

On Flowers and Nations: Native Symbol in Ralph Waldo Emerson and Kshetra Pratap Adhikari

Komal Prasad Phuyal*

Abstract

The local symbols laconically express the whole of the spirit of a nation in poetry as poetic expressions magnify even the tiny objects of nature to represent the complete picture of social sphere. American Romanticist poet and philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) and Nepali lyricist poet, Kshetra Pratap Adhikari (1943–2014) contemplate on the local flowers to transcend beyond the quotidian understanding and assert the aesthetic value of the native in relation to the national spirit. The sole purpose of both the poets remains the upholding of the beauty of the locally available symbols over the traditionally established images of canon that dictate the poetic imagination despite their staleness and predictability in poetic articulation. Emerson's "The Rhodora" (1834) presents a local flower over the traditionally established rose as a European symbol of aesthetics, while Adhikari's "Ma ta Laliguras Bhayechhu [I Happened to be a Red Rhododendron]" (ca. 1976) coins both the nation and personal romantic feeling into a single object that can spread itself across a variety of geographies. This paper seeks to textually analyze the two short poems to see the ways each poet develops a common poetic style to sing the person and nation through native symbols.

Keywords: Nepali lyrics, Rhododendron, American Romanticism, Rhodora, Flower and Poetry, Nationalism

The native knowledge forms its body from the local contexts that shapes and reshapes the poetic perceptions in a specific society as much as the poetic contemplation gives a particular form to the way people view their reality surrounding them. In cultural landscapes, poetry acts as a vehicle to promote the local symbols, themes, and knowledge in order to establish the local as the mainstream way of relating to the life and society. This study focuses on two short poetic pieces from Nepal and the US by two giant literary figures: both

*Komal Prasad Phuyal, PhD
Lecturer
Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal
Email: ephuyal@gmail.com

Khestra Pratap Adhikari's (1943-2014) "Ma ta Laliguras Bhayechhu [I Happened to be a Red Rhododendron]" (ca. 1976) and Ralph Waldo Emerson's (1803 –1882) "The Rhodora" (1834) present rhododendron as a native Nepali flower and rhodora as a native American flower respectively to reflect on the very native ways of looking at the cultural uniqueness in one's own national context. Through the local resources available in each case, the poets construct a social world through which they revisit the traditional canon, critique the dominating ethos within the context covertly and overtly remaining there, and explore a new avenue of semantic relations of such native symbol.

The local flowers function as the vehicle of poetic imagination and expression to celebrate the cultural uniqueness of people in specific and the nations in general. As the geographical variations matter for such distinctions in people and their practices, the poems reveal multiple layers of social construction and their meaning for the people through their own symbols. For instance, Emerson's rhodora fights back with the rose in an attempt to redefine the nation on its own terms in that being an epitome of aesthetic symbol, the rose has ruled the European mindset for a long time. Even after the independence, the American psyche continued to celebrate the foreign rose in its discourses, whereby ignoring the native flowers. The Romantic poet revisits the great European aesthetic canon so as to locate its own position in the new global order fifty-eight years after American independence in 1776. Similarly, Adhikari assumes in rhododendron the implied aspects of love for his nation, geography, people, and their practices. Singing the national flower of Nepal, he moves on locating the diverse terrains of the flowers from the plains in the south to the steep, inaccessible hills, then to the romance of the exciting bloom in the Spring, and consequently to the red color in the form of vermillion that represents the idea of marriage. Both the poets precisely locate their political motive behind such presentation of the flowers in their poems in celebration of cultural identity as shaped by the surroundings on the one hand and the celebration of the human ways relating to the aesthetic perceptions through locally available creative resources on the other. Both the poems treat the flowers in the specific context to build the knowledge system that helps to sing the nation and the people: the local resides at the heart of the national in the poetic contemplations of both Emerson and Adhikari.

I have studied these two short poetic creations from Nepal and America, and locating detailed reading of the poems posed a serious challenge during the

research. I have surveyed some of the relevant documents in the areas of the study. Some indirect but relevant studies on Nepali poetry have been incorporated in the paper in order to illustrate the ways the local has remained instrumental in analysis of poetry. Reading Emerson contextually, Thomson (1928) telescopes the legacy and influence of British Romanticism in Emerson. As he has analyzed, "By 1835 we find him asserting that Wordsworth is the most original, as well as the sanest, poet of his age" (p. 1173). The influence of the great tradition marks one way of reading such poetic geniuses. For the other, the development of poetic sensibility gets viewed against the great Romanticist tradition of the Western Europe. Similarly, some of the readings on Emerson's "The Rhodora" have been included to see two broad themes in the poem: nature and spirituality. Both the readings closely link the poem with the understanding of the oversoul which carries a major significance in the study of Emerson's poetry and his philosophy of transcendentalism.

Emerson's "The Rhodora" is generally viewed as an attempt to interpret nature. In a way one can argue that the poet sees both the nature and the flower coming in unison in the poem as the poet typically implies in his idea of the oversoul. As an 1834 transcendentalist poem, the poem seeks to establish the connection of the world element with the oversoul. For instance, Michaud (1919) argues that Emerson holds transcendentalist philosophy deeply in his life and poetry: for him, the world is embedded in the ideal form beyond the mundane world of the material manifestations. The real lies at and/or as the transcendental one. He has stated that in Emerson transcendentalism promotes autonomous religious faculty "in transferring authority from outside inside and rebuilding religion on the basis of ethics" (p. 75). The connection with nature is generally understood as the major driving force in Emerson's writings: Axelrod (1974) links "The Rhodora" with the poet's perception of nature as the poet sets the flower in the wild. The lonely flower drops its petals on the water; it spreads its fragrance in the wild; and the world beyond human access consumes the flower as such. Axelrod sees the connection of the flower with the oversoul (p. 35) so as to illustrate the notion of beauty and nature embedded in one symbol. In such an argument, Emerson sees people and all the organisms emanating from nature and dissolving themselves into it. The all-encompassing tendency of nature overwhelms the poet into thinking that nature realizes itself through the wild flower.

Secondly, he presents cultural norms in the poem. People always seek higher worldly values and noble virtues through transcendental mode of reasoning to

go beyond the abstractions in understanding and perceptions. Emerson pictures the scene of such a search in the poem as he believes that the manifest results from the ideal. The poem is read as the expression of noble values and spiritual attainment as well. For instance, Garrod (1930) reads Emerson in a completely different light for his presentation of the higher virtues in poetry. He has observed:

Though Emerson's best poetry is, I think, in the metaphysical kind, it is proper to notice that one or two of his noblest successes are scored in a different kind, a kind almost plain. Such poems as "The Rhodora," "The Two Rivers," and the Concord Monument "Hymn," reach, in a quite different style, effects either beautiful or noble. (p.12)

The aesthetic perception of the poet builds itself on the basis of the beautiful in nature. Because the poet transcends from the world to realize the presence of the beautiful in the wild, he transforms himself into an observer in the forest to actually see both the physical and the metaphysical realities of the universe. Also, the poet acknowledges the presence of the spiritual in the poem. Reading the religious influence on Emerson, Yoder (1972) explores Christian form of spirituality in the poem when he argues that through the flower, the poet observes the virtue of self-sacrifice and martyrdom. As he has assessed, "... the poet identifies himself with the same Christian virtues: his 'simple ignorance' is faith, if not in Providence, certainly in a wise and sensitive Creator; the worshipful humility which the poet and the flower share explains their intimate rapport" (p. 257). This study establishes a close affinity between the flower and Christ in terms of suffering in loneliness. The utmost realization of pain and the deeper desire for self-sacrifice emanate from the analysis as the significant concerns in the poem. The personified flower turns into a stoic symbol that suffers all the hardships of the wild in order to emerge pure in the spiritual domain.

Finally, Emerson presents the vision of organicity in nature through the poem. The balance between nature and the world is maintained by appreciating the aesthetically rich composition of the flower. The flower connects itself with the creative principle of the world through which to help itself stand as the ultimate marker of beauty and grandeur. Zheng et al (2019) explore Emerson's vision of nature as an organic whole in their study. They see Emerson appreciating nature through the use of the flower, rhodora. As they have noted,

Emerson's Transcendentalism belongs to the category of idealism. In his eyes, every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual existence. The physical world is the terminus of the spiritual world, or rather, the spiritual world is contained in the phenomenal world. Every natural object, if observed properly, demonstrates a kind of spiritual power. (p. 760)

Spiritually speaking, the ideal space is expressed through Emerson's concept of the oversoul that realizes itself through the wild flower. The poet departs from the semiotic of nature in order to dive deep into the heart of spiritual domain of the phenomenon. The realization of the spiritual power manifests itself in the form of beauty in the flower.

Like the 1830s in the United States of America, Nepali poetry witnesses some major changes after the 1960s. King Mahendra's political move towards establishment of the Panchyat system resulted in suspension of parliamentary democracy in 1960. The freedom of expression was under complete check. Consequently, the new normal was put in use through redefinition of the changing context. People like Bhupi Sherchan or Mohan Koirala appeared with their poems with multiple layers in the construction of their symbols: they had protest, satire, and dissatisfaction within a new package for the readers. In fact, Adhikari also emerged as one of the novel voices of Nepali poetry in the same era. Studying on the tendencies of the era, Hutt (1991) has critically pointed out: "During the 1960s, Nepali poetry departed quite radically from the norms of the preceding twenty-five years, which was a result of the unprecedented changes that occurred in Nepali society in general and in intellectual circles in particular" (p. 14). The political change of the 1960s was the major backdrop for new type of intellectual to understand and promote the new socio-political order in their creative works. The transformation that Nepali society was undergoing intellectually and culturally got its expression in the poetry of the time. The poets began to intervene into the scene through their voice as agents. The overall impact of the concerns of the people and culture developed as more critical poetic concerns of the time.

Detailed studies are not available on the poet or the lyric under study. Interviews with people who knew Adhikari closely have helped me formulate ideas during the research. Similarly, the paper has reviewed two studies on bird in Nepali poetry, with an assumption that as component of the local, both bird and flower share a methodological affinity in the study of poetry. Paudel (2008)

on modern Nepali poet Laxmi Prasad Devkota and Phuyal (2019) as comparative study between Whitman and Devkota reveal some insights in the use of local resources in poetry. Discussing the birds in Devkota's works, Paudel writes that Devkota upholds in his later poetry the music of the local birds (p. 53). Viewed from this perspective, Nepali poetry makes profuse use of the local birds. In the same line of argument, Phuyal examines the use of bird as a symbol of contemporaneity in Walt Whitman and Laxmi Prasad Devkota. He finds that both the poets use local birds: Devkota presents the swallow, while Whitman contemplates on the humming bird. He has concluded:

Both Whitman and Devkota celebrate the creative principal of life and poetry through the use of bird that helps each of them to talk about life as the extension of creativity. The inner content of human subjectivity, life, and poetry reveal to each of them through the use of bird as a symbol in the form of abstractions like love, nation, death, and poetic voice. (p. 31)

The studies conclude that modern Nepali poetry relies on local birds in specific and local resources in general to discuss the basic ideals of life and society in Nepal. The historical changes, the cultural lenses, and the aspirations of the people are documented in Nepali poetry through such local symbols.

The earlier studies show that no serious attention is paid to modern Nepali poet, Kshetra Pratap Adhikari's "I Happened to be a Red Rhododendron" (referred to hereafter as "Rhododendron") despite the presence of some numerous studies on other poets. Similarly, a scanty amount of reading of Emerson's "The Rhodora" presents two fundamental themes in the study: firstly, the poem is constructed as a poetic contemplation on nature; and secondly, the poem is read from the perspective of spirituality. The relationship between the flower and the nation has remained a new area to work on for three fundamental reasons: first of all, the comparative study of Adhikari's 1976 lyrics and Emerson's 1834 poem becomes a new way of dealing with two different contexts as such; secondly, this study attempts to fill the gap of inadequate attention paid to both the poets; and finally, political readings and meanings imbedded in flowers reveals the quest of both poets to help the respective cultures attain distinct position. Adhikari and Emerson read the nation and culture through their use of native flower in order to assert the political aspirations of the people.

This study presents the analysis of Kshetra Pratap Adhikari and Ralph Waldo Emerson's poems on the subject of local flower. A close reading of both the poems reveals the fundamental differences in the similarities in the objective of use of the local symbols in their respective poetic expressions. Through a hermeneutic lens, the content is analyzed in order to seek out the deeper political and/or aesthetic goals imbedded in the poems: the historical timeframe is paid due attention to while making meaning out of the specific use of the flower to sing the nation and the cultural practices of the people. This paper analyzes Adhikari's lyrics written in Nepali: for the purpose of the study, the researcher has translated it into English. The tentative date of Adhikari's poem has been calculated after verification with Prakash Sayami, Tika Bhandari, and Aman Pratap Adhikari. This study assumes that the local resides at the backdrop of aesthetic perceptions and shapes the epistemological ground of people as much as the people invent their ways to shape their own understanding of the world through the lens of such local resources locally available to them.

The laconic way of poetic expression always seeks themes, symbols, and motifs in nature in order to present the nation through person and the observer's choice from nature. American Romanticist Ralph Waldo Emerson and modern Nepali poet Kshetra Pratap Adhikari choose native flower to redefine the aesthetic perceptions of people in their respective society: Emerson celebrates rhodora as a wild American flower as the expression of nature in America, while Adhikari sees geographical variations, mental landscape, and expression of love and beauty in native Nepali red rhododendron. In the backdrop of the prevailing European aesthetics that upholds rose as the measure of all beauty, the native flower in Emerson and Adhikari pops up as a voice of protest against the mainstream understanding on the one hand and establishes heterogeneous perceptions of beauty rooted in each location as such. Singing the local and upholding the native knowledge and perceptions, both the poets bring flowers to view the collective spirit of the nation. Reading Emerson's "The Rhodora" and Adhikari's "Rhododendron," this paper examines the poet's celebration of nation and culture through reassertion of the local independent status of beauty, and rejection of the foreign.

People find their grounding on the soil of a nation where multiple types of flowers bloom and spread a peculiar sense of the place, adding to the unique sense of viewing oneself and the collective. As a powerful feeling for celebration

of people and geography, nationalism finds its way into Emerson's "The Rhodora" (1834) which presents a local, wild flower, only found in America, to refer to the formation of the collective, distinct national identity that is different from the aesthetics of Europe. He reasserts the local flower rhodora to illustrate the basic idea of American aesthetics. The subtitle of the poem "On being asked whence is the flower?" implies that the poet knows everything about the flower (rhodora) because he is asked its whereabouts. This knowledge implies that the poet celebrates the local, minor, and minute. As he views the flower, "I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods, / Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook" (lines 2-3), his obsession for the flower is manifest through two phrases in this section: "in the woods" and "leafless bloom." "The woods" implies the wild in the flower. In other words, the poet seeks freshness in the wild. Similarly, "leafless" in a general sense refers to ugliness. However, he praises the bloom for being leafless. It shows his fondness, deep attachment, and celebration of the ignored flower because it appears in poetic contemplation for the first time in 1834. To redefine the basic idea of national aesthetics, he employs the flower as a symbol.

Aesthetics of any nation emerges naturally from the perceptions derived from the vegetations present within its geography. Emerson's "Rhodora" cherishes the independent status of existence of beauty. In other words, it holds a political objective in that the native flower blooms for no utility at all. He wants nobody to seek out why the flower blooms. He writes:

Rhodora! if sages ask thee why
This charm is wasted on the earth and sky
Tell them, dear, if eyes were made for seeing,
Then Beauty is its own excuse for being... (lines 9-12)

He compares the flower to a body part (eyes) to claim that the flower possesses its own independent existence. When he says that Beauty is its own excuse for being, he warns us not to seek any utility/usefulness out of the flower. The flower becomes the ultimate symbol of beauty for the poet.

Nepal seeks to express the inner aesthetic drive through the use of red rhododendrons that cover its diverse geography in March and April. The spring season endows the earth with its blessing in the form of this wild flower which is also declared as the national emblem of the country, shaping the

perceptions of beauty in general. Adhikari's lyrical persona transforms himself in a red rhododendron in "Rhododendron." The typical spirit of the Spring too reflects in the poem as he sings, "I happened to be a red rhododendron/I bloom in the heart like I do in the forest" (lines 1-2). In the Spring, the color of forest implies the bounty of nature, for it brings a completely new sight that elates the heart of a beholder. As a symbol of poetic expression, the flower conjoins person and nature into a new entity: nation. The bloom of rhododendron and the people in the spring merge into a singular perception of national aesthetics as such when the poetic persona transcends to equate himself with the flower in front of him.

Emerson establishes a distance between the flower and himself, allowing himself a position of an observer who initiates a dialogue with the flower. This political agenda becomes clear when he critically views the wisdom of the people who seek out utility in everything present in nature. "Rhodora" is built on the political meaning of distance between the flower and the poet, while "Rhododendron" completely erases the distance between the poet and the flower as the poet exchanges himself for the flower in the Spring. Adhikari does not have to fight against any political ideology or any other aesthetic symbol in order to establish rhododendron as the emblem of beauty in national aesthetic order, for it is the national flower in Nepal. On the contrary, the rose enjoys the privilege in both cultural and political frame of the US (Otieno, n. pag.), which puts Emerson in a very strategic position to view and celebrate rhodora as a lonely, wild forest where it blooms for itself.

Emerson rejects the European aesthetics in favor of the American perception of the beautiful. In "The Rhodora," the "rose" represents the European perception of beauty while "rhodora" symbolizes the American ways of viewing beauty. He opposes all the ideals surrounding the discourse of rose as such in order to show to the American people the value and position of a local flower in native aesthetics. Actually, the US as a nation is used to comparing itself to Europe as a cultural bloc. The poet addresses rhodora as a "rival of the rose" (line 13). Similarly, he uses the word "sages" (line 9) to mean the pundits of the traditional aesthetics who can only celebrate the rose. To answer the sages regarding the origin of the flower, the poet subtly argues: "I never thought to ask, I never knew;/But in my simple ignorance, suppose/The self-same Power that brought me there brought you" (lines 14-16). As a transcendentalist philosopher, the poet realizes the creative force that does not discriminate at all.

The poet, the rose, and the rhodora share the same foundation as implied in “the self-same Power” (line 16). This power gives life, existence, and perception of an independent being in all of them. Actually, he undoes the rose as a foreign symbol of beauty in order to establish a local American flower as the ideal of beauty in American poetry.

Adhikari has transcended the geographical variations and obstacles in the country to explore equality in the bloom of rhododendron. The red flower blossoms in any type of landscape because the persona knows about the limited space of the plain terrain in the country. The cliff and the rocky Mountains are also Nepal, just the way happiness and sadness are equally the parts of life. In “Rhododendron,” the poet sings:

Who gets satiated only with the bloom in the plains?
I bloom in the steep cliffs as well.
Only happiness does not last forever,
I bloom equally in the grief too. (lines 3-7)

The boom covers various geographies of the nation, thereby appearing as a transcendental landscape where the nation begins to stretch itself through the redness of the flower. The rhododendron does not discriminate between the steep, rocky mountains and the plains of the South in the country: the bloom equally goes everywhere in all kinds of landscape. The poem sketches a similar type of mental landscape, informing two polarities: happiness and grief. The flower does not see any difference between them: it reveals its meaning and significance in each state equally. It blooms alike and carries its poetic, emotional value alike in any even state of heart and mind.

Emerson presents the local flower as the idea of native beauty for the US so as to present American nationalism through rhodora. The poem presents his vision of American nationalism that upholds its own glory by celebrating the local, minor, and minute, and rejecting the foreign. The local is represented through the flower in the title of the poem. The simple native flower transcends beyond the poetic vision to redraw the whole aesthetic boarder as such when he sings:

Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!
I never thought to ask, I never knew;

But, in my simple ignorance, suppose

The self-same Power that brought me there brought you. (lines 13-16)

Placing the flower as the rival of the rose, the poet attempts to achieve his political goal of asserting the native superiority over European ideals. In fact, American Romanticism refers to a nationalist movement in which the poet and philosopher, Emerson played a vital role by shaping American perceptions. As Ruland and Bradbury (1991) have argued, "Emerson's statement of the innocent vision at work in a natural world was meant as a new beginning for himself and all Americans, and that is what it eventually came to seem" (p. 119). The same organic view of life and society gets manifest in the poem when the persona happens to see it amid the wilderness.

Like the transcendentalist in Emerson, Adhikari conjoins the personal and the national into a single flower: red rhododendron. The bloom covers any sort of external geography and provides with solace to any sort of mental, emotional landscape as well. The external and the internal get united into a single symbol in order to assert the harmony of the form and content at the national and the personal level respectively. Emotionally playing with the expressiveness of the flower at the personal level, the persona begins to extract the color from the flower and use it to fill the parting of locks on his beloved's scalp. According to Nepali practice, it refers to the union of two souls in the form of marriage. He writes:

If I find someone to look at me,

I bloom in the pupil of eye;

If I find someone to accept me,

I bloom on the parting of hair at scalp. (lines 7-10)

Adhikari's persona romanticizes the flower at a personal level and makes the bloom a means of adding redness on face and then in life. The colour of the flower turns into a symbol of youth, romance, and spiritual and physical union in the Spring season. Thus, Adhikari makes the red rhododendron a symbol that carries the spirit of the nation at one level, while it still implies the uneven emotional states of personal life that undergoes happiness and grief.

Flower and nation merge into a singular transcendental spirit in both Emerson and Adhikari who present rhodora and rhododendron to redefine the personal

perceptions of beauty and the national spirit in general. The rhodora blossoms with purple leaves, brightening the dark water and the forest, whereby transcending beyond the purpose of utility. Similarly, the massive bloom of red rhododendron inspires Adhikari's persona to mutate himself into the flower itself: as he sings, "I happened to be a red, rhododendron" (line 1). The person and the nation get unified in the red rhododendron in the way the oversoul serves as a principle of transcendental source in Emerson. So too, "the poem concludes in the linking of nature and man through the "Power," the universal spirit, the oversoul" (Axelrod, 1974, p. 35). The passage of flower from the personal to the national both inside and outside implies that unlike traditionally established symbols of beauty, the native flower can express the aesthetic ethos in a far better way. Emerson explicitly names the rose as a European symbol of poetic expression in the poem, saying that the rhodora is a rival of the rose (line 13). As such, the rose symbolizes the European consciousness of the beautiful. Both the poets find the spirit of the nation in their local flowers, rhodora in the US and red rhododendron in Nepal.

The local symbols require serious attention in the study of poetry and other creative forms of literature in that they help us explore the significance of the political tension in the historical contexts. The local functions as a way of finding a unique vantage point through which to reevaluate and critique the existing social reality. Besides, poets employ the local themes and symbols to mediate upon the ills of the traditions and/or contemporary political orders as well. Despite the claims by critics that Emerson was much influenced by the British Romanticist tradition, this examination of "The Rhodora" reveals that he reads the native wild flower against the background of the rose. The traditionally established canon of art and aesthetics turns into an insufficient discourse for Emerson because he believes that America has its own political way of developing native perceptions. Similarly, Adhikari's "The Rhododendron" blooms in all the places of the country: the poet feels jovial when he begins to romanticize the idea of nation in personal quest as he sings that he wishes to get married by using its colour on his beloved's forehead. Adhikari's rhododendron represents and holds within itself two different categories like the person and the polity. Despite presence of other multiple species of flowers in each case, the poets choose the native resources for their poetic contemplation in order to fulfill the political motive: they reveal the inner aesthetic perceptions of each culture as grounded in the locally available symbols. Also, the real reflection begins in poetry when the creative artists

employ the local to explore the cultural distinctions of people and nations through such symbols like local flowers.

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**I acknowledge the time and support of Kshetra Pratap Adhikari's son, Aman Pratap Adhikari for this research. Similarly, Prakash Sayami and Tika Bhandari have supported me to get relevant information on Adhikari's lyrics. My sincere indebtedness goes to Prof. Tulasi Diwas, poet and folklorist from Nepal, for encouraging and inspiring me with his great theoretical insights on the use of the context in poetic expression. He generously granted one fine afternoon to me at his residence to discuss his great vision to study the local context in creative works.*