

CROSS CULTURE COAXING: THE INDIANS OF THOREAU'S ORIENTALISM

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ABSTRACT

It is an overwhelming endeavor to paint a picture of Thoreau from the beginning of the second decade of twenty-first century. The complete volume of literary studies, growing now for over a century, is enough to reduce the spirits of the boldest critic. Of course, the same type of challenges also confront the student of other canonical figures of the same period, as a glance at the terrifying body of scholarly studies produced over the past few years on such writers as Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau and many others would be at test. Yet Thoreau presents special challenges. Thoreau has assumed the status of an oriental writer more than any writer of his time. If people know nothing else about the impact of oriental thoughts on American literature of nineteenth-century, they are at least likely to recall something about Thoreau's stay at Walden Pond and the famous book he wrote about it. The knowledge of the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita had already blossomed in the mind of this pioneer of American literature of the 19th century. The philosophy of the Upanishads was so deeply engraved on his mind that he was called the Brahmin of America along with others two; Emerson and Whitman. He is a kind of cultural idol and to that degree represents orientalism in American literature, whether or not, or how recently, we have actually read and understood the impact of orientalism in 'Walden' or 'Civil Disobedience' or visited Concord and the Pond itself.

This paper observes Thoreau's arrangement of Asian oriental thoughts that set the American literature and the living on rage. Voicing the idea of minimalistic living and images drawn through structures and themes from Hindu excerpt and revolutionizing the living in the woods inspired from his Indian friends, who changed the course of sustainability for the writer in Walden. The paper aims to re-cultivate the idea behind Indo-American renaissance; followed by an overview that surrounds the Nature's sage, finding joy in little things and understanding of Godhood through the absorption of the wild.

KEYWORDS: *Orientalism, Intersectionality, Nature and Spiritual Health*

Article History

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INTRODUCTION

Environmentalism has grown rapidly as a field of study as well as a social justice movement in recent years, combining the ideas of intersectionality and climate change to address our current "climate crisis" (Bernie Sanders, 2016). Henry David Thoreau was one of the most early environmentally-conscious philosophers to push past the boundaries of intersectionality in order to contribute to the ever-growing environmentalist movement. Thoreau's writings and observations from his remote cabin at Walden Pond show that nature is important in every person's life, no matter his or her race, class, or gender.

Henry David Thoreau, born in Massachusetts in 1817, was one of the America's well-known practical philosophers, Transcendentalists, Unitarians, and nature poets. He wrote poetry about nature beginning in the 1840s, and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson was his mentor. Emerson helped him to edit his works, gave him the land at Walden Pond, and was his best friend. In 1845, Thoreau began his two-year retreat at Walden Pond, where he wrote his most well-known work, *Walden*, a book that explains his reasoning for separating himself from the industrial world for a while. He identified with many of the rebel theology groups of the time, and he strongly believed that nature was a key element for a healthy life.

During Thoreau's life, he observed or experienced racism, sexism, the police's response to civil disobedience, environmental injustice, among other topics under the intersectionality umbrella. It is incredibly hard to separate the intertwining of the similar factors, but Thoreau's *Indian Notebooks* analyze the North-American Indian cultures which he observed on his travels without including the intersectional factors that came along with the impact of the Western Europeans on the American Indian tribes. Thoreau wrote his *Indian Notebooks* from 1847 to 1861, and they are a collection of long essays that would help in reshaping a contorted view of American Indian cultures (Fleck, Introduction to the *Indian Notebooks*). Also according to Richard Fleck's introduction of his transcribed version of Thoreau's notebooks, Thoreau had the friendship of the Penobscot Indians Joe Aitteon and Joe Polis, who helped Thoreau grow his knowledge about the American Indians in the woods of Maine.

Thoreau's direct contact with American Indians helped him to understand the intersectional factors that the Indians lived with, and to separate the factors from each other so he could look at each one closely. Thoreau witnessed traditional dances and rituals during his stay at Walden Pond. In a lot of his notes, he references translations of tribal phrases that allude to the natural world, and a big part of his writing is about the immense knowledge American Indians have about how nature works, both physically and spiritually. One of his observations is as follows:

“*Wain-je-tah We koon-de-win*—Feast called for by dreams. Feasts of this kind may be held at any time, and no particular qualifications are necessary in the entertainer or his guests. The word *Wainjec-tah* means common, or true, as they often use it in connexion with the names of plants or animals, as *Wainje-tah, O-muk-kuk-ke*, means a right or proper toad, in distinction from a tree frog, or a lizard.” (Thoreau, IN VI: 349-350)

Here, Thoreau is merely describing an American Indian feast in no particular celebration. He wrote about how even though there was no true purpose for the feast other than to have fun at a meal together, the American Indians value nature and spiritual health very highly. He describes their kind hospitality as he stayed in one of the Indian's homes (the name of the tribe or person he was staying with was not written down). Thoreau learned about gender roles in that particular tribe just by experiencing daily life in that tribe he lived in a wigwam, shared meals, participating in drum circles, and observed how the Indians prepared food, among many other daily activities. When he traveled west to Lake Michigan and Lake Erie, he wrote about how the Indians used the coastline for food, which includes geographical location as a factor of intersectionality.

The Indians of the sea shore collected and sold oysters and musels [sic] to Indians who lived higher up in the country—“for this reason you see immense numbers of oysters and musel [sic] shells piled up near such places, where you are certain that the Indians formerly built their huts.” Thoreau adds, “This ought to make the geologists cautious.” (Thoreau, IN III:108)

Sociologists today tend to follow the same observational steps as Thoreau did when conducting their research. Sociologists “make the familiar strange” (Conley, *You May Ask Yourself*) by focusing on small personal interactions or on things that we normally don't think twice about. Sociologists pull apart the fabricated concepts of race, gender, ethnicity, and class in order to study each one individually. In Thoreau's case, he focused on the small interactions of the American Indians and observed their daily routines in order to change his society's idea of American Indians. Even if it is nearly impossible to separate these factors in our daily lives, both Thoreau and modern sociologists use this skill in order to learn more about why these factors play such a big role in the complex social structure of humans.

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