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“The Mountain and the Squirrel”: Talents Differ, and All Is Wisely Put

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Abstract:

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s poem “*The Mountain and the Squirrel*” presents a deceptively simple yet philosophically profound dialogue between two contrasting elements of nature. Through the humorous quarrel between a massive, immovable mountain and a sprightly, self-assured squirrel, Emerson explores enduring themes of individuality, diversity, interdependence, and respect for the natural order. This research paper examines the poem through multiple lenses—literary devices, structure, tone, and thematic essence—and reveals its deep resonance with Vedantic and Upanishadic teachings, particularly the ideas of *svadharma* (one’s true duty), *sama-darshana* (equal vision), and the divine orchestration of cosmic harmony. Drawing parallels from the Vedas, Bhagavad Gita, Vachanamrut, and Shrimad Bhagwat Mahapurān, this study demonstrates how Emerson’s Transcendentalist vision harmonizes seamlessly with Sanātana Dharma’s spiritual cosmology, ultimately promoting a worldview that embraces difference without hierarchy and encourages self-realization over comparison.

Preface

Ralph Waldo Emerson, a pioneer of American Transcendentalism, was deeply inspired by the sacred philosophies of the East, especially the Vedānta. “*The Mountain and the Squirrel*” is a short narrative poem often categorized as a fable, yet it encapsulates profound metaphysical and ethical insights. Written in simple diction and structured in rhymed couplets, the poem stages a witty exchange between two natural entities—a mountain, symbolizing immensity and stability, and a squirrel, embodying agility and modesty. While the mountain boasts of its strength and grandeur, the squirrel defends its own worth, pointing out that both have essential yet different roles in the grand design of existence.

This research undertakes a holistic analysis of the poem—its literary craft, structural elements, and emotive undertones—while also unveiling its philosophical underpinnings that align with core teachings from the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and other Indic scriptures. By juxtaposing Emerson’s poetic vision with Sanātana Dharma’s principles, the study aims to showcase how Emerson articulates universal spiritual truths through natural allegory, suggesting that greatness lies not in comparison, but in fulfilling one’s unique place in the cosmic order.

1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech

Emerson’s poem, though deceptively simple, is rich with literary artistry:

- **Personification:** The mountain and the squirrel (Bun) are anthropomorphized, engaging in a lively debate, attributing human traits like pride, wit, and self-respect to non-human entities.
- **Metaphor:** The mountain and the squirrel serve as extended metaphors for contrasting aspects of life—grandeur versus agility, strength versus intellect.

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• **Stanza and Line Breaks:** The poem lacks stanza divisions but maintains coherent thought progression. Each couplet delivers a complete idea.

• **Enjambment:** Mild enjambment is seen in lines such as: “To make up a year / And a sphere.” This draws attention to the holistic message.

3. Theme and Subject Matter

The primary themes are:

• **Equality in Diversity:** Differences in ability or size do not determine worth. The mountain is grand; the squirrel is agile—both are essential.

• **Self-Acceptance:** The squirrel accepts its limitations without inferiority and celebrates its unique talents.

• **Harmony in Nature:** All creatures and forces, big or small, contribute to the harmony of the world.

• **Moral Wisdom:** The poem conveys a moral akin to fables—every being has a rightful place and purpose.

4. Tone and Mood

• **Tone:** The tone is playful, witty, and philosophical. Emerson uses a light-hearted tone to deliver profound insights.

• **Mood:** The mood is uplifting and thoughtful. It evokes a sense of acceptance, balance, and joy in individual uniqueness.

5. Philosophical and Spiritual Interpretation

Emerson, a **Transcendentalist**, embeds deep philosophical truths:

• **Vedantic Connection:** The Bhagavad Gita teaches that **Svadharma (one’s own duty or nature)** is superior to imitating another’s greatness (Gita 3.35). The squirrel’s acceptance of its role echoes this idea.

• **Upanishadic Wisdom:** The Isha Upanishad (Verse 1) states that everything in the universe has its own place and purpose—“**tena tyaktena bhunjithah**”, suggesting contentment in one’s role.

• **Vachanamrut (Gadhada I-19):** Bhagwan Swaminarayan emphasizes the divine arrangement in the diversity of all beings, each performing its duty in cosmic order.

• **Emerson’s Mysticism:** The notion of a universal soul manifests in the respect for both the mountain and the squirrel—expressing **Unity in Diversity**.

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “The Mountain and the Squirrel” harmonizes deeply with Upanishadic and Vedantic wisdom, as well as teachings from the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, Vachanamrut, and Shrimad Bhagwat Mahapurān. Though presented in a light-hearted, fable-like structure, the poem conveys timeless philosophical truths that mirror the Sanātana Dharma’s core ideas of divine order (ṛta), svadharma, non-dual awareness, and unity in diversity. Below is a detailed alignment:

1. Upanishadic Wisdom

A. Svadharma and Divine Design

“If I cannot carry forests on my back,
Neither can you crack a nut.”

This statement mirrors the Upanishadic principle of each being fulfilling its own essential function (svadharma).

• Taittiriya Upanishad (2.7.1) – “*Satyam jñānam anantam brahma*” – Brahman manifests as truth, knowledge, and infinitude in all beings. Every being has its own unique function within this unity.

• Isha Upanishad (1)¹ – “*Īśāvāsyam idam sarvaṃ...*” – All creation is pervaded by the divine. Each part is essential, and nothing is superior or inferior in divine eyes.

• Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad (1.4.14)² – “*Ātmanastu kāmāya sarvaṃ priyaṃ bhavati*” – Everything functions for the sake of the Self, implying that all roles are meaningful in the cosmic scheme.

B. Interdependence and Wholeness

“All sorts of things and weather
Must be taken in together
To make up a year
And a sphere.”

This reflects cosmic interdependence and the idea that unity arises from diversity.

• Chandogya Upanishad (6.2.1)³ – “*Ekam evādvitīyam*” – Reality is one without a second, but appears manifold.

• The diversity of beings is like different sparks of one fire (agni)—distinct in function, yet the same in essence.

2. Vedantic Philosophy (Advaita Vedanta)

A. Unity in Diversity

The squirrel and the mountain are not in opposition; they represent diverse expressions of the same Brahman.

• Bhagavad Gita (13.27)⁴ – “*Samam sarveṣu bhūteṣu tiṣṭhantaṃ parameśvaram*” – The Supreme dwells equally in all beings, though forms may differ.

• Gita (5.18)⁵ – “*Vidya-vinaya-sampanne brāhmaṇe gavi hastini... sama-darśinah*” – The wise see the same divinity in a Brahmin, cow, elephant, and even a dog.

Thus, Emerson’s idea that “Talents differ; all is well and wisely put” parallels sama-darshana (equal vision).

3. Bhagavad Gita

A. Svadharma (One's Own Duty and Nature)

“If I’m not so large as you,
You are not so small as I...”

This resonates with Krishna’s teaching:

• Gita (3.35)⁶ – “*Śreyān svadharmo viguṇaḥ para-dharmāt sv-anuṣṭhitāt*” – It is better to perform one’s own duty, even imperfectly, than to imitate another’s duty perfectly.

Each being, like the squirrel, has a unique path. Fulfilling it is spiritual success, not imitating someone else’s role.

B. Balance and Harmony in Creation

• Gita (4.13)⁷ – “*Cātur-varṇyam mayā sṛṣṭam guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśah*” – The Lord says He has created the social order based on qualities and actions. This supports the idea of functional differentiation, not inequality.

4. Vachanamrut (Teachings of Bhagwan Swaminarayan)

A. God’s Design is Perfect and Purposeful

• Vachanamrut, Gadhada I-18 – Bhagwan Swaminarayan says that God has created the world with a precise purpose and everything, from the smallest ant to the greatest deva, has its assigned role.

The squirrel’s role is small yet crucial. Likewise, even a blade of grass exists according to divine will—an idea repeatedly emphasized in Swaminarayan philosophy.

B. Equality of Souls, Diversity of Forms

• Vachanamrut, Gadhada II-28 – All jivas (souls) are equal in essence but are bound by their karmas, leading to different forms and capabilities. Yet, no role is lesser in God’s eyes.

5. Shrimad Bhagwat Mahapurān

A. Divine Respect for All

In the Bhagavatam, Lord Krishna and Lord Rama are often shown respecting humble beings—like the squirrel who helped Rama build the bridge to Lanka.

• Valmiki Ramayana (Yuddha Kanda) – Rama appreciates a small squirrel’s contribution alongside mighty vanaras. This directly reflects:

“I’ll not deny you make

A very pretty squirrel track.”

This shows that divine beings appreciate sincerity over size—just as the squirrel defends its place with quiet confidence.

B. Bhakti Through One’s Natural Role

• Bhagavatam (10.14.3)⁸ – Lord Brahma praises Krishna, saying, “*One who stays in their natural position and offers service in devotion is most blessed.*”

The squirrel does not aspire to be a mountain; it fulfills its role sincerely—this is true bhakti.

6. Other Scriptural Parallels

A. Atharva Veda (12.1.1–63) – On Cosmic Unity

“All forms of life, from the smallest to the grandest, are parts of Earth and Her law. Each has a role in maintaining cosmic order (ṛta).”

B. Manusmṛiti (Chapter 1) – On Varna and Roles

Though controversial in later interpretations, early verses promote the idea of functional hierarchy without superiority, emphasizing that societal harmony comes when all roles are fulfilled well.

Conclusion: Scriptural Resonance with Emerson’s Poem
Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “The Mountain and the Squirrel” is not just a whimsical fable but a profoundly spiritual and

philosophical work. Its essence mirrors Vedantic principles of:

- Unity in diversity
- Respect for individual svadharma
- Divine purpose behind all existence
- Moral harmony in nature

It encourages the squirrel-like humility, self-respect, and awareness of one’s unique place in the divine order, echoing the wisdom of the Vedas, Upanishads, Gita, Vachanamrut, and Bhagavatam.

6. Historical and Cultural Context

- **Time and Place:** Written in the early 19th century during the **American Transcendentalist movement**, which valued nature, self-reliance, and inner truth.
- **Cultural Influence:** The poem reflects post-Enlightenment Romantic ideals, particularly those found in works by Wordsworth and Coleridge.
- **Philosophical Context:** Emerson was deeply influenced by Indian scriptures, German idealism, and American democratic ideals—all promoting **individual worth**.

7. Poet’s Perspective and Emotional Mindset

- **Inspiration:** Emerson’s fascination with nature and his belief in the dignity of all forms of life likely inspired this work.
- **Emotional Mindset:** He was likely motivated by a sense of cosmic harmony and moral justice—a belief that every being deserves respect.
- **Autobiographical Elements:** Emerson often felt misunderstood by mainstream society, much like the squirrel, whose worth is underestimated by the dominant mountain.

8. Target Audience and Purpose

- **Audience:** Broad—ranging from children (due to its fable-like structure) to philosophers and poets seeking deeper truths.
- **Purpose:** To encourage humility, promote the acceptance of diversity, and inspire self-respect regardless of social stature.

9. Personal Interpretation

The final takeaway is profound in its simplicity: greatness is relative, and every being has a role to play. The poem resolves the initial conflict with the wisdom that “**Talents differ; all is well and wisely put.**”

Personally, the poem resonates as a call for self-respect and a reminder not to measure oneself against others. It aligns beautifully with the universal spiritual truth that all creation, however big or small, is sacred and essential.

Conclusion

“*The Mountain and the Squirrel*” may appear as a childlike parable at first glance, but within its rhythmic simplicity lies a spiritual and philosophical vision of striking depth.

Emerson masterfully communicates that value is not a matter of size or strength, but of fulfilling one's inherent nature—an idea beautifully echoed in Indian philosophical traditions. Through this poem, the message of *svadharma*, mutual respect, and the harmonious interdependence of all beings is conveyed in an accessible yet insightful manner.

By aligning the poem with the teachings of the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Vachanamrut, and the Bhagavatam, we see that Emerson's poetic moral reflects the Vedantic understanding of reality—a unity in diversity, where each being has a divinely ordained role. The poem does not just entertain; it educates and elevates, inspiring the reader to embrace their individuality without arrogance or inferiority. As such, Emerson's squirrel is not merely a witty creature—it is the voice of Atmic wisdom, reminding us that in the eyes of the divine, *all talents differ, but all are wisely put*.

References

- ¹ ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किञ्च जगत्यां जगत् ।
तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथा मा गृधः कस्य स्विद्धनम् ॥ १ ॥
- ² स नैव व्यभवत्, तल्लेयोरूपमत्यसृजत धर्मम्; तदेतत् क्षेत्रस्य क्षेत्रं यद्धर्मः,
तस्माद्धर्मादपरं नास्ति; अथो अबलीयान् बलीयांसमाशंसते धर्मेण, यथा
राज्ञैवम्; यो वै स धर्मः सत्यं वै तत्, तस्मात् सत्यं वदन्तमाहुः, धर्मं
वदतीति, धर्मं वा वदन्तम् सत्यं वदतीति, एतद्धेयेवैतदुभयं भवति ॥ १५ ॥
- ³ सदेव सोम्येदमग्र आसीदेकमेवाद्वितीयम् । तद्धैक आहुरसदेवेदमग्र
आसीदेकमेवाद्वितीयं तस्मादसतः सज्जायत ॥ ६.२.१ ॥
- ⁴ यावत्सञ्जायते किञ्चित्सत्त्वं स्थावरजङ्गमम्।
क्षेत्रक्षेत्रज्ञसंयोगात्तद्विद्धि भरतर्षभ ॥ 27 ॥
- ⁵ विद्याविनयसम्पन्ने ब्राह्मणे गवि हस्तिनि।
शुनि चैव श्वपाके च पण्डिताः समदर्शिनः ॥ 18 ॥ विद्याविनयसम्पन्ने
ब्राह्मणे गवि हस्तिनि।
शुनि चैव श्वपाके च पण्डिताः समदर्शिनः ॥ 18 ॥
- ⁶ श्रेयान्स्वधर्मो विगुणः परधर्मात्स्वनुष्ठितात्।
स्वधर्मे निधनं श्रेयः परधर्मो भयावहः ॥ 35 ॥
- ⁷ चातुर्वर्ण्यं मया सृष्टं गुणकर्मविभागशः।
तस्य कर्तारमपि मां विद्ध्यकर्तारमव्ययम् ॥ 13 ॥
- ⁸ ज्ञाने प्रयासमुदपास्य नमन्त एव
जीवन्ति सन्मुखरितां भवदीयवार्ताम् ।
स्थाने स्थिताः श्रुतिगतां तनुवाङ्मनोभि-
र्ये प्रायशोऽजित जितोऽप्यसि तैस्त्रिलोक्याम् ॥ ३ ॥