Chapter 5: Sufi Element in Prose of Thoreau

“The country knows not yet or in the least part, how great a son it has lost.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Henry David Thoreau as a member of transcendental club and a close friend of Emerson was enthusiastic on God and nature to find the God from each parcel of nature. He was a devotee of simplicity and morality and he was against slavery. He had read many Oriental books and scriptures especially Indian ones and also he influenced Gandhi the leader of India by his Civil Disobedience. He spent a large part of his time in Emerson’s home library and there is no doubt he was influenced by him and finally he built his tiny shanty in the property of Emerson in the Walden Pond and he dwelled there for more than two years to find if there are new mysteries of life in the woods. This chapter tries to trace Sufi elements in some selected prose works of Thoreau especially Walden as well as Indian and Persian influence on his works.

Sufi Element in Thoreau’s Prose:

Let us start with the best and remarkable one – Towhid (Absolute Unity). “la elaha el-allah” – there is no God but God. There is no Reality and Clear Target other than God and actually this world is only an illusion and finally all of us shall return to Him.

The lost child always seeks his/her mother impatiently and till finding her can not enjoy, sleep, eat well, and get rid of thoughts. Like the child all of us
have lost our Origin and always are searching for it. The man of God, Thoreau, one night while he was a young boy, found it difficult to sleep at night and when his mother enquired why he could not sleep, he replied:

“Mother, I have been looking through the stars to see if I could see God behind them.”¹

If this world is mere illusion and God is the only Reality how long are we going to be satisfied with the illusory? Should we not come face to face with Reality? In the Week we come across this significant question:

“May we not see God? Are we being put off and amused in this life as it were with a mere allegory? Is not nature rightly that of which she is commonly taken to be symbol merely?”²

Thoreau finds God by his divine soul through nature and at last he gets the happiness by finding his Real Beloved:

“Alone in some solitary place let him constantly meditate on the divine nature of the soul, for by such meditation he will obtain happiness – reza.”³

And in Sufism reza is there when a Sufi reaches his Beloved. Thoreau says:

Let nothing come between you and the Light …… When you travel to the celestial city, carry no letter of introduction. When you knock ask to see God none of the servants. In what concerns you much, do not think that you have companion: know that you are alone in the world.⁴

But the all embracing, all pervasive notion of God appealed most to Thoreau. Even the Upanishadic concept of God extending beyond the created universe had its attraction for Thoreau.⁵

Thoreau says: “a wise man will dispense with repentance. It is shocking and passionate. God prefers that you approach him thoughtful, not penitent,
though you are the chief of sinners. Only by forgetting oneself, one can go near to Him (God)” (Journal 2:3).  

“Certainly there is no sentiment as rare as the love of God” Thoreau said. His reference to the love of God gradually leads him to an urge to “view the God’s state and the stars” and to feel a need to be earthborn as well as heaven-born. 

Truly speaking, simplicity is the best motto for those who want to enjoy life as much as possible. Simplicity brings happiness, security, humility, self-knowledge, reality, truth, faith, kindheartedness, and all advantages of life for us and that is why the friend of nature gets used to living a simple life and because of that he finds God easily and becomes His friend. In Persian we say oomre Gol kam ast – the life of flower is short and people who die early are like flowers, beautiful and good smelling, but short – lived. The best instance of such people is Thoreau who died early. 

The simple life looked fair for Thoreau, “like a Persian city or hanging gardens in the distance, so washed in light, so untried, only to be thridded by clean thoughts.” 

As chapter two stated, simplicity gives truth and pure wine to anyone and Thoreau explains this fact eloquently:

Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth. I sat at a table where were rich food and wine in abundance, and obsequious attendance, but sincerity and truth were not; and I went away hungry from the inhospitable board. The hospitality was as cold as the ices. I thought that there was no need of ice to freeze them. They talked to me of the age of the wine and the fame of the vintage; but I thought of an older, a newer, and purer wine, of a more glorious vintage, which they had not got, and could not buy. The style, the house and grounds and "entertainment" pass for nothing with me. I called on the king, but
he made me wait in his hall, and conducted like a man incapacitated for hospitality. There was a man in my neighborhood who lived in a hollow tree. His manners were truly regal. I should have done better had I called on him.\textsuperscript{10}

Simplicity is more than a mode of life for Thoreau; it is a philosophical ideal as well. In his ‘Economy’ chapter of \textit{Walden}, Thoreau asserts that a feeling of dissatisfaction with one’s possessions can be resolved in two ways: one may acquire more, or reduce one’s desires. Thoreau looks around at his fellow Concord residents and finds them taking the first path, devoting their energies to making mortgage payments and buying the latest fashions. He prefers to take the second path of radically minimizing his consumer activity which is the simplicity. Thoreau patches his clothes instead of buying new ones and dispenses with all accessories he finds unnecessary. For Thoreau anything more than what is useful is not just an extravagance, but it is a real impediment and disadvantage. He builds his own shack instead of getting a bank loan to buy one, and enjoys the leisure time that he can afford by renouncing larger expenditures. Ironically, he points out, those who pursue more impressive possessions actually have fewer possessions than he does, since he owns his house outright, while theirs are technically held by mortgage companies. He argues that the simplification of one’s lifestyle does not hinder such pleasures as owning one’s residence, but on the contrary, facilitates them.

One aspect of the doctrine of \textit{simplicity} demanded \textit{voluntary poverty} and the practice, as often as possible, of the primitive arts of life. Poverty was a necessary consequence once acquisition was rejected and a maximum amount of energy devoted to the higher goal of self-culture. Thoreau practised it with
moderation and wrote of it in his journal with polemic excess, reaching at times the principle that “just in proportion to the **outward poverty is the inward wealth**.”

As Moslems’ Prophet and Imams have recommended again and again about **simplicity** and **self-working**, the best and joyful life is the one which is made by the person himself and all mystics and Sufis are doing their own jobs by their own hands. The champion of simplicity in America also is not an exception: Thoreau’s propensity for pure and simple life was matched only by his ardour for solitary life.

Calverton rates Thoreau higher than his 19th century contemporaries because he was not afraid of manual labour, “**the working hand.**” And Thoreau himself says:

> I only ask a clean seat. I will build my lodge on the southern slope of some hill and take there the life the gods send me. Will it not be employment enough to accept gratefully all that is yielded me between sun and sun? Even the fox digs his own burrow.

And again he advises us to procure our provisions in a simple way for our families:

> “Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands and provided food for themselves and families simply and **honestly enough**, the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged.”

Thoreau never again attempted to derive his livelihood from the **simple economy** whose activities he continued to praise in his journal. He wished occasionally that he were back in the woods, and he envied the men who
explored the Maine forests for cuttable timber – but he stayed put in Concord. He wrote, “I hate the present modes of living and getting my living. Farming and shop-keeping and working at a trade or profession are all odious to me. I should relish getting my living in a simple, primitive fashion.”

Another irony of Thoreau’s simplification campaign is that his literary style, while concise, is far from simple. It contains witticisms, double meanings, and puns that are not at all the kind of New England deadpan literalism that might pass for literary simplicity.

Thoreau seems to have had from his earliest years an inclination towards a life of solitude, contemplation, and closeness to nature which he finally chose deliberately as a way of life. It is revealed in youthful compositions, letters, and earliest Journal entries, and obviously springs from deep within his personality and emotions.

Behind and beyond all his jests and paradoxes was his sincere love of a simple life, freed from the encumbrances which he found all about him, in the comparatively simple surroundings of Concord, where most of his thoughtful days were spent. He early found that all he had to do was to investigate Nature under the light of idealism, and to report what he saw.

Those who look for more and more property of this temporary world are really mistaken and they convert their joys into bitter sorrows because they always sweat for mundane things and always such people face calamities and blasphemies, but being a simple one removes all these volitions. Only one should live by faith and experience and a simple life, then one can taste the sweetness of life and Thoreau has the same idea as do Sufis:

“In short I am convinced, both by faith and experience that is possible to maintain one’s self on this earth not as a hardship but a pastime if we live
simply and wisely……It is not necessary that a man earn his living by the sweat of his brow, unless he sweats easier than I do.”\textsuperscript{18}

In one sentence we can claim that Thoreau really is the Master of Simplicity.

Life is more pleasant when it is simple and those who are busy in collecting all the unnecessary things of the world can not enjoy their life and that is why all Sufis lead a simple life and one can find in their life only a few things because their main business is only the \textbf{seeking of God} and trading with God. And Thoreau as a devotee of simple life adores those who have simple life and not complex, pompous, and queenly life. Just a few years before his death, Thoreau wrote in his journal that a man who had spent his time in business and who had acquired “much money, many houses, and barns and woodlots”\textsuperscript{19} surely had been a failure in life. He went even further and equated sin and death with material realization. Later his strictures became even more severe when he declared that simple acts are poetic, but trade is not simple but “artificial and complex.” And not only does it postpone life but actually it substitutes death.

Thoreau believed that the essential object of man in life was the aspiration for \textbf{perfection}. But in order to aspire, there must first be expiration or \textbf{purgation of being}. Chapter two discussed that for being a Perfect man one should make oneself pure first and one should avoid all other extra businesses and entertainments.

To live, according to him, is to “let in the flood, raise the gates and set all our wheels in motion.” After living for a few months at Walden Pond Thoreau propounded his belief in a “hard and emphatic” life and his desire to roam far, to grasp life and to conquer it, learn much and live. “His ceaseless endeavour to reach perfection and his realization (self-knowing), in fact, his obsession with the paradox that man is not what he is but something much greater is
reflected in his exhortation: “Be resolutely and faithfully what you are: be humbly what you aspire to be.”

Sufism is the seeking and finding of God and Reality through inner light, meditation, and contemplation.

What was Thoreau’s apparent understanding and practice of contemplation? Curiously enough, one does find both the unifying vision and introspectiveness in his experience. If Thoreau wished to be pure always, it was only to enable him to be at the top of his condition, ready for whatever turned up in heaven or earth. He wanted to be in ‘right knowledge’ so that he could commune with the supreme Unity of the cosmos. In Bhagavad Gita he apparently found the answer to some of the knotty questions that arise from the life of action and inaction, the active life and the contemplative life.

One more element of Sufism is solitude and hermitage; in fact, it is the main stage of Sufism for thinking of the Beloved.

Thoreau in his early essay “Literary man” says about solitude:

Happy the man who is furnished with all the advantages to relish solitude; he is never alone and yet maybe retired in the midst of the crowd; he hold sweet converse with the sages of antiquity and gathers wisdom from their discourse he enjoys the fruit of the ire labors their knowledge is his knowledge their wisdom his inheritance.

Thoreau says:

It is a great relief when for a few moments in the day we can retire to our chamber and be completely true to ourselves. It leavens the rest of our hours. In that moment I will be nakedly as vicious as I am; this false life of mine shall have a being at length. I thrive best on solitude, if I have had a companion only one day in a week, unless it were one or two I could name, I find that the value
of the week to me has been seriously affected. It dissipates my days and often it takes another week to get over it. I wish to know something; I wish to be made better. I wish to forget a considerable part of every day, all mean, narrow, trivial men (and this requires usually to forget all personal relations so long), and, therefore I come out to this solitudes, where the problem of existence is simplified. I get away a mile or two from the town into the stillness and solitude of nature, with rocks, trees, weeds, snow and about me…. My fairies invariably take to flight when a man appears upon the scenes. That solitude was sweet to me as flower. I sat down on the boundless level and enjoyed the solitude, drank it as the medicine for which I had pined, worth more than the bear-berry so common on the cape. Do you think I am impoverishing myself by withdrawing from men, but in my solitude I have woven for myself a silver web or chrysalis and nymph-like shall ere long burst forth a more perfect creature; fitted for a higher society.  

In his love for, in fact his absolute need for, **solitude**, Thoreau was simply affirming a basic doctrine of all **mysticism**. The vital need of the mystic and Sufi for solitude is obvious: first, the need for intensification and amplification of **purity** and **simplicity**; second, there is the need for conditions favourable to **meditation** and **contemplation**. In the “stillness and solitude” of nature, Thoreau says he felt as if he had come to an open window; as he put it, “I see out and around myself.”  

And also he states:

“I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. I never found the companion that was as companionable as **solitude**.”

One of the most important characteristics of a real Sufi is his happiness with **death**. He never fears death, because it is a bridge, which leads him to the **vesal** with his Beloved. One can see this element in Thoreau also.
Thoreau even as late as a month before his death was working at his manuscripts and talks to his friends and visitors with utmost jollity. Sam Staples his one time jailor visiting him on March 23, found him in perfect good spirits, serene and happy. “Never saw a man”, Said Staple, “dying with so much pleasure and peace.”

Thoreau never lost till the last moment his mental equipoise and his sense of humour. When his aunt Louisa asked him if he made his peace with God, he replied, “Did not know, we had ever quarreled, Aunt.” Similarly, when Parker Pillsbury, an old family friend asked him, “you seem so near the brink of the dark river that I almost wonder how the opposite shore may appear to you.” Thoreau only answered “One world at a time!”

His sister Sophia also said that, “During his long illness I never heard a murmur escape him or the slightest wish expressed to remain with us………None of friends seemed to realize how very ill he was, so full of life and good cheer did he seem.” On the 6th of May, 1862, as his mother, his sister and his aunt watched, his breathing grew fainter and fainter and without the slightest struggle, he entered the land of immortals. “Some thing beautiful had happened, not death”.

“Every part of nature teaches that the passing away of one life is making room for another. The Oak dies down to the ground, leaving within its rind a rich virgin mould, which will impart a vigorous life to an infant forest.” This, in the widest sense echoes passages in the Kathopnishad and the Bhagvad Gita.

“He who is born is sure to die and he who dies is equally sure to be born.” Similarly in the journal of 1856 he says, “We find that we had virtually forgotten the note of each bird and when we hear it again, it is remembered like a dream reminding us of a previous state existence. How happens it that
the association it awakens is always pleasing, never saddening, reminiscences of our sunset hours.”

Emerson, his friend and guide, closed his funeral oration in the following words:

The country knows not yet or in the least part, how great a son it has lost. It seems an injury that he should leave in the midst of his broken task which none else can finish – a kind of indignity to so noble a soul, that he should depart out of nature yet, before he has been really shown to his peers for what he is……. His soul was made for the noblest society; he had, in a short life, exhausted the capabilities of this world. Wherever there is knowledge, wherever there is virtue, wherever there is beauty he will find a home.

**Nature** is the best teacher for every one as chapter two discussed and whoever is keen and intelligent can collect ample knowledge from every parcel of nature as great Sufis did. In the *Holy Koran* also there are many verses about nature and its components as meaningful lessons. Undoubtedly, Thoreau is one of those who find everything in nature and he dedicates a poem to it also. He went into the woods and joined nature and chanted like this:

“I want to go soon and live away by the pond, where I shall hear only the wind whispering among the reeds. It will be success if I shall have left myself behind. But my friends ask what I will do when I get there. Will it not be employment enough to watch the progress of the seasons?”

Thoreau found “reality” in **solitude with nature**, and “unreality” in society.

Thoreau’s habit of pretending to see **moral significance** in every aspect of nature often produces merely a conceit, whose meaning would be hard to define exactly. In a letter to Lucy Brown, of July 21, 1841, for example, he writes in typical vein: “I dream of looking abroad summer and winter, with
free gaze, from some mountain side, while my eyes revolve in an Egyptian slime of health, — I to be nature looking into nature with such easy sympathy as the blue-eyed grass in the meadow looks in the face of the sky.”33

In the Week, Thoreau did not seek a way of life as the answer to his need, but a kind of inner spiritual revelation. The voyager dreams as he floats along, almost passively, while the experiences of the day are occasionally interrupted by speculative essays. Although Thoreau resoundingly rejected institutional Christianity, he believed at this time, and to some extent all has life, in what William James defined as the essential character of all religion: the acceptance of an unseen order of power or spiritual force, of which the material world is only a partial expression. In the Week, it is the divine, as manifest in nature that Thoreau seeks to know as reality. It is to him ultimate reality that nature can reveal as part of itself, or which can be glimpsed through nature rightly approached. He asks the anguished question, “May we not see God?”34 The Week was Thoreau’s first systematic attempt to relate the life of solitude in nature to the search for reality; and it was a reality of intense spiritual idealism, linked in his imagination with the sages of the East and ancient times.

Even the silence of the nature and harmonious sounds of the nature, as chapter two mentioned, the sound of tree leaves and their music are the factors of thinking about the Creator of such piquant sounds. And these simple sounds could relate Thoreau to God.

“Silence is when we hear inwardly, sound when we hear outwardly.”35 Thoreau wrote in the Week:

“These simple sounds relate us to star……How can I go on…..suddenly Old Time winked at me…..Ah, you know me, you rogue….and news has
come that it was well. That ancient universe is in such capital health, I think undoubtedly it will never die. Heal yourself, doctor, by God I live.”

Taking of the music of nature, Thoreau says, “Nature makes no noise. The howling storm, the rustling leaf, the puttering rain are no disturbance, there is an essential harmony in them.”

Thoreau considered his main profession to be always on the alert to find God in Nature, to know his lurking-places, and to attend the oratories and operas of the outdoors. Of his purpose in going to the Walden hermitage he writes: “my purpose in going to Walden Pond was not to live cheaply nor to live dearly there, but to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles.”

In his essay ‘Excursion’ about nature as a best teacher he writes:
“Nature has taken more care than the fondest parent for the education and refinement of her children.”

Finally Thoreau himself explains why he went to the woods:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived……I wished to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime to know it by experience and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.

Emerson gave his doctrine “God in man, but incomplete” and this moved many others especially the members of the transcendental club. Thoreau being
a close friend of Emerson and a member of the transcendental club was affected by this doctrine strongly. On the other hand he was an ardent follower of Holy Scriptures especially Eastern, therefore, he devoted his life to the Almighty and he found him in nature.

Thoreau’s faith in God, which was not merely a matter of social formality but one of deep conviction, transfigured his entire life to a degree that the common man could neither understand nor admire. He says, “There is more of God and divine help in a man’s little finger than in idle prayer and trust.”

And how beautifully, these ideas have correspondence with the doctrines of Sufism and even with the verses of the Holy Koran, “ana agrabo men hablel varid.”

Sufism says that “all of us are from God and to Him we shall return” and it is so strange that consciously or unconsciously every one is seeking Him in various ways. But to find Him one should be a real friend and a serious seeker and for this one needs Sufi elements like chastity, purity, holiness, and so on. Thoreau also loudly declares that:

The generative energy which when we are loose dissipates and makes us unclean, when we are continent invigorates and inspires us. Chastity is the flowering of man; and what are called genius, heroism, holiness, and the like are but various fruits, which succeed it. Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open ……He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established.

“I blew up my own Spirit on to the clay” said the Great God and now there is not any doubt that our Soul belongs to the Allah and no one else. And really it is a hard task to know the mysteries of such matters and always such things
occupy the minds of human beings and the only answer is that God Himself knows the answers of such riddles and puzzles. Thoreau also a wonders at such questions and answers and once he cried out:

“With all your science can you tell how it is, and whence it is, that light comes into the soul?”

Thoreau while he was a young boy was only thinking about God, while other young people were thinking of enjoyment. It is worthwhile to mention a poem from Sufi literature in Persian which says:

\[
\text{در جواوی پاک بودن شیوه پیغمبریست}
\text{ورنه هر گبری به پیری می شود پرهزگار}
\]

Being a pure one in youth is the way of Prophets
Everyone can be a priest in his old age.

Thoreau condemns the restlessness with which God is often sought by the believers or rejected by the non-believers. In Sufism there is a doctrine that God never disappoints his creature and He accepts all prayers whether they would be of believers or of non-believers. Even the Great God accepts the repentance of those who disobey He orders again and again:

\[
\text{این درگه ما درگه نا میدی نیست}
\text{صد بار اگر توبه شکستی باراً}
\]

Our door is not the door of disappointment
Even if you disobey hundred times
come again towards this door.

And Thoreau as he believes in the forgiveness and greatness of God says “the great God is very calm withal. How superfluous is any excitement in his
creature! He listens equally to the prayers of the believers and the unbelievers. The moods of man should unfold and alternate as gradually and placidly as those of nature……”

“Everyone” said Imam Ali “has his own way to God and finally all ways and paths lead to God.” No one can escape this path and consciously or unconsciously one has to walk this path as all rivers and rain and even a drop of water at last join the Sea. Sufism states that all of us must go back to our real home and the Holy Koran as already mentioned says, “From God we are and to Him shall we return.” The man of path, Thoreau, has similar idea as those of Sufism:

My life will wait for nobody but is being matured still irresistibly while I go about the streets and chaffer with this man and that to secure a living. It will cut its own channel like the mountain stream which by the longest ridges and by level prairies is not kept from the sea finally. So flows a man’s life, and will reach the sea water, if not by an earthly channel, yet in dew and rain, overleaping all barriers, with rainbows to announce its victory.

Thoreau had much interest in the Holy Scriptures of the world especially the Oriental ones. It seems that he had found many morals in each of them and one can suppose that he was familiar with the verse of the Holy Koran “Those are dear for me who possess faith for me whether they are black, white, …. Or any races.” Believing in the Holy texts he suggests a mix of them to edit one common book. Here also we can see Hindu and Persian influence on him.

It would be worthy of the age print together collected scriptures or sacred writings of the several nations, the Chinese, the Hindu, the Persians, the Hebrews and others as the scripture of mankind. The New Testament is still,
perhaps too much on the lips and in the hearts of man to be called a scripture in this sense. Such a juxtaposition and comparison might help to liberalize the faith of man. This is a work which time wills surly edit, reserved to crown the labours of the printing press. This would be the Bible or book of books which let the missionaries carry to the uttermost part of the earth.\textsuperscript{46}

**Doing well to others** has been recommended again and again in various religions and Holy Scriptures especially in Islam and Sufism. About it Thoreau also advises us as Krutch has mentioned.

Krutch says about Thoreau, “He quite openly distrusted those who would do good to others before they had discovered how to do good to themselves; and far from seeking some social discipline which would unite humanity into a manageable mass of essentially uniform creatures with predictable reactions, he desired, so he said, “as many different persons in the world as possible.””\textsuperscript{47}

In the apparent inaction and austerity of the Sufis Thoreau saw something glorious. This according to him was the right spirit in which life was to be lived. The mood of renunciation forced itself upon the contemplative Thoreau as a sharp contrast to the unduly active and hectically possessive western society. In this acquisition he saw seeds of future destruction. He brings out the distinction between the two ideologies.

“I would give all the wealth of the world and all the deeds of all the heroes for one true vision.”\textsuperscript{48}

“faman yaamal mesghala zarraten khayran yarah, va man yamal mesghala zarreten sharran yara.” said the Holy Koran – and whoso has done an atom’s weight of good shall see it, and whoso has done an atom’s weight of evil shall see it.\textsuperscript{49}
Every good deed has its own reward and every bad deed its own punishment. In order that these rewards and punishments are repeated, the individuals should have a long chain of births and deaths. Thoreau does not directly state his acceptance of this theory of the Koran, but the following two passages evince his interest in the verse of the Koran. In the first journal he writes: “I was informed today that no tyranny presided at the framing of the world, that I am a free man of the universe, and not sentenced to any caste” and in Walden he writes: “every path but your own is the path of fate. Keep on your own track, then.”

The ‘Excursion’ (one of the Thoreau’s essays) rests on a final distinction between science (the discipline and method) and true science, science in its broadest, its etymological and Transcendental sense, which is a state of consciousness, “the true man of science will know nature better by his finer organization; he will smell, taste, see, hear, feel, better than other man.”

The human eye (as one of the important symbols of Sufism meaning knowledge and heart eye) is the most important of all the organs. It is like a window through which the soul can peep outside; their loss submerges the individual into an ocean of darkness. In Thoreau’s writings the eye figures a number of times. His reference to the eye in his essay ‘Nature’ is well known become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing I see all, says he in another context. In Thoreau’s writings we come across many references to the eye. He talks of the eye as the noblest feature, of fairest colour, the jewel of the body.

And again in the journal we have this praise of the eye; man’s eye is the true star finder, the comet seeker. No superior telescope to this has been invented. In those big ones, the recoil is equal to the force of the discharge. The poet’s eye in a fine frenzy rolling ranges from earth to heaven which the astronomer’s eye does not often do. It does not see far beyond the dome of the
observatory. In Sufism the same idea is there. For example, it says to see God one has to have heart’s eye not the body eye.

The eye does the least drudgery of any of the senses. It oftenest escapes to a high employment. The rest serve and defend it. “I attach some superiority, even priority, to this sense. It is the oldest servant in the soul’s household; it images what is imagined, it ideates what it idealizes. Through it idolatry crept in which is a kind of religion. If any joy or grief is to be expressed, the eye is the sweet runner that carries the news. In circumspection double, in fidelity single, it serves truth always and carries no false news. Of five (sic) castes it is the Brahmin. It converses with the heavens,” Thoreau says.⁵²

Again comparing the eye to God he says, “The eye has many qualities which belong to God more than man. It is his lightning which flashes in it, when I look into my companion’s eye, I think it is God’s private mine. It is a noble feature; it cannot be degraded for God can look on all things undefiled.”⁵³

Walden and Sufi element:

Thoreau stayed for more than two years far from society among woods and it was a great opportunity for him to get experiences of the mysterious life more and more. He found the hidden realities in Nature and God. It would be no exaggeration to say that for the most part Thoreau’s life was dominated and determined by the Walden spirit. Walden envisages all his findings through Nature and it is not surprising to find many mystical and Sufi elements in this salient work of art.

The outcome of the Walden experiment is chiefly to be sought in its reiteration of the faith in the individual. In the final as also the initial,
analysis it is the individual that matters and notwithstanding the great political movement and social change and mass upheavals the strings are pulled by a single individual and the mass or the mob rather goes up or down along with the over towering individual. In the *Walden* towards the close we have this somewhat prophetic utterance, “it is said that the British Empire is very large and respectable and that the United States are a first rate power. We don’t believe that a tide rises and falls behind every man, which can float the British Empire like a chip, if he should ever harbor it in his mind.”

*Walden* is the record of an experience in serene living, a venture in simplicity and discipline as timely today as it was nearly 100 years ago. In *Walden*, Thoreau found that poverty is not poverty. He states about his stay in Walden:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach and not, when I came to die, discover that I have not lived…………. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath shave close, to live into a corner and reduce it to its lowest terms, and if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it and publish it’s meanness to world; or if it were sublime to know it by experience and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. I learned this at least by my experiment that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams and *endeavours* to live the life he has imagined he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.
**Solitude** or **individuality** is one of the elements of Sufism and Thoreau follows that as well as Sufis and there is no policy behind it other than **finding of God.**

Longing for **solitude** is not due to any misanthropy or hatred of company but for self-realization, for coming to grips with oneself and thus emerging from every dose of solitude, a whit stronger to face and to live one’s life. It is thus that a man discovers the best in himself (**self-knowing**) and lives a fuller and a richer life as Imam Ali also has mentioned it (**man aarafa nafsahoo faghad aarafa rabbahoo**). \(^{57}\)

Thoreau’s communion with nature in Walden was one of the requirements of his philosophy. It was a part of his **self-exploration**, for he wanted to discover his **own self** indirectly through nature. So while at Walden, Thoreau merged with nature and, through nature, with **God.** He felt that he was an essential part of nature.

Thoreau’s quest for individuality was not political in its motivation. It was primarily **moral** and **spiritual.** For Thoreau, the **individual soul** is the very embodiment of godhood nay God himself and the body was the temple which we erect for him. **Purity** thus was the essential pre-condition of living. A life devoid of purity, by its very nature, demands chastity and restraint and moderation not only in matters of sex, which however is what the body craves for. \(^{58}\)

There is no doubt Thoreau was influenced by Eastern philosophy and there are many traces of Sufism in his works especially *Walden*.

Certainly there is no doubt that *Walden* is permeated with a vaguely Hindu atmosphere. There are many overt references to the sacred texts of Sufism….. And Thoreau himself follows certain Hindu customs… There are also many less obvious references as for example to the language of silence which is so
common in India and which is invoked in Thoreau’s silent communion with the old fisherman who joined him at the pond.” Flute playing, his own and that of John Farmer is also mentioned and is reminiscent of god Kirishna’s favourite musical pastime. Most significant of all are many references to the river and the definite equation of the Walden Pond with the sacred Ganges. To dismiss all of these references as simply part of Thoreau’s temperamental affinity for East is to underestimate the extraordinary influence of the orient on his thinking and to misunderstand the purpose of Walden.  

“In comparison with the philosophers of the east we may say that modern Europe has yet given birth to none. Beside the vast and cosmogonical of the Bhagvad Gita even our Shakespeare seems sometimes youthfully green and practical merely.”

Speaking about the simplicity and universality of the Eastern Scriptures Thoreau says “what extracts from the Vedas I have read fall on me like the light of a higher and purer luminary which describes a loftier course through a purer stratum free from particulars simple universal. I rise on me like the full moon after the stars have come out wading through some far summer stratum of the sky.”

The simplicity and other writings provide ample proof of his admiration for it, as also the way he led his life. Talking of Sufi’s austerity he says “the very austerity of these Easters in tempting to the devotionals as a more refined and nobler luxury… one may discover the root of a Sufi religion in his own private history when in the silent intervals of the day or the night he does sometime inflict on himself like austerities with a stern satisfaction (reza).”

The concept of Maya (illusion) is another important contribution that Indian sages and Sufis make to the world philosophy. According to them the whole
creation is an illusion, a sort of a dream and our lives here are only **momentary** and **dreamlike**. We ultimately return to God, the absolute reality. In our utter ignorance we regard the unreal as real and are unmindful of the **Eternal Reality**.

The theme of the **renunciation** which in certain ways, is central to the teachings of Sufism and has been advocated in almost all the scriptures, finds expression in Thoreau’s writings at a number of places. The Walden experiment itself was **renunciation** put in action. Thoreau’s persistent refusal to get involved in the affairs of the world is proof only of his conviction of this creed. Even his idea of **simplicity** is only an approximation of the concept of renunciation. Let our affairs be of two and three and not of a hundred and thousand, he says. Our wants if they cannot be completely done away with are to be brought to a minimum. Our food, dress and furniture are all to be ruthlessly simplified. The whole world and its affairs are to be regarded as of no consequence. His utter disregard of what are known practical considerations is voiced in this way: “What after all, does the practicalness of life amount to? These things immediate to be done are very trivial. I could postpone them all to hear this locust sing. The most glorious fact in my experience is not anything that I have done or may hope to do, but a transient thought or vision, or dream which I have had. I would give all the wealth of the world, and all the deeds of all the heroes, for one **true vision**.”

C.R Anderson in his profound study of *Walden*, entitled *The magic Circle of Walden* has very freely and frankly admitted the Eastern atmosphere of the book apart from the fact that one of the chapters, incidentally, is entitled Maya, the entire book is interspersed with sentences like these: Thoreau found in the Orientals what neither neo-Platonists nor Christians could give him. He was more deeply read in the oriental scriptures than any of the other
transcendentalists.” “The Oriental Bibles proved his best source for imagery of the spiritual life.”"64

Henry Seidel Canby’s excellent biography “Thoreau – the biography of a man who believed in doing what he wanted” (1939) shows a much better appreciation of the situation when he says, the Bhagvad Gita was explicit and like Emerson’s Nature, went deep down into his consciousness and gave him a new birth.”65

Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wise have always lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor. The ancient philosophers, Chinese, Hindu, Persian, and Greek, were a class than which none has been poorer in outward riches, none so rich inward.66

Thoreau’s real purpose at Walden Pond as well as throughout his whole life was to educate the whole of mankind to realize the divine in man.

‘Visitors’ and ‘The Bean Field,’ two chapters of Walden show clear impact of Sufism which emphasize to a great extent the need for solitude. It gives directive to the Sufis to practise solitude:

“Alone in some solitary place, let him constantly meditate on the divine nature of the soul, for by such meditation he will attain happiness”67

Thoreau’s task, then, would seem to be to teach mankind enough science so that they could, in the end, move beyond science into that condition of Transcendentalism elevation of sainthood which is his great goal and the particular focus of his greatest work.68

Walden begins with a discussion of the means utilized, and concludes with an invitation to all to wake up, explore themselves, and find out who they are. The constant theme in Walden is that of ‘spiritual’ awakening. It appears
metaphorically in almost every chapter, the commonest symbols being those of spring, morning, and restorative medicines. It is reflected in the overall structure of the book. Although Thoreau lived at Walden Pond for more than two years, his book is an ideal account as a single year, following the seasons from summer to spring. The seasonal change from winter to spring is exploited metaphorically at the end to describe the awakening of the human being to **self-realization, well-being**, and **development**. It is time, he means, for the whole human race to awaken, and assume a consciousness it has rarely shown yet, and seize its opportunity to live.

Although Thoreau’s vocabulary still retains the words ‘**soul**’, ‘**divine**’, and ‘**spiritual**’ they must be understood in quotation marks. In chapter ‘Higher Laws’ he refers to the “higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life …”\(^{69}\)

In a later letter, a few years after the publication of *Walden*, he says, “our souls (I use this word for want of a better) …”\(^{70}\) there are at least two suggestions as to what he may mean by ‘Higher Laws’. First, that natural law supports the development of the spiritual man: “… the laws of the universe are not indifferent, but are forever on the side of the most sensitive. Listen to every zephyr for some reproof, for it is surely there, and he is unfortunate who does not hear it.” (\*W, II, 242\) Or second, that ‘Laws’ may mean **self-regulations** according to the moral principles that rise from the ‘suggestions of his genius,’ (\*W, II, 239\) which man must respect.

In the *Holy Koran* constantly one finds verses about the ignorance of man while he observes various **signs of God in Nature** which are eminent teachers for students of Nature.

It is important that Thoreau emphasizes **man’s ignorance**, and the difficulty with which he wrests from nature ‘truths’ that will satisfy his
craving for reality. Thoreau adheres to the empirical approach and in *Walden* he writes:

If we knew all the laws of Nature, we should need only one fact, or the description of one actual phenomenon, to infer all the results at that point. Now we know only a few laws, and our result is vitiated, not, of course, by any confusion or irregularity in Nature, but by our ignorance of essential elements in the calculation.  

Consequently, Thoreau’s real purpose at Walden Pond as well as throughout his whole life was to educate the whole of mankind to realize the **divine in man** as Emerson also claimed “God in man but incomplete”.

Like Emerson, Thoreau too, was fascinated and influenced by the Eastern thought – especially the Hindu and Sufi philosophy. As in his prose so in his poetry also this influence can be seen, which will be the main concern of the following chapter.
Notes and References:

1. Deshmukh. p. 3
2. Ibid. P. 56
3. Ibid. P. 37
4. Ibid. P. 52
5. Ibid. P. 45
7. Tripathy. P.57
8. Ibid
13. Deshmukh. P. 16
14. Ibid. P. 18
15. Paul. P. 48

18. Deshmukh. P. 18


22. Deshmukh. P. 26


24. Tripathy. P.76

25. Deshmukh. P. 23


27. Ibid

28. Ibid

29. Ibid. P. 40

30. Ibid

31. Ibid. P. 24

32. Ibid. P. 16

33. Taylor. P. 57

34. Ibid

35. Walter Harding, George Brenner, and Paul A. Doyle. 124
36. Ibid. P. 125
37. Deshmukh. P. 64
38. Christy. P. 203
40. Deshmukh. P. 29
41. Thoreau. *Journal I*, p. 181
42. Deshmukh. P. 30
43. Taylor. P. 62
44. Deshmukh. P. 27
45. Ibid. P. 53
46. Ibid. P. 82
47. Mayer. P. 66
48. Deshmukh. P. 43
50. Tripathy. P. 12
51. John Hildebidle. P. 100
52. Deshmukh. P. 70
53. Ibid
54. Ibid. Pp. 29-30
55. Mayer. p. 54
56. Deshmukh. P. 29
57. Ibid. P. 26
58. Ibid. P. 30
59. Ibid. Pp. 72-73
60. Ibid. P. 43
61. Ibid. P. 44
62. Ibid
63. Ibid. P. 65
64. Ibid. P. 73
65. Ibid. P. 77
66. Tripathy.- Pp. 67-68
67. Ibid.- P. 75
68. John Hildebidle. P. 97
69. Paul. P. 72
70. Ibid
71. Paul. P. 80