

Eunice de Souza and Emerson: A Transcendental Reading

Barsha Sahoo is a PhD scholar at Gandhi Institute of Engineering and Technology University, Gunupur, Odisha, India

Dr. Shishir Kumar Swain is a Professor at Gandhi Institute of Engineering and Technology University, Gunupur, Odisha, India.

Abstract

Transcendentalism, originating in nineteenth-century America, foregrounds the primacy of individual conscience, spiritual autonomy, and the pursuit of inner truth beyond institutional dogma. While traditionally associated with thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, transcendentalist ideals continue to resonate within modern literary expressions across cultures. This paper offers a comparative reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Eunice de Souza, examining how transcendental concerns—selfhood, moral independence, skepticism toward social conventions, and the search for authentic experience—manifest in their respective works. Although de Souza’s poetry is rooted in a late twentieth-century Indian urban milieu and marked by irony and restraint, it reveals a modern reworking of transcendentalist sensibilities. The study argues that de Souza does not replicate Emersonian idealism but revises it through skepticism and everyday realism, thereby extending transcendental discourse into a postcolonial, modern context.

Keywords: Transcendentalism, Individualism, Emerson, Eunice de Souza, Modern Indian Poetry

Introduction

American Transcendentalism emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as a philosophical and literary movement that challenged religious orthodoxy, social conformity, and materialism. At its core lay a faith in the individual’s capacity to access truth intuitively and morally, without mediation by institutions. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the movement’s principal voice, articulated a vision of self-reliance, spiritual autonomy, and moral independence that profoundly shaped American intellectual life.

Eunice de Souza, a prominent modern Indian English poet, belongs to a vastly different cultural, temporal, and ideological context. Her poetry is often characterized by irony,

minimalism, feminist critique, and a sharp engagement with everyday Indian realities. At first glance, Emerson's affirmative spiritual idealism and de Souza's restrained, skeptical tone appear incompatible. However, a closer reading reveals shared philosophical preoccupations with the self, resistance to dogma, and ethical independence.

This paper undertakes a comparative transcendental reading of Emerson and Eunice de Souza to explore how transcendental ideas persist, mutate, and acquire new meanings in a modern, postcolonial literary framework. Rather than claiming direct influence, the study traces thematic and conceptual affinities that position de Souza as a modern inheritor and revisionist of transcendental thought.

Emerson and the Foundations of Transcendentalism

Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays, particularly *Nature* (1836) and *Self-Reliance* (1841), articulate the philosophical foundations of Transcendentalism. Emerson posits the individual as inherently capable of discerning truth through intuition and self-trust rather than through inherited tradition or institutional authority. His insistence that "imitation is suicide" underscores his belief in originality and inner authenticity.

Nature, for Emerson, is not merely a physical entity but a spiritual medium through which the individual perceives universal truths. The human soul, he argues, is continuous with the Over-Soul, a universal spiritual force that connects all beings. This metaphysical optimism underwrites Emerson's moral philosophy, which emphasizes ethical self-reliance, nonconformity, and resistance to social coercion.

Equally important is Emerson's critique of organized religion. He rejects ritualistic faith in favor of personal spiritual experience, asserting that true religion arises from inward moral awareness. Thus, Emersonian transcendentalism is both philosophical and ethical, advocating an independent self grounded in moral intuition.

Eunice de Souza and the Modern Self

Eunice de Souza's poetry emerges from a modern Indian context shaped by colonial history, Catholic upbringing, patriarchal norms, and urban middle-class life. Collections such

as *Fix*, *Women in Dutch Painting*, and *Learn from the Almond Leaf* reveal a poetic voice that is skeptical of authority, wary of grand narratives, and deeply invested in personal truth.

De Souza frequently interrogates institutional religion, especially Catholicism, exposing its constraints on female autonomy and emotional freedom. Her poetry resists doctrinal certainty, privileging lived experience over imposed belief. This skepticism parallels Emerson's rejection of organized religion, though de Souza's tone is ironic rather than idealistic.

The self in de Souza's poetry is introspective yet socially conscious. Her speakers often confront familial expectations, gender norms, and cultural hypocrisy, asserting moral independence through quiet defiance rather than overt proclamation. In this sense, de Souza's poetry enacts a modern form of self-reliance—one that is tempered by irony and grounded in everyday realities.

Comparative Transcendental Concerns

Individualism and Self-Reliance

Emerson's concept of self-reliance advocates radical confidence in one's inner voice. De Souza, while less celebratory, similarly foregrounds the necessity of personal integrity. Her poems often depict individuals who refuse emotional dishonesty or social pretense, suggesting a moral independence aligned with transcendentalist values. In Emerson's poem "Self-Reliance", Emerson points out that he doesn't follow what his fellow mankind follows or believes in. His only guide is his intuition, which is his sole spiritual guide. He writes, "...forever I forego, / The yoke of men's opinions. I will be/ Light-hearted as a bird, and live with God. / I find him in the bottom of my heart, / I hear continually his voice therein..." ("Self-Reliance by Ralph Waldo Emerson")

Eunice de Souza has written two novels: *Dangerlok* and *Dev and Simran*. Both have protagonists who are single women. *Dangerlok* is a semi-autobiography of de Souza herself where her protagonist has non-conformist views regarding the Indian society. (Indian Writing in English - an Institution of Eminence Project, "Eunice De Souza: A Biographical Note - Indian Writing in English"). This shows her individualism and will of self-reliance on herself in a society that is very critical of its women's marital status. Eunice de Souza's

protagonists, namely Rina Ferreira and Simran, trust their intuition more than acting or taking decisions based on others' opinions or advice.

Resistance to Dogma

Both writers critique rigid belief systems. Emerson challenges religious institutions that stifle spiritual growth, while de Souza exposes how religious and cultural dogmas regulate women's lives. In both cases, transcendence lies in rejecting imposed authority in favor of inward ethical awareness. In the poem "The Rhodora" Emerson writes,

"...Rhodora! If the sages ask thy why/
This charm is wasted on the earth
and the sky, / Tell them, dear, that, if eyes were made for seeing, /
Then beauty is its own excuse for being;" (Academy of American Poets)

The above lines demonstrate Emerson's resistance to any form of religious conformity. His simplest explanation of a flower, here, is that the rhodora's beauty lies in its own existence. It's not a god's gift to mankind but its own existence that makes it beautiful to look at (Baldwin). Eunice de Souza, similarly, in her poem "Transcend Self, You Say" from the collection "*Women in Dutch Painting*" (1988) writes about how cultural history books are not fit to be printed because they demean women. The widows were seen as impure in Hindu culture and were not fit to be among the pure Hindus. Widows were treated as outcasts of society. De Souza also writes how, "A novelist said that, / who spent his life wondering why, / when the Nazis came, his mother pushed *him* in the closet, / and let his sisters go to Auschwitz." (De Souza, *Volcano: The Collected Poems of Eunice de Souza: With an Introduction by Vidyan Ravinthiran* 68)

Nature and the Everyday

Nature occupies a central symbolic role in Emerson's work as a source of spiritual renewal. De Souza's poetry, by contrast, rarely romanticizes nature. When natural imagery appears, it is subdued and contextual, reflecting a modern sensibility. This shift marks a movement from transcendence through nature to transcendence within the everyday.

In the poem "Nature", Emerson sees nature as other transcendentalists do. In other words, nature is what transforms when one comes in close contact with natural surroundings. Nature is different and awakens the moral and spiritual side of men rather than encouraging men's materialistic pursuits ("Nature by Ralph Waldo Emerson"). Even in his essay "*Nature*"

(1836), he romanticizes nature as a source of inspiration and enlightenment for mankind (Emerson Central). Eunice de Souza, on the other hand, has poems such as “Learn from the Almond Leaf”, “I Disentangled the Moon”, “Summer”, and “Avocado Stone” from her collection “*Learn from the Almond Leaf*” that talk about the reality of urban nature. She associates themes of death, global warming, and afforestation with the changes in nature brought about by the activities of human beings (De Souza, *Volcano: The Collected Poems of Eunice de Souza: With an Introduction by Vidyan Ravinthiran*)

Tone and Method

A crucial difference lies in tone. Emerson’s writing is affirmative and visionary, grounded in metaphysical optimism. De Souza’s poetry is marked by irony, restraint, and skepticism. Yet this difference does not negate transcendental affinity; rather, it demonstrates how transcendental ideas adapt to modern disillusionment and postcolonial realities.

Transcendentalism Reimagined in a Modern Context

Eunice de Souza’s engagement with transcendental themes reflects a modern revision rather than replication of Emersonian thought. In a world shaped by social fragmentation, gender politics, and historical disillusionment, transcendence no longer appears as spiritual exaltation but as ethical clarity and personal honesty.

De Souza’s transcendentalism is inward, muted, and resistant to idealism. It acknowledges the limitations of the self while still affirming the necessity of moral independence. In this way, her poetry extends transcendental discourse beyond its American origins, demonstrating its adaptability across cultures and historical moments.

Conclusion

A transcendental reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Eunice de Souza reveals a shared philosophical commitment to the sovereignty of the individual conscience, resistance to dogma, and the pursuit of authentic experience. While Emerson articulates these ideals through metaphysical optimism and reverence for nature, de Souza reworks them through irony, skepticism, and engagement with modern Indian realities.

This comparative study demonstrates that transcendentalism is not a static nineteenth-century doctrine but a flexible intellectual tradition capable of renewal in diverse cultural contexts. Eunice de Souza's poetry, in its quiet assertion of moral autonomy, stands as a modern testament to the enduring relevance of transcendental thought. This study has attempted a transcendental reading of Eunice de Souza's poetry in dialogue with Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophical vision, revealing a nuanced convergence as well as significant departures between the two. While Emerson's transcendentalism is grounded in an optimistic faith in the Over-Soul, self-reliance, and the redemptive power of nature, De Souza's poetic imagination reworks these ideals within the constraints of modern Indian urban life, marked by irony, skepticism, and socio-cultural disillusionment. Her poetry does not reject transcendental values outright; rather, it interrogates their applicability in a fragmented, postcolonial reality.

De Souza's emphasis on individual consciousness, moral introspection, and resistance to institutional authority resonates with Emersonian self-reliance. However, her transcendental quest is stripped of metaphysical idealism and reframed through a sharp awareness of gender, religion, and social hypocrisy. Where Emerson perceives nature as a transparent medium of divine truth, De Souza often presents it as muted, constrained, or ironic—reflecting the limitations imposed on the modern subject. This contrast underscores how transcendental thought adapts across cultural and temporal contexts.

Ultimately, the comparative reading demonstrates that Eunice de Souza represents a modern, critical transcendentalist whose poetry negotiates inner freedom amid external constraints. By placing her work alongside Emerson's philosophy, the study expands the scope of transcendentalism beyond its American origins, showing its relevance as a flexible, cross-cultural mode of thought. De Souza's poetry thus emerges as a site where transcendental inquiry survives—not as spiritual exaltation, but as ethical resistance and self-awareness in a disenchanting world.

Works Cited

“Self Reliance by Ralph Waldo Emerson.” *Famous Poems, Famous Poets. - All Poetry*, allpoetry.com/Self-Reliance.

---. "Eunice De Souza: A Biographical Note - Indian Writing in English." *Indian Writing in English*, 16 May 2022, indianwritinginenglish.uohyd.ac.in/https-indianwritinginenglish-uohyd-ac-in/authors/eunice-de-souza-a-biographical-note.

Academy of American Poets. "The Rhodora." *Poets.org*, 1867, poets.org/poem/rhodora.

Baldwin, Emma. "The Rhodora by Ralph Waldo Emerson." *Poem Analysis*, 28 Oct. 2025, poemanalysis.com/ralph-waldo-emerson/the-rhodora.

---. *Volcano: The Collected Poems of Eunice de Souza: With an Introduction by Vidyan Ravinthiran*. Penguin Enterprise, 2025.

"Nature by Ralph Waldo Emerson." *Famous Poems, Famous Poets. - All Poetry*, allpoetry.com/poem/8494667-Nature-by-Ralph-Waldo-Emerson.

Emerson Central. "Nature by Ralph Waldo Emerson | Essay." *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 1 Dec. 2025, emersoncentral.com/texts/nature-addresses-lectures/nature2/chapter1-nature.