



# Over-Soul: A Comparative Study of the East and the West

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**Abstract:** Ralph Waldo Emerson used the term Over-Soul to denote the relationship between individual soul and the universal soul. Emerson's extensive reading of both Eastern and Western philosophies has prompted him to articulate such a concept that adheres to the philosophical discourses of both the continents. Emerson's concept of the Over-Soul denotes inseparable, impersonal and eternal essence fundamental to human consciousness, integrity and nature. The concept has a universal appeal as scholars have examined the notion from the perspective of different schools of philosophy spanning across the globe. This universal approach of the notion poses Emerson at the centre of the Eastern and Western metaphysical discourse. Over-Soul resounds with the Eastern concepts like Brahman, Non-dualism and Sunya (Void). It also echoes with the concept of Sunya (void) articulated by Bhima Bhoi, an Odia saint poet. Both these concepts, 'Over-Soul' and 'Sunya' share a common notion that is Brahman, the Vedic concept of the Ultimate Reality or the Supreme Being. This Supreme Being or Brahman pervades all existence. It is the source and destination of every being. In their writings both Emerson and Bhoi articulate that the individual self (the soul) is part of the cosmic self (the Over-Soul). To them, Brahman is not an intangible essence but an active consciousness that binds the "seer and the seen, the subject and the object" into one metaphysical reality.

**Keywords:** Over-Soul, Brahman, Sunya, Being, Metaphysical reality

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## INTRODUCTION

The concept of the Over-Soul was first articulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American Transcendentalist, in his essay "The Over-Soul". Though deeply associated with the intellectual and philosophical setting of American Transcendentalism, the concept Over-Soul shares a deep mystical notion which transcends religious and cultural limitations. Emerson's metaphysical notion of the Over-Soul distinctly resonates with several philosophical schools of the East particularly with the Vedic notion of Brahman. This paper makes a comparative study of the philosophical significance of the Over-Soul and Brahman. It also argues that Emerson's concept of the Over-Soul shares almost similar philosophical significance as does the Vedic concept of Brahman. This study makes a comparative and textual analysis of both the concepts through the metaphysical lens of the East, particularly the Vedic philosophy and the West. In the Vedic philosophy, Brahman is regarded as the foundational essence of all existence. It is also regarded as the ultimate truth and the cause of every being. Everything in this universe whether being or non-being are governed by the same underlying principle called Brahman. It also explains that all forms of life, even the most seemingly contrasting ones are interconnected. It is all that has been and all that will be and it is beyond time as it transcends time and space as it permeates everything.

Many scholars have examined the idea of Emerson's Over-Soul from Vedantic and the Upanisadic point of view. Robert C. Gordon, in *Emerson and the Light of India*, says that Emerson's access to Eastern

scriptures such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Vedas encouraged him to articulate the notion of the Over-Soul which echoes with metaphysical idea of non-dualism. “Emerson’s Over-Soul is an Americanized, poeticized Brahman—impersonal, infinite, and the true Self of all beings” (Gordon 92). Similarly, in *The Orient in American Transcendentalism* Arthur Christy notes that Emerson’s reading of Oriental texts has formed his perception of the soul as a part of the divine whole (Christy 107–10). The concept has its roots in Neoplatonic philosophy, especially Plotinus’ *Enneads*. The metaphysical articulation of Emerson that the individual self dissolves into a higher self, echoes with Plotinus’ notion of union with the One. In *Ruin the Sacred Truths*, Harold Bloom brands Emerson as “the American Orphic”. Bloom says that Emerson’s Over-Soul synthesizes Plato’s divine forms, Christian spiritualism, and Oriental non-dualism into a single visionary ideal (Bloom 179–80). Many scholars opine Over-Soul as visionary; others critique it for vagueness. Quentin Anderson is of the opinion that “The Over-Soul remains a mystical abstraction, failing to anchor itself in any rigorous theology or philosophy” (Anderson 56). In recent scholastic discourse, Over-Soul is being examined from a comparative mystical point of view. In *Emerson and the Divine*, Richard Geldard argues: “The Over-Soul is Emerson’s most enduring legacy—the articulation of the divine as immanent, silent, and ever-present. It remains America’s purest mystical vision” (Geldard 54). The concept continues to encourage environmental, moral, and mystical interpretations. It also encourages recent discourse such as interconnectedness, inner transformation, and universal spirit. Keeping in view of the above scholarly discourses it has become evident that the scholars have tried to interpret the concept from different perspectives however none has made an extensive comparative study of both the concepts of Over-Soul and Brahman. Hence the writer feels that there is a need to examine these two concepts from the lens of the East and the west especially focusing on the works of two mystics- Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American Transcendentalist and Bhima Bhoi, an Odia saint poet and the preacher of Mahima Dharma.

Both the mystics through their works have articulated the concept of Brahman by using different terminologies such as ‘Over-Soul’, propounded by Emerson and ‘Void’ by Bhoi. Both the 19<sup>th</sup> century masters preach for an exclusive movement one being Transcendentalism in America and the other is Mahima Dharma in India, particularly in Odisha. They advocate similar philosophical ideas that reverberate with the concept of Brahman, the ultimate reality. Coming from distinct cultural and religious background, Emerson’s idea of the Over-Soul and Bhima Bhoi’s vision of the formless Absolute, (void) advocate a non-dualistic approach of Brahman as it pervades all beings and transcends all attributes (*nirguna*). To Emerson, the Over-Soul- a concept that echoes with Brahman, is the infinite metaphysical essence that conglomerates all individual souls and transcends the empirical world. Whereas, Bhima Bhoi talks of an ineffable, *nirakara* (formless) a divine essence that is the source of liberation. Both the thinkers propagate that the realization of this ultimate reality leads to moral development and spiritual emergence. Emerson, in his magnum opus essay *Nature* articulates a metaphysical concept that reverberates in Transcendentalist ideals, Neoplatonism, and Vedantic philosophy. His prime vision here is the perception of the Universal Being, a notion that bears tremendous similarity with Upanisadic concept of Brahman. He says in the introduction to *Nature*:

Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed... In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity... which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe

air, and uplifted into infinite space, -all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (P. 9-10).

This remark expresses a profound spiritual experience such as loss of ego and immersion in a cosmic unity. Here the “transparent eye-ball” is a metaphysical state where the self gets stripped of individuality and reasons to finally become an all-encompassing One. Bhima Bhoi, in other hand, foreground a unique vision of Brahman which he calls *sunya* (void). To him the supreme being is Alekha, the ineffable and Nirakara (formless) who dwells in *sunya*, as he calls the Almighty “*sunya vasi*” (dweller of void). In *Stuti Chintamani*, Bhima Bhoi says that “...*chhapanakotiye jete jeevachhanti mora atma pray dishe*” (Boli.62, 16), (I see my own self in all the 56 *koti* creatures). Here, Bhoi articulates the immersion of the individual self with the cosmic self of the universe. This very idea resembles with Emerson’s concept of the “transparent eye-ball”. Both the writers advocate that an individual self (*atma*) becomes part of the cosmic self (*paramatma*) and experiences the cosmic flow that runs through every individual self. For him (Bhoi) Alekha Brahman (ineffable Brahman) though invisible but not completely absent rather it is in the *maha sunya* (great void). Bhoi says that Brahman reveals and circulates through every being as a divine light and guides the individual on a metaphysical journey towards liberation. The same idea is expressed by Emerson through his metaphor of “transparent eye-ball”. Both the mystics have described a condition where the self dissolves and becomes receptive to the eternal presence. Emerson uses nature as a medium through which he experiences the divine presence (over-soul) but Bhoi expresses the inadequacy of language to describe Brahman as he writes. “*abyakata para ate shunya dehi anadi arupa brahman*”, (Stuti Chintamani, 61.11). (the void is ineffable, eternal, formless, brahman). Through this mystical insight both perceive Brahman beyond any object of thought but the base of all existence. Both the writers have used metaphorical language to evoke a sense of mysticism rather defining the supreme reality. Both, Emerson and Bhoi have articulated the concept of Brahman by using different idioms such as Brahman or Over-Soul and *Sunya Brahman* (Void). Though both the masters belong to different continents, while reading them, it seems they think alike. It seems as if they, through their works, are in an agreement to preach for the same ineffable, supreme reality that is the essence of all existence. They urge the readers to enhance their (reader) intuitive and spiritual insight so that they (readers) can develop empirical reasoning to experience the creative discipline “the universal current” which governs this whole universe. A voracious scholar of the Eastern scriptures such as the Upanisads and the Bhagavad Gita, Emerson translates Eastern philosophy to Western mind. In one of his influential essays “The Over-Soul”, he writes

“...we shall catch many hints that will broaden and lighten into knowledge of the secret of nature. All goes to show that the soul in man is not an organ, but animates and exercises all the organs ; is not a function, like the power of memory, of calculation, of comparison, but uses these as hands and feet ; is not a faculty, but a light; is not the intellect or the will, but the master of the intellect and the will ; is the background of our being, in which they lie, — an immensity not possessed and that cannot be possessed. From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all.” (CWRWE, V.II, 270).

Here the “soul” is not the individual consciousness rather a universal spirit—supreme yet inherent—the Over-Soul that exists within all beings, the supreme essence that is the cause of knowledge, virtue, and

identity. Further he affirms:

“We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul.” (CWRWE, V.II, 269)

The concept of Brahman or the Over-Soul, as he means it, denotes to be a philosophical harmony that underlies the material world. He declares that when the human beings live “in succession, in division, in parts,” within them exists “the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty... the eternal ONE.” The idea clearly resonates with the Upanisadic notion of Brahman as the ineffable, undivided reality that permeates all beings. The Over-Soul is not an intangible essence but an active consciousness that binds the “seer and the seen, the subject and the object” into one metaphysical reality. Emerson in the Upanisadic metaphysical insight affirms that the differences of the world is a revelation of a single reality. The Over-Soul, for Emerson is not limited by time or context. When he says “the whole, of which (the sun, moon, tree) are the shining parts, is the soul,” Emerson speaks of a non-dualistic notion of reality, where individual units get refracted manifestations of a single, inexpressible being “the eternal ONE”. In the essay he offers a metaphoric voice to a philosophical insight that keeps the human soul in straight communion with the Infinite, rejecting all dualities into a sublime unity. Likewise, Bhoi talks of Alekh, the term means beyond expression or description- that cannot be written. Alekh, to Bhoi, is not a theoretical idea rather an active mystical reality that communicates both his spiritual outlook and socio-ethical purpose. In one of his famous poems *Adianta Gita* Bhoi says that all the beings have emerged from lord Alekha. He declares that in the beginning, Lord Alekha was in the void and he is the first to descend to earth. All the human beings and the Gods have been emerged from him. As he writes:

*Anadi alekha prabhu go sunye thile*

*Pruthi bharabhara dekhi je ulhaile.*

*Buddha abatara hele go narayana*

*Agyan gheni janmahele go bhakta gana.*

*Brahman Vishnu shiva tahun go tini bhai*

*Etebele chhanti deha go dhari hoi.*

*Tetisi koti debata go rabi tale deha dhari hoichhanti go etebele.*

(*Adianta Gita*, Ch.11)

(Lord Anadi-Alekha was there in the void, realizing the earth’s suffering He descended on earth. Took the incarnation of Lord Narayan, Buddha then the devotees emerged from him following the Trinity, Brahman Vishnu Shiva took their bodily forms the sun.). With this affirmation, Bhoi reverberates the Vedic notion

of *Hiranyagarbha* (golden embryo) “In the beginning rose Hiranyagarbha, born Only Lord of all created beings. He fixed and holdeth up this earth and heaven. What God shall we adore with our oblation?” (Griffith, X.CXXI.1) and in the *Satapatha Brahmana* Prajapati creating the universe: “Now this Person Prajapati desired, ‘May I be more (than one), may I be reproduced!’ He toiled, he practised austerity. Being worn out with toil and austerity, he created first of all the Brahman” (VI,I,I,VII). Bhoi in same manner narrated the creation of the universe as described in the Vedas and the Upanisads. He writes:

*Mahima garbharu jata hela tinipura,*  
*Sorga martya gheni hela patala bimbar.*  
*Mahima garbharu jata hele Chandra suriya,*  
*Ude asta ye sansare heuchhi biraja.*  
*Mahima garbharu jata nabalkhya tara,*  
*Akashare jaluchhanti jesaneka hira.*  
*Mahima garbharu jata mahi o dharati,*  
*Mahima garbharu jaata sthiti utapati.*  
*Mahima garbharu jata chhapnakoti jantu..*

(*Brahman-Nirupana Gita*, Chapter VII. 8)

(From Mahima emerged the Three realms later known as the heaven or sky, earth and hell. Taking birth from Mahima, the Sun and Moon shine in the world. The stars, who glitter in the sky like the diamonds have come from that womb of Mahima. The universe including all existence and 56 crores of creatures have emerged from Mahima). The difference here is he, keeping Mahima (the glorious) or Alekha in the place of Prajapati or Brahman, he imagines Mahima to be the sole creator of the whole universe. The idea of the almighty remains the same rather Bhoi has used a very simple language and manner. Unlike the Vedas the Upanisads, while reading Bhoi, a common man can easily understand the very nature of the ultimate reality. As Emerson imagines the Over-Soul as the “soul of the whole,” Bhoi announces Alekh exists in all beings, irrespective of caste, religion, and hierarchy. He writes:

You are the essence of Brahman,  
the follower of dharma. Heroic are your deeds.  
One single place is your abode,  
yet you pervade everybody, and all three worlds.  
You permeate water and earth, fire and air.  
You are both inside and out.  
The form of the word stays in the Formless,

as if it has become the essence of all.  
Large in large forms, yet small in small,  
you are equally within all things,  
living and non-living, in places pure and impure,  
without discrimination, everywhere.  
You dwell in the wicked, in the demon, the sinner.  
There is nowhere empty of you.  
You pervade all beings as their very soul,  
bearing the name of Brahman.

(Beltz, 213)

The concept, Over-Soul denotes a cosmic essence that pervades everything. This metaphysical essence unites individual souls into a universal soul. Emerson Says: “The soul in man is not an organ, but a light; it is not the intellect or the will, but the master of the intellect and the will.” (The Over-Soul, 1841). This Over-Soul transcends the personal ego or individual identity and connects all beings in a greater unity. It is impersonal, infinite, and divine, reflecting Emerson's belief in the inherent divinity within each person.

## CONCLUSION

Commonalities that unite Emerson and Bhoi across cultures are their shared metaphysical discourses. They insist that Brahman cannot be perceived by appearances, forms, or names. To them Brahman is not something that can be worshipped but the core of all being. It is a realization that transcends all contraries. The spiritual yearning in both writers is for an empirical, supreme being who transcends all binaries of intellect/emotion, presence/absence, self/other. Their use of poetic contradiction and refusal of duality is not merely literary but spiritual, that manifesting a truth, exceeds understanding. Finally, the concept of Brahman for them is not a being among beings, but the Being itself that is beyond form, quality, and division, yet the basis of all existence.

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