

## A Comparative Study of Oriental Sufism and American Transcendentalism (with particular reference to Bulleh Shah and Emerson)

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### Abstract

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*Ideologies are ever beyond the bounds of borders and barriers of land or space. During their process of evolution, key characteristics of some Ideologies around the globe emerge as identical. Such is the case with Oriental Sufism and American Transcendentalism. Ralph Waldo Emerson, as a forerunner of transcendentalism while expounding on the ideals of humankind, culture and relationship of man with the nature, came in touch with the thoughts and writings of the Sufi poets of Persia and other parts of the Eastern world. It was then that he could not live without sharing with the ideologists of Sufism; and Bulleh Shah is one such of those. In fact, his work has often been regarded as a pioneering effort to help bridge the intellectual understanding gap between East and West. This research is intended to have a detailed look at singular Sufi poet, Bulleh Shah, whose work has previously been unrelated to Emerson's, yet whose own ideals and thoughts, though composed several years before this torchbearer of American Transcendentalism, bear a profound relationship to those held by Emerson, Thoreau, and the American Transcendental movement.*

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**Key words:** Sufism, Transcendentalism, Bulleh Shah, Emerson, nature, universalist.

### 1. Introduction

When going through the works carried out on the influence of Persian and other Islamic poets on the literature and thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson, it comes to light that in much of his work a strong line from Sufi poets such as Rumi and Hafiz ran through Emerson's own corpus of essays, prose and poetry. As evident, Emerson was the first so-called Western philosophers to have incorporated, indeed, to have been immensely influenced by, those and other 'seers and sayers' of the East. His translations of Hafiz and others, as well as his juxtaposition of Persian verse with his own, are clear indications that Emerson drew his muses from a deep and distant wellspring, in his exploration of the *inextricable mutual bond and co-dependence between mankind and nature*. One may call to mind his poems *Brahma and Saadi*, in particular, as strong examples of the role that the semiotics of 'out-lying' cultures—so distant in time and place from his own New England—played in his poetics and his view of life as a universalist.

He wrote in the introduction to his essay, *Nature*;

*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?*

Now, in hindsight of over a century and a half of reflecting on Emerson's work, it might be interesting to consider the poetry and beliefs of Bulleh Shah, a Sufi poet who, though unaffiliated with Emerson's work *per se*, presents an indirect illumination of the universal tolerance and values of American Transcendentalism.

This research is intended to establish the contact between such two ideologies that prospered on different continents but with the similar motifs.

### 2. Sufism: Definition and Dimension

In order to make the exploration on Sufism and Transcendentalism more comprehensible and more elaborative, it seems pertinent to define at this stage, in particular for the amateurs of the field, the term and dimension of Sufism: *Sufism, or Tasawwuf as it is known in the Muslim world, is often characterized as Islamic mysticism (Lings,15).*

The earliest people to call themselves *Sufi* were a group of disciples of the Prophet Mohammed, *Praise Be Unto Him (henceforth abbreviated in this paper as PBUH)*, who would often sit at his feet to listen to the tenets of Islam and receive enlightenment in the faith.

Dr. Seyyedeh Nahid Angha writes a descriptive definition of Sufism and of its early beginnings:

The history of the origin of Sufism records that during the lifetime of the Prophet Mohammed (*PBUH*), fifteen centuries ago, there was a group of pious individuals from different nations who, guided by the Laws of Islam, sought for the direct experience of the Divine. Companions of the Prophet, they were people of principles practising certain disciplines and meditations for the sake of purification, the realization of Divine love, and the understanding of reality. They were the Lovers of God who sought union with Him through losing the limited self in His Divinity (*fana*), and staying alive in that Reality (*bagha*).

These individuals met on the platform, or *suffe*, of the mosque where Prophet Mohammed (*PBUH*) used to pray in Medina, Arabia. They would meet there almost everyday to discuss the ways to inner knowledge, the truths of revelation, and the meanings of the verses of the Koran. Thus the platform of that mosque in Medina became the first gathering place of one of the most influential groups in the history of mankind's spiritual civilization. They were called *ahle suffe*, the People of the Platform.

After the Prophet Mohammed (*PBUH*) passed away, each Sufi returned to his homeland to instruct students eager to follow the path toward inner knowledge. There they became the great missionaries of Islam. History shows that within a century or two their style of self-understanding and discipline were introduced by their students to nations as diverse and widely separated as Persia, India, Indonesia, Syria, Mesopotamia, Egypt and other regions of North Africa. Their teachings were based on individual understanding and direct experience, not just on particular texts or rote learning. In this manner their fundamental teachings have been preserved in their style up to the present.

Non-Muslims often mistakenly take Sufism as a sect of Islam. *Sufism is more accurately described as an aspect or dimension of Islam.* Sufi orders (*tariqas*) can be found in Sunni, Shia and other Islamic groups. Ibn Khaldun, the 14th century Arab historian, described Sufism as:

*... dedication to worship, total dedication to Allah most High, disregard for the finery and ornament of the world, abstinence from the pleasure, wealth, and prestige sought by most men, and retiring from others to worship alone (Keller).*

On the other hand, in something of a departure from more prevalent definitions, Paul Yachnes quotes Islamic scholar Victor Danner, in his own introduction to his translation of Ibn Ata'illah's *Book of Wisdom* (1978): “*When dealing with Sufism, it is best to leave to one side such terms as ‘mystic’ and ‘mysticism,’ if only because in the modern Western world such words nowadays often lead to confusion.*”

According to Yachnes, Danner instead prefers to identify it ‘operatively and institutionally,’ as he does in his book *The Islamic Tradition: An Introduction*:

*Sufism is the spiritual Path (tariqah) of Islam and has been identified with it for well over a thousand years... It has been called ‘Islamic mysticism’ by Western scholars because of its resemblance to Christian and other forms of mysticism elsewhere. Unlike Christian mysticism, however, Sufism is a continuous historical and even institutionalized phenomenon in the Muslim world that has had millions of adherents down to the present day. Indeed, if we look over the Muslim world, there is hardly a region that does not have Sufi orders still functioning there (Danner, 84).*

A strong *cultural element* has evolved with the interpretation of Sufism: as mentioned earlier, Sufism has been prevalent throughout the Muslim world up to the present time. Whereas the shades of meaning and understanding and apparent shape of Sufism might be different across cultures, the basic ideology is the same from East to West, from Sufi poets as diverse as Rumi and Bulleh Shah.

R.A. Nicholson in his brief introduction to Sufism, *The Mystics of Islam* (1914), remarked: “Sufism, the *religious philosophy of Islam*, is described in the oldest extant definition as ‘*the apprehension of divine realities*’ and although referring to it as ‘Islamic Mysticism’, he still maintains the popular idea that Sufism was largely the product of diverse philosophical and spiritual influences, including Christian, Neo-Platonic, and others. Nicholson further states that it is “a subject so vast and many-sided that several large volumes would be required to do it anything like justice”.

This definition focuses on the diversity, universality and acceptance of all religions and creeds, which is one of the most significant and unique aspects of Sufism.

As Hidayat Inayat-Khan writes in his article "What is Sufi?":

*Sufism is neither a religion nor a cult or a sect, nor is it only from east or from west. Sufism, which means wisdom, has always been and shall always be open door to Truth; the wise feel sympathy towards all beliefs, while at the same time avoiding speculation upon abstract concepts. Sufism believes in the Divine origin of every form of worship in which the unity of religious ideals is respected.*

Meanwhile, in his book "Kim," Rudyard Kipling was content to refer to a Sufi as "a free-thinker" (167). ...Simplistic, or insightful?

Almost all scholars today accept the concepts of divine origin and tolerance in Sufism. But Hidayat Inayat-Khan has given the meaning of Sufism simply as *wisdom*, and along with Kipling's *free-thinker*, they seem to be incomplete terms compared with the basic doctrine that follows. In his article "Sufi Path," the definition of Sufism (*Tasavof*) is given thus, as a much more rigorous characterization:

*Tasavof is the journey of the soul in search of the Truth, as well as its arrival. This is the renunciation of everything but God. It is paying complete attention and having a heart-felt connection to Him. It is infinite resignation to the point that one sees nothing but God with the vision of the heart, to the point that all other beings are seen as mere shadows of the Divine, until the state is reached in which "There is no being but God," and "There is nothing but Him(HU)".*

### 3. Bulleh Shah(1650-1758)And His Philosophy

Considered by many to be the greatest mystic poet of the Punjab, Bulleh Shah's compositions have been regarded as the pinnacle of Sufi literature. His admirers compare his writings and philosophy to the works of Rumi and Shams-i-Tabriz.

Bulleh Shah's compositions reflected his rejection of orthodox hold of mullahs over Islam, the nexus between the clergy and the rulers and all the trappings of formal religion that created a gulf between man and his Creator. A common theme of his poetry is the pursuit of *self-knowledge that is essential for the mystical union with the Beloved*. In his compositions we can find numerous references to Islamic thought and mystic literature. Thenceforth, the more he attained mystic realization, the more his erudition and learning acquired a novel phenomenon. But Bulleh Shah had to pass through a hard struggle before he could attain the inner knowledge. This attainment was possible only through his contact with his *Murshid* or Spiritual Guide, Inayat Shah. The study of scriptures and other holy books had only aroused his interest and curiosity about spiritual realization. His longing for union with the Lord reached its consummation only after he became a disciple of a perfect Spiritual Guide in the person of Shah Inayat Qadiri.

Thus, it was his contact with Shah Inayat Qadiri that enabled Bulleh to realize his deep-felt wish to *transcend earthly passion*, including that which he felt for his Spiritual Guide, and attain the divine love he sought of the lord.

Because of his pure life and high spiritual attainments, he is equally popular among all communities. Scholars and dervishes have called him 'The Sheikh of Both the Worlds,' 'The man of God,' 'The Knower of Spiritual Grace' and by other equally edifying titles.

(Puri and Shangari, *The Life of Bulleh Shah*)

Sufism had been established in the Muslim world centuries before Bulleh Shah, and this tradition is still a part of the modern day Muslim world. Though Bulleh Shah's ideas were not alien, his rather unconventional and courageous verses was not something easily acceptable for the so-called norms of fundamental society. For example, during his time with his spiritual guide Shah Inayat Qadiri, he used the feminine metaphor to voice his thoughts; and he dressed like a woman and whirled like a common dancing girl of the street though he was from a highly esteemed and respected background

(Puri and Shangari, *The Life of Bulleh Shah*)

It can be said that Bulleh Shah, at a point, turned rather eccentric in his behaviour (and some around him even called him crazy), as he tried to define the love he felt for both his spiritual guide and for his deity. The following lines (Granger) are taken from Bulleh's homage to the love and passion he felt toward both his guide and God:

*Your love has made me dance all over;  
 Falling in love with you was supping a cup of poison.  
 Come, my healer; it's my final hour.  
 Your love has made me dance all over.  
 And  
 Leaving my parents, I am tied to you.  
 Oh, Shah Inayat, my beloved guru.*

His message through much of his poetry matches his *broad perspective of universality that is much deeper than the mere appraisal of natural beauty*—it has deep roots that reach down to the human soul and human heart. *This concept is larger than life: divinity to universality and then to spirituality, all are interconnected, and cannot be separated.* This is characterized by the phrase “Ana ul Haq” — “I am divine.” (Uttering such a phrase was considered at the time such a blasphemous expression that when it was uttered by the seer Mansoor Halaj (c. 858 - 922), he was forced to drink poison for his complex spiritual slogan.

Bulleh Shah was a unique voice at that time in the eastern, particularly, in the Muslim world (*and certainly at the present place and time as well*), as he asked the people to destroy the mosque and the temple, since it is in the human heart where God dwells. The concept of ‘self’ is his focal point as he addresses mankind, proclaiming in one of his more famous poems (known as a *kafi*),

*Come to Our Abode:*

*Time and time again you go to temples and mosques,  
 but have you ever entered your own heart?*

This concept of forsaking the established constructs of prayer, and in particular the physical trappings of worship such as mosque, church, and religious books, later caught universal attention, and brought new awareness to people like Malcolm X (1925–1965), also known as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz and others who felt disenfranchised by the majority religion and culture by which they were ruled. One sees that such an awareness or enlightenment often can be contributory to turn many from criminal outcasts to leaders and visionaries.

To regard all as equals, to achieve a humanistic equality is paramount to the path of the human being on earth, which was and remains the heart of Sufism.

*Remove duality and do away with all disputes,  
 The Hindus and Muslims are not other than He.  
 Deem everyone virtuous, there are no thieves.  
 For within everybody He himself resides.  
 How the trickster has put on his mask!  
 (Puri and Shangari, *Bulleh Shah: The Love-Intoxicated Iconoclast*)*

The Sufi seers of Persia such as Hafez, Rumi, and Saadi, whom Emerson so admired, conveyed the same message vigorously, and Bulleh Shah carried forth with this message with the same vigour centuries after.

It is a major tenet of Sufism that the adherents are all-accepting, all-tolerant of every faith and race, in that every human being is to be treated with equal love and respect—Hindu, Jew, Christian—in a universalist view toward one humankind, one God. It is the same *universalist* quality that can be found echoing later in R.W. Emerson's own “conversion” from the strictures of his earlier Calvinist faith, through Unitarianism, and finally arriving at a devotion that transcended the limits of the parochialism of his present-day Christianity, to embrace all people of all faiths, of all humankind, removing dualities.

#### **4. Thematic Essence of Sufism and Transcendentalism**

*(Adopting, Adapting, Empowering)*

The Reverend Jone Johnson Lewis, in her piece *What is Transcendentalism?*, writes of transcendentalism this way:

*One way to look at the Transcendentalists is to see them as a generation of well-educated people who lived in the decades before the American Civil War and the national division that it both reflected and helped to create.*

It needs to be kept in mind that it was a time of moulding of a national identity out of its European roots. The academia and scholarship, the sensibilities and cultural trappings of the Old World were quickly becoming encumbrances, especially for the so-called academic elite of the north eastern America.

Lewis goes on to write, “These people, mostly New Englanders... were attempting to create a uniquely American body of literature. It was already decades since the Americans had won independence from England. Now, these people believed, it was time for literary independence.” With the questions being asked then in European countries of old assumptions of religion and beliefs, we can see them “as a generation of people struggling to define spirituality and religion in a way that took into account the new understandings their age made available,” especially in light of the rise of evangelical Christianity and Unitarianism. Emerson, in particular, was drawn to religious thought and the scriptures of non-Western cultures—Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism, for example—using such sources by which to examine his own ideas of God and truth. Emerson found much in them to direct his understanding of truth as something more widespread, close to a universal truth.

Emerson, his famous oration delivered to the Phi Beta Kappa Society in Cambridge, Massachusetts at the end of the summer of 1837 (and published as “The American Scholar” ) concludes with a manifesto of Transcendentalism:

*We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds. A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men.*

While its tangible essence is that of a movement grounded in literature, one can say that its truer landscape is comprised of a way of *seeing mankind as an inextricable part of the natural world*. The ideals of transcendentalism have been manifested in the writings of its adherents and proponents, and continue to this day to be seen in what is termed ‘nature writing’ and the environmental movement.

Yet our ability to express our profound link with nature is limited by the language we require in order to articulate this connection in any spiritual sense; as Emerson sought to express such a bond with nature he relied on its symbolism to make the human-nature connection. Let us then look briefly at how Emerson's own sense of semiotics were reflected in his view of nature:

*...this origin of all words that convey a spiritual import,—so conspicuous a fact in the history of language,—is our least debt to nature. It is not words only that are emblematic; it is things which are emblematic. Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture. An enraged man is a lion, a cunning man is a fox, a firm man is a rock, a learned man is a torch. A lamb is innocence; a snake is subtle spite; flowers express to us the delicate affections. Light and darkness are our familiar expression for knowledge and ignorance; and heat for love. Visible distance behind and before us, is respectively our image of memory and hope ( Nature, 9).*

In fact, we can observe in the above a remarkable illustration of his progression of thought from natural fact through a recognition of the mind's own incompleteness—the inability to characterize a symbolic essence through language. With his essential axiom that “*every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact*,” let us consider the *tripartite* of this dynamic structure of his thought:

- 1) the inchoate essence of the natural fact—the stimulus, exists;
- 2) the mind, seeing this fact as a symbolic manifestation, gives it a meaning;
- 3) the mind recognizes the symbolism as something spiritual (transcendent of the object's merely physical and unobserved presence in nature), and as such, the symbolism falls short of its tangibility.

As the mind seeks out a sense of the spiritual in the symbol, with language it tries to seize and then convey its essence. But of course it cannot—we cannot—as language itself falls short of such an endeavour. Perhaps then it is the inadequacy of our language rather than any shortcomings in the mind's perception and apparatus of thought. This is something that Emerson was acutely aware of, and a problem that absorbed much of his writing, especially in his work *Nature*.

Returning to Bulleh Shah's poem *Come to Our Abode*, the reader may notice several references to the author's regard for the conventional religion of his day. On the one hand, at the time Bulleh penned these works, Islam had become a fundamental part of everyday life in the Punjab. The influence of religious doctrine was an important element of the political and social structure of life in the Punjab region of Pakistan. Indeed, to speak out against the so-called system was tantamount to blasphemy, or at the very least, it was seen as a rejection of one's own society. Yet it was Bulleh's perspective as a Sufi that guided him away from the formalist religio-political establishment, and toward a more open-minded, humanistic, yet deeply spiritual view of God in one's own life.

Thus, his point of view was a very personal one, rather than societal.

As evident in *Come to Our Abode*, Bulleh Shah makes reference time and again to the rejection of the trappings of religion—the sacred texts, the mosque, the religious hierarchy that governed the lives of Muslims—and calls on all people to instead embrace what God can mean to their own lives, as they may see Him for themselves.

### **Come to Our Abode**

( *Sade Veray Aaya Karoo* )

*If God could be found by the clean and well washed  
then frogs and fish could find God  
If God could be found by roaming in the forests  
then cows and fowls and animals could find God  
Oh dear Bulleh, God is only found by those who are of good heart.  
While reading thousands of books,  
you haven't even read your self,  
Time and time again you go to temples and mosques,  
but have you ever entered your own heart?  
Oh Mankind, you fight with Satan in vain  
but you have never fought with your own demons and desires  
Says Saint Bulleh Shah, you try to reach the sky  
but you could not capture the One who dwells in your own heart.  
Come to our abode,  
Oh Beloved, in the morning and in the evening  
Come to our abode,  
Friend, in the morning and in the evening  
Come to our abode,  
Guide, in the morning and in the evening.  
By God,  
his God would not be angry with him  
the one who has the skill to reconcile with his beloved  
He does not need to go to Makkah, who can experience pilgrimage just at  
the sight of his beloved  
Seek in the forest, seek on the island  
Destroy the mosque, Destroy the temple  
Destroy anything that you can destroy  
But never break the human heart  
As God dwells in hearts, therein  
While seeking in forests and among islands,  
Seek in all the world  
Do not torment me, Beloved  
Oh Beloved come to our abode in the morning and in the evening.*

(Translated from the Punjabi by S. Bano)

One can observe Bulleh's rejection of the established, and as to him; the suffocating, religious didacticism of his day, and see his desire to embrace the individual heart as tantamount to the veritable house of God. All else is equal and worthy within the walls of the abode, the dwelling place—the heart. We may then look at these verses selected from Emerson's poem *Brahma*, wherein we may glimpse imagery and sentiment that bear resemblance to Bulleh's own.

*Far or forgot to me is near;  
Shadow and sunlight are the same;  
The vanished gods to me appear;  
And one to me are shame and fame.  
They reckon ill who leave me out;  
When me they fly, I am the wings;  
I am the doubter and the doubt,  
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.  
The strong gods pine for my abode,  
And pine in vain the sacred Seven;  
But thou, meek lover of the good!  
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven.*

The metaphors of transcendence and reference to nature are not lost here. Nor is the path from Bulleh's problem-to-solution very distant from that followed by Emerson, Thoreau, and other Transcendentalists of the American 19th century. *The dogma of religion that suffused both Bulleh's time and Emerson's—be it Islam, Calvinism, Unitarianism—was to be cast off by those so encumbered, and then, it is the setting of nature that provides the domain for belief.* Bulleh to his “mango grove and orchard of dates” (Puri and Shangari, *The Life of Bulleh Shah*), Emerson to his New England woods. Thoreau, of course, to his Walden Pond and his bean garden. Emerson writes in his essay *Nature*, “To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society”. It shows a clear break with the past idea of the cloistered academic or even religious fervent, isolated in his study or cell. Emerson urged those who would seek spirituality and learning to step outside, thereby stepping into the realm of nature. Walt Whitman exhorted the classroom-bound to ‘rise up and glide out’ in his poem “When I Heard the Learn’ d Astronomer,” which is found in his collection *Leaves of Grass*. The poet is sitting in a lecture hall surrounded by sundry charts, tables, numbers, as the lecturer seeks to convey the essence of the stars. After which Whitman writes,

*How soon, unaccountable, I became tired and sick;  
Till rising and gliding out, I wander’d off by myself,  
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,  
Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.*

Indeed, it is precisely what Henry David Thoreau had done when he quit village life and society in Concord to spend his 14 months in a cabin alone by Walden Pond, thinking, writing, studying the birds, flowers and trees, and of course, growing his beans.

In his essay on Persian Poetry, which appeared at the end of E. Fitzgerald's translation of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám and Salámán and Absál*, Emerson mentions “The seven masters of the Persian Parnassus—Firdousi, Enweri, Nisami, Dschelaleddin, Saadi, Hafiz, and Dschami” (*Selected Essays*, 105). He refers to or quotes from works of these revered names in this essay, as well as in his own poetry published elsewhere. (Note: One wonders if the fatalism of Omar Khayyám's *rubaiyat* might have appealed to Emerson's own understanding of Calvinism, in the sense of his own retained Puritan ethic.)

According to Richardson in his “Emerson—The Mind on Fire,” his first encounter with non-Western (i.e. non-Christian) religious ideas was a book entitled *Akhlaq-i-Jalaly* (translated as *Philosophy of the Muhammedan People*), published in 1839. It was Emerson's first encounter with Sufism, which its translator W.F. Thompson called the “practical pantheism of Asia.” Thompson stated further that the book should actually be translated as *Transcendental Ethics*, “holding all visible and conceivable objects to be portions of the divine nature” (406).

Emerson also owned the publication *The Desatir: or Sacred Writings of the Ancient Persian Prophets*. These and other writings enabled Emerson to consolidate his understanding of the various ‘parts’ of Sufi poetry and thought into a holistic structure (Richardson, 407).

It was an all-encompassing ‘system’ that gave Emerson the wide view of mankind he was seeking. Iranian scholar Farhang Jahanpour recently wrote of Emerson's intellectual journey in his essay *Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Sufis: From Puritanism to Transcendentalism*: “The study of his religious thought charts the journey from a narrow and dogmatic religious outlook towards a mystical, universal outlook (2).”

As was his point, Dr. Jahanpour might very well have written the above with Bulleh and other Sufi poets in mind, as well as Emerson.

And of course, Henry David Thoreau, the so-called godfather of present-day nature writing as well as of the environmental movement, travelled a similar line, from his own doubts of the religious sentiment of the day, through to his own consideration of humankind's place in nature and, thus, with God. Nature as God's dwelling place, humanity as an equal part of the grand universal abode: *"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 (in Walden, "Solitude", 60)."*

Thoreau's high regard for the spirit of nature is seen in his deep understanding of all its contiguous parts. Nathaniel Hawthorne was particularly taken with Thoreau's insight. The following is an excerpt from Hawthorne's journal:

*September 1, 1842. Mr. Thoreau dined with us yesterday... He is a keen and delicate observer of nature--a genuine observer--which, I suspect, is almost as rare a character as even an original poet; and Nature, in return for his love, seems to adopt him as her especial child, and shows him secrets which few others are allowed to witness. He is familiar with beast, fish, fowl, and reptile, and has strange stories to tell of adventures, and friendly passages with these lower brethren of mortality. Herb and flower, likewise, wherever they grow, whether in garden or wildwood, are his familiar friends.*

The following is taken from Thoreau's seminal work *Walden*, which reflects his time in his cabin at Walden Pond, when he devoted himself to living "... deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach" (42). Here, he describes what it means to tend his beans, which one senses is for him a near-religious devotion to nature herself:

*We might try our lives by a thousand simple tests; as, for instance, that the same sun which ripens my beans illumines at once a system of earths like ours. If I had remembered this it would have prevented some mistakes. This was not the light in which I hoed them. The stars are the Transcendentalist Tradition apexes of what wonderful triangles! What distant and different beings in the various mansions of the universe are contemplating the same one at the same moment! Nature and human life are as various as our several constitutions (6).*

He mentions 'beans' 35 times in *Walden*, as if the subject itself were a spiritual link with nature and an understanding of how humankind can coexist as her equal partner.

In fact, reference to this same so-consecrated legume is made with regard to Bulleh's life. While society in general has not looked upon farming as an intellectual pursuit, still, tilling and cultivating the land for one's sustenance is held in high regard by both Thoreau and Bulleh's master, Inayat Shah. Puri and Shangari write of the nonconformity of a religious disciple and master in engaging in such a vocation, and the severe effect it had on society. "For a distinguished scholar [Bulleh Shah], who belonged to the line of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), to accept an ordinary vegetable grower as his master was a very extraordinary event in the social conditions of Bulleh Shah's times. It was like an explosion which shook the prevailing social structure" (Puri and Shangari, *The Life of Bulleh Shah*).

## 5. Transcendentalists And Sufis On Nature and Metaphysics

There is little evidence that Bulleh Shah or other Sufis had any special recognition of 'nature' as we see it, *per se*, as something apart from the trappings of civilization, but of course it was certainly a spiritual entity for the Transcendentalists. That tradition of regarding nature in a sacred sense is carried today by such contemporary authors as Gary Snyder (*Turtle Island*, among other works), Mary Oliver (*Thirst: Poems*), Terry Tempest Williams (*Finding Beauty in a Broken World, Illuminated Desert and The Open Space of Democracy*), Rebecca Solnit (*One Nation Under Elvis: An Environmentalism For Us All*), Ed Abbey (*Desert Solitaire*), Jack Kerouac (*On the Road and Dharma Bums*), and Linda Hogan (*Dwelling: A Spiritual History of the Living World*). It has become an integral part of academia; for example, Rebecca Chamberlain teaches a course at Evergreen State College (Washington), called *TRANSCENDENTAL VISIONS: Re-Imagining The American Dream*. She offers two quotes on the course website that are pertinent here:



*In Wilderness is the preservation of the world...*

--Henry David Thoreau, "Walking"

*We are taught by great actions that the universe is the property of every individual in it. –*

*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

The spirit of transcendentalism might even be called a kind of cultural personality trait in the American collective conscience, having manifested itself throughout the 20th century in politics and social revolution (non-violent civil disobedience, transformational activism concerning human rights and minority enfranchisement, the hippie movement, environmentalism and anti-pollution lobbying, and the consumer rights movement spearheaded by Ralph Nader).

In Chapter Two of Emerson's essay *Nature* called "Commodity," he writes:

Under the general name of Commodity, I rank all those advantages which our senses owe to nature. This, of course, is a benefit which is temporary and mediate, not ultimate, like its service to the soul.

The taking from nature to extract, to form, to mould, to create, to manufacture, he says, is "the only use of nature which all men apprehend."

Of course, Emerson and his peers saw 'giving back to nature' not as we do today—recycling and conserving in such a rhythm as to endeavour to at best match our material appropriations, in some kind of physical balance with what we take from nature's abundance. Rather, they saw their 'returns' to nature as recognition of the deeply spiritual sense of their natural environment, to see nature's attributes as gifts to humankind. And so he presents us with his concept that what we extract will (must) be returned to nature in the form of veneration, to be revived as our own spirit and enterprise needs us to do, in holding nature's gifts in reverence. *For to return what we have wrought from the earth back unto it*, for Emerson and his descendents of the more ecological environmentalists, is an act of the highest moral virtue of humankind.

What angels invented these splendid ornaments, these rich conveniences, this ocean of air above, this ocean of water beneath, this firmament of earth between? this zodiac of lights, this tent of dropping clouds, this striped coat of climates, this fourfold year? Beasts, fire, water, stones, and corn serve him. The field is at once his floor, his work-yard, his play-ground, his garden, and his bed.

One finds the same desire *to return what we have wrought from the earth back unto it* and the same ecological environmentalism in Bulleh Shah when he writes of the inexorable link between life, death and the earth itself:

*The soil is in ferment, O friend  
Behold the diversity.  
The soil is the horse, so is the rider  
The soil chases the soil, and we hear the clanging of soil  
The soil kills the soil, with weapons of the soil.  
That soil with more on it, is arrogance  
The soil is the garden so is its beauty  
The soil admires the soil in all its wondrous forms  
After the circle of life is done it returns to the soil  
Answer the riddle O Bulleh, and take this burden off my head.*

(Puri and Shangari, *Bulleh Shah: The Love-Intoxicated Iconoclast*)

Of the oceans of air and water, of fields of soil, of 'beasts, fire, water, stones, and corn,' Emerson quotes George Herbert in bringing to mind both the utility of nature and the inference of our own stewardship:

*"More servants wait on man  
than he'll take notice of."*—

(*Nature*, 24)

Such is the way that both Transcendentalists and Sufis represent nature in their own means but for the same end. For Transcendentalists through nature we reach the truth and Divine Soul, whereas, for Sufis nature is the manifestation of the Divine Entity.

## 6. Conclusion

Having delved through the pages of history to conduct a study on the Oriental Sufism and the American Transcendentalism, it can be concluded with certainty that American Transcendentalists were well aware of the torch bearers of Sufi ideology though both were being sown and grown on lands poles apart and environment absolutely alien. The study makes us aware about the common characteristics of these ideologies; as both of them have their springing from the same roots and both of them strive for the same goals and for the same gains. Both of them find truth in nature and through nature. Both of them show disgust in the prevailing and orthodox set of systems whether religious or social. The very interesting point to note is that there is nothing like escapism in both of these ideologies though both take nature as their main source. Both of them believe in the change from within. Both these ideologies seem striving for peace and harmony for progress and prosperity. Both consider recognition of human conscious, reckoning of the individuality, self esteem, self reliance as the pillars on which the castle of overall change stand.

In a nut shell both of them have such sublimely embraceable features that make them look like twin ideologies.

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