Abstract

The present study was inspired to a large extent by a well-known fact of American literary history – the deep interest of the two pioneering figures Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau in the East. Both were not only deeply interested in but influenced by the ancient civilization and thought of the East. Unfortunately, the ‘East’ has almost always meant ‘Indian’ for scholars. As a result, the Indian element in Emerson and Thoreau has been the subject of many studies. What is not generally recognized is the fact that both Emerson and Thoreau were also interested in Persian Literature and thought. Emerson for instance has an essay on Persian poetry and a poem entitled ‘Sa’di’. When one looks at the philosophy Emerson espoused, Transcendentalism, and also at the way of life in the community he and others like Fuller and Hawthorne founded at Concord, one is struck by the similarity between their values and the Sufi principles. This perception can be regarded as the genesis of the present study. An examination of critical literature on Emerson and Thoreau showed that there are many studies dealing with the Indian, especially the Hindu influence on Emerson and Thoreau, but there are practically no full-length studies tracing out the Persian element in their work. Since Sufism is at the heart of Persian culture, a study that undertakes to find the Sufi elements in Emerson and Thoreau is sure to be fruitful. And therein lies the originality of this study. It expects to fill up the absence of such a study in Emerson-Thoreau scholarship.

Similarly, an ancillary aim of this study – a by-product of this research – is to show how Edward Said’s picture of the West in *Orientalism* and in general the view of Post-colonialism is simplistic, totalizing and how they are
governed by considerations other than literary. Whatever the worth of Said’s socio-political observations, the truth is that the theory he expounded does not take into account the fact of our reading experience – that is, the fact of literary transcendence. By tracing the Sufi elements in American writers, the study expects to show that different cultures can and do meet at some levels.

With these objectives in mind, the study is designed in seven chapters. The first chapter, Introduction, gives a brief account of Emerson and Thoreau’s life, touching upon some biographical details like Emerson’s founding of the Concord community, Thoreau’s’ ideal of simple living and high thinking. It also explains the aims and objectives of the study, as outlined in the foregoing paragraphs. The chapter takes a survey of recent Emerson and Thoreau studies and shows how there is a need for a study that delineates the Sufi element in these two major American writers.

The second chapter deals with Sufism and some salient features of it which the study finds in these two American authors. Also, the chapter has shown Sufi figures in Persian poetry especially Hafiz, Sa’di, Jelaleddin Rumi, and Khayyam. The best selling poet of America in 2006 was not Whitman, Dickinson, Frost or Emerson but a Sufi mystic; Jelaleddin Rumi, who was born in Afghanistan, on the borders of the Persian Empire (Iran). Rumi is one of the best known Sufi poets but digging deep into the realms of Persian literature one can find a wealth of Sufi poetry which even today retains a universal and timeless appeal.

Sufism is the mystical branch of Islam. It has its roots in the Koran and the Islamic tradition, but at the same times encompasses the universal mysticism that we see in other spiritual traditions. The essence of Sufism is the simple path of loving God. The Sufi Masters sing of the all pervading love
which inundates their being when they become one with their ‘beloved’. If there is just one goal of Sufism, it is to overcome the attachment to the binding ego and attain liberation through realizing one’s identity with God. And thus the Sufi poets speak of dying to be born again, a concept similar to Indian mystical traditions like transmigration.

Sufism as a well-known philosophy of East and even now the West also, is spread all over the world and has attracted many writers and thinkers. Sufism simply means a love affair with the Almighty and Ultimate Being. Sufism means finding of God by ‘inner light’ and by ‘contemplation’ or ‘meditation’ (fikr). Sufism knows no formality, then any one can be a Sufi, whether a Christian, a Moslem, a Buddhist, a Jew, and a Hindu. It is a relationship with God and really is a dangerous relationship because the closer you come to God the more you evaporate. It is suicidal, but this suicide is so beautiful because to die into God is the only way to really live.

Really Sufism is an ocean, an infinite ocean, with pure water, with so many calamities and catastrophes. It is not the cup of tea of an amateur sailor to sail in this ocean. One who will to have a voyage through this ocean should be sober, expert, and full of knowledge. There are serious ups and downs in it, which are not easily bearable. It is a long journey with the dreadful storms and waves. One should have the daring of a lion to enter into this ocean because the destination is so far and unknown. Yes, the ultimate destination of this trip is God and He is an unknown phenomenon for the passenger. Therefore, one should not commit any mistake in this journey otherwise one will sink into the depth of this deep ocean. The great Sufi Muhyi’d-Din Ibn Arabi, used to pray which began: ‘Enter me, O Lord, into the deep of the Ocean of Thine Infinite Oneness,’ and in the Sufism ‘Ocean’ is mentioned over and over, likewise by
way of this symbolic reference to the End towards which their path is directed. Therefore, it takes so long time to overcome to this knowledge. Some important elements of Sufism are, Love of God (eshq-e- khoda), Austerity and solitude (riazat va khalvat), Absolute Unity (tawhid), Simplicity and Poverty (sadagi va faqr), Love of Nature and other creatures (eshq-e-tabiat va makhlouq), Death as a bridge to the Beloved (marq), Constant remembrance of God (dhikr Allah), Union with Beloved (vesal), Searching of God through Meditation, Contemplation (fikr), and Heart (qalb), Annihilation (fana), Importance of living in the moment (zendegi dar zamne hal), Perfect Soul or Perfect Man (rawh-e-kamil ya ensanol kamil), and Purity (tazkiyeh ya paki).

The study traces out these features in Emerson and Thoreau.

In third chapter, we have traced these Sufi elements from prose of Ralph Waldo Emerson. For this, the study has selected some well-known essays of Emerson like ‘Self-Reliance’, ‘Compensation’, ‘Spiritual Laws’, ‘Prudence’, ‘Heroism’, ‘The Over-Soul’, ‘Circles’, ‘Intellect’, ‘Art’, ‘Experience’, ‘Character’, ‘Nature’, and ‘Immortality’. As is well-known, Emerson was deeply interested in and influenced by the East. An examination of Emerson’s prose and verse shows how deeply he was influenced by the Sufi philosophy. Emerson was such a great friend of God that he could finally be as great as the Sufis like Mansour Al-Hellaj and give his doctrine “God in man, but incomplete”. Hence, there is no doubt about the mystical and Sufi features in such a man. Therefore, the study has shown the said Sufi elements in the essays of Emerson in this chapter. For instance, in his ‘Self-Reliance’ he writes about being with God:

"When a man lives with God, his voice shall be as sweet as the murmur of the brook and the rustle of the corn."

In ‘Compensation’ about the omnipresence of God he says:
“The true doctrine of **omnipresence** is that God reappears with all his parts in every moss and cobweb.”

In ‘Heroism’ about the poverty as an ornament of great soul he chants:

"The heroic soul does not sell its justice and its nobleness. It does not ask to dine nicely and to sleep warm. The essence of greatness is the perception that virtue is enough. **Poverty** is its ornament. It does not need plenty, and can very well abide its loss."

The **fourth chapter** examines some poems of Emerson which convey the Sufi elements. Also in this chapter we have shown the clear influence of Persian poets especially Hafiz and Sa’di. He admired Hafiz and he wished to be a man like him:

“He [Hafiz] is not scared by a name, or a religion. He fears nothing. He sees too far; he sees throughout; such is the only man I wish to see and to be.”

He had read some works of other eminent poets of the Persian Poetry like Firdousi, Enwari, Ammar Asjedi of Merw, Ferrideddin Attar, Jelaleddin Romi, Nisami, Jami, Omar Khayyam, Ibn Jemin, Feisi, Kermani, Hilali, and Seyd Nimetollah of Kuhistan. Emerson’s poems like ‘**Gnothi Seauton**’, ‘**The Informing Spirit**’, ‘**Spirits**’, ‘**The Sphinx**’, ‘**The Problem**’, ‘**Unity**’, ‘**The Rhodora**’, ‘**Self-Reliance**’, ‘**Astrae**’, ‘**Blight**’, ‘**Good-by**’, ‘**The Park**’, ‘**Fable**’, ‘**Threnody**’, and ‘**Hymn**’ contain the most well-known elements of Sufism like absolute unity, purity, perfect-ness, pure soul, love of God, love of nature, nature as a best teacher, the spirit of God in man, closeness of God to man, and some others. For example, in his poem ‘**Self-Reliance**’ he writes:

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Henceforce, please God, forever I forego
The yoke of man’s opinions. I will be
Light-hearted as a bird, and live with God.
I find Him in the bottom my heart,
I hear continually His voice therein.
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Emerson in his poem ‘Blight’ gets tired of surfaces and desires to find only **truth** among the woods and nature in such brilliant words:

Give me truths,
For I am weary of the surfaces,
And die of inanition. If I knew
Only the herbs and simples of the wood.

Emerson in ‘Good-bye’ gives up all the seculars and seeks the real place and hates all wrong and devilishness.

Good-by, proud world, I am going home,
Thou’rt not my friend, and I am not thine;
Long through thy weary crowds I roam;
A river-ark on the ocean brine,
long I’ve been tossed like the driven foam,
but, now, proud world, I’m going home.

The **fifth chapter** examines the Sufi elements in the prose of Henry David Thoreau who was a close friend of Emerson and an ardent follower of the transcendental club. Thoreau’s writings had a far reaching influence on many public figures. Political leaders and reformers like Mahatma Gandhi, President John F. Kennedy, Civil rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr., Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, and Russian author Leo Tolstoy – all spoke of being strongly affected by Thoreau’s work, particularly *Civil Disobedience*. So did many artists and authors including Edward Albee, Willa Cather, Marcel Proust, William Butler Yeats, Sinclair Lewis, Ernest Hemingway, E. B. White and Frank Lloyd Wright and naturalists like John Burroughs, John Muir, E.O. Wilson, Edwin Way Teale, Joseph Wood Krutch and David Brower.
Though he had a short life, he did a great job because of his special ideas and thoughts. He went to the woods (Walden Pond) for more than two years to face the mysteries and necessary facts of life. He was an intimate follower of God ever since he was a young boy. A 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.” He was also interested in Orient Scriptures and books. Thomas Cholmondeley of England who came primarily to see Emerson, later come under the spell of Thoreau and lost interest in Emerson. A life long friendship ensued in spite of the great distance and Cholmondeley sent to Thoreau in autumn of 1855 a collection of 44 oriental books including Rig Veda Samhita, the Mandukya Upanishad, Nala Damayanti, the Vishnu Purana, the Institutes of Manu, the Sankhya Karika, the Aphorisms of Mimansa and Nyaya, the Bhagvad Gita, Sakoontala and the Bhagvata Purana, as also a number of volumes of history and criticism of Indian literature. Furthermore, he spent most of his time in the private library of Emerson and it seems that he read some works of Persian, though there is no clear evidence of it, but the study has found some similar ideas. Walden as a masterpiece by Thoreau contains most salient features of Sufism like simplicity, austerity, poverty, solitude, love of nature, nature as an outstanding teacher, Unity, goodness for others, Pure soul, absolute unity, and so on. His celebrated statement that if one had to sell one’s clothes or ideas, one should sell one’s clothes and keep one’s ideas is said that to have a tremendous impact on Gandhi. We have shown such elements in the Week also. We have attempted to show such features in his journal and Civil-Disobedience (which influenced the great leaders of the world like Gandhi). In the Week, it is the divine, as
manifest in nature that Thoreau seeks to know as reality. It is to him the **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?**” 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 and Sufis of the East** and ancient times. In the *Week* also he writes:

“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, doctors, **by God I live.**”

*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 Pond, Thoreau found that **poverty** is not poverty. In *Walden* he states:

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 life into a corner and reduce it to it’s 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.

The **sixth chapter** is about the Sufi element in poetry of Thoreau. Thoreau is well-known for his *Walden* and *Civil-Disobedience* and not as a great poet because he has only a few poems to his credit. But still his poems contain his transcendental thoughts especially his views on God, nature, reality, and simplicity. This chapter shows the Sufi elements in his poems like ‘**Let such pure hate still underprop**’, ‘**Manhood**’, ‘**The Virgin**’, ‘**The River Swelleth**'

And it doth more assert man’s eminence
Above the happy level of the brute
And more doth advertise me of the heights
To which no natural path doth ever lead,
No natural light can ever light our steps,
But the far-piercing ray that shins

From the recesses of a brave man’s eye.

Nature as a teacher was revealed by Thoreau in his ‘The River Swelleth More and More’:

Here Nature taught from year to year,
When only red men came to hear;
Methinks it was in this school of art
Venice and Naples learned their part;
But still their mistress, to my mind,
Her young disciples leave behind.

In his ‘Prayer’ see what he asks of God:

Great God, I ask for no meaner pelf
Than that I may not disappoint myself,
That in my action I may soar as high
As I can now discern with this clear eye.

The **seventh** and the final chapter, Conclusion, brings up together and ties up the loose points in argument, if any. The chapter deals with the line future research in the field can take. For instance, as a matter of the East-West Encounter, studies of authors who came under the spell of Persian culture like Richard Burton, Edward Fitzgerald can be undertaken. Secondly, the chapter spells out the implications of such a study for Post-colonial theory, especially as advanced by Edward Said. The chapter highlights the fact of literature’s power of cutting across the barriers of space, time, gender, race, and culture and thereby underscores the essentially simplistic and totalizing nature of post-colonialism.