

WALDEN” BORDERING TO SUFISM

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The aim of writing this article is to show influences of Sufi Philosophy on Thoreau as are echoed in ‘Walden’. Sufism has paved the way to humanism and challenged the fanatic thinking, orthodox behavior and hypocritical way of living. It preaches simplicity in life and simple ways to attain God. Thoreau was a perfect human being replete with noble human feelings. His ideas on religion, politics, economics, nature, societal behaviour and the like are very close to Sufi tenets.

Henry David Thoreau occupies a very high place in American English literature. He is popularly called a writer- philosopher. He delved deep in oriental philosophy and studied Hindu scriptures and assimilated Hindu philosophy that left a formative influence on his writings. Walden is an immortal creation of H. D. Thoreau. Thoreau’s thoughts on human behavior and life style as expressed in the Walden find echo from Sufi philosophy. Thoreau’s advice to man; ‘Simplify, simplify, simplify’ is a backbone of Sufism. What he advocates is that man’s life must be guided by the ideal of simplicity; and this principle can be the real basis of spiritual, moral, social, political and economic activities of human beings. Simplicity is found in self- restraint and in the culture of man. It rejects any form of indulgence, and it is opposed to materialism. Simplicity should guide our primary needs like food, shelter, and clothing; and it should also shape and mould our feelings and emotions.

Like a Sufi saint Thoreau faced the question ‘How to live’. Walden is concerned with this basic problem. ‘How to live’ refers to the means of livelihood, to the manner of obtaining them; and to the way these means are transformed to add to soul waking. This is the question that helps us to understand the meaning and goal of life. Sufism abhors hypocrisy, rituals and traditional forms of worship, prescribed by a certain religion for attaining salvation or bliss of God. Body of man is pushed to the background or to some extent it is completely ignored in realization of other worldly life. Sufism brings a smooth compromise between the physical and spiritual world. It opines that human body should be given due place while exploring spiritual world as it is the foundation of every activity. Whatever we try to achieve, it is through our body. The similar ideas are echoed in the Walden when Thoreau says “The carcass of the body must be sustained somehow”.

Self- restraint has been a guiding principle of the Sufism. All the Sufi Saints discourage violence in every form, whether it is physical or verbal and to combat it, they employ self- restraint as a potent weapon. Thoreau glorifies this noble virtue in Walden. He underlines the idea that we have to conquer the brute within us; the hunter has to be tamed in order to allow the divine spark within to grow and develop. This is done by regulating and controlling our habits of eating and drinking and our physical desires and needs “chastity is the flowering of man; and what are called genius, heroism, holiness and the like are but various fruits which succeed it. Man follows at once to God when the channel of purity is open.”¹

It is by little physical exertion that we can acquire the necessities of life. But man has increased his dependence on things by inventing materialistic things. While the New Hollander, without any luxuries, can go naked without any sensation of cold, the European shivers in his clothes. The most essential thing is to preserve the vital heat which is within us. Many luxuries and comforts of life are superfluous life has to be understood from the vantage ground of voluntary poverty:

“Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrance to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meager life than the poor. The ancient philosophers, Chinese, Hindoo, Persian and Greek were a class than which none has been poorer in outward riches, none so rich in inward. We know not much about them. It is remarkable that we know so much of them as we do. The same is true of the more modern reformers and benefactor of their race. None can be impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what we should call voluntary poverty; of a life of luxury, the fruit of luxury, whether in agriculture, or commerce, or literature, or art. There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically. The success of great scholars and thinkers is commonly a courtier like success not kingly, not manly. They make shift to live merely by conformity, practically as their father did, and are in no sense the progenitors of a nobler race of men. But why do men degenerate ever? What makes families run out? What is the nature of the luxury which enervates and destroys nations? Are we sure that there is none of it in our own lives? The philosopher is in advance of his age even in the outward form of his life. He is not fed, sheltered, clothed, warmed, like his contemporaries.”²

Sufi saints established deep affinity with nature. She was not merely a source of external beauty but became a living entity, enriching life with noble ideas. Nature appears in Sufi literature as a store house of knowledge. Thoreau also held that one lives the good life by being alive to the beauties of nature. Nature has remarkable simplicity on the basis of which man can establish his domestic, social, political and economic life. About his purpose in going to Walden Pond, Thoreau writes:

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to find 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 did not wish to live what was not, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life to live so sturdily and Spartan like as to put to route all that was not 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”.³

Thoreau's doctrine of life in Walden is a clear departure from western philosophy of life. He appears as a true sufi saint where no disparities, contradictions, pretensions are allowed to creep in.

References:

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