

Chapter 1

Background and Conceptual Framework

This research is an effort to study Jon Krakauer's popular book *Into the Wild* through the perspective of transcendentalism. The journey made by the protagonist of the text, Chris McCandless is observed as his quest to eternal peace, self-realization and ultimately to transcendental experience. Here, self-realization is the scientific or spiritual process when an individual knows who he/she truly is. It is the state of celebrating carefree life. The term 'self' refers to our subjective existence. It arrives at the state of pure subjectivity within the consciousness of an individual only. It resides in deepest ignorance and is experienced with transcendence.

Transcendentalism is a nineteenth century movement, developed by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau and many more American philosophers and the writers. The philosophy believes that people are at their best when truly self-reliant and independent. The theory also emphasizes on subjective intuition over objective empiricism or logic. A core belief of transcendentalism is in the inherent goodness of people and nature. It believes in the individual power and primarily focuses on personal freedom.

The book *Into the Wild* begins with the graduation of the central character, Chris. From the beginning, he seems to be in the quest of something and is indifference towards the modern materialistic world. He rejects his conventional life by destroying his credit cards and identification documents, donates his entire savings and sets out in his old Datsun to experience life of wilderness.

Chris's automobile catches flash flood forcing him to abandon everything he has. He burns his remaining cash and gives himself a new name; Alexander Supertramp. He does not want to carry on his personality which reminds him of his

past, his family and his identity. Thus, he sets off to live his life as a free spirit.

The journey leads him to South Dakota and stops in Carthage. He works for harvesting company until his boss is arrested for satellite piracy. He then travels to Colorado river, Los Angeles and many more places. He starts feeling corrupted by modern civilization and decides to leave the place. In April 1992, Chris arrives in a remote area of Denali National Park and sets up a campsite in an abandoned bus. Initially he is content with isolation, the beauty of nature and the thrill of living off the land. He is immensely pleased with a new life in the wild.

On the way to his transcendental journey, a journey to pursuit freedom from relationships, obligations and self-realization. His eventual aim is to travel into Alaska, into the wild, to spend time with nature, with 'real' existence, away from the trappings of the modern world. His travels lead him on a path of self-discovery, to examine and appreciate the world around him. Unfortunately, he happens to eat the wild potato in order to thrive his hunger. The poison takes apart his beautiful soul from his body.

Krakauer and His Trend of Writing

An American non-fiction author Jon Krakauer was born on April 12, 1954 in Brookline, Massachusetts. He is the third child of five children of his parents, Carol Ann and Lewis Joseph Krakauer. Krakauer's love for mountaineering and his interest towards journalism is an interesting part of his life because of which he stands out as a unique figure among all the writers of his times and even today. Just after graduating from college, he spent three weeks alone in the wilderness of Stikine icecap region of Alaska and climbed a new route on the Devil's Thumb, an experience he described in *Eager Dreams* and in *Into the Wild*. Again in 1992, he made his way to Cerro Torre in the Andes of Patagonia-a sheer granite peak considered to be one of the most difficult

technical climbs in the world. Likewise, in the year 1996, he took part in a guided ascent of Mount Everest. Luckily, he was able to escape himself from the storm, disaster caught in the Everest, while four of his teammates died while making their descent in the storm.

Krakauer's popularity as a writer exposed out from his work as a journalist for *Outside*, an American magazine which focused on the outdoors. The first issue of *Outside* was published in September 1997. The topics he covered as a freelance writer varied greatly; his writings also appeared in *Architectural Digest*, *National Geographic Magazine*, *Rolling stone* and *Smithsonian*. In the year 1999, he received an Arts and Letters Award for literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Krakauer is the son of Jewish father and Unitarian mother. His father Lewis was a doctor and a weekend climber who familiarized Krakauer to mountaineering. He was raised in Corvallis, Oregon from the age of two. He experienced splendid adventurous life in his early ages as he was introduced to mountaineering at the age of eight which eventually developed his interest and patience towards wilderness. He was graduated in 1972 from Corvallis High School. In the same way, the writer gained his degree in Environment Studies in 1976. The adventure lover Krakauer, met Linda Meriam, a former climber in 1997 and started married life since 1980 in Seattle, Washington. He moved to Boulder, Colorado after releasing his book *Into Thin Air*. *Eager Dreams*, is a debut book of Krakauer which is a collection of mountaineering essays. He has published several non-fiction books such as *Into Thin Air* (1997), *Under the Banner of Heaven* (2003), *The Odyssey of Pat Tillman* (2007) and many more which has celebrated years in *The New York Times* best seller list.

Into the Wild is a 1996 adventurous non-fiction book written by Krakauer. It is

an expansion of a nine thousand words article by the same author on Chris titled “Death of an Innocent”, which appeared on January 1993 issue of *Outside* magazine. *Into the Wild* is an international bestseller, which has been printed in one hundred fourteen languages and one hundred seventy-three editions and formats. The story of the book is based on the true experience of the protagonist Chris McCandless who has renamed himself as Alex. He tries to find his way out in the wild of Alaska, denouncing the material possessions and pursuing self-realization embracing the beauty of nature.

Krakauer executes *Into the Wild* in a straightforward style, objectively presenting the events of Chris’s life. His language is concise and easy to understand, making his writing accessible to readers. While many biographers tend to create imaginary-even if likely-scenes and events to make the account read more like a narrative, Krakauer instead opts for a journalistic approach to his writing. His book is somewhat an autobiographical story where the protagonist of the story Chris, resembles with the life of writer himself. Both men decided to venture out alone into the Alaskan wood. Like Chris, Krakauer also had a love for nature and the outdoors, both donated some of their money to charity, decided to venture out in *Into the wilderness* of Alaska relatively at the very young age. A key difference between them was that Jon by all accounts was not likely to return to the civilization. He was too much of an idealist for it while Chris seems to be a realist. As Krakauer realized that while he enjoyed his adventures he saw them as adventures only not a way of life.

Examination of Previous Observations

An American writer, Krakauer is popular for writing outdoor literatures and about the experiences of mountain climbing. Being an adventurous person, the themes and writing style in *Into the Wild*, are heavily influenced by his own background and

experiences. The reasons behind leaving modern civilizations to live in the wild of Alaska gave birth to *Into the Wild*. He executes straightforward style, informative tone, clear and concise language in the book to make his writing accessible to readers. It has been studied by a wide circle of readers with and unanimous praise and has been interpreted by various critics from different dimensions such as individualism, existentialism, naturalism, etc.

Krakauer accepts that his book *Into the Wild* is heavily influenced by his own biography. He depicts the parallelism between his own life with what he discovers about McCandless in writing the book. Moreover, comparing his own adventure to Alaska, he calls the mission of Chris to a journey of a slow-motion suicide. Krakauer considers the death of Chris as the result of recklessness or ignorance about the realities of living in the wild. In an interview with Audie Cornish in *NPR*, a mission driven public radio program in Colorado, Krakauer observes:

I approached this book not as a normal, you know, unbiased journalist.

I admitted that I identified with McCandless very much. When I was his age, when I was 23, a year younger - he was 24 when he died.

When I was 23, I went to Alaska by myself into the glaciers of the coast range and climbed a mountain by myself. It was incredibly reckless, incredibly stupid. But I was lucky. And I survived, and I came back to tell my story. (Cornish)

Krakauer admits the behavioral similarities between himself and Chris. He remembers one of his careless journey in which he nearly dies. He considers fate as an incredible agent for the life and death of a person.

In his brief review in *The New York Times*, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt praises *Into the Wild* as “Terrifying...Eloquent... A heart-rending drama of human

yearning” (17). For Lehmann-Haupt, the book is an outcome of “the powerful imagination and eloquent handling of the writer” (17). According to him, the novel is not merely sad but interesting for the readers “Because the story involves overbearing pride, a reversal of fortune and a final moment of recognition, it has elements of classic tragedy” (17). Krakauer is praised for his powerful imagination and strong narrative technique in the book. Besides that, Chris is compared to the classic tragedy hero who has to face the unintentional end of life.

Like Lehmann-Haupt, Thomas McNamee in *The New York Times* remarks, “Christopher McCandless's life and his death may have been meaningless, absurd, even reprehensible, but by the end of *Into the Wild* you care for him deeply” (18). From the above statement we can say that Thomas McNamee explains the novel from the perspectives of absurdism and nihilism.

Critic Luke Nye-Smith perceives *Into the Wild* an appealing nonfiction book about adventure and survival. He loves Krakauer’s way of informal writing that is superficial for generating feelings and emotions to the readers. For him, the book is the source of inspiration to live the life of self-contentment. Praising the aesthetic beauty of the book, Nye-Smith states:

Anyone who has ever been interested in venturing out on their own, to live in nature, leaving society behind, to fend for themselves and make it on their own without modern conveniences would enjoy this book. It really made me think about what it would take mentally, emotionally and physically to actually leave family, society and all conveniences behind to go live in the wild and be totally self-sufficient. (1)

Nye-Smith wonders how a person like Chris can give up all the conveniences of life for the sake of autonomous life in wilderness.

In a review in *The Washington Post*, critic Angus Philips remarks *Into the Wild* as “a narrative of arresting force” (20). Philips adds, “anyone who ever fancied wandering off to face nature on its own harsh terms should give a look” (20). For Philips, “it’s gripping stuff” (20). Here, the book is considered remarkable for them who has keen interest on travelling into the nature. Philip suggests the readers to go through this book if they have desire to wander off the nature.

John M. Meyer, a playwright and social scientists finds the book *Into the Wild* “as one of the most popular pieces of adventure writing of the late twentieth century” (3). In addition to that, he observes the book from the point of view of social problems and traditional family bounds. Meyer sees Chris’s helplessness as the result of the clash between his parents. Connecting the book with family drama, Meyer claims:

McCandless’ vulnerability to the most universal of sensations: the shock of discovering your parent's imperfections. The recognition of parental imperfections threatened two aspects of the self. First, it upset McCandless' appreciation for his parents' model of adulthood; second, it challenged McCandless' assumed ability to achieve his own ideals. After all, if his parents could not live up to the values they taught their son, how could he possibly hope to achieve his own ideal behavior? (3)

The role of the parents plays greater value to shape the behavioral and cultural framework of the children. Growing weak bond between parents obviously lead the children to the disinterest towards family. According to Meyer, Chris’ distraction, started with the unhealthy relation between the parents, ultimately provoke unconcern to the material world and killed his life.

The Spokesman Review has credited the book *Into the Wild* as the projection of “strange spiritual quest in the western tradition” (Seattle 9). The stories of spiritual

quest are common in eastern society. In this sense, Chris' attempts to attain divine wisdom can be considered as the strange spiritual quest of a westerner. Likewise, critic Chole Lizotte, in her review in *Book Lore* studies the book from the readers' psychological point of view. For her, *Into the Wild* is "a psychological portrait of an adventurer whom readers identify with, and possibly one day become" (23). Most of the young readers consider Chris as their role model as well as the great adventurous hero. They envy his freedom and way of life that impresses them to pursue a similar path as enjoyed by their hero.

A wide ranging criticism has been found about *Into the Wild* since its first publication in 1996. Apart from the criticisms mentioned above, there are many dimensions of the text that are still unexplored. This research is an attempt to study the book in the perspective of American Transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau. Though, most of the earlier critics want to declare the journey of Chris as the symbol of foolishness, irrational thought and lack of experience; the research aims to explore his journey as a young man's pursuit to self-realization and transcendental experience.

Chapter 2

Transcendentalism: A Philosophical and Literary Movement

The Beginning

Transcendentalism is one of the most attractive, academic and philosophical movements. The movement emphasizes on spiritual gain and natural ecstasy alternative to materialism and self-awakening through simple living and celebrating life with spiritual freedom. It came into rise as a philosophical movement in the late 1820s and 1830s from the eastern part of United States by a group of eminent American scholars. The philosophy is characterized by its norms and attitudes which changed people's mind. Transcendentalists believed that God, man, and nature are interrelated to shape the concept of life.

Transcendentalism was a short-lived philosophical movement that emphasized transcendence where 'trans' means 'for' and 'send' means to 'take away', so it is taking away the life and idea, search for or going beyond. Transcendentalists believe in going beyond the ordinary limits of thought and experience in several senses. They believe in transcending society and physical world by living a life of independence, contemplate self-reliance often out in nature and make contact with spiritual or metaphysical realities. Believers of this theory even transcend transcendentalism itself by creating new philosophical ideas based on individual instinct and experience.

The philosophy says that our knowledge of reality comes from an analysis of our own thought processes, rather than from scientific evidences. According to the transcendentalists, if god exists, the god can be found through human intuition. Here, intuition is the ability to acquire knowledge without recourse to inference or conscious reasoning. The word 'intuition' has a great variety of different meanings, ranging from direct access to unconscious knowledge, unconscious cognition, inner

sensing, inner insight to unconscious pattern-recognition and the ability to understand something instinctively, without the need for conscious reasoning.

Transcendentalism is a formal word that describes a very simple idea. People, men and women equally, have knowledge about themselves. The world around them that transcends or goes beyond what they can see, hear, taste, touch or feel. This knowledge comes through intuition and imagination not through logic or the senses. People can trust themselves to be their own authority on what is right. A transcendentalist is a person who accepts these ideas not as religious beliefs but as a way of understanding of life relationships.

In the early-to mid-nineteenth century, the individuals most closely associated with this new way of thinking were connected loosely through a group known as The Transcendental Club formed in the year 1836, which met in the Boston home of George Ripley. Their chief publication was a periodical called "The Dial," edited by Margaret Fuller, a political radical and feminist whose book *Women of the Nineteenth Century* was among the most famous of its time. The club had many extraordinary thinkers like Frederic Henry Hedge, George Ripley, and George Puntam which accorded the leadership position to Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The Transcendental Club was associated with colorful members between 1836 and 1860 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The key literary figures associated in the club were Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Walt Whitman. But the most interesting character was Henry David Thoreau, who tried to put transcendentalism into practice. A great admirer of Emerson, Thoreau nevertheless was his own man - described variously as strange, gentle, fanatic, selfish, a dreamer, a stubborn individualist. For two years, Thoreau carried out the most famous experiment in self-reliance when he went to Walden Pond, built a hut, and tried to live

self-sufficiently without the trappings or interference of society. Later, when he wrote about the simplicity and unity of all things in nature, his faith in humanity, and his sturdy individualism, He reminded everyone that life is wasted pursuing wealth and following social customs. Nature can show that all good things are wild and free.

Transcendentalism describes the idea that every man and woman should have knowledge about themselves and this knowledge should not be based on logic and science, but on intuition and imagination. In the early nineteenth century, transcendentalism was considered as a conventional movement of Unitarianism which was the dominant religion in Boston that believed in God and his unitary. Kurtz states, “The movement was rather conservative in its metaphysics and epistemology, but it was decidedly liberal in its morals and politics. It was fairly inchoate movement – literary, religious, political, and philosophical distinguishable more perhaps by what it opposed than by what it supported” (26). Initially, the concept of Transcendentalism was narrow in being knowing or being identified. Though it was liberal in its morals and politics it was an incomplete movement regarding its literary, religious, political and philosophical aspects.

Among transcendentalists’ core beliefs was an ideal spiritual state that transcends the physical and empirical and only realized through the individual's intuition, rather than through the doctrines of established religions. In religion, transcendentalism was born out of religion, the idea of intellect that stated that mind and observation of nature would determine the existence of God. It began as a religious concept and radicalized in the minds, ideas and thoughts of American democracy. It is also represented an idealistic system of thought such as strength, courage, self-confidence and independence and focused on the idea that man should be individual, the spiritual center of the universe and happiness depends on self-

realization.

Apart from its philosophical thoughts, transcendentalists tried their hands in writing because most of them began to express their ideas about transcendentalism, and wrote these thoughts in books such as Ralph Waldo Emerson who was the most famous transcendentalists at that time with his works; *Nature*, and *Self-Reliance*; Thoreau was another figure who wrote the famous *Civil Disobedience*. Both of these works affected people's mind because it has shown the importance of transcendentalist philosophy.

Transcendentalism, Individualism and Isolation

Transcendental knowledge defines as a prior knowledge; it is considered as a meta-knowledge. Immanuel Kant pretended that transcendental argument is new concept of grounding the certainty of philosophy, science, and mathematics. He argued that knowledge is possible; his main questions turned around what conditions make knowledge possible. What must the world be like? And what must the function of our minds be like, if human knowledge is to be possible?

Kant pretended transcendental aesthetic among those conditions of knowledge. Here, the mind is the main composition which orders sense experience into a spacio-temporal sequence, and transcendental analytic; the mind imposes classes like substance and reason onto experience. Thus, transcendental knowledge allows understanding that the world is a form of series situated in time and place, related to causal relationships through one another.

The term 'transcendentalism' contains a lot of ideas that affected American society in the nineteenth century, and one of its fundamental and essential ideas is "individualism" This term insists that a human being must have his own personality without being under the influence of society. Individualism emphasizes that actions

and thoughts of a person must be independent. Among transcendentalists that were well known with the context of individualism are Emerson with his essay *Self-Reliance*, and Thoreau with his essay *Resistance to Civil Government*. They were considered as individualists; they acted against the social, religious, and cultural influence on individuals, to push them to be aware and deserve to be more important than everything, and to face and to act against government (15). Among transcendentalist writers, Emerson and Thoreau were more concerned towards individualism. They projected the importance of individualism through their essays. They forwarded their views against social, religious and cultural influences which acted as a hindrance towards individualism.

In 1830s, many people in New England saw that the religion they adopted from their puritan ancestors had become too strict and impersonal. That's why Emerson's essay *Self-Reliance* comes into picture; he supported that man should be responsible for his decisions and his personal life and encouraged people to rely on themselves. To be independent and free, he gave them a platform of freedom to talk, live, and think. He tried to make changes in society through new ideas, he believed that society prohibits people to express themselves and that their power was neglected, as a result people lost their self-confidence in expressing their own ideas as Emerson states, "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" (31). According to Emerson, great man is that who is able to enjoy the pleasure of solitary independence while being in the crowd too.

Thoreau was a student of Emerson; he was influenced by his way of thinking, they shared the same ideas; especially at the point of individualism. Thoreau adopted

the same ideas of Emerson, but Thoreau focused more on the government and considered it as an obstacle for the dreamers, because society compels men to behave as machines in order to serve it under its strict orders.

During the Walden experiment, Thoreau discovered that isolation was essential for his self-development. In short, his isolation at the pond facilitated a process of self-actualization that culminated in his realization that humanity and nature coexist as one. *Walden* has a whole chapter dedicated to addressing solitude, in which he often criticizes America's social life for suffocating individual freedom: "Society is commonly too cheap. We meet at very short intervals, not having had time to acquire any new value for each other. We meet at meals three times a day, and give each other a new taste of that old musty cheese that we are" (147). Through *Walden*, he explains that we lack time for self, lack time to be in isolation which is very essential for self-development, self-actualization. We carelessly meet each other often and fail to acquire new values for self and for others too. Ultimately, we never change and remain the same self, we were previously. Thus, it is much essential to have time to view inward personally.

On the other hand, solitude, even when it does not mean complete isolation, is essential for anyone who seeks to contribute intellectually to society: "A man thinking or working is always alone, let him be where he will. Solitude is not measured by the miles of space that intervene between a man and his fellows. The really diligent student in one of the crowded hives of Cambridge College is as solitary as a dervish in the desert" (*Walden* 146). To create new ideas or philosophies one needs to think or realize things or situation for which the person needs peace and isolation from the maddening crowd of the society.

For Emerson, isolation also had the same social implications as for Thoreau,

as he implied in his criticism toward society's tendency to alienation:

Society everywhere is in a conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs. ("Self-Reliance," 261)

Because society tends to foster conformity, Emerson understood solitude as indispensable for the development of thought autonomy. But he believed that isolation also had spiritual implications. In his typical mystical discourse, solitude was a necessary path for both self-reliance and oneness, as it contributed to an awareness of the universal spirit: "All men have my blood, and I have all men's. Not for that will I adopt their petulance or folly, even to the extent of being ashamed of it. But your isolation must not be mechanical, but spiritual, that is, must be elevation" ("Self-Reliance," 273).

Emerson implied that isolation, which must be "spiritual" provides access to divine intuition. Due to the spiritual edification that isolation brought, he showed preference for silence in church: "I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching" ("Self-Reliance," 272). The parallels with Smith's Quaker faith are clear, because, in simple terms, a Quaker concept called Inner Light implies that silent isolation leads to the divine.

Experience and the Idea of Innate Knowledge

Most of what is known as transcendentalism stems from a term from Kantian philosophy called "innate knowledge" or "innate ideas." According to Art Berman, empiricism was an "epistemological validation of naturalism," which hypothesized

that all of nature's "rules, laws, or principles are discoverable through special methods of thought (logic) and scrutiny applied to information" (*Preface to Modernism* 10). On the other hand, transcendentalists were strongly informed by Kant's notion of the human knowledge as innate. Berman states that Kant's postulation was based on what he called "transcendental logic," in which a supersensory realm grounded the "reality known by the senses" (*Preface to Modernism* 13). Since this idea cannot be confirmed empirically, different "modes of knowing," such as intuition, were essential for a validation of Kant's transcendental logic (13). Therefore, Kantian transcendental philosophy received this name, because it sought to transcend the boundaries of knowledge imposed by empiricism (15). Buell Lawrence states that for transcendentalists, the idea of innate knowledge was not to be understood, as much as it had to be aroused (*The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings* xxiii). In the consciousness of the Christian New England, the idealism of Kantian philosophy and its metaphysical implications were, therefore, bound to ferment.

Emerson and transcendentalists reacted against Lockean ideas, because Locke's view of humankind was supposedly "unspiritual" (*The American Transcendentalists* xix). Their dispute was to some extent religious, because transcendentalists viewed themselves as recouping some of the spiritual roots that the empiricist Unitarians had set aside. Transcendentalists found support in the Kantian doctrine of innate knowledge, because an intuitive perception of "Truth" was more suitable to the strong Christian roots of the region.

In the address *The American Scholar*, Emerson coined the term "Man Thinking," which parallels his idea of a person who speaks from within and who relies on his own perception of truth as paramount to the truth presented in books. The term, which describes the ideal condition for the American scholar, also showed his

concern with how the excess of specialization in society tended to transform man into a thing. In this process, the scholar was delegated as the intellect, the only segment of society that was given the chance to exercise thinking. Notwithstanding the problems already posed by limiting knowledge to an elite, he had another important concern: the average scholar was becoming a parrot of other men's thinking, who merely reverberated principles imposed by academic conditioning.

The Kantian doctrine of men's innate knowledge inspired Emerson to develop a discourse in defense of self-reliance, according to which men were entitled to individually shape their own character, intellect, set of beliefs, and artistry through personal experience rather than the adopted talent of another. Emerson in his essay "Self Reliance" states,

Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life's cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another, you have only an extemporaneous, half possession. That which each can do best, none but his maker can teach him. No man yet knows what it is, nor can, till that or can till that person has exhibited it. Where is the master who could have taught Shakespeare? Where is the master who could have instructed Franklin, or Washington, or Bacon, or Newton? Every great man is a unique. The Scipionism of Scipio is precisely that part he could not borrow. Shakspeare will never be made by the study of Shakspeare, (278-79).

Emerson's call for self-reliance was primarily a demand for the average American to become a free agent and autonomous thinker. And such was the ethos behind the transcendentalist movement. Most noticeably, his pupil Thoreau deepened the emphasis on free agency and thought autonomy to the point of writing what can be

considered a treatise on the practice of these concepts in *Walden*. For over 160 years, *Walden* has been arguably one of the most influential literary statements that placed autonomy as a definer of the American consciousness. The work tells the story of Thoreau's personal retreat to Walden Pond, where he lived for two years experiencing nature fully and meditating on the state of nineteenth-century American society.

Throughout *Walden*, Thoreau cautioned the readers that the nineteenth-century America was discouraged from exercising intellectual autonomy and believed that living upon materialistic values was the only choice left: When we consider what, to use the words of the catechism, is the chief end of man, and what are the true necessities and means of life, it appears as if men had deliberately chosen the common mode of living because they preferred it to any other. Yet they honestly think there is no choice left (*Walden* 14). This context that suppressed thought autonomy left society with a supposedly complete absence of choice. Alienating society from self-actualization, this context also prevented society from questioning whether or not certain values were necessary.

Chapter 3

Quest for Self-Realization in Chris

Chris as an Individualist Freelancer

One of the masterpieces of Krakauer's *Into the Wild* is a story developed from the real life incident of a young man who grew up in a "well-to-do East Coast family" (ix). The young gentleman wanted to invent a new life for himself. Thus he decided to take up residence at the ragged margin of our society. He wandered across North America in search of raw, transcendent experience. He sets up his journey and is hopeful to live his life to his imagination as he says, "Hey. I am goin' to get up on there, live off the land, go claim me a piece of the good life" (4). From his statement it is clear that he is not satisfied with the kind of life he is living; therefore he is in search of life which is different from others.

The young man's eventual aim is to travel into Alaska, into the wild, to spend time with nature, with real existence, away from the trapping of the modern world. The book is exhibiting many transcendental aspects in the life of Chris such as individualism, isolation, self-reliance, autonomy of thought, nonconformity, simplicity, love and treasury of nature, free thought and Inner divinity. He exhibits these traits willingly because he knowingly follows the transcendental tenants. Krakauer's main goal when characterizing Chris was to show that he was a transcendentalist based in the way he approached his life.

Chris, the focal character of the book wanted to live the transcendental experience. After graduating from college in 1990, he travelled across North America and eventually hitchhiked to Alaska in 1992. He set out along an old mining road known as stampede trail, with minimal supplies, hoping to live simply off the land. On the way, he meets Gallien, who offered him a drive. Getting to know that Chris is

going into the wild Gallien asked whether he has a hunting license, he replies, “How I feed myself is none of the government’s business. Fuck their stupid rules” (6). His disinclination to abide by the government’s regulations shows the transcendental value and the importance of individual conscience versus society’s law or expectations. He wanted to be able to live by his own rules.

Before heading towards the wilderness in Alaska, Chris writes his last postcard to Wayne Westerberg, a friend for whom he had worked, which says: “Please return all mail I receive to the sender. It might be a very long time before I return South. If this adventure proves fatal and you don’t ever hear from me again, I want you to know you’re a great man. I now walk into the wild” (69). He knows very well that he is embarking on a dangerous adventure, and that his margin for error is very slight. He feels this is worth it, however, for the real experience of living completely freely and independently.

Chris shows how intertwined his need for independence and freedom is with his inability to let people too close. He likens his entrance into the wilderness to fleeing and emphasizes that he is alone, and that only now to enjoy ultimate freedom. As the line states:

Two years he walks the earth, no phone, no pool, no pets, no cigarettes.
 Ultimate freedom. An extremist. An aesthetic voyager whose home is
 the road. Escaped from Atlanta. Thou shalt not return, ‘cause “the
 West is the best”. And now after two rambling years comes the final
 and greatest adventure, the climactic battle to kill the false being within
 and victoriously conclude the spiritual revolution. Ten days and nights
 of freight trains and hitching brings him to the great white North. No
 longer to be poisoned by civilization he flees, and walks alone upon

the land to become lost in the wild. – Alexander Supertramp, May
1992. (162)

The lines clarify how he feels about his journey and he is proud of himself and proud of what he has accomplished as he writes, “Thou shalt not return” (162). The implication is not that he is walking into the wilderness to die, but that he will not go back to the East since over his two-year journey he has fallen deeply in love with the American west. It also indicates the parallels among Chris’s, Thoreau’s and Krakauer’s experiences exemplify a sort of simpler, more natural state of being. Hence, this parallel is the means to argue that Chris was leaving society in search of a transcendental experience as Thoreau had done in *Walden*.

Parting or departing oneself from people or community is what isolation refers to. The condition can move others towards creativity and innovation, as a result of having been forced to rely solely on their own minds. Similarly, self-reliance is ability to think independently, embracing your individuality and striving towards the own challenging goals. On the other hand, self-actualization is taken as a motivation to realize one’s own maximum potential and possibilities. Self-actualized person is endowed with the characteristics like people are realist, have autonomous behaviour, enjoy solitude and privacy and are spontaneous too. All these traits are found in Chris because of which I claim his journey as a transcendental journey.

Starting from Chris’s adventurous journey to Alaska which stretches his story till his last breath is itself a story of isolation, self-reliance and self-actualization. As his journey is the journey of transcendental search we find the traits of transcendentalism throughout his activities, feelings and search. He proceeds his journey towards wilderness so that he only has himself to account to. In the passage, he is just leaving Ron Franz, who spends the next year waiting for his return living by

his tenets. Krakauer describes in the book in this way,

McCandless was thrilled to be on his way north, and he was relieved as well-relieved that he had again evaded the impending threat of human intimacy, of friendship, and the messy emotional baggage that comes with it. He had fled the claustrophobic confines of his family. He'd successfully kept Jan Burres and Wayne Westerberg at arm's length, flitting out of their lives before anything was expected of him. And now he'd slipped painlessly out of Ron Franz's life as well. (55)

This passage illuminates Chris's deep problems with intimacy, which are very central in his ultimately fatal two-year quest for meaning and peace. During these two years, he does not contact his sister, with whom he was very close, and while he meets many people but becomes close only to a few, he always makes sure to maintain a certain distance.

Chris wanted to live alone and live meaningfully and the only place he thought he could do that was in Alaska: "On Alex's map, nevertheless, the broken line meandered west from the parks highway for forty miles or so before petering out in the middle of the trackless wilderness north of Mt. McKinley. This, Alex announced to Gallian, was where he intended to go" (5). Alex felt that he needed to remove all the distractions from his life by leaving civilization completely to find himself.

After parting himself from Ron Franz's life, Chris in the name of Alexander writes a letter to Ron encouraging him to accept changes in life and avoid the monotonous life he was living. He says that people must dare to have new experiences which teach them about life. There he says, "You are wrong if you think Joy emanates only or principally from human relationships. God has placed it all around us. It is in everything and anything we might experience. We have to have the

courage to turn against our habitual lifestyle and engage in unconventional living” (58-59). We can relate this statement to Emerson’s idea of the over soul in which god, nature and men are all eternally connected. With the Over-soul we are all associated to nature and each other. It contains and unites all souls and acts as the animating force behind them. The answers to your questions are in you. Everything in life has a purpose.

Likewise, glancing the activities and going into the thoughts that Chris went through, we find the tenants of transcendentalism in abundance. When Krakauer addresses the relationship between Chris and his parents, he starts the chapter with a passage from Thoreau’s *Walden* highlighted by Chris. Using this passage, he illustrates the kind of strict moral code by which Chris measured himself and those around him: “Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth. I sat at a table where were rich food and wine in abundance, an obsequious attendance, but sincerity and truth were not; and I went away hungry from the inhospitable board. The hospitality was as cold as the ices” (117). When Chris comes to know about his father’s past, it made him down and he just wanted to know the truth.

The passage exposes Chris’s anger when he discovered that his father lived as a bigamist for years. Like Thoreau, Chris felt estranged from the contemporary society and its imposed norms. He was born into a wealthy family but there is nothing he despised more than desire for wealth, consumerism and conformity. He believed that a modern man’s desire to acquire more and fascination for materialistic things only drew him away from inherent beauty of life that can only be found in simplicity.

Chris and His Affection to Nature

Chris’s relationship with nature is extremely inscrutable. It makes us wonder that what is it about nature that makes a young man like him abandon everything and

set forth into the unknown. Krakauer introduces us into an incredible world of raw wilderness. The novel poses a question: how to face or conquer it? Even more importantly, how to face and conquer the wilderness within ourselves? The idea used by Krakauer in *Into the Wild* is Thoreau's idealization of nature and wilderness as a romantic pastoral garden where one can retreat from civilization.

The interpretation that Krakauer uses seems to be aligned with Leo Marx's reading of *Walden*, where he argues that *Walden* was the report of "an experiment in transcendental pastoralism" (Marx, 1967, 242). The first aspect of pastoral motive is the will to escape from an artificial world, from civilization to nature, from sophistication to simplicity and from the city to the country. Here Krakauer introduces,

If the day and night are such that you greet them with joy, that is your success. All nature is your congratulation. The greatest gains and values are farthest from being appreciated. We easily come to doubt if they exist. We soon forget them. They are the highest reality. The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little star-dust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched. (48)

Thoreau tried to depict the ineffable delight that nature provides when observing it and living in conformity to it. This sheds some indirect light on Chris's view of nature as a source of fulfillment and joy and suggests the philosophy which might have set his soul on his Alaskan quest.

In a letter to Ron Franz that Krakauer cites in the same chapter, Chris argued: "The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing horizon, for each day to have a new

and different sun, joy is in everything and anything that we might experience” (58).

Chris was bored in normal things and was always curious to find joy in new experiences of life.

Thus, Chris placed too much value on a transcendental way of life where the contact with different horizons, new suns, and everything in the universe was itself a goal. As we find out from his journal, all he ever wanted was to purify himself from the poisons of civilization by escaping into the wild and becoming one with nature.

Influence of Thoreau in Chris

The kind of thought that drives Chris and the activities he exposes are heavily influenced by Thoreau. Moreover, Thoreau is the most cited writer in Krakauer’s book. The epigraphs and citation that draw parallels to Thoreau’s life and ideas play the role of examples inspiring Chris’s actions. To draw similarities between Thoreau and Chris, Krakauer presents the ideas of Thoreau’s essay so that they appear to be summarized in a simple motto. As Chris’s father points out: “He refused instruction of any kind” (111). This exposes the fact that Krakauer’s interpretations of civil disobedience as a rejection of every kind of imposed law expresses a romantic form of liberalism which is exceedingly individualist and accepts the fanciful possibility of freeing oneself from society and power.

Ideals of simple living, rejection of social norms and materialism were key to Thoreau’s philosophy, which Chris strived to implement in his own life. Like Thoreau, Chris thought people were meant to find themselves by being separated from the society and immersing themselves into a pure realm of nature. Like Thoreau, Chris wants to live in nature and with nature. He believed his quest would not be as genuine and true, if he brought money and ID with him. He knew he had to experience the real struggle and hardships of life on his own. Chris adopts and fully

implements Thoreau's idea of self-reliance. He truly understands that independence is more important than neediness.

Chris states in a letter to Wayne Westerberg, a friend for whom he had worked: "I wish I hadn't met you though. Tramping is too easy with all this money. My days were more exciting when I was penniless and had to forage around for my next meal" (33). Thoreau's rejection of material possessions and his economy designed to achieve a higher spiritual purpose supports the parallel that Krakauer draws between Thoreau and Chris.

While traveling from Colorado down into Mexico to the Pacific Ocean all by canoe he says that the trip giving him a sense of freedom that only the nature seemed to offer him. This moment gave him time for a further quest for self-knowledge which is known value amongst transcendentalists. When being in Las Vegas, he wrote in his journal, "It is the experiences, the moments, the great triumphant joy of living to the fullest extent in which real meaning is found" (37). This is also connected to the transcendentalist value of the importance of living in the moment, keeping the senses aware of the present moment. It seems that living in now, to find happiness in the moment is one way to live life to its fullest.

Thoreau's anti-capitalist ideas can be understood as a practical philosophy to achieve liberty and self-realization. The final passage of *Into the wild* brings together all the book's themes and questions into a single, compact description. The passage reads:

One of his last acts was to take a picture of himself, standing near the bus under the high Alaska sky, one hand holding his final note toward the camera lens, the other raised in a brave, beatific farewell. His face is horribly emaciated, almost skeletal. But if he pitied himself in those

last difficult hours-because he was so young, because he was alone, because his body had betrayed him and his will let him down-it's not apparent from the photograph. He is smiling in the picture, and there is no mistaking the look in his eyes: Chris McCandless was at peace, serene as monk gone to God. (199)

The lines provide final justification for reading *Into the wild*. To close out and unify the book's two plots, the passage revisits the reasons a reader might find Chris's story dramatic, his youth, his terrible death, and his struggle against the wilderness outside him and the anger within him. The author emphasizes one of the book's central themes, that of almost Chris like peace and happiness, of a monkish dedication to a single vision of better life. The book also depicts Chris's bravery and celebrates his other worldliness. If there is no mistaking the look in Chris's eyes, the passage implicitly insists, then the reader should remember him as happy. Thus, *Into the wild* exists to commemorate the unusual happiness he achieved.

Though Chris took radical path to his transcendental experience, he is one of the greatest heroes of non-conformity. He is a hero because he decided to challenge everything he had ever known. Alexander Supertramp, master of his own destiny, did not want to return back in any way, to ensure he would obtain absolute freedom. He took charge of his new life and was brave to be able to just leave everything he knew and was comfortable with in order to find himself to embrace his individuality.

Chapter 4

Chris as a Transcendentalist

Krakauer has successfully mirrored Chris and his quest for self-realization, eternal peace and pleasure in his novel *Into the Wild*. Chris is embarking into the wild in order to get immense pleasure and find the ultimate truth of his life. In his journey, he struggles with varieties of things frequently whether it may be about transporting from one place to another or getting sufficient food to recollect energy. Still, the young man is accepting all these discomforts willingly and is longing to pursue his real happiness.

After reading the book *Into the Wild*, one infers that the mosaic of characterization in Krakauer's work is inspired by transcendental theory. Krakauer has chronicled the unsatisfying life of Chris, dislike towards his material possessions and desire to live a spiritual life. He has also portrayed how American society is proceeding violently and their intense want of materials being indifferent towards humanity, love and spiritual happiness.

Chris is in search of eternal peace and happiness that satisfies his soul whose instinct can best be interpreted through the theory of transcendentalism. He escaped from a world he personally did not understand. Chris didn't like rules, as rules were restraints that held him down from being who he was meant to be. He wanted to exist in a world where he was intended to live, where he fit in and in doing just that, he didn't just leave his old life behind but began a new one as Alexander Supertramp, master of his own destiny.

Chris's parents provided their children a good education, money and comfort, thus Chris and his sister lacked nothing from the materialistic aspect of life. What they did not have though was parental love and support. It angered Chris that his

parents were such materialists and they thought that material aspects would make up for it. For example, his parents wanted to give Chris a car as a graduation gift, which he refused. Such relationship in the family ended up forming Chris's views on society and its values. He actually ended up despising everything that had to do with society until the very end. Ultimately, the young man left the society in search of transcendental experience.

He pursued silence and truth while fighting the overwhelming presence of his demons. Evidence suggests that the wilderness provided Chris the answer he was searching for. As we know, isolation draws people back to others. It makes them crave for the things that were absent from their solitude. When in the wild, it is up to you and only you, to define your reality. Wilderness offers a destination for chasing dreams and for chasing ideals. It has the power to challenge, to shape and to heal the individual who seeks its branches and its boughs as a shelter.

Human nature tells us to want what we cannot or do not have. Everything from people to a toy to a kind of hairstyle- we just always want what is not ours. Chris is no exception. He lives his life as part of an upper-middle class family, is smart and goes to and does well in college. But he still feels like something is missing from his life. He wants something completely opposite of the life he is used to. Chris McCandless spent a lot of time looking for something entirely different from what he already had and while he found true happiness that ultimately leads to his demise.

From the beginning and through his death, Chris remains same: Keen, self-confident, individual and good natured. The tragedy in his life befalls on the way to his transcendental journey when he happens to eat wild potatoes to thrive his hunger. By the time Chris died, he seemed to have found a measure of peace, and a kind of life he wanted to live. As he mentions in one of his last notes that he lived a blissful

life. He thanks lord and wish that every good things befalls in others' life too. This makes us feel that till he was alive he was able to live up to his expectations.

As soon as one encounters the word 'transcendentalism': individualism, intuition, idealism, self-realization, nature and quest become the mind griping subjects. Chris possesses all these qualities and is in his journey of transcendental search. He sets his journey alone in the wild and proceeds forward to achieve his quest about self-realization confidently which projects him as a true individualist and eventually a transcendentalist.

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