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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THOREAU'S CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE: A VOICE OF NON-VIOLENT RESISTANCE TO DISSENT AN UNJUST POLITICAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

This article reviews Henry David Thoreau's social and political philosophy of Civil Disobedience, which rebels against government's brutality and it suggests fighting against tyranny to get freedom, breaking with conventional customs, rejecting the social traditions and values and unjust law and policies affecting the democrats. This study also reviews some of the writings of political situations which display the political meanings and aspirations. The purpose of the article is to explore the power and importance of individual over groups, especially government through Thoreau's Civil Disobedience. In addition, it also tries to discuss how people's taxes are misused by the government for an unnecessary war and dispute with other countries instead of taking good care their own citizens. Therefore, this article seeks to discuss and eventually justify the relevance of civil disobedience as a catalyst of positive change for the stability and sustainability of the democratic process and system of government in a state. It also evaluates his open call for every citizen to sacrifice oneself for the nation's cause not to pay taxes and avoid colluding with government by refusing to play an active role. Finally, this study justifies that his resistance against the government is not anarchic impulse or ideological motivated hatred of the state, but from a more pragmatic understanding of how tax dollars enable the continuation of oppressive government policies.

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Introduction:-

It is impossible to provide a comprehensive picture of the many forms of political voice, but it is worth highlighting some dimensions that have a particular resonance today. The proliferation of protests, uprisings, and social mobilization worldwide in recent years that include established democracies reflects profound dissatisfaction with the quality of democratic representation. Political literature sometimes can be contentious and disruptive. Politics has always been a fascinating subject for literature. The 'Literature of Politics' reveals some of the writings of political situations that display the political meanings and aspirations. One needs a deep insight why writers rebel against government's brutality for a specific need to abolish unjust law and policies affecting the democrats. Many writers use literature as a medium to speak politics through which they dictate their political visions. Typically, anarchism is used in the English language to imply chaos and disorder, as if a world without government would devolve into dog-eat-dog violence. Alain Robbe-Grillet, a French novelist associated with the concept of the Nouveau Roman (New Novel), asserted that the author must serve political causes. The fear of inserting ideology into the literature is rampant among critics and authors, who believe politics has an unfavorable effect on a

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literary work. Political writers would find difficulty since he or she no longer uses “original” sources. The idea of putting heavy political content into literary pieces is the subject to controversy and resistance. Syofyan in his Essay: Literature and Politics suggests three ways of sociopolitical notion into writings as

1. First, social ideas are presented in a straightforward manner in a novel.
2. Secondly, a certain idea is not expressed in a straightforward manner, but should clearly show the intention of luring people toward it. Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, is a good example of propagandizing history. Though not through history, DH Lawrence achieves a similar effect in his work, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.
3. Third, a certain idea is proffered as a convention. It seems reasonable and is not seen as propaganda. Readers will judge it as common sense or universal human experience. (10)

Rebellion is an act of disobeying, resistance, revolting, fighting against, rejection to submit or to bow to any authorities that the person thinks they are against his/her goal. It can be fighting against government’s tyranny to get freedom, declining boss’s unfairness, breaking with conventional customs and rejecting the social traditions and values. Parks comments on Doctorow’s neutral stand: “Doctorow seeks a fiction that is both politically relevant and aesthetically complex and interesting. By blurring the distinction between fact and fiction, [Doctorow] seeks to disclose and to challenge the hegemony of enshrined or institutionalized discursive practices” (454-455).

Review of Literature:-

One needs to understand the significance and influence of political climate on which the following works are written and different notions behind them. To trace out how political ideas have been expressed from ancient times, here are some of the notable writers and their works that set a base for the study. Plato’s *Republic* (375 BC) and Aristotle’s *Politics* (4th Century) have been one of the world’s most influential works of philosophy and political theory both intellectually and historically. Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), against censorship, Jan Kochanowski’s Political commentary *The Dismissal of the Grecian Envoys* (1578), Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travel* (1726), Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* (1729), Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759), Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz’s *The Return of the Deputy* (1790) Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) George Orwell’s *1984* (1949), Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), and Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) have set tone of democratic expression.

The following writers’ works are against the politics of kingship such as: Shakespeare’s *Richard II* (1597), Julius Caesar (1599), *Richard III* (1633), Henry V (1599), Thomas Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* (1600) Christopher Marlow and Nathaniel Lee’s *Massacre at Paris* (1593), Aphra Behn’s *The City Heiress* (1682) and *Love Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684). There are other writers who wrote against the Ruler or the Empire in their respective works such as: Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) Jane Austen’s *Manfield Park* (1814), Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness* (1902), Rudyard Kipling’s *The White Man’s Burden* (1899), Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and *Great Expectations* (1861) Derek Walcott’s *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960* (1962), and Gorge Orwell’s *Burmese Days* (1934). There are some other writers whose writings are centered on the horror of war in their works such as: Charlotte Barrett’s *Essay on World War I*, Wilfred Owen’s *Anthem for Doomed Youth* (1917), Edward Thomas’s *As the Team’s Head Brass* (1916), Isaac Rosenberg’s *Returning, We Hear the Larks* (1922).

Political fiction often applies satires in an Utopian and Dystopian 20th century that include Jack London’s *The Iron Heel* (1908), Sinclair Lewis’s *It Happens Here* (1935) George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949) where he addressed some of the major political movements of his time such as: imperialism, fascism, and communism. Graham Greene in his *The Quiet of American* (1955), questions the America’s involvement in Vietnam in the 1950s and American foreign policy. Edmund Burke’s *Reflection on the Revolution in France* (1790) is considered as an intellectual attack on French Revolution and he made his essays as a part of his political credo and his protest against the British conduct of American affairs through the following works *On American Taxation* (1774) and *On Moving His Resolution for Conciliation with the Colonies* (1775). Richard Hendry Horne’s *Orion* (1843), Arthur Hugh Clough’s *Bothie of Tober-Na-Vuolich* (1848), George Meredith’s *Sandra Belloni* (1881) and *Beauchamp’s Career* (1875), William Morris’s *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876) demonstrate political and literary intelligence working in harness to produce fine political literature. E.L Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel* (1971) a political genealogy of the American Old Left and Don DeLillo’s *Libra* (1988) develop some sense of the underlying historical and political themes which affect the literature of contemporary America. Finally, Robert Alter in his brilliant study *The American Political Novel* (1984) divides the political novel into two classes-the conventional political novel and the adversary political novel.

Transcendentalism as Response to Rationalism:

Transcendentalism is an American literary, philosophical, religious, and political movement of the early nineteenth century 1836 in response to rationalism. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau are the central figures. This taught that divinity pervades all nature and humanity, and its members held progressive views on communal living. As the nineteenth century came to its midpoint, the transcendentalists' dissatisfaction with their society became focused on policies and actions of the United States government: the treatment of the Native Americans, the war with Mexico, and, above all, the continuing and expanding practice of slavery. The question of its morality and entrenchment within the American political system came to the fore with the annexation of Texas, where slavery was legal. Emerson addressed on the topic "On the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies" (1844) was delivered in this context. (The Slavery Abolition Act was passed by the British Parliament in 1833 and celebrated annually in Concord.) In his address Emerson wrote: "Language must be raked, the secrets of slaughter houses and infamous holes that cannot front the day, must be ransacked, to tell what negro-slavery has been. These men, our benefactors...the producers of comfort and luxury for the civilized world...I am heartsick when I read how they came there, and how they are kept there. Their case was left out of the mind and out of the heart of their brothers" (A, 9). Transcendentalist thought and influence, particularly the ideas of Henry David Thoreau persisted through several decades of American history. Henry David Thoreau published *Walden* as a narrative in 1854 detailing the author's life at Walden Pond, on property owned by his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson near Concord, Massachusetts. If *Walden* gives us reflection, *Civil Disobedience* gives us intent. Thoreau spent two years living a social experiment, escaping what he called "over-civilization" in search of the "raw" and "savage delight" of the wilderness.

Thoreau experimented Emerson's theoretical, philosophical, and political movement Transcendentalism developed in the late 1820s and in the beginning of 1830s in the eastern United States with the core belief that people are at their best when they are self-reliant and independent, rising above society and its institutions into a practical, daily lifestyle. He proved to be a philosopher by living a simple life, having independence, having trust, and solving problems of life theoretically and practically. Malcolm Bradbury rightly suggests that "understanding American history . . . was clearly an approach that fitted the sobered, un-utopian political mood of the Seventies" (271). Thoreau was arrested in 1846 for nonpayment of his poll tax, and he took the opportunity presented by his night in jail to meditate on the authority of the state. Thoreau and many Americans strongly objected to the war. The reason for the war was due to the conflict between Mexico and the United States it was caused by a dispute over the boundary between Texas and Mexico and also Mexico's refusal to discuss selling California and New Mexico to the United States. Thoreau refused to pay his taxes and was forced to spend a night in jail. Being the transcendentalist, this made Thoreau to act together to voice out in the form of his essay "Resistance to Civil Government" also called *Civil Disobedience* (1849). *Civil Disobedience* means a deliberate disobedience of the law of the government of the state. His disobedience of the law by non-payment of a poll tax was primarily a protest against a government which supported slavery. He propounded this theory in an essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience". The whole essay is compressed into three core ideas such as: paying taxes, slavery, and government's ill-treatment of its own citizens. He defines *Civil Disobedience* an act of inclusive resistance achieved by not obeying the laws. He considers being hypocritical.

1. The first act of *Civil Disobedience* is not to pay the tax
2. Another act is to avoid colluding with government by refusing to play an active role

Throughout the essay, he uses the first person narration which lends in especially striking note of authenticity and personal convictions to his essay which describes his own experience where one can connect with him. In general, first person narration allows Thoreau to frame a complex in abstract political issue in a voice that personally bears witness to the human effects and consequences of government oppression. This suggests self-examination his fellow citizens. This is one of the most influential essays in the history of American thoughts.

Non-Violent Resistance:

Thoreau refused to pay the tax due to his opposition to the Mexican American war that led to make slavery a part of the new territory. He considered paying a poll-tax was unjust. He begins his essay by expressing his anger against the American government. But he was not an anarchist. Thoreau proposes radical political ideas in the beginning of the essay itself, saying "I heartily accept the motto, "That government is best which governs least;" and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe, "That government is best which governs not at all;"(1) Thoreau considers *Civil Disobedience* as moral and social duty of American citizens by his remarks, "when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected

to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize.” (7). Slavery outlives all other causes for revolution both in magnitude and moral gravity. He disgraces himself by associating with government that treats even some of its citizens unjustly.

Thoreau takes the issue with William Paley, an English theologian and philosopher who argues that any movement of resistance to government must balance the enormity of the grievance to be addressed and the probability in the express of redressing it. On the other hand, Thoreau rejects the criteria of expediency used by Paley to justify necessity rebellion at the given moment in the history. He argues that Americans should really follow their conscience saying, “Why has every man a conscience then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward.” Thoreau’s distinction was made even clearer: “It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right.” (5). According to Thoreau, laws are only worthy of respect and allegiance when they do not violate one’s conscience when they are right. In addition, he emphasizes in the essay that the power and importance of individual over groups, especially government, but it’s not all about peaceful reflection, it is a call to action and resistance by saying, “If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man’s shoulders.” (10) This is the open call for every citizen to sacrifice oneself for the nation’s cause. Further, he expresses his serious displeasure against the law, “if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, breaks the law.”(12)

Government as Machine:

Another aspect of the essay is that Thoreau condemns not only the government, but also the people who blindly follow government and its policies. Those people are categorized into four types of group of people who serve the nation in different ways. He starts speaking about his favorite hypothetical group of people, “the mass of men.” He calls them as machines. He worries about the first group of people that why so many people obey laws without questioning them to consider whether they were just. He also explored why some like soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys, (boys who carry gunpowder for soldiers) still obey laws, even when they think they are wrong by marching in admirable in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills and against their common sense and consciences. Throughout the history, these people have submitted themselves completely to carry out the orders of dictators and despots. He criticizes these mass of men as:

1. Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,
2. As his Gorse to the rampart we hurried;
3. Not a soldier discharged his farewell shot
4. O'er the grave where our hero we buried. (5)

He moves on to the second group of people called machines. They are the National Security Agency, Army, Militarian, Jailers, Constables, Police officers and Intelligence Agents and their act of spying American innocent people for the Government and they invade their privacy of their fellow citizens by using military tactics and tools, often harming or killing innocent people. In his opinion, they are wooden men, stone men, horses and dogs to serve them who don’t have a conscience, heart, and moral judgment. Hence, they are even commonly esteemed as good citizens. He then moves on to the other group of men who serve the nation chiefly by their heads.

He also deprecates the third group of people who hardly make any moral distinctions; they are as likely to serve the devil, without intending it, as God. They are: legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and officeholders. Thoreau then appreciates the fourth group of people he stands with:

A very few as Heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men serve the state with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated as enemies by it.” A wise man will only be useful as a man, and will not submit to be “clay,” and “stop a hole to keep the wind away,” but leave that office to his dust at least. (6)

Further, he makes remarks on two types of people based on their submission to serve the nation. The first type of people, who gives himself entirely to his fellow-men, appears to be useless and selfish; but lie who gives himself partially to them is pronounced to be a benefactor and philanthropist. Thoreau views government as fundamental hindrance to the creative enterprise of the people. He cites as a prime example of regulation of trade and commerce and its negative effect on the force of the free market. He shows his dismissive attitude towards some of the grievances that have sparked in the past that the American government is an agent of corruption and injustice. He condemns the political organisations as slave’s government. Political parties and parliaments everywhere are the

least trusted institutions in the eyes of the population. All men recognize the right of revolution, that is, the right to refuse allegiance to (and to resist) the government when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable. But almost all say that such is not the case now. But such was the case, they think, in the Revolution of '75. (6-7) He is referring to the American Revolution in the 1775 was the date of the Concord militia's first pitched battle with the British on tax on foreign goods preceding the Declaration of Independence by more than a year. If resistance was justified, then, Thoreau asks, how can it not also be warranted now?

If one were to tell me that this was a bad government because it taxed certain foreign commodities brought to its ports, it is most probable that I should not make an ado about it, for I can do without them: all machines have their friction, and possibly this does enough good to counterbalance the evil. But when that friction comes to have its machine, and oppression and robbery are organized, I say, let us not have such a machine any longer. (7)

At several points in the essay, he uses the mechanical metaphors to describe the functioning of a government to consider the state as a machine that suggests its dehumanizing effects especially with regard to the treatment of slaves. These metaphors are the largest part of the dichotomy in Thoreau's thinking between natural and artificial social structures such as government, corporation, and the church. He uses natural metaphor borrowed from the natural world to justify civil disobedience. He further argues that those who oppose slavery and American-Mexican War (1846-1848), should stop paying taxes:

A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight. If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood. (15)

The minority will not remain forever if it is outnumbered the majority. Government has the responsibility to take care of both whoever voted and not voted. It is the duty of the government to take care of every citizen of the nation. The tax collected from public is misused by the government for waging war, slavery, unjust and immoral policies.

Influence of Civil Disobedience:

Thoreau's essay Civil Disobedience has influenced American civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, Martin Buber, Leo Tolstoy, Ernest Hemingway, W.B Yeats, President John F. Kennedy and others. Martin Luther King Jr wrote the following about the importance of resistance in his autobiography:

During my student days I read Henry David Thoreau's essay On Civil Disobedience for the first time. Here, in this courageous New Englander's refusal to pay his taxes and his choice of jail rather than support a war that would spread slavery's territory into Mexico, I made my first contact with the theory of nonviolent resistance. Fascinated by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system, I was so deeply moved that I reread the work several times. (Par-4)

King always credited Thoreau as a major influence for his later protests. Gandhi came across Thoreau's work entitled Essay On the Duty of Civil Disobedience when he was in prison in South Africa in 1908 and he was deeply impressed. Thoreau's theory did give a more potent framework for Gandhi's principle of non-violence as well as new dimensions for his principle of non-cooperation in the struggle for freedom against the British. Walters (2017) has asserted on Thoreau's theory of Civil Disobedience which resulted to form National War Tax Resistance Coordinating Committee which has estimated that about 8000 people a year refuse to pay US federal income tax as an act of civil disobedience. Tax money is wasted by putting up a wall on the Mexican border instead of helping the poor and the needy.(Par.13)

Unjust Government:

If the government supports unjust and immoral laws, Thoreau's notion of service to one's country, paradoxically takes the form of resistance which demonstrates a desire to build a better one as a highest form of patriotism. He does not advocate the wholesale rejection of government, but resistance to specific feature regarded to be unjust and immoral. Majority rules in a democracy, but there is no guarantee that the majority will have virtues such as wisdom and justice. But its democracy is not the remedy for the corrupt government. Zinn argues that "we are going to need to go outside the law, to stop obeying the laws that demand killing or that allocate wealth the way it has been done,

or that put people in jail for petty technical offenses and keep other people out of jail for enormous crimes.”(488) He calls his fellow citizens to withdraw their support from the government of Massachusetts and risk to be thrown into prison for the resistance. If the government forces to keep all men and women in prison in terms of slavery, the state would quickly become standstill. Ultimately, Thoreau’s position cannot be accurately characterized as anti-government since he is indeed willing to support some forms of social welfare with his tax dollars. His resistance against the government is not anarchic impulse or ideological motivated hatred of the state, but from a more pragmatic understanding of how tax dollars enable the continuation of oppressive government policies. A number of social and historical conditions provoke Thoreau’s thoughts resulting in the subject of his essay Civil Disobedience. One of the factors that influence Thoreau to consider Civil Disobedience as a method of resistance was the poor treatment of Mexico by the United States. In the essay, he is also disturbed by the way United States fails to take care of vulnerable people and why it embraces Christian ideals of sacrifices by saying, “Why does it always crucify Christ, and excommunicate Copernicus and Luther, and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels?” (12) Finally, he gives the solution to all the issues by saying, “disobey unjust policies of the government, to be “counter friction to the machine”.

Conclusion:-

To sum up Thoreau’s notion, it is predominantly clear that his ideas are relevant even in the contemporary world paying taxes would fund wars and slavery, where a nation wages war against another nation with its power, scientific advance, military force, medical mafia to prove themselves as a superpower among all nations and addicted to war by wasting the taxes paid by citizens, manpower, resources, nuclear weapons, and misusing the power given by the same citizens. The US-Mexican War extended slavery in America. No country has a right to bomb other countries, to overthrow any other governments, to assassinate other nation’s officials, to strangle other nation’s economy, and to deploy their soldiers in other countries. In this regard, the government is not perfect. There is something higher than the government. That is, a religion which makes humans to lead a life with morality and values. If they consider the religious philosophy, the idea of slavery would be wrong. One should not own or buy another man as a slave. Thoreau firmly asserted the rights of the individual against an unjust state.

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