A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers: An American Travelogue

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Abstract

Travel-literature, compared to other forms of literature happens to be neglected by literary critics. A systematic study of the famous travelogues will, no doubt, reveal a few patterns, which could be very interesting. Travelogues may be broadly classified into two categories: one, those written by natives and two, those by foreigners. Each of these categories can yield very interesting types of experience and narrative methods. Travelogues written by foreigners are generally known for their depiction of exotic life all the more exaggerated by the wide gap between two cultures. But those written by native writers are generally known for their search for details of human life belonging to the same culture, which is known to the authors at least partially. Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* happens to be a travelogue written by a Native American about his travel in America. Thoreau undertook the journey not by way of merry-making, but with an intention of educating himself, just in line with Francis Bacon's observation that travel is part of education. He made the journey in the autumn of 1839, which actually occupied only ten days, but he compressed it into only seven days by giving it a diary structure. The journey was prompted by Thoreau's intention of escaping from the utilitarianism and materialism of the so-called civilization of America into the soothing company of Nature, thereby achieving some kind of spiritual enlightenment.

Key Words : Photographic description, philosophical observations, moralizing statements, transcendental leaps, poetic outbursts, mystic raptures

Journey, which is at the heart of Thoreau's travelogue, has an archetypal significance and easily brings to our mind similar motifs in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress,* Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and Virginia Wolf's *The Pilgrimage* and so forth. But the main difference between the fictional journey and Thoreau's journey happens to be that the former is basically allegorical or symbolic, whereas the latter is an actual one simultaneously attaining the height pf symbolic one. Although the journey motif is the chief one in a travelogue, it is associated with the allied motifs like the adventurous exploration of the unfamiliar world; willingness to enrich one's experience by exposing oneself to the diversity of things, beings, customs, manners and worldviews and yet perceive the unity behind all the bewildering diversity. Thus the spirit of adventure and philosophical quest for knowledge appear to be the motifs closely associated with that of a journey in a travelogue.

The journey undertaken by Thoreau is not a land-journey or air-journey or even a sea-journey, but a river-journey, which offers him an opportunity of observing a variety of places and people within the restricted scope of the river's meandering course. Thoreau's experiences have neither the unrestricted freedom of land-journey, nor the distance of air-journey, nor the exclusive aquatic surroundings of the sea-journey. On the contrary, he is privileged in his river-journey to observe both the aquatic life and the land-life along the shore.

The journey that takes place in *A Week* may be classified into two kinds: one, physical and two, mental or philosophical or spiritual, which go on alternating in the whole course. Such a pattern is rightly perceived by the American critic, William Drake (64). Thus Thoreau's body and mind go on engaging themselves in adventures alternately thereby giving rest to either of them at a time. In between the two, the heart also is allowed a chance to drink deep into the enchanting beauty of Nature.

The first requirement for a journey happens to be sound physical health with the concomitant spirit of adventure. It also requires an extravort personality, who has the patience and willingness to observe the world around him and absorb the experience sensitively. Thoreau, obviously, has all these qualities in him, which enable him to undertake the physical journey. But being an extraordinary type, he had the qualities of an introvert also with poetic and philosophical tendencies. That is why he could delve deep into his own heart as easily as he could go out into the external world of Nature for spiritual enlightenment. He could observe the details of phenomenal life with almost scientific precision and accuracy; he could moralize and philosophize about its essence and he could also experience the bliss of a poet on observing its bewitching beauty. *A Week* may, therefore, be called an unconventional travelogue, wherein the travel narrative is embellished with a rich embroidery of near-photographic description, philosophical observations, moralizing statements, transcendental leaps, poetic outbursts, mystic raptures and so on.

He begins the journey on the Concord River on a Sunday and reaches the Merrimack River and concludes it on the next Friday. In the physical journey, Thoreau's senses, especially the eye and the ear, are busy absorbing the phenomenal colors and sounds microscopically, photographically and almost scientifically. His observation of men and Nature, the earth and the sky, the strange customs and manners of exotic tribes like Red Indians etc, is remarkable for its details and accuracy. His eyes have captured the multicolored beauty of human and natural life with the sensitiveness of a camera lens. His ears have recorded the variety of sounds, melodies and voices of Man and Nature with superfine sensitiveness. What makes his records almost scientific is the tireless patience with which he collects and classifies the abundant data. The basic American scientific temperament is clearly evident in the record of his variegated experiences.

The names of rivers like Concord and Merrimack, which mean peace and joy, are not only descriptive of their local and etymological importance, but also act as symbols of Thoreau's ideals of life like spiritual peace, harmony and happiness. The boat selected by Thoreau is compared by him to a fish and a bird simultaneously in order to highlight its realistic as well as symbolic significance. "If rightly made, a boat would be a sort of amphibious animal, a creature of two elements, related by one half its structure to some swift and shapely fish and by the other to some strong-winged and graceful bird" (*A Week* 25).

He proceeds with the journey after the local shore-rites are duly performed. In the course of the river journey, Thoreau, like any traveler, goes on observing a variety of objects like various aquatic creatures like fish, snakes, birds, animals, strange and colorful tribal people and enjoying their hospitality. He also hears and learns many

local legends, myths and historical facts thereby enlarging the vista of his experience. The physical journey enables him to observe the minute details of the innumerable peculiarities with almost a scientist's patience, curiosity and sensitivity. But being a poet and a philosopher at heart, he enlivens the otherwise arid details with his poetic response and philosophical observations. The microscopic details of the beautiful objects of Nature like sunrise, sunset, stars, sky, wind, mirror-like water, islands and water-falls show his communion with Nature and invite comparison with the British Nature-mystic Wordsworth. His description of the ethereal beauty of Nature is very enchanting:

> The stillness was intense and almost conscious, as it were a natural Sabbath, and we fancied that the morning was the evening of a celestial day. The air was also so elastic and crystalline that it had the same effect on the landscape that a glass has on a picture, to give it an ideal remoteness and perfection. The landscape was clothed in a mild and quiet light, in which the woods and fences checkered and partitioned it with new regularity, and rough and uneven fields stretched away with lawn like smoothness to the horizon, and the clouds, finely distinct and picturesque, seemed a fit drapery to hang over fairyland. The world seemed decked for some holiday or prouder pageantry, with silken streamers flying…(*A Week* 48).

One of the goals of a traveler is to meet or observe the strange people unexpectedly and have delightful experiences with them. One may have even bitter experiences along with the sweet ones. He should, thus, be ready to have all the unexpected experiences without any grumbling. The net result of all these strange experiences would be to realize the essential humanity of all the people and the universality of all life. The truth of Thoreau's observation that "All nations love the same jests and tales, Jews, Christians and Mohammedans, and the same translated suffice for all. All men are children, and of one family" (*A Week* 60) is intensely realized by him in the course of his journey. When, for example he meets an honest man near Merrimack he likes him for his human interest. "The best relations were at once established between us and this man, and though few words were spoken, he could not conceal a visible interest in us and our excursion. He was a lover of the higher mathematics, as we found, and in the midst of some vast sunny problem when we overtook him and whispered our conjectures" (*A Week* 76). On Tuesday Thoreau enjoys the hospitality of a young woman in her house. "It's mistress," says he, "was a frank and hospitable young woman, who stood before me in a dishabille, busily and unconcernedly combing her long black hair while she talked, giving her head the necessary toss with each sweep of the comb, with lively, sparkling eyes, and full of interest in that lower world from which I had come, talking all the while as familiarly as if she had known me for years, and reminding me of a cousin of mine" (*A Week* 160). Thoreau's experience with the homely and gentle lady may be contrasted with his experience with a man called Rice, who is a rude, ill-mannered and uncultured hunter, who, in spite of all the crudities of his life, extends hospitality to Thoreau in the evening. Thoreau remarks that Rice was "indeed as rude as a fable satyr" (*A Week* 179). His experience with such a rude man is an education for him and a sort of training in the art of patience, tolerance and acceptance of the harsh realities of life. Thoreau is very much aware of this aspect of experience and therefore, says, "But I suffered him to pass for what he was – for why should I quarrel with nature? — and was even pleased at the discovery of such a

singular natural phenomenon. I dealt with him as if to me all manners were indifferent, and he had a sweet, wild way with him. I would not question nature, and I would rather have him as he was than as I would have him. For I had come up here not for sympathy, or kindness, or society, but for novelty and adventure, and to see what nature had produced here" (*A Week* 179).

Thoreau had another interesting experience while he was treading the land like a pilgrim. "Farmers have asked me to assist them in haying when I was passing their fields. A man once applied to me to mend his umbrella, taking me for an umbrella mender, because, being on a journey, I carried an umbrella in my hand while the sun shone. Another wished to buy a tin cup of me, observing that I had one strapped to me belt, and a sauce pan on my back" (*A Week* 263). Such unexpected experiences, no doubt, provide a good deal of humor not only to the traveler i.e. Thoreau, but also to the reader of the travelogue thereby easing the monotony of traveling as well reading respectively. On Thursday, Thoreau happens to see a soldier and comments on his conceited nature:

> Far up in the country – for we would be faithful to our experience – in Thornton, perhaps, we met a soldier lad in the woods, going to muster in full regimentals, and holding the middle of the road; deep in the forest, with shouldered musket and military step, and thoughts of glory all to himself. It was a sore trial to the youth, tougher than many a battle, to get by us creditably and with soldier-like bearing. Poor man. He actually shivered like a reed in his military pants, and by the time we got up with him, all the sternness that became the soldier had forsaken his face, and he skulked past as if he were driving his father's sheep under a sword-proof helmet" (*A Week* 269).

Such experiences hold mirror to Thoreau's sensitive and photographic observation and subtle understanding of human nature. His coming in contact with a variety of people has, obviously, widened the range of his experience and deepened the nature of his thinking. It has also helped him to go beyond the apparent contradictions of human life by synthesizing them into a unified vision in a very broad sense. The physical journey has offered sufficient exercise for his body and given him a new vigor.

The physical journey, in turn, awakens his intelligence and imagination. Consequently his mind soars high in the sky of imagination and travels faster than his physical being both vertically and horizontally, both in time and in space. The physical journey is, no doubt, interesting in its own right, but it also serves to trigger off the mental journey inspiring Thoreau to penetrate into the world of art, literature, philosophy and religion of the whole world including both the Occidental and the Oriental. The physical journey stimulates his mind and imagination to such an extent that he seems to forget the immediate surroundings of his place and be immersed in a sort of contemplation through the exercise of his memory and the principle of association of ideas. Nikita Pokrovsky rightly remarks, "*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* was infused with Transcendentalist conception of man" (50). Whereas his body, in the physical journey, is confined to a limited place on the surface of the river, his mind, in the psychic journey, can traverse vast stretches of time and place; jump from country to country, from continent to continent and synthesize all of

them into a unified eclectic vision of life. Whereas the physical journey acquaints him with a variety of phenomenal existence, the mental journey enables him to distil the essence of his experience into poetic and philosophical observations.

Thoreau's realization of the transcendental unity of life has enabled him to view the entire humanity with equal importance and respect. For him there is no qualitative difference between ordinary men and great writers:

> You shall see rude and sturdy, experienced and wise men, keeping their castles, or teaming up their summer's wood, or chopping alone in the woods; men fuller of talk and rare adventure in the sun and wind and rain than a chestnut it of meat, who were not only in'75 and 1812, but have been out every day of their lives; greater men than Homer, or Chaucer, or Shakespeare, only they never got time to say so; they never took to the way of writing (*A Week* 19).

Thoreau's recognition of the great potentiality of all men and the basic dignity of human life easily makes him a champion of the ordinary man. His view is comparable to Mahatma Gandhi's respect for villagers, the downtrodden and the Harijans, whom he considered to be the children of God. Though there is a difference between the cultural contexts of the two writers, their philosophies have a striking resemblance.

Thoreau has great respect for all the great and classical works of literature of the whole world. In spite of being a Westerner, especially an American, he has the open-heartedness to appreciate and enjoy the great literature produced all over the world. The Hindu works like *Hitopadesa*, the *Laws of Manu*, the *Visnu Purana*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the plays of Kalidasa, the Greek classics like the *Iliad* and the *Odessey*, the Persian work like Sadi's *Gulistan*, the Chinese philosophical works like the *Analects* of Confucius and the Christian works like the *Bible*, the poetry of Chaucer and the plays of Shakespeare happen to be the milestones of his literary and mental journey. His sensitive and appreciative mind travels back and forth in time from ancient days to the modern times and in space from the European continent to the Asian continent without any prejudice, but with a yogic impartiality and enthusiasm. Whatever he is unable to achieve in his physical journey he achieves in his mental journey. He has a special respect for mythical and legendary literature, as he rightly believes that, "To some extent mythology is only the most ancient history and biography. So far from being false or fabulous in the common sense, it contains only enduring and essential truth, the I and you, the here and there, the now and then, being omitted" (*A Week* 60). As the myths of the world are conveyors of superhuman intelligence, dreams and unconscious thoughts of mankind, Thoreau takes them very seriously and consequently acquaints himself with the Greek, Christian and Hindu mythology and appreciates the symbolic truths embedded in them.

A deep interest in all the major religions of the world known to him at that time happens to be part of his psychic journey that assumes an international width. A man with a serious temperament, Thoreau had no respect for cheap literature that either excites or titillates us. On the contrary, he believes in serious and morally educative literature, especially all the scriptures of the world. He, therefore, pleads for the publication all the scriptures of the world in a single volume. "It would be worthy of the age to print together the collected scriptures or sacred writings of the several nations

– the Chinese, the Hindus, the Persians, the Hebrews and others as the Scripture of mankind" (*A Week* 127). This suggestion holds mirror to the height of Thoreau's ideal, nobility of thought and wholeness of vision. Psychologically he would travel through the exotic realms of many religions and perceive the transcendental unity behind their apparent diversity and contradictions. He could, therefore, appreciate not only Christianity but also other religions of the world including Hinduism. He could read the *Bible* and the *Bhagavad Gita* with equal love and appreciation as he saw the religious universals in them. His liberal attitude to life enables him to have a comparative picture of the world religions and even appreciate the positive features of religions not belonging to his culture. His appreciation of the Oriental, especially Hindu religion and philosophy, in spite of an element of a little exaggeration in it, is symptomatic of his magnanimity of heart. "In everyone's youthful dreams, philosophy is still vaguely but inseparably, and with singular truth, associated with the East, nor do after years discover its local habitation in the Western world. In comparison with the philosophies of the East, we may say that modern Europe has yet given birth to none. Beside the vast and cosmogonal philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita*, even our Shakespeare seems youthfully green and practical merely" (*A Week* 127). Such views held by Thoreau are evidence of his yogic impartiality and appreciation of Truth, Beauty and Goodness irrespective of local habitations and names.

The journey –both physical and mental – embraces not only the present but also the past. In other words, all the experiences described by Thoreau are not the ones happening to him during the physical journey itself, but some of them are recalled from the past through the exercise of memory according to the principle of association of ideas. Thus the present and the past are linked together meaningfully. Most of his mental journey might be said to depend upon his recollection of knowledge earned and assimilated in the past. His physical journey is confined to the Concord and Merrimack Rivers of America, whereas his mental journey covers the vast space of the entire globe and the long stretch of time from the known past to the present. His mind jumps from topic to topic in a random but a reflective manner. "…the leisurely and discursive suggests the very spirit of Concord River, which for Thoreau and Emerson alike served as a symbol of the invisible stream that bears life on" (Spiller 1972: 403).

The result of Thoreau's journey – both physical and psychic; both empirical and symbolic – is the enrichment of his experience and simultaneous extension and intensification of his vision of human life. The journey has enabled him to observe the phenomenal variety, abundance and contradictions of human and natural life. In-between the observations it has also given him an opportunity to meditate deeply upon life. In the midst of the American countryside, he has drunk deep into the mysterious beauty of Nature and derived a good deal of spiritual consolation. "It is important that self-exploration for Thoreau is metaphorically identified with exploration of the natural world; it is not a dualism, which he expresses, but an integration" (Drake 63). Like the forest philosophers of India, he is armed with a new vision of life enabling him to perceive the unity of life and experience a sort of God-realization. Thoreau seems to have realized what he says about a saintly man, "To the virtuous man, the universe is the only *sanctum sanctorum*, and the penetralia of the temple are the broad noon of his existence" (*A Week* 267). He seems to have realized

the essential holiness of human and natural life, which is borne out by his ecstatic expression in language. It is the holiness of his vision, which raises the journey from the secular level to the religious one. The journey, therefore, assumes the significance of a pilgrimage. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* may rightly be described as an American Pilgrim's Progress, which shows the pilgrim's final attainment of spiritual salvation. However, one difference should be noted. Thoreau, unlike the Christian pilgrim, does not go to Heaven physically, but like a Hindu yogi, returns to the business of life after achieving spiritual liberation. His pilgrimage has helped him to realize the ideals of joy, peace and harmony of life symbolized by the Rivers of Concord and Merrimack. Thoreau's return to the shore from which he had started off the journey seven days ago easily brings to our mind the principle of circularity of life connoting not only the rhythmic principle of music in Nature and human life but also the attainment of wholeness of being suggested by the circle.

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