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DIALOGUING SOCIAL RESPONSES: A CRITICAL STUDY OF THOREAU'S *CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE*

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Abstract:

David Thoreau, an American transcendentalist poet, essayist and philosopher made a significant attempt to transform lives and social behaviour through his literary contributions. Known for *Walden*, a chief exemplar of transcendentalist text, and essays like *Resistance to Civil Government*, Thoreau's abhorrence against slavery and Mexican-American War is a remarkable footfall towards universal human values. Similar to the ideas of Gandhi's 'Civil Disobedience' which talks about non-violent protests against unlawfulness, Thoreau's text *Civil Disobedience* makes a leading effort to give directions and define lives. This research paper is a study of aspects of individualism, subjective growth, perspectivism and social progression presented through the critical study of Thoreau's essay *Civil Disobedience*. Defined by the motto "That government is best which governs least", the essay clarifies the importance of rising against all dominant forces that curtails human nature. This research paper would ameliorate further discussions on the factual values of literary texts in mending fundamental knowledge and social transitions.

Keywords: Transcendentalist, Transform, Slavery, Individualism, Disobedience, etc.

All art forms communicate the fundamentals of living in unique ways. Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was a renowned writer known for works presenting the importance of nature and necessity of social institutions receptive towards the citizens. Highly influenced by the chief transcendentalist writer Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau's ideologies were of high regards that talked about the important means of living in a society that considers its citizens with high regards. His writings developed a social insight among the Americans and are still considered crucial in creating a just and harmonious society. Thoreau's experience in jail while protesting against the social injustices and unjust war consequences is a masterpiece that takes its form in his critical essay *Resistance to Civil Government* or *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* or simply as *Civil Disobedience*.

The essay emphasized the importance of individuality and self-reliance. Written in a short and concise manner it is impeded with meanings that clarified stands taken by citizens during social crisis. Being autobiographical in nature, Thoreau himself practiced civil disobedience in his life by refusing to pay taxes while protesting against the Mexican War, finally ending up in prison for a night. He was a stern social activist as well opposing the practice of slavery or any other dehumanizing activities. His stay in jail while protesting infused in him the responsibility to create consciousness among citizens through literary writings the result of which is the critical prose *Civil Disobedience*. The first draft of the text was presented orally at the Concord Lyceum in the year 1848 followed by its publication after a year in 1849 with the title *Resistance to Civil Government*.



The paper argues importance of identifying social issues and making responsible citizens who can attempt to distinguish progressive intentions against repressive measures governing the society. The paper highlights:

- Importance of a responsible government for individual and general growth
- Writers as motivators of change through literary tracts
- Practical solutions and changes through civil disobedience practices
- Writing as an important form of social protest
- Autobiographical expositions and standing against the battered ones

The research paper is a critical in-detailed analysis of an essay that talks about social institutions and human values. It is a descriptive literary analysis of a theoretical work with autobiographical elements imbibed in it. A comparative analysis of the civil disobedience movement by other prominent social activists and thinkers like Gandhiji and King Jr. helped in the understanding of the text through varied lenses and perceptions. Knowledge of the Dalit literature, Subaltern and Race discourses, Black or African-American literature and Cultural Studies assisted in understanding the social scenarios. Coming across the recent e-resources, journals and literary materials available as library data on the primary and secondary materials are collected to understand the topic adequately.

The topic of *Civil Disobedience* is identified with Mahatma Gandhi who discussed the importance of nonviolent resistance to take charge against the British domination. The Salt March or Dandi March is an exemplar of the colonial India nonviolent civil disobedience movement when Mahatma Gandhi left the Sabarmati Ashram at Ahmedabad on foot along with 78 followers on 12th of March 1930 resulting in the defying of salt law, land taxes and other unpopular taxes. Even though, 'civil disobedience movement' came to be known as any method of refusal of the citizens to obey certain commands of the government that hampers the growth and development of citizens. In short, these are methods of nonviolent protests and resistance.

Similar to Gandhi's ideologies, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., one of the most renowned leaders of the Civil Rights Movement very ideally remarked that practitioners of Civil Disobedience movement takes part in protests consciously with the thought that they might face lynching or end up in prison to bring a change in the society. Martin Luther King Jr. inspired by Gandhi's idea of peaceful resistance took up the method as a leader of Civil Rights movement against the oppressive laws towards the black people in the 1950s' American society with its first instance on December 1, 1955 with The Montgomery Bus Boycott. He further argued to say that civil disobedience is not lawlessness but higher form of lawfulness to bring positive changes and social conformity.

Similar to Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.'s ideologies; the literary piece, *Civil Disobedience* by the American writer Henry David Thoreau is a nonviolent method of criticism towards governmental policies and practices. The essay is a fervent protest against the American intolerance, slavery and futility of war. First published in 1849 it presents the idea of anti-slavery sentiments and the criticism towards the government for upholding unlawful behaviour.

The major issues distressing the American psyche at the time was slavery and the Mexican American War. United States declared war against Mexico in 1846, leading to the Mexican-American War that idealists like Thoreau and others saw as an act of oppression and methods to deviate from real times crisis. With the introduction of laws like Fugitive Slaw Law the situations became crucial and various forms of protests talking about government policies became very influential. Thoreau is optimistic with the thought that there will be government which will not govern at all but will represent the people as a sincere representative. He wishes the government to be citizen friendly and



stand to educate its people, maintain a dignified status of the country and settle the internal affairs. Under a positive involvement of the government the citizens can improve their life significantly. He remarks on the restrictions of trade and commerce imposed by the government as well. He demanded for a removal of a dictatorship form of the government with a highly supporting government representing the wills of the citizens sincerely.

He therefore asks the citizens to identify the important of the hour and stand for what is right. He gives the example of the soldiers to say that the soldiers are merely puppets acting at the direction of the government and have no will of their own or else they will be held with charges of treason. The enslavement of the people and the attacks and bloody war presents the real side of the scenario which Thoreau highly criticizes in the essay. Thoreau incites the countrymen to take some action and bring in changes rather than simply become the passive thinkers. The first step toward opposition to slavery and war can be stopping to pay taxes as a means of protest irrespective of the horrendous consequences.

Being autobiographical in nature, Thoreau introduces the idea of right to revolution to attain a progressive nation. Throughout the essay he talks about the role of individual and the importance to maintain a life of individual freedom. He articulates that individual has every right to decide on a government that does not exist for its people.

Highly moved by the injustices of his time, Thoreau through the essay "Civil Disobedience" presents a highly critical view of the functions of the Government and the role played by individuals to defy all kinds of despotism. It talks about the power of individual and importance of freedom and general goodness and growth. Introduction of friendly laws and not imposing anything to the citizens are importance means of respecting independence in the society. The paper talks about the roles citizens can play to bring in positive growth and a higher social structure. It talks about a system of governing respecting the needs and wants of citizens by developing a mutual understanding of love and admiration for each other.

This research work would further ameliorate study of literary texts through distinct angles and try to bring forth innovate ways to resolve socio-political issues existing in the state scenario. It is an effort to bring higher balance in society through ideas presented in such classical writings that contemplates through newer and advanced methodologies that can be applicable at all times.

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