

Inspiration and Influences of “Individualism” in R.W. Emerson’s *Self-Reliance* in Contemporary Literature

Dr. Richa Verma* & Srishti Mehra

Department of English, School of Languages
C.S.J.M. University, Kanpur

Abstract

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Father of Transcendentalism, explains the idea of ‘individualism’ in his revolutionizing and phenomenal essay *Self-Reliance* which even after an epoch, influences the modern world with its theories of trusting ‘our own instincts’, developing human virtues such as integrity, self-sovereignty and social conformity. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s notion of self-belief, individualism and free-spiritedness, creates curiosity for the writers of contemporary literature and an urge to investigate how these notions become relevant to modern interpretations. The aim of this research paper is to highlight an impact of self- autonomy prevalent in today’s society, to contemplate on the concept of ‘individualism’ in contemporary writings and a need of ‘self-reliance’ to anchor it in modern society in order to focus the idea of R. W. Emerson’s ‘aboriginal self’.

Key Words: Individualism, modern society, self-reliance, R.W. Emerson

Introduction

Self-Reliance, a revolutionizing essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson is a literary masterpiece of 19th century, which urges American youth to be true to their original self, to trust their latent conviction towards universal wisdom. Ralph Waldo Emerson, by propagating the notion of self-reliance, unleashed a potent force that “self” is bigger than ego, a resolute belief in one’s own sovereignty. Self-reliance as a terminology, is an attempt for individuals to connect themselves to over soul, which is a manifestation of entire universe.

Inspiration or influence of ‘individualism’ described in R.W Emerson’s *Self-Reliance* can be witnessed sporadically within contemporary literature. The father of transcendentalism, R.W Emerson, in his essay *Self-Reliance* urges individuals to trust their identifiable predispositions

and notions, rather than blindly following the sentiments of society and its establishments. He stresses on the consequences of being self-reliant deep within, counting on one's own rationality and knack, rather than peripheral authentication from others, which can be undeniably felt in the cosmos of literature. Emerson intricately weaves the fabric for self-discovery of human soul.

Human soul is constantly suffering and struggling within itself. This phenomenon can be improved by preaching a notion of belief that every human spirit is generous, noble and creative. An individual is reminded of crucial virtues of prudence, credibility, friendship, heroism and moderation which have become unusual in today's world. Emerson's vision of a holistic world can restore these immeasurable virtues to our life and our conscience. 'Individualism' can be metaphorically termed as a garden, and human being as striking flowers. Human beings may engulfed within the aura of garden, which facilitates and liberates its species, the shocking and rampant growth of pessimism as its weeds and vines, which true to their innate nature are there to dethrone and disrupt the beauty and its mannerisms. The realization of this fact can be achieved through the distinctive traits of 'individualism' in many of the legendary literary works. Whether it's the odyssey of *Hamlet*, who is transformed from an obedient son to a revenge thirsty murderer¹, where his mind plays tricks on him or it can be witnessed in *Pride and Prejudice* while navigating a journey of Elizabeth, who possesses wit, virtue, courage, self-reliance and caliber to admit her mistakes². Thus proving a notion that individuality is like a garden, sheltering weeds and flowers, it can be seen that through the portrayal of these characters in the literary world, depends on the fact, that a certain part of their individuality is triggered to enchant its readers. All such literary works do reveal an unsaid power of individual characteristics, if it embraces and celebrate the peculiar truths and forms of 'individualism' in relation with the universe.

Influence of Self-Reliance on Contemporary Literature

Self-Reliance extols the originality of thinking and belief in the universality of individual realities, establishing the fulcrum for contemporary literature. One of the striking facets of contemporary literature is that nowhere readers get the feeling that characters are entirely manipulated by the author or subdued by the interest of the novel. Contemporary plot does not comprise of dramatic actions but rather arise from the thoughts and feelings of a character. This phenomenon can be witnessed in *Americanah* and *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The major focus of *Americanah*' is on issues of distinctiveness, immigration and race; the characteristics of individualism are intertwined into a plot. Ifemelu, the protagonist undergoes an odyssey of liberation and self-discovery as she traverses her life in Nigeria and the United States. She shares her experiences of residing as an immigrant and black women in America. In the 'Introduction' of the novel she admits that she "felt differently...American perspective about blackness and black women's hair", She resembles herself with Ifemelu, "the

female character whose raised d'ere is not likeability".³ The protagonist explores her possibilities in racist and androcentric world, redefining her individuality and self-worth.

R. W Emerson validates a statement referring to the concept of Individualism, "Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life's cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another you have only an extemporaneous half possession. That which each can do best, none but his Maker can teach him."⁴ The theories related to Individualism is represented in many recent novels of modern era. For example, this notion can be discernibly grasped in the novel *Purple Hibiscus*, where the protagonist oblivious of her inner forte and mayhem, sets on a catastrophic journey which culminates in rapid evolution and development of the character. *Purple Hibiscus* is set against a backdrop of political turmoil in Nigeria. The political discontent with ruling soldiers in the novel and an urge to define 'Renewed Democracy' impacting the lives of characters helps in unfolding the narrative.⁵

Portrayal of a political turbulence mirrors a wider societal context and act as a metaphor for the internal struggles within the family members. *Purple Hibiscus*, at its core, is a bildungsroman novel, where Kambili's journey is depicted as a quest for autonomy and identity, where she defies all the societal practices and non-conformity to the authority of her father and his religious beliefs, thus, reflecting her individualistic trait. The narrative successfully weaves together a sense of self- belief within political turmoil, illustrating an influence of 'individualism' in contemporary literature. The title of the book symbolizes an association with nature, representing growth and beauty in the appearance of adversity.

R. W. Emerson highlights the erroneous concepts that magnificent art structures, impressive work and expensive books, intimidate people by decreasing their self-concept. The *White Tiger*, written by Arvind Adiga, highlights a societal perception stressed by R.W. Emerson in *Self-Reliance*. R.W Emerson critiques the overriding inclination to favor discourses of famous personalities over plots focused on unremarkable acts of honesty by ordinary men. He questions the public leaning to uplift the actions of the famous men while downplaying the significance of marginalized population. R.W Emerson challenged this incongruence in discernment, emphasizing that the impact of the virtuous and immoral actions of regular individuals can be just as thoughtful as those of an influential. In doing so, he prompts the readers to reassess their prejudices, recognizing the intrinsic value and momentous nature of an average moral choices made by usual people. This mentality can be witnessed in the writings of contemporary author Aravind Adiga in his critically acclaimed work *The White Tiger*. The novel is gripping and with its gloomy exploration of socio-economic disparity, showing a struggle for individual identity in contemporary India, where there is lack of 'action' and 'change'. "I'm a man of action, and

change.”⁶ The novel *The White Tiger* critically scrutinizes the rigid class-construction in India and the vicious and stark differences between the elite class and the impoverished masses through the portrayal of a protagonist. Balram’s retrospective narrative and characterization reflects a universal tussle for every individual to break free from the coop of societal constraints. Balram as a progressive protagonist advocate for the individuality of his nation, his actions endorse with a non-conformist spirit which extend beyond his individual pursuits for broader perspectives.

Emerson suggests non-conformity in his treatise, giving stress to trust on one’s knack and authentic judgment rather than outer validation. He strives to preserve uniqueness with a concept of self-belief, being truthful to oneself. Through this essay, Emerson heightens the worth of self-autonomy and self-discovery. R.W Emerson’s work of *Self-Reliance* is a brilliant acquaintance through the journey of existence, providing a feast of encouragement and vision, full of sanguinity and idealism. Scrutinizing R.W. Emerson’s writings is like consuming a strong elixir that revives the soul. Emerson's doctrine of nonconformity defied in-built designs of thought, influenced by society but not voiced by it. Inherently, nature with its figure and framework mirrors the image, which individualism can utilize to breed magnificence and invigorate the self. Human beings must acquire to distinguish and dissect the

“gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the luster of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he (humans) dismisses without notice his thoughts, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side.”⁷

The insights from above, coupled with an individual’s innate intuition function as a doorway to success, unheeded answers and truth. Individuals are a manifestation of their will, and for Ralph Waldo Emerson, individual resolve is paramount. It propels the intellect to act immediately, without any delay. The integrity of insights needs to be trusted to avoid dictates from the society. Literature encapsulates dynamic characters, who are impulsively guided by “epiphany moments”, altering the path of their individualistic destiny.

R W Emerson emphasizes to “trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.”⁸ History had witnessed many great men, who unconventionally charted this path of trusting their predispositions with childlike conviction, are now the prodigy of their era, deceiving the acumen that absolute reliability resides in their hearts, functioning through their hands and infusing their entire existence. Prodigies like Steve Jobs, Mark Zukernberg, Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Einstein, Arundhati Roy, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Kazuo Ishiguro, Teju Cole established this fact to the world and its runners. Contemporary literature should try to capture the individualistic valor and brevity of the ancient Philosophers and embrace the role of leaders, benefactors, redeemers and harbingers, progressing bravely against chaos and disarray. R.W. Emerson defines few

arenas in which self-reliance holds lot of importance: such as - religion; which scars creativity, culture; underplays individualism, and society; which falsely values so-called positive development.

The Book Thief by Markus Zusak runs parallel with the religious aspect of individualism. Set against the backdrop of tumultuous Nazi Germany, *The Book Thief* narrates the story of Liesel Meminger, residing with her foster family. Death narrates the novel and discovers the power of stories and words. The novel centered on Jewish – Nazi conflict, touches the theme of religion, civilization, morality and individuals quest for sense in a challenging world. Hans Heuberg, the father of the protagonist shelters a Jewish man, defying subjugation and showcasing his moralistic and individualistic stance with larger context of religious and societal expectations. “When she came to write her story, she would wonder exactly when the books and the words started to mean not just something, but everything.”⁹ The plot minutely intertwines facets of compassion and love, offering a contemporary perspective on the intersection of individual and the religion.

The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri is testimony to the dimension of ‘individualism’ in context of culture. The novel effortlessly transcends between the events in New York and Calcutta and scrutinizes the nuances involved, when one is caught between two distinguished and conflicting cultures marked by different ideologies. The plot revolves around the name of the protagonist, Gogol, who is an Indian-American born to Bengali immigrants. Gogol is the name given to him by his Father to honor Russian author “Nikolai Gogol”. The protagonist perplexed with his name, throughout his life as it is unconventional. He experiences alienation and drift throughout his life, as he desires to establish his own self in American culture. “There’s no such thing as a perfect name. I think that human beings should be allowed to name themselves when they turn eighteen,” he adds. ‘Until then, pronouns.’¹⁰ Gogol's voyage includes a frequent exploration of his cultural identity and a steady reception of his heritage. The novel exemplifies that embracing one's cultural ancestries does not necessarily mean sacrificing individualism; rather, it becomes a process of self-discovery and understanding. Jhumpa Lahiri, through her work cleverly exemplifies the importance of individuality, which is definitely, much more than the trivial physical characteristics and individual names. For Gogol, his individuality as a soul extended beyond his unusual name, which is simply a proper noun within the grammatical structure of English. His self-concept and moral worth help him to redefine his individuality, which ultimately releases his mental dilemma concerning his name.

There is an amplified regimentation in all provinces of existence. Despite all the brag of democracy and freedom of expression, there is an amassed tendency nowadays to treat man as mere automation or machine, to subordinate his individuality to the state, postulated by R.W Emerson years ago. In a strategic economy, individual has no familiarity of life according to his own agency. The world is racing towards Artificial Intelligence (AI) and equipment master to overpower man; the process should be vice versa. This existing phenomena, give rise to an important question, “Is Man oblivious of his own sanity and individuality amidst the paradigm shift?”

The answer could be achieved through our “intrapersonal introspection” or an “individual’s soliloquy”. Soliloquy is a distinguished literary device in literature, chiefly in plays, where an individual vocalizes aloud their internal turmoil and bottled-up emotions, usually when they are secluded on stage. It’s a monologue, where character through his self-expression unleash the forces of his subconscious mind, thus undergoing a vital and self-illuminating process of “stream of consciousness”, which harness the “individualistic trait” of an individual and act as a catalyst for such individual to self-immolate himself, to rise above the conscious realms, and to attain his individualistic transcendence. Through this evolving journey, the individual upsurges above the mundane and transcends the margins of their conscious realms, ultimately achieving a deep understanding of themselves and their dwelling in the universe. Contemporary authors, philosophers and infants can transverse the soul and trace the heart, they can serve as potent force waging an inexorable war for dignity of human mind.

One such war was waged by writer, Kazuo Ishiguro in search of individuality in one of his widely acclaimed novel, *Never let me go*. Kazuo Ishiguro in *Never Let Me Go* provides a nuanced assessment of individualism within the restraints of a dystopian civilization where clones are upraised through organ donation. Despite the characters' prearranged destinies, Ishiguro paints them as entirely realistic individuals with their own opinions, sensations, and needs.¹¹ One aspect of ‘individualism’ in the novel is the character’s struggle to define themselves and to carve out their own identities despite their predetermined destinies. Apart from clones being raised in a controlled environment, characters like Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth exhibit unique personalities and aspirations. They form complex relationships, harbor individual dreams, and wrestle with the idea of agency and free will. *Never Let Me Go* is one of the unique tales from the 21st century which has been bestowed with Nobel Prize along with manifold awards. Kazuo Ishiguro remains one of the greatest, persuasive authors of our period. As the story infer, the readers ostensibly discern the dehumanization of technical human clones for the resolve of garnering organs.

Simultaneously, this unconventional novel can also be deliberated as one of the allegorical masterworks that convey out the ethnic discourse which can also be alleged in the dispute of imperialistic clash. Critically analyzing an innovative work like *Never Let Me Go* requires a keen eye to analyze cryptic transcript to probe beneath the surface and delve deep into the narrative. Kazuo Ishiguro's explanation is layered with symbolism, subtext, and hidden meanings, challenging critics to unravel its complexities of themes. Kazuo Ishiguro masterfully employs unique literary techniques such as foreshadowing, irony, and ambiguity to entice readers and to probe their individuality into a world, that is at once familiar and hauntingly enigmatic to the audience. Kathy, the main protagonist of *Never Let Me Go* reflects on the enduring nature of love and individuality. She muses on the idea that even though their memories may fade over time, their feelings and identities remain intact. Despite their predetermined destinies as clones raised for organ donation, Kathy emphasizes the importance of preserving their humanity and individuality through their experiences and relationships. This novel underscores the characters' struggle to assert their own identities and maintain a sense of individuality in the face of societal expectations and prearranged fates.

Through meticulous attention on detail and a profound understanding of human psychology through soliloquy and stream of consciousness, Ishiguro crafts a narrative that resonates on both personal and universal level. *Never Let Me Go* serves as a compelling meditation on what it means to be human, challenging readers to confront their own mortality and contemplate the nature of existence itself. In essence, *Never Let Me Go* is more than just a novel—it is a work of art that invites readers to wrestle with the convolutions of their individuality in their life, love, and loss. By peeling back the layers of the story and digging into its hidden depths, readers can uncover a profound meditation on the human experience that transcends cultural boundaries and speaks to the universal truths that bind us all. Thus, highlighting the supremacy of individualism as a trait, it enables man to transgress infinite boundaries, which can be witnessed sporadically in literature.

Contemporary literature serves as a custodian of spiritual and cultural values in a world, disfigured by increasing industrialization and materialism. One should realize the fact, that an idea of ‘individualism’ as a distinguished characteristic, should be universally acknowledged and the writer, who crafts those ideas should be celebrated in the world. Modern writers should attempt to alter the discourse of the world with their writings like the, *The Palace of Illusions*, by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The novel oscillates from the perspective of Draupadi, the female protagonist of, Indian magnum opus, “Mahabharat”. Through Draupadi's recitation, readers are not only immersed in the epic events of the Mahabharata but are also acquainted from the female discourse of the events. Draupadi's sternness of mind in the face of misfortune, postulates her individualistic trait, which forewarns her about the catastrophic occurrence in the history of atrocities attempted on women. Chitra Divakaruni delves into the complexities of Draupadi's relationships with the Pandava brothers, underlining the nuances of love, loyalty, and rivalry that define their interactions.¹² Moreover, Chitra Divakaruni's exploration of Draupadi's quest for justice and redemption adds layers of depth to her personality, challenging traditional interpretations of her role in the epic. Draupadi emerges as a strong, resilient, and multidimensional protagonist, grappling with the consequences of her actions and striving to assert her agency in the patriarchal society. In addition to its compelling characters, *Palace of Illusions* captivates readers with its lush and evocative depiction of ancient India. Chitra Divakaruni skillfully brings the world of the Mahabharata to life, transporting readers to a time of opulent palaces, epic battles, and larger-than-life characters.

Overall, *Palace of Illusions* has garnered widespread acclaim for its masterful storytelling, rich characterization, and thought-provoking exploration of timeless themes. It continues to resonate with modern readers, offering a fresh and compelling interpretation of one of the greatest epics in Indian literature. The Palace of Illusion, as a literary work, justifies the title of the research paper, where each character wage a war with the forces of society, where their individualism act as a weapon and shield.

Contemporary literature mirrors society, it acts as a refuge from the real world to reel world. Literature mocks, satirizes and critiques the dominant society, it captures the prevailing norms, beliefs and culture of a particular habitat, it mirrors human atrocities and relationships, by narrating acts and describing characters, it unravels the intricacies of the mortal condition,

making it relatable to readers by replicating the collective experiences of the society. It acts as a social commentary, often helpful in shedding light on the devious truth of society, which are unacknowledged or often too challenging to be openly accepted. Contemporary writings becomes a pleasure for the readers, offering a dimension where humans can accomplish all their subconscious desires through reading. Contemporary literatures being tailored for the youth, retains a responsibility to stand on the tenant of 'individualism' propagated by Emerson in *Self-Reliance*, and to craft an irreplaceable composition, having a potential to inspire, tutoring to be virtuous and instructing the generations to be self-reliant in order to immerse themselves in the sanctity of their intuitions and caliber.

Art and literature have a potential to stimulate sensation and emotion; they have a potential to substantiate the extraordinary powers of human intellect. Art and literature have long been associated with the belief in 'individualism', and the concept of 'self-reliance', an idea propogated by transcendental writers since 19th century has also played an important role in shaping and promoting the value and importance of contemporary literature. Emerson believed that a self-reliant mind with a poetical sense which not only trusts the impressions about the external world, but also act upon that trust.

Emerson suggests in "Self-Reliance" that "the spontaneous expression of thought or feeling is more in keeping with personal will, and hence with the natural world as constituted by human faculties, than that which is passively assumed or accepted as right or good, or that which conforms to social norms. Emerson's individualism or self-reliance exalted human intuition, which precedes reflection, and it privileged the will over the intellect. Feeling and sensation are antecedent to reason, and Emerson believed that they registered moral truths more important than anything cognition could summon forth."¹³

That does not mean that the individual is necessarily unbounded, only that the individual establishes his own boundaries and sets his own priorities.

Conclusion

The characteristic of 'Individualism' will aid literature and its readers to manner exquisiteness, to yield tangible from intangibles, to create meaning and reality due to which we our able to act on an 'imagined self', which is a formation of "genius self".

Individualism, as a lost but timeless tradition has the power to revolutionize the society and its people, it's a gift of time, bestowed on humanity from eternity. To open peripheral doors of universe with opportunities, one needs to master the art of uniqueness and abide themselves to its ways and conduct. Emerson, through his essay was successful in awakening the spirit of Americans, who had succumbed to societal pressure, rigid socio-cultural dimension and political influence. Self-reliance wielded a huge influence during it's time.

The unique and individual perspective nurtured through individualism, poses threat to the societal forces that govern the community and are a threat to the sovereignty as well. An individually evolved human will question the rigidity of the existing framework. Humans are trapped within their own consciousness, and preconceived notions, which prevent them from furthering in life.

Individuality in contemporary literature often intersects with the celebration of diversity. Authors should accentuate the value of distinctive perceptions, involvements, and voices, contributing to a rich tapestry of narratives.

“Whatever the mind can perceive, it can conceive”¹⁴ Nothing is at last sacred, but sanctity of mind, Individualism helps to draw profound consciousness from ordinary, to derive miraculous results from the common thread. According to R.W Emerson, *Self-Reliance* was not a dictate to be followed but a conduct to be striven for on which Emerson postulated anyone could steadily live. It was an aim, an archetypal, a call for his “unique self” as well as others”

Contemporary Literature should parallel the teachings of “Individualism” postulated by R.W. Emerson in his monumental work *Self-Reliance*, by intentionally focusing on writings, which can unite individuals’ and their consciousness, thus invigorating and illuminating the collective consciousness of the world. Literature has the power to shape the future, thus its writing should be helmed properly.

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*Dr Richa Verma
Assistant Director
School of Languages
Chattrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University
Kanpur, India, 208024