



## A Comparative Study of Kannadasan and Ralph Waldo Emerson

Dr. M. Jothilakshmi, Guest Lecturer in English, H.H. The Rajah's College, Pudukkottai, Tamil Nadu, India.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0473-7272>

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### Abstract

*The present study is designed to estimate the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson from American Literature with Kannadasan of Tamil Literature in the light of Vedanta. It is an effort to study the authors' select poems that contain the philosophy of Vedanta. Both poets show their interest in Vedanta with their respective languages and culture. Emerson's Essay "Over-Soul" and Kannadasan's poetry "He is Only God" are the epitome of the paper. Kannadasan's "Arthamulla Indumatham" is an attempt to prove the existence and the work of God in all existence in the cosmos. The select writers belong to different countries and centuries and yet their point of view of God looks the same. They believe in the soul in animate and inanimate objects as said in Vedanta. Emerson calls God a 'Universal soul' who encompasses entire objects of the world. Kannadasan views God as a ruler who dominates and activates everything and every work in the world. Thus, their belief in the presence of the Supreme Soul or God in every individual soul and all things becomes dominant throughout their writings. Hence, this present study aims to find the ideas of Vedanta in the writing of Emerson and Kannadasan and the parallel ones among their writings.*

**Keywords:** Comparison, Kannadasan, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vedanta.

### Introduction

Vedanta is a prose rendering of Four Vedas. It is a spiritual philosophy of the Hindu religion. The word 'Vedanta' is a combination of 'Veda' that means 'knowledge' and 'anta' that means the 'end of' or 'the aim of knowledge'. Vedanta's suggestion of the aim of knowledge is to gain the knowledge of God. Vedanta claims non-dualism. It means the cause of Brahman and the effect of Atman are the same. The Sanskrit terms 'Brahman' and 'atman' refer to God and soul respectively. According to Vedanta Brahman, the highest reality manifests in individual souls and resides in all and Atman, the inner reality, exists in each creature. According to Vedanta God is believed to be a divine light and its spark pervades in every individual being or soul. Kannadasan is a 20<sup>th</sup> century famous writer and poet in Tamil Literature from Tamil Nadu in India. He is a patriot of Tamil language and literature. He is a celebrated writer for his lyrics for playback songs in Tamil cinemas apart from his popularity for his poems and other writings in Tamil. Kannadasan is well-versed in the spiritual philosophy of Indian Vedanta and his writings express the ideas of Vedanta. Emerson is a popular writer, poet, orator and thinker in America. He is well-known for his maxim 'newness'. Whicher Stephen, E. points out his genius in his book *Freedom and Fate*. Emerson is the head of the transcendentalist group in America in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. He wants to go beyond restrictions put by religion and other things. Emerson became familiar with the Indian philosophical ideas by reading them when he studied at Harvard University. He has expressed his strong faith and deeper understanding of the spiritual philosophical ideas of Indian Vedanta. His writings based on the ideas of Vedanta display his firm belief in transforming society and the world through those precious ideas. Emerson's essay, "Over-Soul" has the ideas of Universal soul and individual soul resembling 'Brahman' and 'Atman'



in Indian Vedanta. Emerson's essay, "Over-Soul" discusses the unity between the Universal soul and the individual soul. He writes "The act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and spectacle, the subject and the object, are one." Emerson defined this unity as "within which each man's particular being is contained and made one with all other...." (Essays, First Series) The very passage is a notable example of Emerson's knowledge of Vedanta. Deussen says, "THE Vedanta of Sankara and his school makes a distinction between the supreme soul (paramatman) and a multitude of individual souls (jîva âtman, sârîra atman). The former is omniscient, omnipotent, omni-present; the latter are limited in wisdom, power and capacity of movement. The former is neither active nor passive, and is therefore free from the very beginning; the latter are active and receptive, and are therefore entangled in the eternal round of samsâra, and stand in need of deliverance. Yet the individual âtmans are not properly distinct from the supreme âtman." (256) Kannadasan and Emerson's idea of 'humanity's inner essence' seems similar to the idea of divine reality in Vedanta. Hence, the paper will do a comparative study on the select poets with reference to select works.

### **Kannadasan and Ralph Waldo Emerson**

Kannadasan and Emerson are pioneers who cultivated a sense of intellectual consciousness in Tamil Nadu and America respectively. Their poems are very notable for their upanistic views and philosophy. Most of their poems evince the concept of a universal soul. Remak says, "... study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country and the study of the relationship between two kinds of literature from different languages, and also the study of literature and other areas of knowledge and belief." (31) A comparative study will give more understanding of the similar Vedantic ideas written by the poets. Kannadasan in the poem "He is only God" endorses the realization of God through the mind and God existing within the body promising His true availability. Kannadasan outlines the link of the body with the mind with God. He offers the conclusion that God's presence becomes unlikely without the body with the mind. He thus delineates the infallible value of one to another. Kannadasan in the poem "He is only God" portrays all objects in nature as bodies and as the residence of the Almighty. He sees God's being as a coconut in the shell. Upanishad recounts soul rooms in the background of the body as a mute dweller and a dumb spectator positioned within the heart unaffected by the impurities of the body and its activities. Katha Upanishad looks at the human body as the city of nine gates with two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, a mouth, an anus and the navel.

Kannadasan's emotion for the welfare and elevation of the Tamil race and his unquenchable love for God, Tamil people, Tamil culture, custom and tradition and Tamil Gods such as Goddess Meenakshi, Lord Muruga, and Lord Rama etc. appear to be his conscious wish, desire and appetite. The poem "Atheism" displays Kannadasan's anger against atheism. 'He wants to remove atheism from society by cutting it from the root because it will prevent people from being spiritual, studying divine doctrines and following the just path called "Darma". He wishes the younger generation to study all spiritual doctrines think deeply about them in a tranquil way and worship God daily for knowing about body, soul, God and their nature and secrets for their better and sooner personal development in life, profession and public life. Kannadasan's emotional ideas in the above poem come as proof for the following ideas of Maitri Upanishad. The characteristics of the Dark Quality 'tamas' refer to delusion, fear, despondency, sleepiness, weariness, heedlessness, old age, sorrow, hunger, thirst, wretchedness, anger, atheism, ignorance, jealousy, cruelty, stupidity, shamelessness, religious neglect, pride, inequality. Emerson's psychological frame of mind, his mental perception of matters and his becoming conscious of the desire of his



mind can be witnessed in the poem “The Problem” in which he admits that he has all attraction and liking for the service of the church and monastic life and he has faith in religion but he cannot become a priest. Vedanta states human consciousness includes the mind, intellect, memory and ego. The human mind is the seat of affectation, impulse, feeling, emotion, and indiscrimination, whereas the intellect is the faculty of reason, judgment, decision-making, and cognition. Memory is the storage of recollected thoughts. When the mind functions without intellectual supervision, negative emotions occupy it. If the mind is governed by intellect it becomes the guide to emotions. Thus mind should not be a slave to emotions but a master to them. The emotion of Emerson in the poem “The Problem” becomes proof for all the mentioned ideas of Vedanta. He wishes to remain a divine-inspired writer and orator to work for the divine cause. Emerson accents the soul has all knowledge as well as the capacity for it. Locke says the soul or thinking substance keeps itself the same when consciousness is lost in utter forgetfulness and thus there stays the same soul but a different person. Every man survives as a part of the whole universe through the actions of his physical body, mind and soul. The dualist argues that something non-physical object activates the body which makes a body become a person. It is the soul that activates the body. Emerson calls it a reality of reality which men stay ignorant about but their souls exist with full awareness of men’s lack of consciousness of the soul’s presence, its capacity of all-knowing and having and the reality behind every moment of their life. The lack of consciousness of the soul causes emptiness, meaninglessness and insignificance in their life.

Kannadasan declares that all species are the outcome of a primal matter called Akasha and this world is created from a creative energy called God. Vedantists call it ‘Brahman’, ‘One Supreme’, One Omniscient and One Absolute Reality. According to the Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad, the Ultimate reality is being San Mantran-hi Brahman. The world cannot be, ‘self-caused,’ ‘self-dependent’ and self-maintaining. Upanishads use the word ‘projection’ for ‘creation,’ and they say by creation the projection of all already exists. Kannadasan talks of God creating first the sky, which can be an example of the projection. The reflection of Upanishad and Kannadasan appears to be the work and influence of God behind all creations and so they are God. Emerson expresses his wish to change the human race as God by depriving it of its follies derived from its involvement in the material world. Kannadasan wants to elevate the Tamil race by making it follow Tamil culture, customs and tradition and worship God and Goddess like Meenakshi and Lord Muruga. Kannadasan displays his anger against atheists and wants to remove them from society otherwise, he says that it will spoil people by not being spiritual, not studying doctrines and not following a just path. Emerson accepts his attraction for Church services but he declares that he cannot become a priest for that. He would rather be divinely inspired as and writer, orator and artist for the divine cause. Vedanta principle talks of intuitive knowledge which is different from that of the discursive and meditative knowledge of the ordinary physical mind. Intuitive knowledge is the right knowledge given by the Supreme Soul via man’s soul. Emerson sounds the same idea when he talks of the ‘overpowering reality’ being responsible for men’s right thought, proper action meant by ‘hand’, clear wisdom, pure virtue, its true power and real beauty. Emerson points out humanity’s survival as groups in all generations but he establishes men as souls coming from the entire of the entire called the Supreme Soul.

Kannadasan’s poetry “Nirvanam” explains the emptiness that leads to the attainment of truth. He sings if truth is made to stand rightly and firmly in the heart, nirvana or mukthi shines with all its brightness in the intellect. Men have to practice some disciplines, accept consciously certain inevitable problems caused by their fellow human beings, and control



their minds to reach the state of emptiness, Nirvana. Kannadasan asserts men cannot understand God, the source of all souls, in our Scriptures. All education aims to polish up the external body and enrich ourselves materially. He raises the question of what to use in polishing up the outside when there is no purity in mind. By exploring the individual soul they can understand the existence of the Supreme soul, the God. Hindus accept that the soul is without beginning and end. It is immortal by its very nature but not the body. Kannadasan's poem 'Nenjodu pulambal' insists that the human body is a composite of five elements and decays over time. Swami Vivekananda in his essay titled "Paper on Hinduism" quotes the Vedas calling man as a spirit in a living body and not a body which is subjected to death but the man shall not die. Thus, man continues his living. Emerson is also in the same views as that of Swami Vivekananda in his poem *Brahma*. Both of the poets Kannadasan and Emerson have similar ideas even though they lived in different places and different cultures. This shows the similarity between Vedic concepts and transcendental ethics. Thus, the works of the poets share the intellectual thoughts of Vedanta.

### Conclusion

Emerson declares the source of man comes from the universal soul. Man's mind receives messages from the soul within him. Vedanta philosophy identifies men with much divine knowledge and the soul as the dwelling place of God. Emerson states that God is the 'Supreme Critic of the errors' of the past and present. He calls God the sole 'prophet' and the 'great nature' in which human beings set. Human beings are not responsible for their 'tricks and talents', speaking, writing and characters for they are given to them by the Supreme Soul. Kannadasan's writings contain the Upanishadic theory of the immortality of the soul. In his poetry 'Where is He?' Kannadasan's consideration of God as a formative force and source of flowers can be seen. He describes God as life within life and womb within the womb and as God's work hiding light in darkness and darkness besides light. Kannadasan brings forth the binary nature of God. Kannadasan utters that man is a shadow that can be seen only in the light of God. Hence, both of the poets have written in the concept of Vedanta.

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