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Initial Observations of Thoreau in *Walden*

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Abstract:

It was Emerson's boosting of Thoreau's optimistic and purposeful experiment that enabled Thoreau to move to Walden Pond. His experiences endorse the values of simple living flanked by the ecstatic ambience of nature. He used minimal materials for the austere lifestyle in which very simple and absolutely necessary things are employed in lieu of all the mundane milk and honey. Thoreau's commitment and contentment enlightened him on the divine state of nature. He was carried away by the tranquility and divinity in nature. The genuine factor that triggered such a mystic experience is Thoreau's involvement and spending a long span of life by observing and enjoying himself in the godly environment. What Thoreau thought was that man's identity would be lost in the commotion, cares and cravings of a quotidian life. He exerted all his efforts in the experimenting novel ways and tailored a simple, solitary, leisurely and recreational lifestyle by avoiding unwanted things and attachments; he was of the opinion that one's identity has nothing to do with one's occupation, property and societal rapport.

Keywords: Nature, Minimal materials, Divinity and Self Reliance.

Thoreau was partially isolated from the societal pressure and tension. He devoted his time and attention towards amelioration of his personality with a keen observing eye on the teachings of nature. He found that nature is a great teacher. He lived in the midst of the seasons which roll by, the birds and animals around him, the fascinating sounds and cries that reached his sensitive ears and the scenes that created indelible images on the canopy of his mind.

None of the social activities in the life of Thoreau were ceased; he was there, beside the Walden Pond, as usual except a few things that he adopted in his lifestyle and the way he had intended. He proclaims that he would reply to the interrogations posed by people about limiting

his social life to the surroundings of the woods. He constructively criticizes the way people live, abiding by the tenets of their faith and the traditional manners streamlined by their ancestors, parents and guardians. Human bondage has bound their hands and feet with the ropes of possessing wealth; they become slaves to their professions by pondering over their monetary benefits. Thoreau reminds and warns man

But men labor under the mistake. The better part of the man is soon plowed into the soil for compost. By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool's life, as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before.⁴⁸

Thoreau sheds light on *Self-reliance: Concept of Independent life, Liberation from the traditional system* and the lessons to learn from the objects of *Nature*. Man sticks to catechism along with the material needs and feels that it is the be-all and end-all of his life. In their opinion, it is the best deliberation that has remained as the appropriate choice. For them, it is an intelligent option. Thoreau digresses from the point of materialism to the availability of an affluent spiritual thesaurus. He refers to how people scurry across in an attempt to fortify their identity, to gain a good ground for their worldly comforts. He even points towards *Minimalism* too. In short, living close to nature by minimizing their so-called necessities of a life of contentment is the message forwarded by these passages. When one reads between the lines, it is clear as crystal that man is prejudiced at every step; the buffoonery behind the banal human activities make him mad on the path of pains and pangs wherein he confronts despair and disappointment. It is the result of chasing after wealth and social status. After all, his frantic efforts fail to fetch him fruitful effect.

Thoreau redirects the attention of the people towards their fool's paradise, the concept of '*Independent Life*' and the *traditional way of life* that hinders *self-reliance* and self-realization. Thoreau's basic idea is that 'A life of leisure is not a life of pleasure'. Man's betterment lies in completely curtailing the false notions prejudices he has been nitrifying. In this chapter, the writer speaks of *Simplicity* that enables him to shun leading a conventional lifestyle in order to

sanctify his soul. Nature is the best facilitator. Thoreau is annoyed at the factitious identity of man in society. At last, he is sanguine about the feasibility of a favourable change in life.

To quote an instance of an independent lifestyle, he mentions the name of one of the greatest Persian tomes entitled ‘*Gulistan*’ written by ‘*Sheikh Sa’di Shirazi*’; ‘*Gulistan*’ means ‘*Flower Garden*’. This shows the influence of Persian literature on Thoreau. He refers to an anecdote:

“They asked a wise man, saying; of the many celebrated trees which the Most High God has created lofty and umbrageous, they call none azad, or free, excepting the cypress, which bears no fruit; what mystery is there in this? He replied; Each has its appropriate produce, and appointed season, during the continuance of which it is fresh and blooming, and during their absence dry and withered; to neither of which states is the cypress exposed, being always flourishing; and of this nature are the azads, or religious independents.—Fix not thy heart on that which is transitory; for the Dijlah, or Tigris, will continue to flow through Bagdad after the race of caliphs is extinct: if thy hand has plenty, be liberal as the date tree; but if it affords nothing to give away, be an azad, or free man, like the cypress.” (85-86)

He says about when occupied the abode near the Walden Pond. Accidentally, it was the Independence Day, i.e. 4 July, 1845. The cabin was not completely prepared to live in. It was a *Modest Place* that showered *austerity* and awe. Thoreau expresses his *reverence and unpretentiousness by revealing the process of transformation of his personality, imbibing healthy and spontaneously celestial vibes*. He feels an effective impact of *Spirituality*. The juxtaposition of words discloses the heavenly atmosphere:

This was an airy and un-plastered cabin, fit to entertain a travelling god, and where a goddess might trail her garments. The winds which passed over my dwelling were such as sweep over the ridges of mountains, bearing the broken strains, or celestial parts only, of terrestrial music. The morning wind forever blows, the poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it. Olympus is but the outside of the earth everywhere. (92)

Thoreau tells about the '*Religious Exercise*' he used to do; being awake at small hours, taking a bath in the lake were his routine tasks. Dawn is the part of the day that kindles disciplines like poetry and art. It is a befitting time to savour the *sanctity of Nature* during the early hours by following the tenets of *Cleanliness* in the *Simplest Manner*. He discovers godliness in the world around him. *Nature* was a classroom for him who had craved for profound knowledge and experience. He is like the birds that have not been caged. The chirping birds are his neighbours which seem to sing a serenade.

Thoreau indirectly suggests that tranquility in the ambience around us influences man to a great extent. Living in the Divine Simplicity ought to matter much in attaining psychosomatic relief. He emphasizes the point that there is every possibility of avoiding tension, trials and tribulations by treading on the path of '*Being Naturally Simple*. *The concept of independent life* is what he realized and it is the only way to be liberated from the *Traditionally Orthodox System*. He related the ecstatic state of Spirituality as soon as he moved to Walden Pond. He was carried away by the aesthetic effect which he calls '*New and Unprofaned part of the Universe*'. At the same time, he criticizes people who live in a drab environment. Thoreau's reference to a Hindu scriptural tale confirms his perusal of *Vedic literature*.

He prefers to narrate a Hindu story which explains the grandeur of nature that teaches the lessons of how to *sanctify one's mistaken soul*:

I have read in a *Hindu book*, that "there was a king's son, who, being expelled in infancy from his native city, was brought up by a forester, and, growing up to maturity in that state, imagined himself to belong to the barbarous race with which he lived. One of his father's ministers having discovered him, revealed to him what he was, and the misconception of his character was removed, and he knew himself to be a prince. *So soul*," continues the Hindu philosopher, "from the circumstances, in which it is placed, mistakes its own character, until the truth is revealed to it by some holy teacher, and then it knows itself to be Brahma." (104)

He aims at purifying himself by surrendering himself to the doctrine of *Spiritual Purification* through Nature. In other words, it is the right path towards Self-improvement by educating oneself. A profound analysis of this chapter shows that throughout his stay at Walden,

the things that assisted and accompanied him were natural sounds, books, animals and the pond which had extended a helping in the growth of his Self. As he said in one of the passages '*I wanted to live deep and such out all the Marrow of Life*'. In a nutshell, Nature had been his inspiration.

In the sense mentioned above, his hut flanked by the pond and other things was his heavenly abode. Man amidst nature evolves divine acts of imagination; what Thoreau contributed to American literature in particular, and to world literature in general, is that human personality is developed properly when a man lives with nature learning the lessons of a spiritual life. He meant that man has to forsake all the profane attachments by relieving himself of the unessential matters. In his opinion, this is *Independent Life*. He does not speak of simplicity but of a *Life of Divinity*. After all, the ultimate aims justification of man's existence is to '*glorify God and enjoy him forever*'. *The quintessential notion Thoreau briefs is that MAN is the centre of God's creation i.e. Universe.* The ant-like human life is mean and unworthy.

He studies the classical languages like Greek and Latin so that he could explore into the treasures of the classical literature. He draws our attention towards the process of learning throughout one's life. To ameliorate oneself, always, man has to be a good student and observer. His deep study of different scriptures enabled him to acquire both knowledge and wisdom provided by the sages, saints, scholars and clairvoyant philosophers. His greatness lay in picking up what is conducive to him. He cited Hindu, Persian and Egyptian texts only after accumulating pearls found in the ocean, passed down by authoritative men of insight and foresight. The crystalline human lenses are unable to view and watch the narrowness of the profane world. His vision is blurred by the bounties of worldly wealth. Thoreau remarks:

In accumulating property for ourselves or our posterity, in founding a family or a state, or acquiring fame even, we are mortal; but in dealing with truth, we are immortal, and need fear neither change nor accident. The oldest *Egyptian or Hindu philosopher* raised a corner of the veil from the statue of the divinity; and still the trembling robe remains raised, and I gaze upon as fresh a glory as he did, since it was I in him that was then so bold, and it is he in me that now reviews the vision. (108)

He admires going through great tomes in the natural surroundings rather than in the formal infrastructure of a university. Such ambience can be termed as serious or genuine reading. The days spent at Walden Pond were favourable moments for Thoreau to peruse the gems of world literature. That was the time for Thoreau to make a clean sweep of tremendous tomes. So, he could suck the honey of the *Spheres of Spirituality*. In the middle of the chapter, he takes the name of *Mîr Camar Uddîn Mast*, a *Sufi Poet of Delhi*, who was one of the disciples of the spiritualist maulawî Fakhr uddîn, and devoted himself to the spiritual life. *Mîr Camar Uddîn Mast* was with Sir William Jones from 1781 to 1782. Sufi couplets, poems and ghazals are symbolic of the Omnipresent, Omnipotent and Omniscient God. Thoreau read between the lines of the mystical ghazal written by Mast. He says:

Being seated to run through the region of the spiritual world; I have had this advantage in books. To be intoxicated by a single glass of wine; I have experienced this pleasure when I have drunk the liquor of the esoteric doctrines.
(109)

The above poetic expression makes it clear that without the grace of a guide, teacher and great books, none can taste the '*Wine of Wisdom*'. Thoreau had volumes on his table to study, like the *Iliad* of Homer.

Thoreau reveals that great people and their irrefutable experiences are available in the form of their books. He had made friends with them. Usually, he used to consecrate the tranquil moments of the mild morning by flipping the virtuous works of the genius. He even discloses the weakness of some readers who cannot understand the intrinsic semantic value of philosophical and Sufi writings. It is not their cup of tea. He stresses on the ignorance of many readers:

The works of the great poets have never yet been read by mankind, for only great poets can read them. They have only been read as the multitude read the stars, at most astrologically, not astronomically. Most men have learned to read to serve a paltry convenience, as they have learned to cipher in order to keep accounts and not be cheated in trade; but of reading as a noble intellectual exercise they know little or nothing; yet this only is reading, in a high sense, not that which lulls us as

a luxury and suffers the nobler faculties to sleep the while, but what we have to stand on tip-toe to read and devote our most alert and wakeful hours to. (113)

In the middle of his quotidian tasks like reading and cultivating, there was the rattling of the railroads. Different kinds of animal cries were heard like the cry of the whippoorwills. Other that used to disrupt the peace were the whistle of the train, shrieking and screaming of the wild birds. The people who frequented the area were impatient merchants and traders. He does not concentrate on who is around him and what is going on in the surroundings. He enjoys the effects of various sounds. When it comes to his sensual experience, it empowers him to get the mood of transcendental life. The ecstasy that prevailed in his mind created sentiments that did belong to the mundane world in a broader sense. Thoreau emphasizes the significance of such natural and direct experiences that take man to another level. He was not away from the town in the sense that he often heard the sounds of the bells when the winds blew softly. Never did he feel it a wild place. It can be figuratively said that it was '*Divine Wilderness*'.

Whatever he used to hear that gave him the air and feeling of a melody; the whole atmosphere sounded musical like the strumming of the strings of the harp or the lyre. Thus, Thoreau was involved in the modulations of the natural sounds brought to him by the wind echoed in him from head to foot. The magical charm produced an elevated and transcendental feeling. For Thoreau, they were not mere sounds; they represent the voice of the wilderness or a melody of the nymph of the woods.

Thoreau did not take into account what and whose sound it was. He used to take walks especially during the morning hours so that he could refresh himself and regenerate the power of imagination. His health also improved by listening to the musical notes of the woods. Such heavenly music does have the power of creating a transcendental world.

Human imaginative capacity transcends sensual pleasures. He appreciates the natural music that has the power to send man to the celestial world. The cry of animals and the hoot of an owl resembles a serenade. However, in his opinion, what he feels is, though certain sounds are melancholic, they add a fine touch to the heart that can grasp the wholesome pinch. In brief, every sounding was melodious and pleasing to him. The Natural Pleasure had been there

throughout his stay. The sounds had added an unforgettable and unique flavour to his life. Thoreau says:

What's the railroad to me?
I never go to see
where it ends.
It fills a few hollows,
And makes banks for the swallows,
It sets the sand a-blowing,
And the blackberries a-growing.(133)

Thoreau did not use the term '*Loneliness*' as it carried a negative connotation while the word '*Solitude*' conveys a constructive semantic aspect. Being solitary implies enjoyment in oneself whereas being lonely is melancholy. So, loneliness means that one is alone and in a boring mood; solitude is that state which is both creative and recreational. He speaks of the excitement and ecstasy triggered by his being solitary. Solitude is the situation in which man can attain a great transformation from the sensual world to the world of spirituality. As a matter of fact, solitude promotes man to the spiritual planet. Now, the narrator is in the mood of ecstasy and excitement owing to the beauty of the '*Delicious Evening*' that has evolved a '*Solitary State*':

This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whippoorwill is borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my

serenity is rippled but not ruffled. These small waves raised by the evening wind are as remote from storm as the smooth reflecting surface. (140)

He is not afraid of the darkness; it has lulling effect on him. The dark night, roaring wind, dashing waves and the total ambience stirs the pleasant notes to repose. Wild animals do not rest awhile as they have to go in quest of a 'Prey'; other animals like fox and rabbit roam around fearlessly. All these creatures are the *Watchmen of Nature*, in the language of Thoreau. While thinking, he reckons that they are his companions. The society at Walden Pond was sweet, innocent and tender. Thoreau asserts that in such environment, a melancholic man would also be energized and bloomed like a bud. No man can be uninfluenced by the fascination of the passing seasons. No ear can be unheard of the modal harmony of the natural music. A heavy heart would feel relieved in such a situation.

In solitude, he compares himself to other men who live a simple and social life. Then he feels grateful to God that He favoured Thoreau by providing him with the '*State of Solitude*'. '*To be alone was something unpleasant*' is what he announces. It gave him '*an infinite and unaccountable friendliness*'. He had befriended with the objects and living creatures of nature around his cabin. He acclimatized to them. The sun, wind and seasons: summer, winter, rain, autumn and spring are all cheerful. They seem to be his true companions. They afford varied and mixed feelings. They affect human too. They are no less than the medicine science has been providing. Smelling of fresh air and the vegetables suffice to strengthen human body. The substance of this chapter can be summed up in one of his sentences: *How vast and profound is the influence of the subtle powers of Heaven and of Earth!* This environ sanctifies all and sundry.

He felt that his *Solitude* was distracted when he had any visitor because what he desired as his regular task was '*Solitary Communion with Nature*'. However, at times, he had visitors too. Only once he welcomed twenty-five of them. He did not crave for meeting people. He was a bad entertainer at Walden. Instead, he was proud that the motif of his modest dwelling was, in the words of *Edmund Spenser (1552-1599)*, from his '*The Faerie Queene*':

Arrived there, the little house they fill,

Ne looke for entertainment where none was;

Rest is their feast, and all things at their will:

The noblest mind the best contentment has.(155)

The above lines were inscribed on a walnut leaf by one of his visitors. Sometimes, travelers used to ask for water and his answer would be that they could drink from the pond as he himself did. The distance from the town had prevented people to come to him; very few visitors he had. Thoreau himself says: *I had withdrawn so far within the great ocean of solitude, into which the rivers of society empty.* On the contrary, he was attached to a woodchopper who was from Canada. His company delighted him because of his *simplicity and honesty*. In his opinion, such men were very hard to see; his life had been an ideal one. He was apt model for contentment. He calls him a 'Natural Man'. He used to enjoy himself in the wilderness of Walden. At leisure in winter, he made a fire to warm his kettle of coffee, sitting on a piece of log with his food. A rare phenomenon to see was chickadees, songbirds, were seen to sit on his arm to potatoes from him. He tells that growing beans had taught him many lessons. He discloses the value he derived from his work on the earth. He grew beans and he was so intimate with the rows that:

I came to love my rows, my beans, though so many more than I wanted. They attached me to the earth, and so I got strength like *Antæus*. But why should I raise them? Only Heaven knows. This was my curious labor all summer,—to make this portion of the earth's surface.(168)

According to Greek Mythology, *Antæus*, a wrestler, son of the goddess of the Earth, was:

a giant of Libya, the son of the sea god Poseidon and the Earth goddess Gaea. He compelled all strangers who were passing through the country to wrestle with him. Whenever Antæus touched the Earth (his mother), his strength was renewed, so that even if thrown to the ground, he was invincible. Heracles, in combat with him, discovered the source of his strength and, lifting him up from Earth, crushed him to death.¹⁶

Thoreau was contented that he had cultivated the wild woods and had turned the wilderness into a civilized place. This, he thought, is the right way of life to be one with nature

by taming it. Thus, he could remain as natural as he could. He was able to create a link between the woods and the civilized world. It was a series of systematic tasks like planting, hoeing, harvesting and threshing, sorting and selling and to some extent eating too. He understood the importance of living a natural life by tilling the soil. It is one of the ways to make use of the earth that produces a great number of grains and vegetables that are necessary for a healthy life.

He quotes the instance of the sun that does not differentiate between civilized and uncivilized pieces of land. The rays of the sun do not know any distinction. For Thoreau, the earth is no less than a garden or orchard. At length, his labour on land had been profitable both personally and objectively. He was satisfied that he had grown beans in the place of weeds. He had made the most of uncultivated soil. He was not worried about how much he earned and what was the profit? Anxiety may mar the quality of one's labour. He did whatever he could to the best of his ability sans expecting huge returns.

Divine way of living rests on the tenets laid down by nature. During the first part of the day, Thoreau, as usual, bathes only after hoeing, reading and writing followed by swimming. This was his routine which relieved him from physical and mental strain. He was at leisure in the afternoon. He used to go to the village to know their gossip and news. He did not avoid social life also. When he was free, he visited the villagers; it was like refreshment for him, blending both his life at Walden and his visits to the people at the village and the town.

Thoreau had evolved a new vision of reality available in *Nature*. Thus he reached the stage of transcendence that wholly depends on the 'Vision of Reality'. He had created his own world to develop an eternal relationship with Divinity through the medium of nature. One can read between the lines of this chapter that there are a number of obstacles between the life amidst nature and the life in society. He concludes the chapter in a didactic tone:

Love virtue, and the people will be virtuous. The virtues of a superior man are like the wind; the virtues of a common man are like the grass; the grass, when the wind passes over it, bends.(187)

All the passages disclose the divine charm of the Walden Pond. *Tranquility* is the core component of this chapter that he aimed at. He spent most of the time with the objects of nature,

even by eating the edibles that were available there. These were the *Benefits of Solitude*. There were a number of tasks he did. Some of them are mentioned here. Thoreau begins by saying that when surfeit of meeting people and listening to their gossip, bores him; he went solitarily towards the other parts of the woods in a tranquil mood that provided him with genuine refreshment. He tasted the huckleberries and blueberries on the Fair Haven Hill. Another activity of his was fishing in the company of an old fisherman who was good at fishing. Thoreau was carried away at the humming of psalms by the fisherman who had grown deaf, a state of his age.

Among the other activities, playing the flute sitting in the boat was his forte. While playing, he observed that some birds had perched on the nearby boughs and the moon passed by its regular beat. He enjoyed lighting a fire beside the lake making the ambience more natural and fascinating. He delineates the pond as follows:

It is a clear and deep green well, half a mile long and a mile and three quarters in circumference, and contains about sixty-one and a half acres; a perennial spring in the midst of pine and oak woods, without any visible inlet or outlet except by the clouds and evaporation. The surrounding hills rise abruptly from the water to the height of forty to eighty feet, though on the south-east and east they attain to about one hundred and one hundred and fifty feet respectively, within a quarter and a third of a mile. The water is so transparent that the bottom can easily be discerned at the depth of twenty-five or thirty feet.(191-193)

He describes the other ponds like White Pond, in Nine Acre Corner, Flint's Pond and Fair-Haven Bay. In a poetic vein, he extols the grandeur of Walden Pond:

It is no dream of mine,
To ornament a line;
I cannot come nearer to God and Heaven
Than I live to Walden even.
I am its stony shore,
And the breeze that passes o'er;
In the hollow of my hand

Are its water and its sand,
And its deepest resort
Lies high in my thought.(209-210)

He intends to differentiate between the World of Nature and the Mechanical World which is called the Civilized World. He believes that both the Natural and Spiritual Qualities are indispensable for human healthy living and life. They must come together in a harmonious way.

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