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A Light unto Oneself: An Analysis on *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse

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Abstract: Siddhartha is the critically acclaimed novel of Herman Hesse, a German Novelist who was also a Nobel Laureate. The plot of the novel deals with the question of enlightenment, religious pursuit and most importantly the true nature of wisdom. Knowledge can be imparted but not wisdom. Wisdom can be lived, experienced but cannot be transferred or put into words. This in short is the crux of the novel. In this review, the author has tried his best to cull out this message of self-reliance and experiencing life first-hand as a means of attaining wisdom and not through any religious validation.

Keywords: Siddhartha, Herman Hesse, Buddha and the Masters, Life as a Samana, Kamala the Courtesan, Vasudeva the Ferry Man, Govinda, Wisdom, The Timeless River, Nirvana, *Om* the Sacred Syllable.

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Introduction

Herman Hesse's novel *Siddhartha* is a work of literature, and it is of singular interest to the student of literature, and Hesse in particular because it plays an important role in the development of Hesse and is distinctive in German literature in its presentation of Eastern philosophy. The novel is largely auto-biographical and has an interesting history. Herman Hesse's novels do not have a solid plot around which the action revolves and hence lack suspense or excitement. They are mostly first-person and deal with questions of philosophy of life. Hesse's plot is a medium around which his thoughts are draped, he presents his innermost thoughts and the struggle for an understanding of the great problems of life using the medium as an opportunity. Hesse is, and always has been, a god-seeker; he has a message for his readers, but it demands a careful reading and re-reading of his works to get the maximum benefit of their message. His works are food for thought and are not rather so much for entertainment. They have therefore a very strong appeal for the serious reader but not for the general public that crave excitement and entertainment in place of beauty and depth.

Siddhartha: Some Highlights

India during 6th century BCE. The confluence of the already pre-existing and steady stream of Hinduism and the dawning conception of Buddhism and Jainism. A majority of Indians at the time lived by the Vedas venerating many gods and goddesses. They believed that the outward portrayals of faith such as sacrifices and ceremonies were

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merely ritualistic and superficial substituting for substance and distracting from the core of Hinduism's values. One of these believers was Siddhartha Gautama who left his luxurious palace seeking enlightenment, eventually becoming the Buddha and preached the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. Hermann Hesse was compelled to capture the essence of this dynamic period with his novel *Siddhartha*. Hesse was interested in the east due to his parent's missionary work in India however rather than bringing Western ideals to India he created a work of Eastern philosophy to present to the Western world.

Hesse's story follows Siddhartha, not Gautama Siddhartha but Siddhartha the son of a Brahmin. Brahmins are the venerated caste of people reflective of the ultimate reality, Brahman. Siddhartha is a good obedient son and the joy of his parents, but one day he awakens to the realization that his life is empty, that his soul has been left discontented by his dedication to duty and the strict adherence to all religious ordinances. He wants to find God who so far has been to him only an abstract idea, far and unreal, although he tried to serve him with the earnestness of heart to the best of his understanding. Siddhartha realizes that he has come to a dead-end and that he must break away. So he leaves home renouncing all that he had loved and treasured, all the comforts, giving up his high social position and becomes a *Samana*, an itinerant monk, with no earthly possessions, accompanied by his best friend Govinda who decides to follow Siddhartha. By fasting and exposing his body to the severities of the weather, Siddhartha resolves to empty himself completely of all physical desires so that he may hear the voice of God speaking to his soul, and that he may find peace.

He believed that *“Once all of my self was overcome and had died, once every desire and every urge was silent in the heart, then the ultimate part of me had to awake, the innermost of my being, which is no longer my-self, the great secret”* (Hesse, 1951: 18). Siddhartha with Govinda by his side practices the art of escaping himself shifting into other animal’s bodies but he finds

“Once all of my self was overcome and had died, once every desire and every urge was silent in the heart, then the ultimate part of me had to awake, the innermost of my being, which is no longer my-self, the great secret”

himself at the end of each cycle perpetually returning to himself. As a Samana, he has not come closer to his goal of happiness and peace. It appears to him that his religious zeal and commitment is nothing but a form of self-deception and that the whole time he had been running from himself. The penances and difficulties which he had endured as an itinerant monk had not brought him closer to God. He recognizes this way of life as futile and he hears reports of the Buddha, the enlightened one of whom it was said had attained that divine state of blissfulness, where the chain of reincarnations had been cut asunder, and one who has entered Nirvana. After three years of voluntary physical and mental torture, he resolves to leave the *samanas*.

Govinda and Siddhartha hear the Buddha speak at Jetavana grove. Siddhartha speaks with the Buddha and acknowledges that there are no flaws in the Buddhist teachings but he believes that enlightenment cannot be taught but must be experienced. It becomes clear to him that the way of salvation cannot be taught, that words and creeds are empty sounds that each man must find the way by himself, the secret of the experience cannot be passed on. Therefore, following the Buddha would be equally fruitless as his asceticism. Govinda stays with the

Buddha and so Siddhartha cuts the last link with his past. He is now all alone. And he comes to the immediate realization that all his life he had lived a separate existence, and that he never had pursued a real understanding of his fellow people, and that he understood very little of the world and of life around him.

All of this, a thousand-fold and colourful, had always been there, always the sun and the moon had shone, always rivers had roared and bees had buzzed, but in former times all of this had been nothing more to Siddhartha than a fleeting, deceptive veil before his eyes, looked upon in distrust, destined to be penetrated and destroyed by thought, since it was not the essential existence, since this essence lay beyond, on the other side of, the visible. But now, his liberated eyes stayed on this side, he saw and became aware of the visible, sought to be at home in this world, did not search for the true essence, did not aim at a world beyond. Beautiful was this world, looking at it thus, without searching, thus simply, thus childlike. Beautiful were the moon and the stars, beautiful was the stream and the banks, the forest and the rocks, the goat and the gold beetle, the flower and the butterfly. Beautiful and lovely it was, thus to walk through the world, thus childlike, thus awoken, thus open to what is near, thus without distrust (Hesse, 1951: 49).

Siddhartha, for the first time in many years' perceives about him and the beauty of the world. The world, from which he took flight, appears to him attractive and good. He comes to a realization that he must not seek to flee from life but face it and live it. This is the shocking new discovery Siddhartha makes and so he resolves to leave the forest. He arrives at the city where he sees at the gate the beautiful courtesan, Kamala. He wins her favor and she becomes his teacher, imparting him the ways of the world. He castoffs his beggar's clothes and in short time becomes a successful merchant. But his heart is neither in his love

nor in his business; all the pleasures of the world couldn't still the yearning of his soul. He finds the world defective, too, and, moreover, he realizes after a few years that the worldly things, the acquiring of wealth and possessions have slowly taken control of his life, that he is being confined and distraught by the necessity of making money in order to satisfy his extravagant lifestyle, that he has become a hectic and unfree man whose thoughts dwell lesser on the eternal things. So he breaks away from all that he had acquired, renounces once again everything behind him. Dispassionate by his materialistic living, he leaves Kamala and roams into the forest attempting to drown himself in the river but he becomes spellbound by the river.

Siddhartha sits for a long time at the bank of the river and lets his whole life pass in review before him. He finds that even the not so good things which he had done currently had been essential as an experience in order to bring him to an understanding of what life really was. But he also becomes disheartened because all his endeavours until now had not given him the anticipated insight and peace of soul. There was nothing left in life that might allure him or challenge him or comfort him; he finds himself chained to an inevitable chain of causality, to repeated incarnations, each of which marks a new beginning of suffering. He doubts whether he will ever be able to break this chain and whether he will ever be able to enter Nirvana. He fears the uncertainty of this prospect and is at the point of drowning himself when the sacred word *OM* comes to his mind. He grasps the foolishness of his attempt to try to end his sufferings and find peace by destroying his body. Siddhartha realizes that life is indestructible and that all life and creation is one and indivisible; that trees and birds are indeed his near and dear ones; he sees his folly in trying persistently to do something instead of just to be.

Free of all his materialistic anxieties he joins Vasudeva, the ferryman, who teaches him the great secret of the river; that the concept of time is non-existent. The river just is, for the river there is no past or future or beginning or end; the river is only the present. The river is always in the present everywhere at once upstream and downstream reflective of life.

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Vasudeva tells Siddhartha that happiness is real only when cause and effect; that is time; has ceased to exist for him. Siddhartha had always understood that it is not about finding perfection, but finding completion.

When Siddhartha left Kamala she had known that she would bear him a child, but she did not tell Siddhartha because she realized that she should not hold him back, that Siddhartha had to go his own way. After he left, she too felt the vanity of her life; so one day she decides to seek the Buddha. Her way leads her to the river where, unbeknownst to her, Siddhartha was living. She stops at the river to rest but is bitten by a poisonous snake. Siddhartha finds her dying and recognizes her. After he and Vasudeva had buried her, he takes her son. Kamala before dying had revealed to Siddhartha that he is the father of the boy. Siddhartha feels deeply the loss of Kamala. But he does not feel sadness in his heart, for he has come to an understanding that life is imperishable and indestructible. Kamala has entered a new phase of existence and Siddhartha could feel her in every blossom of a flower and in every breeze that swishes past him.

Kamala is not separated from him, never would she be. He feels that she is nearer to him than ever before. Siddhartha dedicates himself to the caretaking of his son but he finds it painful to understand that his love is not appreciated and his endeavours are rejected. His son wants to live his own life and does not want the life Siddhartha thinks best for him. Thus, in the same manner, Siddhartha broke away from his father in his youth, his son breaks away from Siddhartha leaving him broken-hearted. In his anguish, Siddhartha finds comfort and a sense of unity in the river. With the loss of his son, every fetter that bound Siddhartha to this world is cut asunder.

Finally, after learning his many lessons from the river, Vasudeva teaches him one last lesson. He takes him out to the river and there, Siddhartha learns that the whole world is a continual chain of cause and effect, everything is connected. He understands that this must come to pass, so that he would stop fighting with what he considered fate, but surrender himself wholeheartedly to his destiny; thus, at last, Siddhartha overcomes suffering at last and has fulfilled the final step of his completion. Vasudeva touches his shoulder and Siddhartha's soul is transported into unity with the world. Siddhartha has entered Nirvana; now peace has come to him at last. Vasudeva now leaves merging with the forest.

Siddhartha resuming his role as ferryman meets Govinda. Govinda, long separated from his friend Siddhartha returns to him untouched by nirvana. Siddhartha tells Govinda that he has not succeeded because he oriented himself towards a specific goal. By his very act of seeking he has missed the obvious. Siddhartha reveals that knowledge can be taught but not wisdom and that enlightenment must be individually found and experienced. Siddhartha asks Govinda to kiss on his forehead and then and there Govinda sees a stream of faces and experiences the final face, the Buddha. Siddhartha has

transformed into the Buddha and Govinda bows at his feet as Siddhartha rises finally revealing that he has attained enlightenment.

A Critical Analysis

Hesse, through the novel *Siddhartha* aims to present a philosophical perspective that shows humanity's deviance from true religious focus. Initially Hesse presents Siddhartha as the typical child of the Indian society of that time characterized by constant seeking of knowledge. However, Siddhartha eventually realizes that seeking knowledge is only a distraction, much like the ritual sacrifices and ceremonies practiced by the upper class in India. He states, "I searched Brahman, I was willing to dissect myself and peel of all of its layers to find the core of all peels in its unknown interior, the unknown life, the divine parts, the ultimate part, I have lost myself in the process" (Hesse, 1951: 42).

Hesse emphasizes this through the foil relationship between Siddhartha and Govinda. Siddhartha who follows his own path in search of nothing reaches enlightenment whereas Govinda who deliberately seeks for religious validation never reaches Nirvana. Hesse further emphasizes the importance of self-reliance and religion through the parallels and juxtaposition of Siddhartha's character in *Siddhartha* Gautama. Siddhartha the Buddha and Siddhartha the protagonist of the novel, share the same name foreshadowing the protagonist's own enlightenment. Both the individuals are of high social rank though Siddhartha is of a higher caste. Both resolved to leave their fathers to become ascetics. Siddhartha's parting is much more amicable in comparison to the Buddha's. Both leave their Gurus or masters to go on their own journey. Though there are many parallels between their lives, there are

slight juxtaposing differences thereby proving the point that Siddhartha is destined for enlightenment due to his symbolic connection with the Buddha. His life path is still slightly different, as enlightenment cannot be reached by following but by experiencing life in one's own way.

Hesse states that “all knowledge of the wisest ones had been collected here in magic words, pure as honey collected by bees. No, not to be looked down upon was the tremendous amount of enlightenment which lay here collected and preserved by innumerable generations of wise Brahmins” (Hesse, 1951: 11). (Krishnamurti, n.d.) But where were the Brahmins who had succeeded and not just knowing this deepest of all knowledge, but also to live it? Hesse uses the simile comparing the Brahmins to bees as they are merely collecting knowledge rather than acquiring it from within and experiencing it proving to be futile. Hesse continues to extend the simile describing the Buddhist followers as bees in their yellow robes, showing that, just like the Brahmins, their efforts in learning to become enlightened are in vain. Finally, Hesse uses the symbolism of Vasudeva the ferryman in order to show that following the doctrine will not lead to enlightenment. Vasudeva is the foreshadow of God as his name Vasudeva is reflective of the Vedas that Indians live by, symbolizing Hesse's perspective that true holiness or enlightenment could not be extracted from holy books but from experience and Vasudeva being a physical embodiment of that idea.

Conclusion

After finishing the book, the author cannot help but ruminate on the words of wisdom that sounded from the lips of J Krishnamurti on August 3, 1929, at Ommen, Holland. He made the following ground-breaking statement to dissolve the cult or religion that was built around him proclaiming him as the world teacher.

“I maintain that Truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect. That is my point of view, and I adhere to that absolutely and unconditionally. Truth, being limitless, unconditioned, unapproachable by any path whatsoever, cannot be organized; nor should any organization be formed to lead or to coerce people along any particular path” (Krishnamurti, n.d.). (Buddha, 2015)

With this, J Krishnamurti stood his ground till the very end, that Truth or Wisdom or Enlightenment is not a product or a thing to be bought, sold, received, given or transferred. This is exactly and more interestingly the parting message of the Buddha to his disciples and followers on his death bed. “I am not your light, I am not your authority. You’ve been with me a long time now, be a light unto yourself; betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast to the Truth. Look not for refuge to anyone besides yourselves” (Buddha, 2015).

Siddhartha’s understanding of this truth could be recognized when he gave this parting message to Govinda. “Wisdom cannot be passed on. Wisdom which a wise man tries to pass on to someone always sounds like foolishness” (Hesse, 1951: 146). Ultimately Siddhartha’s journey culminated in this final epiphany. Hesse through this award winning novel presents the idea that life should not be investigated, dissected or explained. Life’s meaning should not be sought after, rather left simply be seen and appreciated. This ultimate lesson is only learned by experiencing life’s beauty first-hand.

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