and exaltation. No doubt then the first lines celebrate the country's duties and status:

[p]erhaps the time is already come when it ought to be, and will be, something else; when the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill. Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvest. Events, actions arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves. (103)

Emerson yearns to achieve through his pen what his contemporary politicians do in politics on a domestic and global scale. Thus, the Emersonian project tries to respond to and simulate American postcolonial enterprise. If the American political, sovereign body has presence in the present, Emerson indeed strives to give it spirit through his literary and philosophical writings that ascribe to the new-born nation its novel character and merits. In addition, he seems to be impatient with the past; he does not

want to be "retrospective"; rather he mentions it frankly and directly that Americans should abandon Eurocentricity. Addressing his audience, Emerson tells them “We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe” (118).

The discourse by which Emerson writes and the tropes through which he makes himself clear and direct mirror American nationhood immersed in a postcolonial spirit. In other words, by saying they have listened very long to Europe, he means the impacts of colonialism, and he calls for abolition of this orbiting and turning to the postcolonial project in which the U.S. emerges as an ambitious nation with expansionism at its hand. Here one can strongly argue that Emerson’s discourse is highly postcolonial one for it stands against and goes beyond its Eurocentric origins and influences.

Literatures and body of writings given by Americans during this period (that are called American Renaissance) indicate the independent status of such writings due to the fact that these literatures emerge

in their present form out of the experience of colonization and assert themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial center. It is this which makes them distinctively post-colonial (Ashcroft et al., 2).

This is exactly what *The American Scholar* does. Emerson’s discourse imitates political postcolonial project in both form and content. He and many Americans want to get rid of Eurocentric (and English) influences whether these are cultural, social, or even linguistic; Americans aspire to revolve around their own country rather than around Europe. During Emerson’s time, the U.S. has just started to establish its identity as an independent country whose history and land are quite derived from colonialism of neighboring continents. Unlike other nations, say the Indian if you will, the Americans do not enter a period between colonialism and postcolonialism. Rather, they transform themselves from being colonized to colonizers. But with some differences: instead of perpetually enacting processes of plunder, genocide, negotiation, confiscation, and victimization, they adopt new strategies of expansion, liberation, and annexation; the former ones belong to colonialism and the latter to postcolonialism. Thus, to exclude themselves from the domination and hegemony of the center, the American feel and notice the inevitable need of calling for Americanization in every aspect of life, language included.

The American Scholar rises and adopts a postcolonial slogan. This slogan serves Emerson’s point of view and stance. The essay then evokes and incites, at the same time, the American new spirit to be both dominant

and unique. This means that the U.S. should write its own policies, history, and literature for the age demands an active participation and leadership and stresses the importance of the individual (Crawford 1999). Emerson finalizes the article with this slogan and hopes he can disseminate his notion among the American: "We will walk on our own feet: we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds. . . A nation of men will for the first time exist" (119).

Indeed, the figure that hovers in this essay, the American scholar, is a new American Adam who, according to Emerson, is going to think and act in ways and manners different from others and in this very sense shall be uniquely American. This scholar shall bring about many changes, not only in science and technology, but in literature as well. Thus, Emerson captures this novel spirit for the first post-colonial community to advance a "national" literature is the U.S. (Ashcroft et al., 16). We will observe these same postcolonial tokens and tropes in Emerson's poetry to which we now turn.

Emerson's Postcolonial Poetry

A ruling and dominant figure in Emerson's verses is this exact American scholar founding in a new world. This figure is romantic, intellectual, and colonizer at the same time. Though his poetry is classified within the school of transcendentalism, one can view it as a postcolonial phenomenon for it modifies romanticism of European continent and adopts the needs and issues of its own soil. In other words, transcendentalism is treated here as a literary trend and more emphatically as discourse that exhibits language, thought, and power. Indeed, one can detect a portrait of postcolonial American figure in Emerson and his contemporaries. They become interested in glorifying and highlighting the American individualism and values. At Emerson's time, people are directly exposed to the attractive ideology of expansionism that can be viewed as a particular American form of imperialism (Paryz 85).

In the following handful of poems, Emerson tends to portray a figure that he hopes and believes to be a prototype, to be imitated and followed by American people. This figure ideologizes, that is, this figure typifies and voices American values and beliefs that would come into being in the postcolonial era. One of the early poems revealing and illustrating this is a poem taken from his *Self-Reliance*. It gives an example about an American person and how this person can lead and develop himself and at the same time is a special one capable of achieving everything. The poem begins by asserting that "Man is his own star; and the soul that can / Render an honest and a perfect man, / Commands all light, all influence, all fate;" (McMichael 495). The poet puts apparent emphasis and stress on the individual who can guide himself and even control his destiny. This new American figure reminds us of American Adam whose merits and abilities Emerson praises and admires. Then the poem develops into a kind of a

prophecy: “Nothing to him falls early or too late. / Our acts our angels are,
or good or ill, Our fatal shadows that walk by us still” (4-6). This “man” is
wise and omniscient.

Another poem echoing same tropes is “Concord Hymn”. The poem
views one of colonial battles as an important step in accomplishing
independence and entering a new phase. It commemorates the Battles of
Lexington and Concord; it mentions American soldiers as heroes who defeat
not only their enemies and earn victory, but stand against death, time, and
nature. It opens with some outstanding images of heroism and victory:

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April’s breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood
And fired the shot heard round the world. (1-4)

The consequences of the “shot” and its echoes that are “heard round
the world” connote to postcolonial hopes which the poet attaches to the
incidents. The line exhibits some implications and threads of an
expansionist speaker. Thus, Emerson does not write a patriotic poem, rather
he highlights the deeds and works of those “farmers,” the early fathers of
the U.S. who change and face colonialism. The poet foregrounds how their
actions and victory turn the face of the world and alter the course of history:

On this green bank, by this soft stream,
We set to-day a votive stone;
That memory may their deed redeem,
When, like our sires, our sons are gone. (9-12)

Emerson manages to connect early fathers with present sons who are
going to have the American “Spirit.” The spirit here is the American
postcolonial determination and will to conquer the world and expand its
territories:

Spirit, that made those heroes dare
To die, and leave their children free,
Bid Time and Nature gently spare
The shaft we raise to them and thee. (13-16)

The poem deals with and positively mentions American values such as
independence, freedom, glory, and heroism. Thus, Emerson uses colonial
anecdote for postcolonial purposes.

The American postcolonial enterprise in Emerson’s poetry takes
various forms and reveals different contents. He tends to express it in more
philosophical and tricky manners than in direct ones. But piecemeal an
ambivalent element runs along in his poems. Ambivalence comes from
American imperialistic, expansionist values and attitudes that may clash
with his personal ideals. *Ode* exhibits such ambivalence. The poem is
concerned with clashes of nations and war between countries; but Emerson

makes it very clear that he does not condemn colonial and imperial expansion. He only criticizes discrimination against the black people. And in this very way, the poem oscillates between describing situations and criticizing some of them; that is, Emerson is highly selective in his discourse for he sides with American imperial deeds and condemns other's deeds which do not differ from that of Americans'. Some parts of the poem illustrate these points:

There are two laws discrete,
Not reconciled,--
Law for man, and law for thing;
The last builds town and fleet,
But it runs wild,
And doth the man unking.

And then he turns to another "law." The poet juxtaposes different laws and opinions without differentiating between them; as if he wants to be as far as possible neutral and elusive:

Let man serve law for man
Live for friendship, live for love,
For truth's and harmony's behoof;
The state may follow how it can
As Olympus follow Jove.

The poem calls for peace and freedom and it tries to contextualize American beliefs within human progress. Emerson tries to be as objective as possible but the discourse betrays him:

He who exterminates
Races by stronger races,
Black by white faces,--
Knows to bring honey
Out of the lion;
Grafts gentlest scion
On pirate and Turk.

The poet in these lines views the world as a jungle, a struggle where the strong survives and the weak dies. This notion can be seen as an expansionist. But the voice and tone are postcolonial. Therefore, Emerson sees himself troubled by the U.S. colonial heritage (Paryz 21).

Some romantic poems Emerson writes elucidate a number of postcolonial images and beliefs. He renders the romantic tropes and merits quite appealing and employs them to serve his postcolonial propaganda. "The New World" provokes in him such meanings and connotations for it contains landscapes, weather, and a variety of all romantic features. Hence, Emerson employs the romantic and the native just to call for the new-born postcolonial American project. In addition to this, Emerson seems to be deliberate in this employment for he knows the near history of settlers who

have brutally slaughtered the indigenous and then claimed the land for themselves. Again, there is an ambivalent element. For example, in “Good-Bye,” the poet conceives a world of his own, tellingly America and how it is pure and still virgin. He begins the poem with a farewell to “old” world: “Good-bye, proud world! I’m going home: / Thou art not my friend, and I’m not thine. / Long enough through thy weary crowds I roam; / A river-ark on the ocean brine” (1-4). The poet prefers America to anything else. What makes the poem quite American is the poet’s persistence on the virginity and innocence of both land and people. Moreover, the poem elucidates a religious element for it connects the land with God as if its land is the “promised land.” Here the religious aspect explicitly denotes and implicitly connotes to the new world. After mentioning that he is going to his new land, Emerson says

A secret nook in a pleasant land,
Whose groves the frolic fairies planned
Where arches green, the livelong day,
Echo the blackbird’s roundelay
And vulgar feet have never trod
A spot that is sacred to thought and God. (17-22)

Emerson employs the U.S. as a metaphor for his romantic, postcolonial discourse. The affinity between the U.S. and everything romantic assists Emerson in making his land an exemplar, a model of a prosperous postcolonial metropolis. Furthermore, the poet wants to make his “home” exceed the importance and dignity of both “Greece” and “Rome” for the U.S. can do this: “O, when I am safe in my sylvan home, / I tread on the pride of Greece and Rome” (23-24).

The poet ends “Good-Bye” with a religious image that adds holiness and vitality to his home. Here the poet mingles the romantic and religious and comes up with a postcolonial concept that his country receives God’s grace; we hear now the echo of the belief in “Manifest Destiny” that takes the lead during this time. This notion refers to the expansionist ideals of the U.S. as a destined mission. He wonders what all science and philosophy mean if they do not go with God and His doctrine. The poet closes the poem with a rhetorical question of how it is vain not to enter in God’s kingdom: “What man in the bush with God meet?” (29-30).

“Compensation” is another poem that praises and glorifies postcolonial enterprise. It juxtaposes man and the harsh universe. It pushes man to seek and pursue her/his greatness and fortune amid

The wings of Time are black and white,
Pied with morning and with night.
Mountain tall and ocean deep
Trembling balance duly keep

In changing moon and tidal wave
Glow the feud of Want and Have. (1-6)

The second stanza goes on in the same direction of highlighting the difficult and hard man's circumstances for "Man's the elm, and Wealth the vines / Stanch and strong the tendrils twine / Though the frail ringlets thee deceive, / None from its stock that vine can reave" (15-18). Then the poet makes a turning point in the poem for he affirms readers that God is fair and after this,

And all that Nature made thy own,
Floating in air or pent in stone,
Will rive the hills and swim the sea,
And, like thy shadow, follow thee. (25-28)

Emerson's annexation of God to the country reveals within itself a postcolonial notion for it justifies the imperial, exploitive works and consequences of postcolonial deeds and actions. He conveys a great deal of religiosity; God stands beside the U.S. and its people—Christianity sustains America. Thus, by employing his transcendentalist discourse the poet renders the American scene quite romantic and imaginative but he cannot dismiss and repudiate the postcolonial elements and tropes his discourse tellingly promotes.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that the period between 1820 to 1885 witnesses the gradual and steady progress and transformation of the U.S. from newly independent states whose identity and prosperity are formed gradually into fully expansionist ones with highly postcolonial interests and policies. In a very short and rapid period, the U.S. manages to become a promising country with postcolonial ambitions, plans, and objectives. In this very sense, it dramatically alters its course from colonialism to postcolonialism. It starts to expand to further territories and in doing so, imposes its ideology and hegemony. As political circles and their politicians’ act according to these postcolonial and imperialistic impulses, literary and intellectual figures try to emulate the zeitgeist. The paper finds that Emerson’s works here are literary attempts in encouraging the postcolonial project the U.S. adopts. But he does this with some ambivalent tone and elements. He employs romantic and intellectual merits of his transcendentalism just to serve and highlight the vitality and importance of the postcolonial project that he sees emerging and progressing.

الملخص

"وأطلقوا النار أطلقوا النار حول العالم": مشروع ما بعد الاستعمار في تفوق إيمرسون
مثنى محمد سلطان

يتناول هذا البحث شاعر أمريكي بارز عاش في حقبة تاريخية مهمة من التاريخ الأمريكي. خلال تلك الحقبة بدأت كل من القومية و الهوية الأمريكية بالتشكل و البروز من خلال المؤسسات السياسية و الأوساط الثقافية و كل على حد سواء. أن هذه الحقبة تشهد تحول الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية من مُستعمرات الى امبراطورية (دولة كبيرة) و هذا يمثل انتقالاً كبيرة من الحقبة الاستعمارية الى مابعد الحقبة الاستعمارية حيث تكون الأدوار الثقافية و الاجتماعية و الأيديولوجية قد غيرت مساراتها و أهدافها. يحلل هذا البحث كيف أن كتابات امرسون و خصوصاً شعره يأتي ليحاكي ما الذي يحدث في المشهد الاجتماعي الأمريكي في أوائل و منتصف القرن التاسع عشر. يشعر و يلاحظ أمرسون بحاجة المتقنين و الأدباء الى أن يدخلوا الحياة الأمريكية و أن يضعوا بصماتهم عليها. يحاول أمرسون أن يصور و يوضح من خلال فلسفته المتعالية في كتاباته كيف يتجاوز المجتمع الأمريكي مع معطيات و قيم "العالم الجديد" و كيف أنهم تحولوا من مُستعمرين الى مُستعمرين. و من خلال القيام بهذا كله، يشارك امرسون في صياغة المشروع الأمريكي لما بعد الحقبة الاستعمارية.

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