

HESSE'S *SIDDHARTHA*: AN EXPLORATION INTO INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

Archana Kumari, Research Scholar, University Department of English, Ranchi University, Ranchi
Dr. Supriya, Associate professor English, Department of English, Ranchi Women's College, Ranchi

Abstract:

Siddhartha, set in India, is subtitled an "Indic Poetic Work," and it clearly owes much to Indian religions. Hermann Hesse's novel Siddhartha is set in ancient India at the time of Buddha (563 B.C. 483 B.C.). We find the roots of Siddhartha's conception in his childhood. Hesse's parents had been in India as missionaries. His mother was born in India. However, the health of Hesse's father declined and the whole family had to shift to Calw. They joined the maternal grandfather of Hesse Dr. Gundert, a well-known linguist and a scholar in eastern philosophy. At this place, Hesse was brought up under the influence of Indian songs, books, and discussions about Indian and Chinese writings. The beautiful objects and pieces of art left a profound impression on Hesse's mind. Hence, in the novel Siddhartha, we find an influence of eastern philosophy. But the question of the exact nature of Hesse's debt to various aspects of Indian religion and philosophy in Siddhartha is quite complicated and deserves detailed discussion. This essay will discuss the elements of Hindu and Buddhist thought present in Siddhartha and make distinctions between them.

Key words: *Hinduism, Buddhism, Samsara, Samanas, Moksha, Eastern Philosophy.*

Much of the current appeal of Hesse can be attributed to the fact that his writings invite his readers to identify their quests for an integral inner life with that endless struggle for self-realization in which the successive characters of his works are engaged. To a large extent Hesse achieves this effect by addressing himself to just those channels which communicate most directly with our deepest reactive processes—archetypal forms, the most basic personal and social conflicts, and universal philosophical and religious quests. As a conscious response to Hesse's appeal to our innermost selves, we seek, always realizing that we may never fully understand the vectored forces which converge within an artist to produce a dimensioned work of art, to produce a nomenclature for his methods, motifs, forms, and sources. None of his works seems to have been spared such analysis, least of all the *Siddhartha*. And for a number of obvious reasons, hardly a commentator on this work has failed to mention the close relationship which apparently exists between it and the principal religious philosophy of India.

“The wrings of Hermann Hesse, the German writer, have a deep and firm root in the Vedas, the Upanishads and in the Buddhism” (Timpe 349). In this contemporary worldly fringe, his writings compel to re-think and unveil the mystery of the self, urge to make a shift from periphery to centre to Know Thyself. His novel *Siddhartha* is a true critique of life and it explores the intrinsic flow to reach Enlightened State. In the novel, an inexorable search for truth is exhibited for creating a harmonious bond with the world. In pursuing the study of this novel, it seems worthwhile to notice Hesse's conception about the East, which is the sole basis of most of his literary art. In his autobiographical novel *The Journey to the East* Hesse states:

For our goal was not only the East, or rather the East was not only a country an something geographical but it was the home and youth of the soul, it was everywhere and nowhere, it was the union of all times(24).

“Hesse's confrontation with Indian culture was unreflected and preconscious” (Baumann1). It

started from his birth in 1877 and lasted until 1904, the year in which he moved to Gaienhofen and started a new life as a professional writer. One can say that he inherited his interest in India and its tradition and culture. Hesse himself often pointed out that his grandfather, his mother and his father had lived in India for many years as missionaries, that they were able to speak different Indian languages and that they possessed many Indian things such as clothes and pictures. His grandfather, Dr. Hermann Gundert, had been a famous scholar who was preoccupied with the Sanskrit and is still well-known in India today. His mother told the little boy anecdotes of her time in India and his father enjoyed reading Buddhist prayers he himself had translated into English or German. The young boy was extremely sensitive and opens to this and so this early confrontation led to a lifelong preoccupation with Indian philosophy and religion.

Nevertheless conflicts with his parents were due to come. Although father and mother were open to a certain degree and respected Hinduism and Buddhism, they always pointed out that according to their point of view Christianity was the only real and true religion. They could not get rid of certain narrow-mindedness in spite of their love for India. This was a source of confrontation because Hermann Hesse could not agree with this lack of acceptance even when he was young and when he got older his open-mindedness and tolerance towards all kinds of religion grew and he regarded them all as equal. He hated dogmatism of any kind.

When Hesse left his parents he had no more contact with India and its philosophical and religious traditions for ten years. Only in 1904, when he was 27 years old and when he started studying the German philosopher Schopenhauer he found himself again in this Indian atmosphere, read translations of Bhagavad-Gita and since then never lost touch with this spiritual world. This period of Hesse is characterized as a time of intellectual confrontation with the Indian way of thinking, a time of spiritual quest.

This stage lasted until 1921. It was no accident that this phase started with the confrontation with Schopenhauer's ideas. At the turn of the century Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were fashionable authors and like the young Thomas Mann Hermann Hesse was much attracted by this intellectual world. Links between Schopenhauer's philosophy and Indian spirituality are obvious. Schopenhauer's epistemological maxim of the world being a mere reflection of our consciousness is strongly related to the Indian idea that our factual world is not real but mere appearance. This idea is a basis of Hinduism and Buddhism. And Schopenhauer's anthropological thesis of the "will" as an irrational force within man corresponds to the Buddhist conception of the "thirst" as a source of human suffering. In addition to that Schopenhauer's concept of salvation corresponds with the one based on Buddhism and Hinduism. According to Schopenhauer salvation can only be gained when selfishness and restrictedness are overcome by compassion and the discovery that all beings are brothers and sisters. This corresponds to the traditional "Tat tvam asi" of the Upanishads and the Buddhist idea of salvation by overcoming "Thirst" and egocentricity. So it is quite obvious that Schopenhauer led Hesse to a new approach to the Holy Texts of India.

Another motivation for Hesse's new interest in a systematic occupation with the religious tradition of India was surely his former dislike of Christianity. He was bored and disgusted by its theory and practice and by his parent's narrow-mindedness. Therefore he was looking for a deeper and more personal spirituality and India offered this to him.

Gunter Baumann in his essay "Hermann Hesse and India" says, "Hesse went on a trip to Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Sumatra, his so-called 'Trip to India', which lasted from September 1911 to December 1911"(3). He was accompanied by the painter Hans Sturzenegger who was his friend. There were several reasons for this voyage: His marriage to his first wife had entered a stage of crisis and ended up in divorce. But it was also an escape from Europe and its political development which drifted towards World War I and a European culture industry which he regarded as unbearable and disgusting. His voyage to India was not merely blind escape; it was a search for alternatives to personal, cultural and political misery. India seemed

to offer this escape because it showed no traits of European decadence. His main impressions of this journey are collected in his "Remembrances of Asia"

In the end the human impression is the strongest. It is the religious link of all these millions of souls. The whole East breathes religion in a way the West breathes reason and technology. Occidental inner life seems to be primitive and exposed to chance if you compare it to the spirituality of the Asian which is protected, secure and trustful. This impression is outstanding because here you can see Eastern strength and Occidental misery and weakness and all doubts, troubles and hopes of our soul are confirmed. Everywhere we can see the supremacy of our technology and civilization and everywhere we can see that the religious people of the East enjoy something we are deeply lacking and therefore appreciate more than any superiority. It is quite clear that no import from the East can help us here and no returning to India or China and no escape to any religiousness organized by any church. But it is also quite obvious that salvation and continuance of our culture is only possible if we regain spiritual mastery in the art of living. I don't know whether religion is something that could be done away with, but I have never seen more clearly and relentlessly than among Asian people that religion or its substitute is something we are deeply lacking. (Baumann 3)

Before discussing the plot, narrative technique and his indebtedness to Indian materials in creation of characters, incidents, one may like to quote Hesse's own words which show his source materials in constructing *Siddhartha* and other writings on India. In 1920 Hesse writes:

My preoccupation with India, which has been going on for almost twenty years and has passed through many stages, now seems to me to have reached a new point of development. Previously my reading, searching and sympathies were restricted exclusively to the philosophical aspect of India the purely intellectual, Vedantic and Buddhist aspect. The Upanishads, the sayings of Buddha and the Bhagavad Gita were the focal point of this world. Only recently have I been approaching the actual religious India of the Gods, of Vishnu and Indra, Brahma and Krishna. And now Buddhism appears to me more and more as a kind of very pure, highly bred reformational purification and spiritualization that has no flaw but its great zealotry, with which it destroys image-worlds for which it can offer no replacement (150).

Siddhartha develops out of Hesse's knowledge of eastern religions. For example, many of the characters are named after either Hindu or Buddhist gods: Siddhartha is the personal name of Buddha, Vasudeva is one of the names of Krishna, and Kamala's name is derived from Kama, the Hindu god of erotic love. Clearly, the most obvious and significant aspect of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* is its use of images, themes, and ideas drawn from Eastern religions. Having both traveled to India and studied extensively about Indian religions, Hesse was able to integrate a substantial understanding of Eastern religious traditions into his novel. In fact, *Siddhartha* does such a good job of developing Eastern religious themes that it has been published in India, and Indian critics have generally praised its sensitive understanding of their religious traditions.

In addition, Hesse bases most of the novel's themes on various Hindu or Buddhist principles. For example, Siddhartha seeks to gain an understanding of Atman, the individual soul, and Brahma, the universal soul that unifies all beings. In order to achieve this understanding, however, he must experience a vision that reveals to him the true meaning of Om, the sacred word that Hindus chant when meditating upon the cosmic unity of all life. The vast majority of Siddhartha's philosophical and religious questions develop out of his attempt to understand these religious principles or other themes drawn from Eastern religions such as meditation, fasting, renunciation, timelessness, transcending suffering, etc. While it

would take an entire book to explain all of the religious ideas that Hesse develops in his novel, he generally presents at least a basic description of these ideas within the book itself. Consequently, readers can at least get a rudimentary understanding of these ideas even if they do not understand all of the subtle complexities of Eastern religious thought. Not only does Hesse borrow names, themes, and ideas from Eastern religions, but he also bases and structures his narrative on the life of the historical Buddha. Much like Siddhartha in Hesse's novel, the historical Buddha was born into a wealthy family, but he renounced his wealth to live as an ascetic. After several years of self-denial, however, he came to realize the errors of asceticism. After leaving behind his austere life, he meditated under a Bodhi tree until he received Nirvana (or complete Enlightenment), and then he spent the rest of his life trying to help others reach Nirvana. This is very similar to the path that Siddhartha follows in the novel as he passes through similar stages of wealth, renunciation, meditation, enlightenment, and striving to teach others.

Siddhartha begins with the traditional conflict between the Brahmanical and Buddhist way. Buddha was the main force behind the protest against the traditional theology, Brahmanical priesthood and sacerdotal ritualism, establishing a more rationalistic, liberal and subjective thinking. Siddhartha, therefore, is introduced in the first chapter of the novel as a Brahmin's son, rigorously observing all the hieratic, externalist and ritualistic pattern in daily life, but still lingering at heart to comprehend the 'Brahman', learning the art of practising contemplation, offering sacrifices, listening to religious discourses, and reciting hymns from Veda and Upanishads could not satisfy him. He decides to try the path of the Samanas (ascetics). This attitude in itself shows how Hesse tries to expound the conflict in the religious tradition of India. This is reflected in his statement about Siddhartha:

Govinda knew that he would not become an ordinary Brahmin, a lazy sacrificial official, an avaricious dealer in magic sayings, a conceited worthless orator, a wicked sly priest or just a good stupid sheep amongst a large herd (04).

But when Siddhartha leaves his father's house, he waits for the permission of his father in the traditional Indian way, and succeeds in getting his permission for the devotion to his aim in life. In the first chapter itself, Siddhartha rejects the Brahmanical way of ritualistic life. In the second chapter he joins the Samanas. But he realizes that the asceticism does not lead him on the proper path. Through self-denial, and following the ascetic rules he 'killed his senses, he killed his memory, he slipped out of his Self in a thousand different forms. He was animal, carcass, stone, wood, water, and each time he reawakened thus reaching at a conclusion,

Govinda, I believe that among all the Samanas, probably not even one will attain Nirvana. We find consolations; we learn tricks with which we deceive ourselves, but the essential thing the way we do not find (20).

In the following two chapters Hesse introduces Gautama Buddha and his followers in a legendary setting in the 'Jetavana grove, which the rich merchant Anathapindika' had presented to Buddha and his followers. Siddhartha and Govinda listened to the teachings of Buddha. Govinda joins the teacher, but Siddhartha departs from him in search of the 'unity of time', 'overwhelmed by a feeling of icy despair'. He now finds that the world from which he has so far tried to flee is attractive. As Hesse puts it:

That was the last shudder of his awakening, the last pains of birth. Immediately he moved on again and began to walk quickly and impatiently, no longer homewards, no longer to his father, no longer looking backwards (44).

In the next four chapters known as Kamala episode, Siddhartha has been exposed to the pleasures and pain of the worldly man. On his way to the city he meets for the first time the longing for sex. 'Here Hesse is presenting a picture from the classical Indian 'Art of Love' (Misra, 117). Next he proceeds to the city, meets Kamala, a courtesan, learns the art of love from her, discards his beggar's cloth and becomes a successful merchant. In course of his conversations with Kamala in their first meeting, Siddhartha explains that resolution is the key to success in each sphere. Siddhartha explains to her:

That is what Siddhartha learned from the Samanas. It is what fools call magic and what they think is caused by demons. Nothing is caused by demons; there are no demons. Everyone can perform magic, everyone can reach his goal, if he can think, wait and fast (63-64)

In the following chapters Siddhartha's self-analysis is the main theme of Hesse's description. Siddhartha meets Vasudeva, a ferryman, and spends the rest of his life with him. Here Siddhartha learns the 'timeless unity' from the river. At the bank of this river he meets Kamala, Govinda and his son. This is how Hesse reunites the plot. Thus Siddhartha in his own way achieves eternal bliss.

There are uncanny similarities between legendary tale of Buddha and plot construction of Siddhartha, it is found that there is a strong sense of parallelism. Buddha left his wife and child to become an ascetic. Similarly, Siddhartha leaves his wife Kamala and his still unborn child to seek truth. Both of them have spent some time of their lives with the Samanas and have practiced yoga. Revelation came to Buddha under the sacred Bodhi tree, whereas Siddhartha takes important decision under the mango tree. River is the final place in both of their lives where they realize the ultimate truth. These parallel incidents prove to a certain degree that Hesse imitated the legendary life of Buddha in constructing the moral allegory of Siddhartha. But the incidents in the life of Siddhartha have been rearranged in an opposite direction than that of Buddha to meet his purpose, in creating Siddhartha as a protest against Buddhist way. Another important character in the novel is Vasudeva, who plays a dominant role in the life of Siddhartha. Though Vasudeva is portrayed as a simple, unconcerned, lone ferry man, many of his statements lead the reader to believe that Hesse created Vasudeva on the model of Krishna's role in the Bhagavad-Gita. After Siddhartha's revelation, Vasudeva leaves him forever. Before leaving he says

I have waited for this hour, my friend. Now it has arrived, let me go. I have been Vasudeva, the ferryman, for a long time. Now it is over. Farewell hut, Farewell River, farewell Siddhartha (139).

In addition to structuring the novel according to the Buddha's life, Hesse also structures the novel according to various principles found in the Buddha's teachings. In fact, several of the chapters are named after specific religious principles. For example, the chapter titled "Awakening" describes how Siddhartha comes to recognize the Buddhist belief that the path to enlightenment must be rooted in the here and now instead of focusing on other distant or transcendent worlds. In addition, the chapter titled "Samsara" describes how Siddhartha is caught in a continuous cycle of death and rebirth because he has not yet achieved a state of total enlightenment or Nirvana, and the chapter titled "Om" describes how Siddhartha eventually escapes from Samsara to achieve a vision of the essential unity of all things. These chapter titles accurately describe the spiritual development that Siddhartha undergoes in each chapter, and these stages of spiritual development provide the structure that organizes both the novel's development as a narrative and Siddhartha's development as a character.

Siddhartha is one of the names of the historical Gotama, the life of Hesse's character; Siddhartha resembles that of his historical counterpart to some extent. Siddhartha is by no means a fictional life of Buddha, but it does contain numerous references to Buddha and his teachings (Misra 114).

Both Hinduism and Buddhism religions stem from India before the Common Era and hold ranks as being one of the top five main religions around the world, therefore, having similar origins and philosophies. Hinduism places third as an organized religion and is much older than Buddhism. Hinduism and Buddhism have lasted for centuries and today is widely practiced among the world. Hinduism is considered to be monotheistic as they believe in the idea of cosmos being thus god takes variation of forms and manifestations, whereas, Buddhism is believed to be non-theistic, which is not belief in God. Hinduism has not been able to identified a founder as it dates one of the oldest history, while, Lord Buddha (recognized as Siddhartha Gautama), was the founder of Buddhism. Buddhism is founded on the knowledge of Lord Buddha which had been a Hindu before achieving Nirvana, and thus you find many

similarities and differences in festivals and feast such as worship, birth of a child and festivals of lights

Therefore, no one can deny the strong influence of Indian culture and philosophy on Hesse's *Siddhartha*. However, it is equally true that Hesse's intention was not to write an authentic Indian work based on Indian religious thought and philosophy. Hesse had faith in his own views which he tries to put down through the protagonist of *Siddhartha*. This work ensures development in Hesse as a writer and reflects his own ideas and beliefs based on the world religion. Hence at the end *Siddhartha*'s departure from the world of spirit to the world of senses shows Hesse's thought that represents a complete change in *Siddhartha*'s experience of reality. *Siddhartha*'s experience of Samsara is an important aspect of spiritual development. The affection between Kamala and *Siddhartha* is rewarded by a son who enables *Siddhartha* to reflect and understand the proper relationship between the son and the father. Like him, *Siddhartha*'s son too rejects the existence of *Siddhartha* and prefers his own way to lead life. This brings maturity in *Siddhartha*. About the synthesis of spiritual and material world in *Siddhartha*'s life Madison Brown writes:

The awakening in question is that of *Siddhartha*'s sense and his sense experiences of the second epoch are an antithesis to his spiritual experiences of the first epoch. In order to continue with his development from the spiritual into the sensuous, *Siddhartha* must reject maya as illusion and accept it as real in order to experience it. (191)

Through his protagonist's quest, Hesse wants to convey that neither intellectual efforts nor sheer sensual and physical gratification is sufficient to attain self-realization. It needs a synthesis of both in order to cope with the problematic existence. In this novel, Hesse concludes his philosophy convincingly by introducing the emotional value to the protagonist's search. This enables him to achieve his much intended goal of enlightenment.

Siddhartha is known as Hesse's wisdom book. The last part of *Siddhartha* portrays the spiritual progression. It assists Hesse to reemerge in the world of Indian religion and culture which was available to him since childhood. Once again Hesse started indulging in a profound spiritual experience by reading the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita of Hinduism and speeches of Buddha. He also acknowledged the contribution of Chinese Spiritual Tradition and psychoanalysis in bringing him out of the letdown in his career. All these philosophies and thoughts serve as the path of healing and progression for Hesse to complete *Siddhartha*. Hesse's mid-life crisis offered him a non-dogmatic form for his religious beliefs. This non-dogmatic formulation had drawn on the Christian, the Indian, and the Chinese spiritual traditions.

Hence, *Siddhartha*'s modified version of the Moksha state is Hesse's Buddha because *Siddhartha* accepts life in its entirety. It seems that *Siddhartha*'s Moksha reflects Hesse's own modified philosophy which is an amalgamation of Hinduism and Buddhism.

Works Cited

1. Baumann, G. "Hesse and India" *Hesse Journal* 30.2 (2002). 1-10. gss.uceb.edu. Web. 7 July 2018.
2. Brown, Madison. "Toward a Perspective for the Indian Element in Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*" *The German Quarterly* 49.2 (1976). 191-202. *JSTOR*. Web. 4 July 2018.
3. Hesse, Hermann. *The Journey to the East*. London: Owen, 1956. Print.
4. _____. *Siddhartha*. New York: New Directions, 1951. Print.
5. Misra, Bhabagrahi. "An Analysis of Indic Tradition in Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*" *Indian Literature* 11.2 (1968): 111-123. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 July 2018.
6. Ziolkowski, Theodor. *The Novels of Hermann Hesse: A Study in Theme and Structure*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1965.
7. Timpe, Eugene F. "Hesse's *Siddhartha* and the Bhagvad Gita" *Comparative Literature* 22. 4 (1970). 346-357. *JSTOR*. Web. 26 March 2018.