

Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922): A Soulful Synthesis of Tradition and Modernity

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Abstract

Siddhartha, the quintessential lyric novel of Hermann Hesse, was commenced on 1919 and published in 1922. Thus, belonging to the post-world-war era, it addresses the wilderness with psycho-philosophical meditation and spiritual radiance. It, like Hesse's other works, speaks of a journey— '*wandern*'—not in the outside world but in the "way within". As an 'ambivalent modernist' Hesse might stand independent of the established mainstream genre of European Novel: his was a search for the self and here Jungian psychoanalysis, expressionism and a sort of neo-romanticism coalescing with a constant conscious learning of the theosophical writings of the East helped his novels reflect a rare inward-directed radical individualism. In a divided age, Hesse's *Siddhartha*, captures the union of various dualities—sensual and spiritual, emotion and reason, the self and the world, Nirvana and Sansara. Though the name as well as the primary events of the novel evoke the life and philosophies of Goutama Buddha, this work of art via its protagonist's odyssey ultimately transcends the boundaries to arrive at a far more subtle and novel mystical juncture where the individual consciousness or *Atman* merges with the all-pervading consciousness or *Brahman*. In my proposed paper, I wish to explore these intricate nuances of the novel that moves us deeply even after a century.

Keywords: Modernism, Neo-romanticism, Individualism, Indian Philosophy



“In every rebellion is to be found the metaphysical demand for unity, the impossibility of capturing it, and the construction of a substitute universe.... The demands of rebellion are really, in part, aesthetic demands.”

Albert Camus, *The Rebel*: 127

As expressed in his *Conjectural Biography* (1925), the First World War happened to lead the renowned German poet-painter-novelist Hermann Hesse to a crucial juncture—the war shattered the solidarity in which he had believed to live in his own world peacefully. Hesse’s ‘*Siddhartha*’ which was commenced in 1919 and published in 1922 bears testimony to the author’s longing for external and internal harmony—it is an intellectual and psychological reaction against the turbulent socio-political post-war scenario. In fact, Hesse found himself sharing a common archetypal agony by detecting the chaos not only in the outer world but in himself. The intermittent production of *Siddhartha*—the gap of a period of one and a half years was related to the emotional upheavals of his private life and Hesse considered his personal crisis to be essentially interrelated to the evil hovering over the world. Psychoanalytic sessions with Dr. Lang under the supervision of Jung truly helped him at this stage to come out of the writer’s block and mental predicament. So, for the deeply conflicted mind of Hesse, the only way to encounter this was to take the cavernous path of the self—‘*Der Weg nach Innen*’— ‘The Way Within’. The study of the comparative religions and the earlier experience of psychoanalysis helped him to look into the fragmented reality through the inner consciousness. Thus, from this period onwards the non-conformist rebellious individuals reign Hesse’s books and they all take recourse to the realm of myth, magic, dreams and legends. *Siddhartha* is the acme of this pattern, following the genre of ‘legend’ with hagiographical elements and stands exemplary in expressing Hesse’s deeper psychic and spiritual insights.

The works of many a writer and artist of early twentieth century reflected a common concern for the collapse of the conventional notions of reality. With the advent of novel theories of Einstein in science and those of Freud and Jung in psychology, life, at large, became relative and centreless. And, finally when the war befell, human existence at social, political, economic spheres turned chaotic and meaningless. Literary thinkers were concomitantly touched by that mayhem and thus in the notes to *The Waste Land* (published in 1922, the same year of *Siddhartha*) we find T.S. Eliot acknowledging his indebtedness to Hesse whose *Blick ins Chaos* [*A Look into Chaos*] (1920) was said to inspire many of Eliot’s lines.

In *Siddhartha*, Hesse faced this “decline of Europe” with the motif of “*wandern*” i.e. wandering or walking: this is the journey inside the self and then crossing the boundaries of the self, i.e., the *Atman* in order to explore the vast expanse of the cosmos with all its minutiae and, ultimately, to be merged with the absolute unity i.e. the all-pervading *Brahman*. Hesse’s hero has an inkling of this harmony right at the outset: “He already understood how to know Atman in his innermost being, indestructible, at one with the universe” (Hesse 1922: 3). Wandering becomes metaphorical here—“Thy soul is the entire world” (ibid: 6) — as it marks the author’s own struggle for adaption with the changes in himself along with the socio-cultural changes of the outer world and so in a broader way, wandering acquires the form of haven for the artist giving him relief from the evils of life. For *Siddhartha*, however, walking is the manifestation of the discovery of his

selfhood, his breaking away from the status quo. Whenever he is fettered in some stasis wandering ushers in movement and freedom—here wandering/ walking becomes equivalent to the philosophical act of thinking in Nietzschean sense: “the thinking man, walking along slowly... overcome by that thought; and instantly another thought sprang from that one, a new thought: ‘...I was willing to dismember my ego and peel it apart in order to find the core of all peels in its unknown innermost essence...’” (ibid: 36). Siddhartha walks away again and again—from his parental home, from the Samanas, from Buddha, from Govinda, from Kamala and her city — only to reach by the riverside where he is destined to meet and ferry other wanderers. His wandering is suggestive of his inner growth and transformation as a radical individual and the following allusion of snake corroborates to it: “Slowly walking away, Siddhartha pondered. He realized he was no longer a youth, he had become a man. He realized that one thing had left him like the old skin that leaves the serpent... the wish to have teachers and hear teachings...” (ibid: 35). Siddhartha’s words by the river reminds us of the *Upanishada*’s chants of ‘*Charaiveti*’: “I am going nowhere. I am merely on the move. I am pilgriming” (ibid: 82). Wandering finally emerges as the sublime emblem of journey toward *Nirvana*—the last leap from the deceptive hiatus separating parts from the whole, matter from the spirit, nature from the soul.

Hesse’s *Siddhartha* is the biography of the soul—“the search for the source of the self within the self” (ibid: xix). The wandering soul of Siddhartha takes halt at the possibility of newer experience and absorb every oppositional force lying in his path like a “waiting vessel” (ibid: 5). Throughout the novel Hesse vis-a-vis Siddhartha tries to synthesise the polarities inherent in every sphere of life—self/ other, self/ world, sense/ intellect, physical/ spiritual, past/ future or *Samsara/ Nirvana* and many more in terms of social, religious or psychological aspects, and he does so by artistic visions or mystical inspirations. In the very beginning when he was just an innocent Brahmin practising ritualistic rites, he was already in search for the enigmatic presence called *Atman* that was not flesh and blood? ... ‘was not thinking or consciousness’ (ibid) either. Surmounting the dichotomy of flesh and mind later Siddhartha and his friend Govinda visit Siddhartha, the Gautama in whom he discovers union of the mundane and the marvellous: ‘nothing seemed to set him apart from the hundreds of other monks... His silent face was neither cheerful nor woeful: he seemed to be smiling inwardly...But his face and his steps, his silently lowered gaze, his silently hanging arm, and every last finger on his silently hanging hand spoke of peace, spoke of perfection...’ (ibid: 26-27). Taking departure from both Govinda and Gautama Buddha, Siddhartha steps in his next phase and a magical illumination reinforces his idea of consolidation of dichotomies in a deeper way: “Both thoughts and senses were pretty things; beyond them the ultimate meaning was concealed” (ibid: 45). Moreover, before his entrance into the life of the senses, Siddhartha’s dream signifies the elemental reconciliation of the male/ female duality as Govinda is transformed into a woman and his camaraderie with Govinda mingles with his hidden urge for the sensual love of a woman: “The milk from that breast tasted sweet and strong. It tasted of woman and man, of sun and woods, of creature and flower, of every fruit, of every pleasure” (ibid: 45-46). Twice Siddhartha comes across Vasudeva, the ferryman beside the river and their meeting is emblematic of the unison of apparent natural polarities. Vasudeva is a mystic figure containing both the innocence of a child and the experience of an aged venerable man— “brightly emanated to him from Vasudeva’s old childlike face: harmony, knowledge of the eternal perfection of the world, smiling,



oneness” (ibid: 114). The flowing stream is representative of the fluidity of life force—it is the mysterious icon of “endless change and changeless presence” (Boulby 1967: 148): “The many-voiced song of the river resounded softly. Siddhartha stared into the water, and images appeared to him in the flow: ... They all merged into the flow, they all flowed as a river toward the goal, ardent, desiring, suffering...” (Hesse 1922: 117-118). Actually, the river is also symbolic of receptivity and submission which is indispensable for one’s realization of the unity amidst multiplicity and the passive act of ‘listening’ to the flow of it is the affirmation of such surrender: “Everything together was the river of events, was the music of life. And when Siddhartha listened attentively to this river, listened to this song of a thousand voices... heard the wholeness, the oneness—then the great song of the thousand voices consisted of a single word, which was "om": perfection” (ibid: 119). Vasudeva and the river, too, then merge with each other at this magical moment of immaculateness: “Radiant was Vasudeva's smile, it hovered, luminous, over all the wrinkles in his old face just as the om hovered over all the voices of the river” (ibid).

Siddhartha’s voyage to the interior of the soul locates him in a two-fold conflicting ground—his soul is at variance with the external world and is often at war with itself also. At the end of his journey, Siddhartha is seen to be at peace with himself and the outer world and that designates his true deliverance. Siddhartha now considers a mere stone as valuable as any soulful being as all are parts of that omnipresent entirety: “This stone is a stone, it is also an animal, it is also God, it is also the Buddha, I love and honor it not because it could become this or that someday, but because it is everything long since and always...” (ibid: 126). The conceptions of the *Isha-Upanishad* seemed to be echoed here:

“*Isha vasyamidam sarvam yat kincha jagatyan jagat...*”

[The God resides into and envelopes every living and non-living elements of this world]

So, Existence may fundamentally be ‘*Maya*’, but all the particles are wrapped up by that illusory veil and all the opposites are replica of each other: “Whether things are semblances or not, I too am a semblance, after all, and so they are always my peers. That is what makes them so dear to me and venerable...” (ibid: 118). The origin of this recognition of Hesse’s hero can be traced back again to *Koushitaki-Upanishad*:

“*Bhutasya bhutasya twamatmahasi/ yastwamasi sohamasmi iti...*”

[I am the soul of every conscious and unconscious being in this world/ I am the same that you are...]

Hesse’s *Siddhartha* is replete with such thoughts from the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-Gita*. In fact, Hesse encountered the contemporary disintegration by the fusion of his Western impulses with Eastern insights, for since his childhood he had had the opportunity to gain inspirations from different religious philosophies. In *My Faith* (1931), he himself reminisced these issues: “I experienced religion in two forms, as the child and grandchild of pious upright Protestants and as a reader of Indian revelations in which I give pride of place to the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the sermons of Buddha... From early childhood I lived just as much in the atmosphere of Indian spirituality as I did in that of Christianity” (Boulby 1967: 122). Hesse’s visit to the East in 1911 strengthened his connections to India and his “Visit from India” (1922) mirrors the same impulse that we



get from *Siddhartha*—a belief in the harmonious existence of all being in this universe. Again, there can be found the shades of the age-old German Romantic tradition in the language and constitution of this novel and its further utilisation of legend-as-structure is befitting to that—the figure of Siddhartha stands both for the Western romantic wanderer as well as for the Eastern nomadic mystic. Though the name of the protagonist and the course of the action are resonant of the Buddhist ideologies, it should be “seen in the context of Hesse’s movement away from Buddhism not toward it, characterised also by the reference to his increased interest in the multiple Indian Gods. Hesse was throughout his life probably more influenced by Hinduism than by Buddhism” (Boulby 1967: 137). Indeed, the novel makes a kind of revisionist endeavour in relation to the philosophies of Buddhism—Siddhartha’s evaluations on Buddha’s doctrines at the closing section seem to show that: “When the sublime Gautama spoke and taught about the world, he had to divide it into samsara and Nirvana, into illusion and truth, into sorrow and salvation... But the world itself, the Being around us and within us, is never one-sided. Never is a man or a deed all samsara or all Nirvana, never is a man all saintly or all sinful. It seems otherwise because we are prey to the illusion that time is a reality. But time is not real, Govinda; I have experienced this time and time again. And if time is not real, then the span that seems to lie between world and eternity, between sorrow and bliss, between evil and good is also an illusion...” (Hesse 1922: 124). Really, the trajectory of Siddhartha’s self-realisation stands itself as the paradigm of Hesse’s revisionary principles: unlike the historical Siddhartha, Hesse’s Siddhartha comes out as a spiritual seeker who is blissfully unified with the God in Christian sense, or with the Brahman in the Hindu point of view. The final moments of epiphany in the novel thus illumine Kamala and Govinda—they not only envision Buddha in their Siddhartha but also remain witness to Siddhartha’s unification with all other worldly beings: “He no longer saw his friend Siddhartha's face; instead he saw other faces, many, a long row, a streaming river of faces, hundreds, thousands, which all came and faded, and yet seemed all to be there at once, which kept changing and being renewed, and yet which all were Siddhartha... this smile of Siddhartha's was exactly the same, was exactly the identical still, fine, impenetrable, perhaps kindly, perhaps quizzical, wise, thousand fold smile of Gautama, the Buddha, as he himself, Govinda, had seen it with awe a hundred times. This, Govinda knew, was how the Perfect Ones smiled” (ibid: 130-131).

To end with, *Siddhartha* is that quintessential work of art which in spite of its archetypal legendary qualities establishes itself as a distinctive modern piece of writing. As Eliot’s *The Waste Land* advocates the regeneration of peace amidst the all-encompassing destruction, Hesse’s *Siddhartha* is designed, thematically as well as technically, to stimulate that aesthetic and spiritual urge in its readers which can arouse a sense of accord among all the ills and fragmentations of our modern life. Truly commented Freedman that “Hesse created an atmosphere that radiated beyond his immediate present, and left its mark on later, similarly insecure generations...” (ibid: vii-viii).



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