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## A Study of the Influence of English Romanticism and Indian Philosophy on Henry David Thoreau and His Work *Walden*

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### Abstract:

Henry David Thoreau is central to the understanding of the Transcendental movement that enveloped America during the middle of the Nineteenth Century. The writer is a reflection of the whole movement as he studied and took inspiration from the very sources that played a key role in developing the central tenets of

Transcendentalism. This movement, later, paved the way for Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and W. B. Yeats in the literary circle. This paper attempts to trace the major sources for Thoreau's inspiration in writing his most well-known prose piece: *Walden*. A correlative study of the text with respect to British Romanticism and Indian philosophy has been done to determine the inspirational trajectory for the American philosopher.

**Keywords:** Henry David Thoreau, Transcendentalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Walden*, English Romanticism, William Wordsworth, Indian Philosophy, Bhagavad Gita.

## I. Introduction<sup>[1]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

In an article, titled "H. D. Thoreau--An Apostle of Nonconformity", writer Philip Eisenbero reports that "It took eight years to sell the first edition of 2000 copies of Thoreau's classic, *Walden*; probably 2000 copies are now sold every week all over the world" (Bharadwaj x). This number gives a clear idea of the literary influence that the great American philosopher holds today. However, Thoreau's works have transpired beyond the world of literature as they were closely read and appreciated by Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, John F. Kennedy and Nelson Mandela, to name a few of the gigantic personalities that have shaped the world.

As part of the Transcendental circle, Thoreau also shaped the course of American literature to follow. His best known works are the prose masterpieces titled *Walden* and *Civil Disobedience*. Both of these were born out of the journal that he used to keep. This paper attempts to trace the inspiration and sources for the former work, *Walden*, which was his magnum opus. For this work, Thoreau is often hailed as the "Protagonist of the Green" and even called the "American Rousseau" (Bharadwaj xi).

*Walden* is a prose account of Thoreau's retreat to a hut in the Walden pond situated near his hometown of Concord. The text is

based upon the writer's attempt to live a simple and natural life in deliberation between 1845 and 1847. While declaring self-sufficiency and independence, the text, as well as the act, aims to project the spiritual journey that he attempted during this course of more than two years of forest-dwelling. In the process of laying out his daily chores and scientific observations regarding nature, Thoreau attempts to propose philosophical pursuits that went beyond the contemporary American cultural milieu. In this, the writer is greatly influenced by his foreign studies.

Lorrie Smith points out a college essay that Thoreau wrote at Harvard. It was titled "Advantages and Disadvantages of Foreign Influence on American Literature" (L Smith 223). Thus, during his own time Thoreau was well aware of the influence of global literature in shaping the American one. In the process of writing *Walden* too, two foreign sources influenced his philosophical tract in a major way. These were the English Romanticism and Indian philosophy. Both of these were introduced to him by Ralph Waldo Emerson. In this study, under the influence of the British movement, a special emphasis has been paid in the Transcendental thought which attempted a diversion from Euro-centric ways. On the other hand, the study of the influence of Hindu philosophy reveals the drive towards the Eastern wisdom.

## II. Influence of English Romanticism<sup>[1][2]</sup>

What began throughout the expanse of Europe as Romanticism in the early Eighteenth century, travelled across the Atlantic with Emerson, and combined with his study of Indian philosophy, Neoplatonism and Kantianism, appeared in the form of Transcendentalism in America. Despite being a consequence of all these factors, it was largely the global success of Romanticism that both influenced American authors and primed European and American readers and critics for American Transcendentalist literature. "In many ways, the return to nature and childhood experiences that is emphasised in Transcendental literature is a

Romantic notion” (Massey 14). This new philosophical movement also came as a reaction to the old Puritan theology and its overarching jurisdiction in almost every field concerning life. At the same time, it also came as a response to the materialism which was a consequent effect of the rapid industrial progress across the United States. Being a combined outcome of all of these circumstances, this new American philosophy posited man and nature at the centre, rather than religion or material. In the literary field, with the arrival of writers like Emerson, Hawthorne, Fuller and Thoreau, New England underwent a religious reformation and intellectual awakening that paralleled Elizabethan England. It is for this reason that the period, inspired by the romantic impulse, is often termed as the American Renaissance. This term however is only applicable for the quantitative parallel and not contextual one. Contextually, the period is identified as the American Romanticism. Like its English counterpart, Transcendentalism liberated the restrictions imposed by earlier literary philosophies. Naturally, a similar consequence of this new philosophy was seen in the new American writings as well. Moving away from the conservative and religious approach in writing, that was particularly seen in the figure of Jonathan Edwards, nearly all subsequent writers of the Nineteenth century New Englanders adopted the liberal religious views. Reuben Post Halleck in his work *History of American Literature* quotes, “The mission of all the great New England writers of this age was to make individuals freer, more cultivated, more self-reliant, more kindly, more spiritual” (129). This also resulted in the diminishing of religious control over other fields and opened the arena for a systematic attempt at self-culture, something America had not seen before. Following the core of the romantic ideology, a special emphasis was paid on the importance of individualism, over traditions. Halleck quotes Emerson’s lines in this regard: ““Do you think me the child of circumstances” asked the transcendentalist, and he answered in almost the same breath, “I make my circumstances.”” (121). A retrospective study of the Transcendentalist movement with the American culture reveals a

number of parallels. The most striking, amongst them, is the influence of the European forefathers. Ralph Waldo Emerson, who is considered as the expounder of the new school of thought, published a series of lectures that laid the foundations of the new literature. This was only made possible after his trip to Europe, after giving up his ministership. During his 1833 Grand Tour, he met “Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle and William Wordsworth, and was strongly influenced by the ideas of European Romanticism” (McMichael and Leonard 938). Upon his return to America, Emerson settled in Concord and began publishing essays and delivering lectures, inspired from his learnings abroad. His 1836 essay, *Nature*, became the manifesto of the collective known as the Transcendental Club, a derisive term at first. In a series of such essays, Emerson fundamentally transformed the way that America saw its cultural and artistic possibilities and enabled a response to the transatlantic literary traditions. “We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. . .” he exclaimed (Emerson, “The American Scholar”). In the opening of *Nature* too, Emerson begins with “Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” (Bosco and Yerson 34). His demand for a self-culture and self-proclamation of the country translated at an individualistic level in the 1841 essay called *Self-Reliance*. In an attempt to stray away from the “courtly muses of Europe” Emerson drew a lot from the very muses. A biographical study of Emerson’s life reveals volumes about his visit to Thomas Carlyle. The American scholar continued his acquaintance with the English writer and even published a few of his writings in America in the wake of his return. He was also concerned with Carlyle’s “ideas about the struggle for religious faith and spiritual conviction in such a material age.” (Lease 178-80). Thus, literary romanticism had a profound effect on the American literature that sprouted out of the country following Emerson’s return. Perry Miller, in his attempt to define American

transcendentalists goes on to the extent of stating that they may be defined in “a somewhat wider perspective as children of the Puritan past who, having been emancipated by Unitarianism from New England’s original Calvinism, found a new religious expression in forms derived from romantic literature. . .” (*The American Transcendentalist* ix). Ian Frederick Finseth furthers this argument by divulging the lines of connection to European Romanticism. By citing the similarity to “Coleridge, Wordsworth, Goethe, Thomas Carlyle and Victor Cousin”, he terms Transcendentalism as “not a purely native movement.” (Finseth, par.7). In his work, Duane E. Smith also terms Transcendentalism as “a part of that larger movement of Nineteenth century thought which we know as romanticism”; he, however, calls it a “curiously American manifestation of the Romantic movement” (D. E. Smith 303). [L T L] [SEP SEP]

An inverse vision is also possible where a number of scholars have termed Romanticism as a British manifestation of the Transcendental movement. In 1825, years before Emerson’s decisive tour, Coleridge wrote a book called *Aids to Reflection*. At that time, the poet was the star-figure of the English Romanticism. In this work, he gave a boost to Transcendentalist philosophy and reflective thinking. Frothingham, therefore, calls Coleridge “the prophet of Transcendentalism in England” (76). However, the roots for this vision certainly lie in the English soil. Therefore, it is the British movement that gives birth to the American one. Two decades after Coleridge’s publication of the work, the Transcendental thought swept across America. Particularly, “the summer of 1839 saw the full dawn of the Transcendental Movement in New England” (P. Miller, *The American Transcendentalist* 36).

Under this foreign drift, caused by Emerson, a band of writers and thinkers emerged especially concentrated around the Concord region of Massachusetts. An effect of this new way of thinking was prominent on these new scholars. These Transcendentalist philosophers endeavoured to transcend beyond the range of human sense and experiences. Therefore, a natural resort for them was nature and its natural forces. They adopted a new perspective and

interpretation of these forces. While early “pilgrims like William Bradford describe the non-human natural environment as a wilderness needing to be conquered and tamed,” the transcendentalist philosopher adopted “the opposite stance and suggested that it should be valued for its intrinsic spirituality” (Raeder 5). As aforementioned, along with nature, it was man that occupied the central role in Transcendentalism, as well as Romanticism. D. E. Smith cites that “the starting point for the political thought” that underlines both these movements is to be “found in a radical and thoroughgoing individualism” (312). Smith also quotes Thoreau and Emerson. While Thoreau writes that the “divinity of man is the true vestal fire of the temple which is never permitted to go out. . .”, Emerson extends the same thought when he says, “the individual is the world” (D. E. Smith 312). Hence, the philosophers that form the part of these two movements are preoccupied, and sometimes obsessed, with individualism.

Quite certainly, the most individualistic amongst this group of Transcendentalists was Henry David Thoreau. In fact, “Thoreau was so “transcendent that” he resisted official membership in this, as in any other, group” (D. E. Smith 302). Halleck cites Thoreau’s reason to not to marry as a consequence of his “transcendental love for isolation” which caused him to declare that he had never found “the companion that was so companionable as solitude”; he declares that Thoreau was “a pronounced individualist, carrying out Emerson’s doctrine by becoming independent of other’s opinions” (Halleck 150). Hence, while Emerson may be cited as the conveyor of the influential English philosophy, Thoreau must be called the practitioner of the said ideas. D. E. Smith writes that “Self-reliance was the theme song of much of Emerson’s writing, and if Emerson preached self-reliance, Thoreau practiced it” (317). Therefore, Thoreau was even more of a Transcendentalist than the person who led him towards the said philosophy. He almost adopted an extreme form of it. <sup>[1][1][1][1]</sup><sub>[SEP][SEP]</sub> Inspired by Emerson’s impression of the Romantic poets of England, Thoreau mimicked the Romantic ideals of the poets that the former had met on his European tour. He

became the transatlantic Romantic parallel to the English poets, especially Wordsworth and Coleridge. He mirrored them, both in terms of writing and even the creative process to a certain extent. Much like his English counterparts, he wrote in nature and about nature. Perry Miller divulges into the connection between Thoreau and Wordsworth. Miller states that “Thoreau does not often mention Wordsworth, but the very opening segments of the *Journal* show that he hardly needed to.” He calls Thoreau a “Wordsworthian” and “a child of the Romantic era” (*Thoreau In The Context*, 149). In tagging him as the “child” he correlates Thoreau more with the second generation of the English romantics, who were his immediate historic and literary predecessors. “Echoes in *Walden* and especially in his late essay “Walking” reveal that along with Wordsworth, whose influence is obvious, his reading of Keats and Shelley may have helped shape Thoreau’s romantic sensibility” (L. Smith 222). Having said that, it was Wordsworth with whom Thoreau seems most akin. The English poet’s annunciation of “a simple, sincere, indigenous poetic expression, his rural existence, his concepts of passive receptivity and emotion recollected in tranquility, his personal relation to an immanent spirit in nature. . . resonated in Thoreau’s own imagination” (L. Smith 225).

However, Thoreau never saw, met or communicated with Wordsworth. The profound influence of the elder English writer on the American one came when met Emerson. In 1837, when Thoreau completed his education from Harvard, Emerson was already gaining fame across the region as a prominent lecturer and essayist. The latter’s famous 1837 speech titled “The American Scholar” was delivered to Thoreau’s batch only. Emerson’s Transcendentalist philosophy, which was based upon the English Romanticism, had a profound effect on the young Thoreau. “Thoreau walked to Boston from Concord (a distance of more than 20 miles!) to hear Emerson speak” (Keith 87). Consequently, the two struck a remarkable friendship that would go down as one of the “most famous and enduring in literary history”, as Keith calls it (87). After finishing his degree, Thoreau returned to his home at Concord, which had

become “a sort of Mecca ” for Transcendentalism (Sanborn 197). He became the youngest member to join the Transcendental circle. Dr Barry Wood, from the University of Houston, in his lecture “Thoreau’s Life at Walden Pond” talks about the period between 1841 and 1843 when Thoreau took boarding in a room located near Emerson’s house. He not only served as a handyman to Emerson during the period but also studied under him. “Living on [this] property gave Thoreau access to the finest library in private hands in Concord and had included all the American books. . . and also books from England. . .” (Wood). Thoreau, therefore, got a chance to read nearly all of Emerson’s writing along with British works. In almost all his works, including *Walden*, one finds numerous references and quotations to the English writings that went well with his own Transcendental philosophy. In their work “Investigating American Romanticism: A Comparative Study”, Sabera Sultana and Md. Mohiul Islam contest that Thoreau was devoted to “his lifelong attempt in order to develop himself as an ideal intellectual as proposed by Emerson” in his aforementioned Harvard lecture (60). As the movement developed in the United States, particularly in the area around Concord, Emerson and Thoreau emerged as the two central figures. As a philosophy, it emphasised on the importance of spiritual over the material when it comes to leading a fulfilling life. It also focused on individualism. Emerson’s work *Self-Reliance*, which was deeply valued by Thoreau, both in terms of writing and thinking, emphasised on self-sufficiency, non-conformity and original thinking. Stephen West in his audio-lecture series *Philosophise This* cites Thoreau’s reading of ‘Self-Reliance’ as a “profound movement” in his life; he goes on to talk about the effect of the Transcendental philosophy propounded by Emerson on Thoreau’s receptive psychology (West). Tim McGee in his ‘Harvard Classic Lectures’ calls Emerson the “thinker” and Thoreau the “doer”; he states, “Emerson in his philosophic mind comes to ideas about transcendentalism, [while] Thoreau asks questions about the practicality [and application] of the [said] philosophy” (McGee).

Another feature that situates Thoreau strongly with the Transcendentalist, and therefore the Romantic, group is the view towards religion. In his 1853 Journal, Thoreau himself writes that “I am a mystic transcendentalist and a natural philosopher to boot.” (A Roy 1). Further, as a true member of the said group, “Thoreau held the concept of immanence of God in nature and in man” (A Roy 1). This new view was in sharp contrast with the Puritan religious view that was generally accepted in early Eighteenth century America and even Europe to a certain extent. Thoreau, much like other Transcendentalists, asserted a new vision of the existence of God. He writes in *Walden* that “we have adopted Christianity merely as an improved method of agriculture” (25). This statement forms part of a long argument that the writer presents with respect to the religion that governs most of Western hemisphere. As these new Romantic ideals spread across the American land, it also coincided with the period of national expansion and a distinct American voice, that Emerson had professed in his essays and lectures. As the conveyor of Emerson’s teaching, Thoreau’s life as well as his writing was layered with solidification of national identity, patriotic pride and rejection of European traditions. Emerson, while describing him, says, “no truer American existed than Thoreau. His preference of his country and condition was genuine, and his aversion from English and European manners and tastes almost reached contempt” (Emerson, “Thoreau”). For his experimental living, Thoreau left Concord on July 4. The date coincides with American Independence day. This coincidence carries a deeply patriotic message. It is his own declaration of independence. Nancy L. Rosenblum terms “Thoreau’s famous aversion to ordinary society and his heroic individualism” as “American variations on familiar romantic themes” (15).

Apart from imbibing the philosophy of individualism and patriotism, Emerson also helped in the practical aspects in the process of Thoreau’s venture. In 1845, he helped Thoreau to find a place where he could focus on his writings. The older man offered a plot of land that he owned in the woods surrounding the nearby Walden pond.

He allowed Thoreau to build a small cabin there. Thoreau's decision to live in the small hut for a spiritual awakening is an echo of Wordsworth's "plain living and high thinking" that the latter poet expressed in one of his poems (Wordsworth) <sup>{L T L}</sup><sub>{S E P S E P}</sub>. Thoreau, putting the philosophy into action, moved to the cabin on July 4, 1845. His decision to retreat to Walden Pond is parallel to the English poets' retreat to the Lake District. All of them wanted a closer relationship with the natural world. Therefore, for two years, two months and two days, the American writer enjoyed this close relationship and resigned from public life. There he penned the first draft of *Walden*. He argues that his escape to Walden Pond was not simply a relaxing retreat to the forest; he settled there to "live deep and suck out the marrow of life" as he writes in the work (*Walden*, 69). Thoreau writes that "I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life. . ." (*Walden*, 68). The quote captures the essence of the entire text and is in fact still present in the form of an engraving on a tree at the site where Thoreau stayed. It also succeeded to appear in the acclaimed movie called *Dead Poets Society* in 1989. The quote also explains the profound relationship between man and nature, as nature becomes the doorway towards divine and introspection. D. E. Smith correlating Thoreau with the English ideals writes that "the romantic is essentially inward looking, retreating from the external world in order to contemplate the unfolding of his own personality" (305). Thus, Thoreau, in his attempt to pen *Walden*, became a Romantic.

Perry Miller confirms this as he terms *Walden* as "one of the supreme achievements of the Romantic movement" (*Thoreau In The Context*, 156). In that, it summarised and vocalised the Romantic ideals against the progressive approach that destroyed nature in its progress. The work later became what Keith terms as a "manifesto on materialism in American culture," and "an antidote to the ills of consumerism and spiritual decay today" (89). Jeremy S Cramer delivered a talk on the 150th anniversary of Thoreau's work. Cramer attempts a linguistic analysis of the text. He says, "by not using a third-person narrative, and by using the strong pronoun "I", he gave

his text a sense of immediacy, integrity and strength” (Cramer). Thoreau, in fact, preferred autobiography over biography. “Almost all of his work is autobiographical, a record of actual experience” (Halleck 152). Thoreau wrote: “If I am not I who will be?” (Cramer). The perceptible individuality in Thoreau’s pronouns is an effect of Romanticism only. He also writes about *Walden*, in the opening of the chapter titled “Economy” that “In most books, the I, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained” (4). This confirms Cramer’s assertion.

Makoto Rokugawa attempted a thematic deconstruction of the work in an essay titled “Romanticism and the Transcendentalist Thoreau in *Walden*”. Rokugawa states that the romantic movement was “extremely individualistic in its tendencies”. The American tradition of “do-it-yourself [. . .] is a striking romantic theme of *Walden*” (Rokugawa 210). His living experiment to be self-reliant and to live in isolation is the prime example of Transcendental life lived to its fullest potential. Thoreau’s self-reliance is a critical stance towards society, a view that he shares with the Romantics. English Romanticism was thoroughly critical of the industrial revolution that was spreading rapidly from the urban centres of the country. For Thoreau, Concord became a symbol of society. By choosing to move away from this urban world into a natural retreat, the writer declaims against society, and chooses solitude over that. Another key theme that influences the writer and the work is nature. For him, nature appears as an inexhaustible source of wisdom, beauty and spiritual nourishment. It became the central figure in his work and in his life. His fellowship with the birds and other creatures is symbolic to depict his relationship with nature. A number of chapters in the text are dedicated where the writer describes his encounter with the animals near his hut. Frederick L. H. Willis, a visitor who went to see Thoreau with Alcott, writes that “a low curious whistle” by Thoreau invited a host of animals including a woodchuck, a pair of squirrels and “several birds, including two crows. . . one of [whom] nestled upon his shoulder” (Harding, *The days* 193). Even Thoreau dedicates a number of sections of *Walden* that describe his

interaction with animals and birds. The description and imagery of the birds, in particular, is an echo of the second generation Romantic poets like Keats and Shelley.

Thoreau, thus, imbibed the Romantic traits of the various English writers. It is what T. S. Eliot, in his work “Tradition and Individual Talent”, terms as “the most individual parts” that Thoreau assimilates from “his [English] ancestors” (37). As mentioned above, Emerson was critical of the European muses that inspired him. Thoreau followed the same suit. His idea of English literature “from the days of the minstrels to the Lake Poets. . . breathes no quite fresh. . . It is an essentially tame and civilised literature. . . There is plenty of genial love of Nature, but not so much of Nature herself” (Thoreau, *Walking* 103). In his American crusade, Thoreau attempted to stray away from this “tame and civilised” tradition. He, thus, Americanised the English Romantic expression. His liberation from the literary traditions allowed him “to manifest the best of his own American romantic sensibility and talent as well as the best of his English predecessors” (L Smith 241). Hence, he chose and imbibed what he appreciated, and avoided what he didn’t. As these choices find a parallel in his other foreign studies, an analytical deduction of them reveals the deviation from the popular Euro-centric ways.

### **III. Influence of Indian Philosophy**

India and its philosophic ideas have been an active contributor in the world’s quest for meaning and truth. The wide variety of Indian literature, namely the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Darśanas, the Dharmashastras, the Puranas, the epics, and the literary classics, encapsulate all of human life and its experience which further the cause of the said quest. Western scholars have, therefore, always been preoccupied in dissecting the knowledge that form a part of the aforementioned texts. Apart from Indian thinkers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo, a host of scholars from the West have made efforts in the said direction.

Sundara Bharadwaj names “Sir William Jones, Charles Wilkins, H. H. Wilson, H. T. Colebrooke, Duperron, Max Muller and others” amongst the prime exponents (2). The Western Orientalist, Max Muller, even places Indian mind and its thinking capabilities above the knowledge of “Plato and Kant” (*India* 6). Even T. S. Eliot, following his studies of Hindu and Buddhist scriptures, wrote that Indian philosophers’ “subtleties make most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys” (*After Strange Gods* 40). Arthur Christy in his 1932 work titled *The Orient in American Transcendentalism* attempts to deduce the “Oriental influence on Occidental thought” (48). Christy writes that “the historical possibility that Greek philosophy was influenced by India through the medium of Persia is generally granted” (52). Max Muller asserts that the Hindu system of philosophy and logic is more ancient than Aristotle’s and therefore, “the Greeks had borrowed the first elements of philosophy from the Hindus” (*Six Systems* 362). Sir William Jones even draws intellectual parallels between the two philosophical countries. Jones declares that “Gautama corresponds to Aristotle, Canada with Thales; Jaimini with Socrates; Vyasa with Plato; Capila with Pythagoras; and Patanjali with Zeno” (Christy 53). This Greek philosophical knowledge became the foundation for the whole of the West. It later shaped the European studies and its mindset, which in turn affects the American way of thinking.

English scholars had always been interested in dissecting the spiritual knowledge that India possessed. Therefore, right after the British acquisition of India, a number of writers began studying and publishing works that were either inspired from Indian philosophy or were their direct translations. Amongst these scholars, Charles Wilkins and H. T. Colebrooke published several works. Wilkins is known for his English translation of *Hitopadesa* of Veeshnoosarma and *Bhagavadgita*, the latter being the first ever English translation of the revered text. Colebrooke also published a series of essays in *Asiatic Researches*. As mentioned before, Coleridge was identified as the expounder of Transcendentalism in England, a few years before it arrived and flourished on the American soil. In doing so,

Coleridge was also fascinated by the “philosophic values and mystic depth of Indian wisdom” (Bose 41). The poet expressed this desire of embracing the “Brahman creed” which he wrote in one of his letters dated October 14, 1797 (Bose 41). The Americans were particularly influenced by the Indian philosophy and its abundant knowledge in the later part of the Eighteenth century. During this period, Harvard and other libraries began possessing Indian books. “Further, during the 1780s and 1790s American missionary activity in India commenced and American ships, engaged in trade between Boston, Salem and Calcutta. . . also [brought] the seeds of Indian culture and thought” (Bhardwaj 29). As Raja Rammohan Roy began gaining fame across the western hemisphere, for his translations of the Vedas and Upanishads, Indian thought became well known across New England circles. Carl T. Jackson observes that the American interest “in Asian thought seems to have begun with Ram Mohan Roy, a brilliant Hindu reformer. . . Roy offered living proof that intellect and high ideals were not monopolies of Western civilisation” (32-33). Soon, after the arrival of Roy, a number of Britain-based Indian studies were available to the American scholar. Its culmination took place much later in the heyday of Transcendentalism. R. K. Gupta points out the same that while Hindu scriptures had reached America in the 1780s, “Emerson, Thoreau and Bronson Alcott were the first American writers to make a serious study and use of the religious and philosophical literature of India” (240). Citing the influence of the Indian philosophy, Paul Elmer More goes on to call Transcendentalism as the “Brahmanism of New England” in *Shelburn Essays* (173). Amongst this new creed of American writers, Thoreau found a particular connection with the Indian studies as he not only implemented it in writing but also in his practice and way of living. *Walden*, therefore, becomes a monumental proof of this assertion. Despite belonging to a culture that was influenced by materialism, Thoreau demonstrated through *Walden* as to “how to be content with less” (24). He declared proudly that his “greatest skill has been to want but little”

(*Walden* 47). The writer belonged to a family that was not without means. “However, both before and after his retreat to the woods, he seemed content to take on only occasional teaching or working as a surveyor of the surrounding countryside, preferring to have time instead of wealth” (Cowan and Echterling 59). This free time was put to a greater use by a study of Indian literature. Thoreau imbibed this practice from Emerson, who was an avid reader of Vedantic writings. Horton identifies that “Emerson’s favourite of all Vedantic writings was the Bhagavadgita which he read and loaned to his friends until it was worn out” (118). Even Swami Vivekananda observes the same in a lecture given at the Shakespeare Club in California of February 1, 1900: “If you want to know the source of Emerson’s inspiration, it is in this book, *The Gita*. He went to see Carlyle, and Carlyle made him a present of the *Gita*; and that little book is responsible for the Concord Movement” (Vivekananda). Between July 1842 and January 1843, Emerson, along with Thoreau, also published extracts from *Manusmriti* and *Hitopadesha* in their Transcendental organ, *The Dial*. Thoreau, however, excelled Emerson in his studies and application of the philosophy that the two read. John T Reid reports that “. . . Thoreau read a great deal in Indian literature, perhaps more than Emerson” (35). This is also confirmed by Thoreau’s bequeathal of “twenty volumes of Indian classics from his personal library to Emerson, some of them new to Emerson” (Reid 22). <sup>SEP</sup> Thoreau’s acquaintance with Indian philosophy began during his Harvard years, where along with the study of Greek classics he also began reading “scriptures from the East” (Paul 69). This happened even before he met Emerson. Upon meeting and living with Emerson, Thoreau’s ideas and views were re-confirmed and realigned in the very direction. In his later Journals, Thoreau reports that he was reading the works of Wilson on January 24, 1856 and the Upanishads on September 30, 1857 (*The Journal* 964, 1196). Harding reports that as the year passed on, Thoreau became so invested in this reading that “the Oriental books were his daily bread” (*Man of Concord* 111). Apart from these texts, the *Laws of Manu* also had a profound effect on the writer. Thoreau

balances the criticism and appreciation for the “Hindoo lawgiver” in *Walden* (147). He asserts that the teachings of Manu “have a place and significance, as long as there is a sky to test them by” (*Journal Volume I* 327). Later, he even edited the *Manu Dharmasastra* for *The Dial*. Thoreau also had a life-long interest in the teachings of Bhagavadgita, ever since he read Wilkin’s translation. Canby, one of Thoreau’s biographer asserts that the Transcendental writer was made by two books: “Nature (by Emerson) and the Bhagvadgita” (97). In his other most well-known work, called *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau writes that he “bathed his intellect in the vast and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavat Geeta” (116). Versluis, in this regard, writes that Thoreau, “had read and been deeply influenced by the concepts. . . and cosmos expressed in sacred Indian literature” (Cowan and Echterling 57).

What also separated the writer from his transcendental contemporaries, apart from his extensive reading of such texts, is their practical application. While others only read them for intellectual or scholarly purposes, Thoreau imbibed all the ideas that he studied in all the Hindu scriptures. In one of his most popular dictums, he asserts that “What can be expressed in words can be expressed in life” (*The correspondence* 216) Therefore, his life and his works enjoy a close synthesis, where they not only affect each other but inspire as well. R. K. Gupta writes that whereas others had “primarily a speculative and theoretical interest in Hindus scriptures, Thoreau alone tried to put their teaching into practice” (41). Even Emerson confirms this claim when he termed Thoreau’s sage-like lifestyle “a holy living” (“Thoreau” 278). By giving up the material world, Thoreau aimed at achieving a higher state of being. For this, Indian philosophy appeared as the perfect match. Much like Thoreau’s attempt, Indian philosophy also aims at the external fulfilment through internal appeasement. For this, Bhardwaj in his work, *The Yogi of Walden*, mentions four “purusarthas” or values of life: “Dharma (virtue), artha (material prosperity), kama (desires), and moksha (liberation)” (7-8). A balance between these four values is the aim of the Indian spiritual voyage. Amongst these, moksha or

liberation is the ultimate and highest end goal of human life. To achieve moksha is to transcend beyond the limitations of human existence. This concept is “India’s biggest contribution to human welfare” (Ramachandran 21). The transcendental state is with respect to the soul’s journey and end-goal. This is either achieved by *jivanmukti*, liberation in life, or *videhamukti*, liberation after life. Bhardwaj mentions four ashramas that “prepare every individual by gradual stages to evolve from the lower to the higher values of life.” These are: “*brahmacharya* (studentship), *grahstha* (householder), *vanaprastha* (forest recluse), and *samnyasa* (anchorite)” (Bharadwaj 10). Thoreau, through his life and especially his *Walden* experiment, moved from being associated with *brahmacharya* and *grahstha*, and later with *vanaprastha* and *samnyasa*. He emulated the life of *vanaprastha* especially when he decided to take recluse in the hut built on the banks of *Walden Pond*. Bhardwaj calls him a “practitioner of yoga” for this period where he “contemplated the cardinal Hindu doctrines of *dharma*, *karma* and *birth*” (69).<sup>[L1:T1] [L1:T2] [L1:T3] [L1:T4] [L1:T5] [L1:T6] [L1:T7] [L1:T8] [L1:T9] [L1:T10] [L1:T11] [L1:T12] [L1:T13] [L1:T14] [L1:T15] [L1:T16] [L1:T17] [L1:T18] [L1:T19] [L1:T20] [L1:T21] [L1:T22] [L1:T23] [L1:T24] [L1:T25] [L1:T26] [L1:T27] [L1:T28] [L1:T29] [L1:T30] [L1:T31] [L1:T32] [L1:T33] [L1:T34] [L1:T35] [L1:T36] [L1:T37] [L1:T38] [L1:T39] [L1:T40] [L1:T41] [L1:T42] [L1:T43] [L1:T44] [L1:T45] [L1:T46] [L1:T47] [L1:T48] [L1:T49] [L1:T50] [L1:T51] [L1:T52] [L1:T53] [L1:T54] [L1:T55] [L1:T56] [L1:T57] [L1:T58] [L1:T59] [L1:T60] [L1:T61] [L1:T62] [L1:T63] [L1:T64] [L1:T65] [L1:T66] [L1:T67] [L1:T68] [L1:T69] [L1:T70] [L1:T71] [L1:T72] [L1:T73] [L1:T74] [L1:T75] [L1:T76] [L1:T77] [L1:T78] [L1:T79] [L1:T80] [L1:T81] [L1:T82] [L1:T83] [L1:T84] [L1:T85] [L1:T86] [L1:T87] [L1:T88] [L1:T89] [L1:T90] [L1:T91] [L1:T92] [L1:T93] [L1:T94] 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who sits alone, sleeps alone and walks alone, who is firm and controlled, himself in solitude, will find delight in forest” (Bharadwaj 80). All these doctrines had a profound effect on the mind that was already inclined and suited for such a life. Emerson observes about Thoreau that “few lives contain so many renunciations. He was bred to no profession; he never married; he lived alone. . . he ate no flesh; he drank no wine; he never knew the use of tobacco” (“Thoreau” 267). Thoreau confirms Emerson’s contention as he also wrote in *Walden* that “I believe that water is the only drink for a wise man; wine is not so noble a liquor” (144).

Inspired by the reading and understanding of these texts and their teachings, Thoreau left the civilised world and retired to the forest. As “search for inner values is easier in the lap of Mother Nature than in bustle of the outer world” (Motwani 189). This strong desire for the withdrawal from society was put to words by Thoreau in his Journal on March 1, 1840: “I can move away from public opinion, from Government, from religion, from education, from society” (Thoreau, *The Journal* 50). This desire became a resolution, as he writes on December 24, 1841: “I want to go soon and live away by the pond, where I shall hear only the wind whispering among the reeds” (Harding, *The days* 123). Associating it with Thoreau’s understanding of the Hindu re-birth, Charles Anderson writes that “his withdrawal was a preparation for rebirth” (50). This re-birth also coincided with the anniversary of American independence on July 4. Just as for the nation, the date marked a new beginning for Thoreau, a sort of spiritual independence. Thoreau’s retirement to the Walden pond in the woods and his hut construction over there was a symbolic move on the philosopher’s part. This ascetic seclusion was for the purpose of spiritual discipline. “In the Walden hit, Thoreau tended his soul, perfected his craft of writing, and experimented with the art of living, reducing his wants to barest minimum” (Bharadwaj 83). Channing, a frequent visitor to this hut, described it as “a wooden ink stand on the shores of Walden pond.” He further reported that it had “no lock to the door, no curtain to the window, and belonged to nature nearly as much as to man” (4-5). As

per the Hindu tenets, hospitality is one of the sacred duties that any person associated with the religion should perform. Another Hindu text *Visnupurana*, correlates guests with god. Thoreau writes in *Walden* that he performed the duty of hospitality according to this text. His open hut, therefore, is a realistic application of the very thought. In his attempt to stray away from the Euro-centric religious customs, Thoreau advocates that “the order of things should be somewhat reversed; the seventh should be man’s day of toil, wherein to earn his living by the sweat of his brow; and the other six the Sabbath of the affections and the soul” (*Thoreau Writings* 9). Mirroring the daily routine of an Indian sage, Thoreau made sure that he had ample amount of time for “broad margin of leisure” (*Thoreau Writings* 262), so that he could study and meditate to uplift his “soul’s estate” (*The heart of Thoreau’s* 10). He would get up early to bathe in the pond which he equates with a “religious exercise” (*Walden* 60). Thoreau cites the reason for it, saying that “The Vedas say, ‘all intelligence awake with the morning’” (*Walden* 60). Following this physical process, he moved on to the mental purification by bathing his “intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavat Geeta” against which “our modern world and its literature seems puny and trivial” (*Walden* 197). Van Wyck Brooks calls the latter procedure as a “bath for the intellect” where “the pure water of Walden [mingles] in his mind with the sacred waters of the Ganges” (361). Following this early morning regime, Thoreau occupied his day with hoeing beans, mending fences, building a chimney, surveying the land and applying himself to labour for hire just to keep himself afloat. In his food habits too, he pursued the yogic way. He writes in *Walden*: “It was fit that I should live on rice, mainly, who loved so well the philosophy of India” (41). So, he exchanged the beans that he grew for rice. With regards to food, and also living, Thoreau professes the theory of minimalism, which he terms as “voluntary poverty” (*Walden* 11). In an article titled “Walden and Yoga”, it is quoted that “certain aspects of Rajayoga were followed by Thoreau,” but

most noticeably, “dietary control, solitude and chastity” (Macshane 333).

“The book became a touchstone for generations of future Americans by exploring the transformational potential inherent in a profound relationship between the individual and nature” (Cowan and Echterling 56). In doing so, Thoreau acquired the status of a sage, whose writing and life exhibit the deep and abiding connection to nature. His assertion of this fluid connection between the self and nature goes against the western approach of “intersubjectivity” which sees mind as an isolated entity (Cowan and Echterling 56). However, Thoreau, in his search for a dependable cosmology, looked towards the East where the boundaries between self and the other, nature and god, and man and nature are more porous. The Upanishads influenced the philosopher in the process. It says that everything--all nature, including human beings--is infused with a spirit of divinity. Thus, living close to nature allows a person deep participation and union with the immanent god. The process of ascetic isolation in nature allows a thinker to look inwards and understand the outwards. In *Walden* too, Thoreau stresses that God dwells in everything that surrounds us. He writes: “Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here” (*Walden* 65). In this way, Thoreau deviated from the Western concept of existence. “His was not a philosophy of exile, of being cast out and longing to return to the garden. Thoreau was already in the garden, literally and figuratively” (Cowan and Echterling 60). This is an echo of the philosophy propounded in the Upanishads where there is no fall from grace. Nature is never corrupted but rather is divine for eternity. *Walden* highlights and reassures the sentiment that nature is sacred, and while being governed by God, is also god. Similarly, self (Atman) is a part of the indestructible force as well. While the Western tradition would have considered it blasphemous to identify oneself with the divinity,

Thoreau accepts and absorbs the Eastern idea that he is a part of the divine.

His absorption into the Indian philosophy can be seen as accomplished completely in a letter that he wrote to his friend H. G. O. Blake. In this letter Thoreau writes about his meditations and influence of readings of The Upanishads: “The yogi, absorbed in contemplation, contributes in his degree to creation; he breathes a divine perfume, he hears wonderful things. . . To some extent, and at rare intervals, even I am a yogi” (B. S. Miller 60) This yogic realisation of the American writer is an assertion of his absorption into the Indian and Hindu culture. Despite belonging to the prototype Western culture, Thoreau was a Hindu in his soul. Sundara Bharadwaj in this regard states that, “He was born in Concord, bred in Concord, and died in Concord, but his mind soared and reached out to. . . the banks of the Ganges” (Bharadwaj 101).

#### IV. Conclusion<sup>[1][2]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

A host of Western writers, poets and thinkers have looked to the East for inspiration as well as realisation. A supreme example of this breed is Emerson. Although his former cause overshadows the latter, as he was mostly invested in an intellectual pursuit. Emerson, however, was but a medium; for it was his disciple, Thoreau, who imbibed the Eastern ideas for realisation more than inspiration. A similar pattern is also observed in Thoreau’s absorption of the tenets of English Romanticism. These two factors majorly influence in shaping Thoreau and his work *Walden*.

History is filled with people who mark the reading of Thoreau’s text as a decisive point in their life. To this day, a number of scholars make pilgrimage to the sacred spot of the Walden hut, where the text was prepared. By creating *Walden* as a mixture of the two tributaries, Thoreau has returned much of what he took from them. A number of British writers, following Thoreau, have taken inspiration from the philosopher in their own poetic creations. Nearing the close of the century, W. B. Yeats, the English Nobel

laureate, penned one of his most famous verses titled *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*. In this short lyrical poem, the poet expresses a desire to leave the materialistic world in order to spend time in a “small cabin” that he would build near the forest. In desiring to do so, Yeats echoes Thoreau’s living experiment in *Walden* (Yeats, *Collected Poems* 35). The English poet even mentions growing “Nine bean-rows” at Innisfree in the poem (35). Much like Yeats, Thoreau has inspired a number of writers and monumental English personalities that follow him. A similar consequence can be seen in the Indian context as well. As Thoreau asserted that the influence of *Bhagavad Gita* caused the Ganges water to feed the *Walden* pond. “But there was a return tributary as well, for Mahatma Gandhi acknowledged Thoreau’s *Walden* and *Civil Disobedience* as influential in his ideas of non-violent resistance” (Cowan and Echterling 66).

*Walden*, therefore, despite being a prose masterpiece is a soulful ode to nature. It is a product of the tenets of English Romanticism and the culmination of Indian philosophy. In *Walden*, we see the intermingling of the waters of Lake District, *Walden Pond* and *Ganges*.

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