

Sufi Poets as Ideal Poets in the American Transcendentalist Imagination

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Abstract— *This research paper examines the philosophical and aesthetic ideas of the Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller regarding the criterion of an ideal poet. The paper tries to demonstrate how the transcendentalist's notion of the ideal poet was greatly impacted by Sufi thought by illustrating a common vision of artistry based upon spiritual freedom, depth of feeling, imaginative capability, and a commitment to free thought and expression. The paper draws heavily from Emerson's and Margaret Fuller's Transcendentalist philosophy to delineate the Transcendentalists' value of freedom of thought and spirit, sincerity, self-sufficiency, and a heightened perception of beauty both in the natural world and in humanity as fundamental traits of an ideal poet. The paper focuses on key components of the idea of the ideal poet and demonstrates how transcendentalists' thoughts parallel Sufi thoughts. It examines key areas such as solitude, the beauty of nature, imagination, free expression, and noble thought.*



Keywords— *Imagination, Poet, Sufi, Solitude, Transcendentalist*

I. INTRODUCTION

During the nineteenth century, the Orient was an influential source of inspiration for Western writers. In America, transcendentalist writers drew on Persian Sufi literature to fuel their creative imagination. In addition, as part of their Transcendentalist beliefs, the idealized Persian poet became an important symbol of creative power around the nineteenth century (Aminrazavi, 217). The American transcendentalists celebrated the imaginative and spiritual qualities that were present within the works of Persian poets and their literary characters, "From the Sufi poets and their characterizations, these American writers fashioned their ideal poet" (Aminrazavi, 213). Evidence of this influence can be seen in both the writings and personal journals of individuals such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller.

II. FINDINGS

The leading transcendentalist Emerson considered Hafiz his ideal poet, "whom he called a 'poet for poets'" (Salami, 7). Emerson emphasizes the point that poets must possess

certain qualities both in personal character (integrity) and in artistic expression, just like Sufi poets. These include freedom of expression, honesty, awareness of beauty in the world, total commitment to one's own creative process, and a willingness to sacrifice. Carpenter in *Emerson and Asia* highlights Emerson's admiration for Sufi poets Hafiz and Saadi as being free thinkers with a great deal of inner freedom, true sincerity, and self-reliance. He states:

to Hafiz and Saadi as ideal poets Emerson ascribed freedom of thought and freedom of spirit, which resulted in their feeling of absolute joy in the world; how they showed him a sincerity and self-reliance, which assured them of the basic value of life; and finally how they possessed for him a perception of beauty in Nature and in Man, which inspired their poetic expression (179).

The Sufi poets Hafiz and Saadi perceived the beauty of nature and man, and this is what is reflected in their poetry. Emerson admired the quality of mental vastness in Sufi poets, their intellectual liberty, and their use of symbols in expressing their love for the divine: "It is the use of wit and the expression of Beauty that gave Sa'di and Hafiz the

assurance of pleasing the Almighty with their poetry” (Aminrazavi, 84).

Margaret Fuller, being Emerson’s disciple, emphasizes similar fundamental characteristics necessary for an individual to embody the philosophy of the ideal poet. In addition to the commonality between both writers regarding freedom of thought and spirit in relation to poetry, both believe that the poet must give complete devotion to their art. Emerson emphasizes that this commitment requires the poet to forgo all earthly pleasures, comforts, and distractions so that they can pursue artistic excellence. Similarly, Fuller states that poets should be prepared to separate themselves from the world, to focus solely upon their art. Both the transcendentalists agree that one characteristic of the ideal poet is their elevated ability to perceive beauty both within humanity and in nature. The ideal poet, for both the transcendentalists, is someone who embodies “dedication and solitude,” a deep “perception of beauty,” “freedom of expression,” and “imagination.”

2.1 Solitude

Aminrazavi compiled an anthology of essays entitled *Sufism and American Literary Masters* that contains references to Emerson’s writings, essays, and journals, which reflect his deep appreciation for the imagery and symbolism employed by the Sufi poets of the East. Emerson wrote in his journal in 1842 that Saadi “celebrates the omnipotence of a virtuous soul” (59). Emerson describes Sufi poet Saadi as an “ideal poet” who has given himself over fully to the creation of poetry; thus, he has devoted all of his time and energy to creating poetry (Aminrazavi 99). Emerson’s admiration for Saadi was so great that he identified himself with Saadi in his autobiographical poem “Saadi,” published in *The Dial* in 1842:

Sa’di appears much oftener as an ideal poet in Emerson’s writings than Hafiz. Probably a reason for this is that Emerson felt himself much more nearly akin to him. Most of the qualities which he ascribes to the Persian might be used to describe Emerson’s own writing (Aminrazavi, 113).

Emerson, in his poem “Saadi,” portrays the poet as someone who prefers to be alone. He writes that Saadi loved mankind, yet he isolated himself not out of dislike for people, but rather because poetry is a solitary occupation. Emerson writes, “Wise Saadi dwells alone. / Yet Saadi loved the race of men” (Emerson, 175). Therefore, Saadi’s isolation was a direct result emanating from his desire to write poetry. Additionally, God has given the poet a gift of musicality in his words, enabling him to sing or recite his poems in a way that no one else can replicate. Emerson asserts that Saadi composed poetry for the love of God. Emerson writes in his journal about Saadi, “Angels

descending with salvers of glory in their hands. On asking one of them for whom those were intended, he answered, “For Shaikh Saadi of Shiraz who has written a stanza of poetry that has met with the approbation of God Almighty” (Bloom, 83).

Emerson reading out his poem “Saadi” to Fuller greatly impacted her, and this influence can be seen in one of her letters, in which she describes her love for solitude in the same way as was described by Emerson for the Sufi poet Saadi. She writes, “I am always most happy to return to my solitude, yet willing to bear the contact of society, with all its low views and rash blame” (Higginson, 66). Fuller describes her experiences as the divine gifts of solitude. She refers to the idea that “some of these saints were able to work in their generation, for they had renounced all!” (Higginson, 183). This sentence is likely a reference to asceticism, which is the practice of renouncing material possessions and physical pleasures to achieve spiritual enlightenment. Fuller suggests that saints are able to achieve remarkable things because they have given up everything else in pursuit of their goals, just as Emerson described Saadi. She further adds:

But all my tendency at present is to the deepest privacy. Where can I hide till I am given to myself ? Yet I love the others more and more, and when they are with me must give them the best from my script (Higginson, 183).

The quotes above from Fuller’s diary, written on July 22, 1842, capture her need to be by herself to discover who she is, while also reflecting her love for other people and her desire to share insights about how to live better and see life more clearly. This sentiment is very much the same feeling attributed to the Sufi poet Saadi.

Margaret Fuller, in her narrative “Magnolia of Lake Pontchartrain,” describes herself as a resurrected magnolia tree that lives a life of isolation, and the smell of her blossoms expresses the beauty of this life. Fuller’s yearning for isolation and guarded privacy is symbolized by the magnolia, which also reveals her newfound determination to focus solely on creativity that is inner-driven. In “Magnolia,” Fuller represents her need for seclusion and guarded privacy, which indicates her newly found commitment to concentrate completely on inwardly motivated creative endeavors (Robinson, 32). Fuller, in *Summer on the Lakes*, writes on solitude: “If loneliness thou canst not bear, / Cannot the dragon’s venom dare, / Of the pure meed thou shouldst despair” (119). She says that if one cannot accept loneliness, they may have to give up the pursuit of rewards. Fuller describes the poet as a whole: “poet must be at the whole expense of the poetry” (Fuller, 27). Being complete in one’s writing, as suggested by

Fuller, means being willing to express one's voice, experiences, and feelings freely. The authenticity of a poet is what makes their poetry rich and meaningful. Therefore, this complete self-expressiveness is fundamental to the creative process of a writer.

2.2 Perception of Nature

Emerson feels that Sufi poets are able to get sustenance from the earth, and they find comfort in nature. These poets recognize beauty in both nature and humanity, which provide them with endless inspiration for their writing. Beauty in nature and humanity is at the center of all Sufi poetry. Emerson saw the Sufi poet Saadi as one of the many poets of nature; his view is clearly expressed in his poem "Saadi": "God only knew how Saadi dined; / Roses he ate, and drank the wind" (Aminrazavi, 111). Fuller, inspired by Emerson's poem "Saadi," echoes these thoughts in *Life Without and Life Within*:

I gave the world the fruit of earlier hours :
O Solitude ! reward me with some flowers ;
Or if their odorous bloom thou dost deny,
Rain down some meteors from the winter sky !
(348)

Emerson asserts that the love of beauty and joy in life are two of the fundamental qualities of Sufi Persian poets, notably Hafiz. Emerson admired Hafiz's peace of mind and his love of beauty: "Hafiz praises wine, roses, maidens, boys, birds, morning and music, to give vent to his immense hilarity and sympathy with every form of beauty and joy; and lays the emphasis on these to make his scorn of sanctimony and base prudence" (Aminrazavi, 122).

Fuller, in *Summer on the Lakes*, suggests that poets should be sensitive to the beauty found in nature: "All river-crafts, sea-crafts, are picturesque, are poetical. Their very slang is poetry" (16). She further adds, "we need only look on the miracle of every day, to sate ourselves with thought and admiration every day" (127). This blending of nature and the poet's inner being is portrayed as necessary to create genuine and profound poetry. Therefore, she clearly states that true poetic inspirations come when a person establishes a strong, emotional link to their surroundings.

2.3 Imagination

Imagination as a source of creative and transformational powers is a key element in both the spiritual aspects of Sufism and the philosophical perspectives of Transcendentalist thought. Both types of poetry see imagination as transcending just visualizing or simply creating images in one's mind. It is viewed by them as having a spiritual and metaphysical quality, allowing for an understanding of what lies beneath the surface of things,

revealing underlying meanings and relationships. The imagination allows the poet to see nature as symbols that represent a larger, often unseen reality. Nature is not limited to physical perception but has a deeper truth that can be accessed through the use of imagination. *Tafakkur* (contemplation) is the means by which the finite minds of individuals can access the infinite, thus demonstrating how the ability of imagination enables people to transcend the limitations of this world. For the Sufis, "Imagination was not merely the power of visualization, somewhere in between sense and reason, as it had been for Aristotle . . . but a creative power by which the mind 'gains insight into reality,' reads nature as a symbol of something behind or within nature" (Aminrazavi, 26).

Transcendentalists also employ Sufis' anagogic method for poetic inspiration, they use their imaginative faculties to transcend ordinary ways of perceiving reality. Thus, they have access to universal truths/meanings that exist beyond the veil of what we see. Similarly, each tradition views poetry as a form of spiritual practice and a means to connect with higher realities. Emerson was familiar with Sufi poetry and spirituality, primarily through his study of Persian and Arabic literature. Emerson wrote on imagination in "Poetry and Imagination" as a form of transcendence and spiritual power. In contrast to simply creating something artistic, imagination allows individuals to access greater truth and reality regarding existence, nature, and the cosmos. The ideas of divine inspiration and accessing spiritual truth via imagination are in line with Sufi poets whose poetry explores the concepts of divine love and ecstatic states as forms of transcendent knowledge. Therefore, Emerson's concept of imagination as a divine, transcendent force is consistent with influence from Sufi mysticism as well as other philosophical/spiritual traditions that he studied during his wide-ranging academic explorations.

Like Emerson, Fuller believed that imagination was an important force linking the individual to a higher, or divine, state. Like Emerson, Fuller also stressed the importance of intuition and self-awareness as key components of the human soul's ability to discern deeper realities. Additionally, Fuller, just like the Sufi poets, saw the imagination as a lens to see the divine and as a way to feel one with all that exists. While Fuller's views on imagination and the divine were likely to be grounded in her Transcendentalist philosophical roots, the overall themes she expressed are consistent with those found within the Sufi mystical tradition.

According to Fuller, a poet is a person with an expanded sense of imagination, sensitivity to beauty, and compassion toward others; as such, they seek to create positive work through their art. In this regard, Fuller describes the poet as

a highly attuned individual with vision and guided by a heart full of compassion. She writes in *Summer on the Lakes*, “Ah! that to some poet, whose lyre had never lost a string, to whom mortality, kinder than is her custom, had vouchsafed a day whose down had been untouched” (74).

Fuller describes the poet as having an ability to view the world from a different perspective; the poet should be a visionary for others. She writes that the poet has the potential to transform how others see the world in *Life Without and Life Within*: “You must reform rather than create a world” (247). Fuller asserts that artists have an obligation to positively affect their community. She suggests that poets should create works of art that provide inspiration, upliftment, and enrichment to all (27). Fuller’s poet as a visionary and empathetic person with profound respect for the aesthetic and a deep love for humanity parallels the Sufi poets, who explore the concept of the unity of all existence. In doing so, the Sufi poets attempt to convey to people that everything in the world is connected and that there exists a deeper spiritual truth behind the physical world. Sufi poets seek to awaken the world around them and share their understanding and emotions through their poetry. Fuller expresses a similar sentiment in *Summer on the Lakes*:

Who sees the meaning of the flower uprooted in the ploughed field? The ploughman who does not look beyond its boundaries and does not raise his eyes from the ground? No--but the poet who sees that field in its relations with the universe, and looks oftener to the sky than on the ground. Only the dreamer shall understand realities, though, in truth, his dreaming must not be out of proportion to his waking! (127).

Fuller makes a point to distinguish between two ways of perceiving the nature of reality - i.e., the narrow perspective of one who experiences only the surface of things (like the ploughman) vs. the wider scope of one who has experienced much in addition to his own world (the poet). Fuller suggests a balance between the imaginative world of dreams and the practical, waking realities of this world. This argument stresses the necessity of a proper harmony between creative imagination and the realities one experiences in the world to truly understand things.

2.4 Freedom of Expression

Emerson’s quality of an ideal poet is one who possesses complete liberty to express themselves fully. Emerson comments in the preface to the American edition of Saadi’s *Gulistan* on how Saadi has the brilliant ability of expression that enables him to be a poet. Emerson admires Hafiz as an example of a “freedom expresser” for his embodiment of the freedom of expression (Aminrazavi, 64). After reading

Hafiz, Emerson exclaimed, “Expression is all we want: not knowledge, but vent: we know enough; but have not leaves and lungs enough for a healthy perspiration and growth. Hafiz has! . . . ‘Keep the body open,’ is the hygiean precept — Large utterance!” (Carpenter, 175).

Like Emerson, Fuller emphasizes that poets should be able to self-express to accurately represent their feelings and thoughts. In many of her works, Fuller stressed that an artist’s ability to uniquely express themselves is a necessity. Her *Summer on the Lakes* expresses the idea that emotional intensity leads to natural expression, especially through the use of verse:

Many verses, good ones, are personal or national merely. Ballads, hymns, love-lyrics, have often no claim differing from those of common prose speech, to the title of poems, except a greater keenness and terseness of expression (155).

Fuller comments that the emotional intensity with which someone expresses themselves, whether through simple forms such as ballads or hymns, has more to do with their authentic experience than with inherent poetic genius. She shares Emerson’s admiration for the Sufi poets’ ability to speak freely, thus implying that the individual’s expression reflects their own unique emotional authenticity. With heightened emotions, individuals naturally express these feelings. Her point is that the emotional honesty of the person expressing themselves matters more than the creativity or complexity of what they express.

2.5 Intellectual Liberty

Emerson considered the Sufi poets an example of absolute intellectual liberation and admired their joyful attitude toward life:

the Persian poets enjoyed “intellectual freedom” that was their joyful attitude toward life. Emerson admires the “sallies of freedom,” “One example of which is the verse of the Persian Hafiz, ‘Tis written on the gate of Heaven, ‘Woe to him who suffers himself to be betrayed by Fate!’ (Aminrazavi, 80).

Similarly, Fuller saw the poet through Emerson’s eyes and portrayed him as someone who was unencumbered by external influences and therefore could create without restriction. She believes one of the things most needed for a poet is their mind to be completely free from all kinds of limitations; they need to have an open, independent mind so they may see beyond ordinary perspectives and reach something greater than themselves. Fuller comments in *Summer on the Lakes* on the lack of true freedom of thought in the West, “there is nothing real in the freedom of thought at the West” (18). Fuller hypothesizes that people in the West spend more time critiquing and evaluating others,

ultimately leading to a disintegration of the fundamental concepts of unconditional love and acceptance. She analyzes that the apparent intellectual freedom experienced by people in the West has nothing to do with actual intellectual freedom and everything to do with outside influences. Fuller in *Life Without and Life Within* advocates for the freedom of artistic and intellectual expression for the poets:

what we expect in the work of the great poet, or the great philosopher — the liberal air of all the zones ; the glow, uniform yet various in tint, which is given to a body by free circulation of the heart's blood from the hour of birth. Here is, undoubtedly, the man of ideas ; but we want the ideal man also — want the heart and genius of human life to interpret it (197).

Fuller suggests that the poet's work should reflect a wide-ranging view that embraces many different ideas and styles. She believes that a person must combine emotional intelligence and sensitivity if he or she wishes to create something that touches people's hearts and spirits.

Thus, the study identifies how Sufi ideas such as asceticism, solitude, anagogic imagination, and intellectual freedom shaped Emerson's views and thus those of Fuller. The study reveals that transcendentalists desired solitude because they sought creative or spiritual development, not because they were antisocial. The study tries to establish Emerson's metaphorical use of Saadi to demonstrate a deep connection to nature and its connection to Fuller's sentiments. Hafiz's sympathy for all forms of beauty and joy supports the idea of a connection to nature. It tries to demonstrate a clear understanding of imagination as a "metaphysical and spiritual force" for Sufis and Romantics alike. Beyond visualizing something, imagination serves as an "anagogic approach" to poetic creation. Emerson's respect for Hafiz as a "freedom expresser" is linked to Fuller's views on poetry emerging naturally from a high emotional state. It tries to demonstrate Emerson's respect for Sufi poets as representing "the free mind," in contrast to Fuller's criticism of what she perceives as a lack of real intellectual liberty in Western society.

III. CONCLUSION

The study illustrates how Emerson transmitted the intellectual legacy of the Sufi poets to other transcendentalists such as Fuller in their shared pursuit of the ideal poet. The involvement of the transcendentalist writers with Persian Sufi literature represents an outstanding example of how deeply Eastern mystical traditions impacted American transcendentalism. Writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller

embraced the spiritual ideals, poetic imagination, and symbolic figures in Persian poetry, allowing them to reimagine Eastern models within the intellectual and cultural environment of New England. Not only did they enrich their literary creativity by adapting Persian mystical thought, but they also expanded the philosophical foundations of transcendentalism to reveal a dynamic exchange between East and West that overcame cultural barriers and created a broader vision of spirituality, creativity, and human potential.

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