



The Despair In Ralph Waldo Emerson's Anglo-Saxonist Perspective: A Critical Review

Dhan Raj Bist¹

¹Research Scholar, School of Arts and Humanities, Singhania University, Pachari Bari, Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan- 333515, India

Naresh Kumar Yadav²

²Associate Professor, School of Arts and Humanities, Singhania University, Pachari Bari, Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan- 333515, India

ABSTRACT

This present paper examines Ralph Waldo Emerson's changing views on history, race, and individual responsibility. Early writings like "Self-Reliance" prioritizes individual activity above historical determinism, rejecting fatalism and emphasizing self-trust. But by the 1850s, Emerson's abolitionist stance betrays his deepening disenchantment with politics that upheld slavery. Emerson's recognition of the limitations of human agency under structural forces in "Fate" (1860) reflects a shift in perspective towards historical inevitability. His Anglo-Saxonist beliefs, which combine self-reliance and racial determinism, highlight the conflict between independence and historical limitations. Although independence feeds against hopelessness, Emerson's later writings, such as "English Traits," expose inconsistencies, especially his racial essentialism. This paper highlights the timeless value of independence as a resistance to fatalism and criticises Emerson's Anglo-Saxonism as a betrayal of his principles.

Keywords: History, Race, Despair, Anglo-Saxon, Self-trust, Fatalism.

INTRODUCTION

Emerson's earlier works, including his essay Self-Reliance from 1841, provided a counterbalance to this hopelessness by promoting personal initiative over acquiescing to fate. According to him, independent people actively participate in influencing history and reject ideas of inevitable events. Emerson's support for abolition, however, progressively portrayed pro-slavery Northern politics as having their roots in despair as his political vocabulary changed over the 1850s. By 1860, Emerson's essay Fate signalled a change in his perspective, as he abandoned his prior optimism about human action and started to recognise the impact of historical inevitability. This change demonstrates a difficult balancing act between his desire of independence and the facts of historical and structural influences. Anglo-Saxonism, a 19th-century racial theory that promoted delusions of Anglo-Saxon dominance and national identity, has been the focus of decades of scholarly analysis of Ralph Waldo Emerson's writings on race and politics (Dain, 2003).

DISCUSSION

Ralph Waldo Emerson examines the significant significance of personal agency and the perils of depending solely on historical narratives for identity creation in his essay "Self-Reliance." He argues that modern people incorrectly utilise historical figures like Alfred, Skanderbeg, and Gustavus as moral compass points and criticises the imagination's propensity to mythologise them. Emerson cautions that a loss of self-sovereignty results from this reliance on antiquated myths, which is a result of discontent with the present. He instead honours individuals like John Brown, whose radical abolitionism demonstrated independence by relying on timeless values like justice and love that are unaffected by historical precedent. Emerson warns against the

use of historical myths to manipulate identity, and his criticism also applies to political players and structures. He sees allegiance to nationalist and monarchical ideologies as the result of illusory and symbolic narratives that obfuscate personal freedom. People run the risk of developing identities based on outside allegiances rather than self-confidence when they show deference to historical personalities. Emerson contrasts the gravitational draw of historical tales with the inward power of self-reliance by using the image of magnetism. True self-reliance is based on an individual's instinct, spontaneity, and intrinsic genius, which are symbolised by this magnetic force.

While referencing modern scientific discoveries like as Faraday's electromagnetic discoveries, Emerson reframes personal agency as an active, inductive force that may influence events rather than be influenced by them. Emerson's metaphor of electromagnetic is consistent with his conviction in the transformational potential of self-trust and human will, in contrast to Newtonian gravitational theories, which placed an emphasis on external forces. Emerson does, however, recognise the limitations of selfhood, acknowledging that people live within uncontrollable historical, social, and political contexts. He highlights that maintaining internal agency while negotiating these external circumstances is necessary for self-reliance. Expanding on Emerson's concepts, Branka Arsić emphasises the conflict between independence and the 'fatality of perception.' According to Arsić, people's interiority is defined by their instinctive sensations and emotions. Therefore, being self-reliant means embracing and changing these outside forces rather than running away from them. Because it necessitates that people constantly reevaluate their responsibilities and identities, this process of growth and self-transformation is frequently painful and elegiac (Arsic, 2010).

The conflict between personal agency (power) and outside constraints (circumstance) is examined in Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Fate," which contrasts with the optimism of his previous essay "Self-Reliance." Emerson emphasises that people must trust their inherent polarity as a guide, acknowledging the harshness and unknowability of outside forces. However, Emerson's increasing awareness of the boundaries of selfhood against circumstance is indicated by the change from 'magnetism' in "Self-Reliance" to "polarity" in "Fate." Emerson struggles with the intractable contradictions between fate and power, which are frequently compared as a Sisyphean conflict. Additionally, he presents racial determinism, which links identity to more general evolutionary and historical factors and places it inside a framework of hereditary limits. His erratic use of the word 'race' reveals a concerning confusion of nation, ethnicity, and species (Castillo, 2004). Emerson's Anglo-Saxonism, which combines beliefs of dominance and conquest with self-reliance, highlights his belief in racial destiny even while he rejects rigid racial classifications. Some contend that Emerson's racial determinism supports his idea of individuality, while others see it as damaging self-reliance.

In order to comprehend Emerson's racist act of self-capitulation, it is necessary to look at the ways in which individualism has not been crushed by history in political action and thought. When does reliance on oneself overcome hopelessness? In his speech on the Fugitive Slave Act in 1854, he had such an opportunity. Emerson explores the possibility of such a legislation being passed by a government that professes to love liberty in this address. Rather than blaming a single entity for cruelty, he says the problem is a general disregard for autonomous behavior and a disregard for personal freedom. Beyond the constitutional advantages they currently have, Emerson argues that pro-slavery Democrats have a type of transcendent political power that is guiding the country towards catastrophe. This, he says, is not the sole political model out there. Conservatives' departure, exemplified by Daniel Webster and others, says as much about their grasp of power and situation as it does about the politics they support. When it comes to vulgar politics, the Whig pursues the past, the old needs, or the Musts, according to Emerson, who believes that the pro-slavery Whig conflates what could happen with what must happen. The reformer fights for what's best, what's ideal, for the people of May. How can people find a middle ground between "May" and "Must," "power" and "circumstance"? This is a question that Emerson poses again in "Fate." Still, the speaker refuses to give in in this speech. Every day, we encounter a plethora of "musts," and while it may seem fatalistic from the outside, being self-reliant means being able to weather the "May" storms and shoulder the "Must." The "musts" of poverty and need are secondary to Emerson's insistence that the human need to rise above, love, and aid one another is paramount. He quickly goes back to urging people to trust themselves and take action after painting Whiggish politics as a philosophy of hopelessness.

Readers who have read "Fate" may reasonably wonder why Emerson includes race in his discussion of the house of the spirit in "Fate" and why he classifies certain notions as "must." There is less of an emphasis on race in Emerson's earlier speech, even though he does utilize comparable racial essentialist terminology. He references the "Anglo-Saxon race" to highlight a theory of despair:

The national spirit in this country is lethargic, consumed by self-interest, and indifferent to principle. The Anglo-Saxon race is proud, strong, and selfish. They only believe in Anglo-Saxons. In 1825, Greece found America deaf. Poland found America deaf, Italy and Hungary found America deaf. England focuses on trade, not liberty; it stands against Greece, Hungary, Schleswig-Holstein, and the French Republic while it was a republic. (789-790)

Emerson uses multiple instances of non-Anglo-Saxon nations fighting for liberty and receiving a callous, insular response from the United Kingdom and the United States to condemn an Anglo-American conspiracy of apathy. This casts doubt on the Anglo-Saxon claim that they are uniquely positioned politically. Specifically, he brings up the 1848 Hungarian Revolution and the legacy of revolutionary leader Lajos Kossuth, who became an icon of democracy in the wake of the revolution. In his 1851 reflection on Kossuth's significance, political individualist James McCune Smith stresses that the American populace looked up to Kossuth because he was neither white nor Anglo-Saxon. There can be no Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism according to Emerson's assessment of the political inactivity of Anglo-Americans. Emerson casts Anglo-Saxon passivity as a trajectory of political hopelessness by incorporating this critique with his prior comments on conservative inaction. Later on, in pieces like "Fate" and *English Traits*, Emerson lays bare the severe political limits of Anglo-Saxonism, an ideology that prioritizes egocentric mythology over the natural human impulses to rise above oneself, love one's neighbor, and lend a hand when needed (Painter, 2009).

At the conclusion of his speech, Emerson rejects the notion that the American and English disregard for liberty is inevitable. He critiques the passivity and indifference prevalent among the active classes regarding slavery's aggressions. Emerson emphasizes that liberty is not an immediate or easy achievement; instead, it requires enduring significant challenges and gradual progress over time. He describes freedom as a hard-won triumph, necessitating the accumulation of effort, resilience, and trials. Only after surmounting immense difficulties, enduring calamities, and resisting temptations, can one genuinely claim freedom. Emerson's words underscore the necessity of perseverance and strength in the pursuit of liberty, portraying it as a deliberate and transformative process rather than an effortless or predetermined outcome.

Therefore, mountains of difficulty must be surmounted, stern trials met, wiles of seduction, dangers, healed by a quarantine of calamities to measure his strength before he dares say, I am free. (790).

Emerson returns to a universal poetics of human agency, asserting that the force of individual action can influence and alter circumstances. While obstacles and imperatives (musts) will always exist, to view persistent injustices in American society—such as slavery, imperialist expansion, and racial determinism—as inevitable outcomes of Anglo-Saxon domination are to abandon self-reliance in favor of despair. This shift, seen in Emerson's later essay *Fate*, represents a profound betrayal of self-reliance. By interpreting circumstances as fixed and succumbing to fatalistic theories, Emerson effectively neutralizes the power of the individual. His contemporaries recognized this critical flaw. Charles Anderson, in a speech against Anglo-Saxonism, emphasized the need for action beyond mere words, urging people to solve societal challenges through deeds (Anderson, 1850). Similarly, in an 1859 column in *Anglo-African Magazine*, a writer identified as "S.S.N." rejected labels like "Anglo-Saxon" or "Anglo-African," advocating instead for Black political organization rooted in an identity of "American" without clinging to outdated notions of national supremacy. While the self may have limitations, relying on deterministic historical theories that undermine individual agency offers no viable alternative.

We cannot consider the Emerson of the *Fugitive Slave Law* address as the definitive authority on his views of self-reliance, history, and race. Emerson himself acknowledges the complexity of his inner struggles, opening the speech with the statement, "I have my own spirits in prison—spirits in deeper prisons, whom no man visits if I do not." Similarly, we cannot regard the Emerson of *English Traits* and "Fate" as the final word on his philosophy, though many scholars of his Anglo-Saxonism have taken that approach. Rather than searching for a true Emerson locked in the prisons of time or intent, it is more productive to examine the persistent influence of his ideas in American political life and the weight of his despair (Castillo, 2004). Emerson's Anglo-Saxonism represents a significant departure from, or distortion of, self-reliance. While both frameworks—self-reliance and Anglo-Saxonism—grapple with the contingencies of external circumstances, they fail in different ways. Self-reliance is an ongoing process of self-work, marked by the fear of losing or changing parts of oneself when faced with uncontrollable forces (Arsic, 2010). This confrontation, however difficult, is essential to personal growth. In contrast, Anglo-Saxonism's actualization has entrenched violence, hierarchy, and racial supremacy, as documented by Horsman, West, and Painter.

Endlessly debating which version of Emerson is definitive overlooks the broader lesson: self-reliance remains a compelling antidote to despair and fatalism. Emerson, though inconsistent in practicing his ideals, offers valuable theoretical insights. As critics, we must also turn to democratic individualists who theorized self-reliance without succumbing to its challenges. This is, in essence, a call for self-criticism.

CONCLUSION

Emerson demonstrates a significant conflict between historical determinism and individual autonomy in his changing views on Anglo-Saxonism and self-reliance. First, he praised independence as a transforming power, highlighting the capacity of the individual to oppose repressive systems and imagine a better future. His later writings, such as *Fate and English Traits*, erode his previous principles by reflecting a retreat into despair and an embrace of historical inevitability and racial determinism. When faced with structural problems like slavery and imperialism, this paradox highlights Emerson's philosophy's shortcomings. Emerson's argument for persistent self-confidence and his criticism of passive politics, however, are still pertinent today. In addition to serving as motivation for democratic individualism, his legacy serves as a warning against the perils of fatalism and restrictive ideologies masquerading as self-reliance.

REFERENCES

1. Anderson, Charles. *An Address on Anglo-Saxon Destiny: Delivered Before the Philomathesian of Kenyon College, Ohio, August 8th, 1849*. John D. Thorpe, 1850.
2. Arsic, Branka. *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson*. Harvard University Press, 2010.
3. Castillo, Susan. "'The Best of Nations'?: Race and Imperial Destinies in Emerson's English Traits." *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 34, 2004, pp. 100–11.
4. Dain, Bruce. *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic*. 2003.
5. Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Self-reliance and other essays*. Courier Corporation, 2012.
6. Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures (LOA# 15): Nature; Addresses, and Lectures/Essays: First and Second Series/Representative Men/English Traits/The Conduct of Life*. Vol. 1. Library of America, 1983.
7. S.S.N. "Anglo-Saxons and Anglo-Africans." *The Anglo-African Magazine*, Arno Press, 1968, pp. 247–51.
8. Painter, Nell Irvin. "Ralph Waldo Emerson's Saxons." *Journal of American History*, vol. 95, no. 4, 2009, pp. 977–85,