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Life History of Buddha as Reflected in Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*

J . Santhosh Priyaa

A Historical Novel

The novel *Siddhartha* written by Hermann Hesse, a German writer and Nobel Prize winner, mirrors the life of Buddha. Hesse opines that the core of man's existence is to unfold himself and to be himself, through the protagonist Siddhartha. According to M.H. Abrahms, "The historical novel not only takes its setting and some character and events from history, but makes the historical events and issue crucial for the central character"(194).

The Focus

In the novel, *Siddhartha*, a Brahmin's son, who wants to be enlightened meets Buddha and His preaching helps him to take a right path to achieve his goal. A parallel is drawn between the Buddha's disciple and Siddhartha's friend Govinda.

The Plot

The plot of *Siddhartha* was sketched from the incidents in Buddha's life. Hesse has added the pads of creativity to mould the character Siddhartha. Before renunciation, Buddha's name was "Siddhartha". When the etymology indicates that in Sanskrit, 'Siddha' means 'attained'; 'artha' means 'wealth' or 'meaning'. It refers to the "one who had attained his goal" (Misra 116).

As the success of a man lies in his achievement and as the central figure desires to attain Nirvana like Buddha did at a young age, Hesse named his hero as Siddhartha. Though Siddhartha had a healthy and happy childhood, "... restless thoughts came flowing to him from the river" (*Siddhartha* 5).

Slowly it is revealed to the reader that the quest for the self is intrinsic in Siddhartha. So he opted to live a detached life in the forest with the ascetics called Samanas. He mastered the art of ejaculating the Self. As he was unable to find something worthy, he quit the life of a Samana too. After conversing with Buddha at Jetavana grove, he decided not to follow any doctrine so as to achieve Self-Realization and to seek salvation in his own way like the Buddha. He plunged into the ecstasy of Samsara for a period of twenty years. Later he gave up pleasures and returned to Vasudeva, a ferryman and spent his time for the next twenty years by the river. Finally he got illuminated and then began illuminate his friend Govinda.

The historical Buddha was a prince and his childhood was happy. As soon as he realized the impermanency of life through disease and death, he renounced his parents, wife and son and went in search of the Ultimate Truth. He found out that ultimate nirvana was to be obtained through his own efforts, not through the practice of any ritual or learning under the tutelage of ascetics. He attained Nirvana under the "Bothi" tree. He preached the Four Noble Truth and Eight Fold Path.

Our protagonist Siddhartha's father compares Siddhartha as "the prince among Brahmins" (*Siddhartha* 4), who had a happy childhood. He rebelled against the ritualistic Brahminical approach. Siddhartha forsook Kamala when she was pregnant. He realized his folly of indulging in Samsara under the mango tree. He realized Truth from the river.

The Structure of the Novel

The novel is divided into two parts. The first part consists of four chapters. The second part consists of eight chapters. This structure represents the Four Noble Truth as the first part and the Eight Fold Path as the second part.

Encounter with the Historical Buddha

Hesse has contributed a chapter, on “Gotama” in which a slice of Buddha’s life is glimpsed. Siddhartha and his childhood friend Govinda renounced Samanism and went to meet Buddha, the Illustrious One, who was in Jetavana grove. They witnessed all the monks and disciples including the Buddha begging for alms once in a day. The food which the Buddha ate would not have satisfied even a bird. Siddhartha quickly identified Gotama in yellow robe. “His peaceful countenance was neither happy nor sad. He seemed to be smiling gently inwardly, with a secret smile, not unlike that of a healthy child; he walked along, peacefully, quickly” (*Siddhartha* 27). The very appearance of Buddha revealed that He was an enlightened Soul. Gotama preached the Four Noble Truth and the Eight Fold Path, to help man to attain Nirvana.

A Flaw? Difference of Opinion

Siddhartha conversed with Buddha and found a flaw in his teaching. He argued that after all the Buddha attained Nirvana without following any doctrine. Moreover, one could not express everything in words to describe his hour of salvation. So, our protagonist Siddhartha decided to achieve his goal in his own way, without seeking or following any doctrine. He had a plunge in Samsara and finally quit Samsara to lead a life of a ferryman. He learned from the river and attained salvation through Vasudeva.

Sign of Self-Realization?

When Siddhartha attained Self-Realization, Vasudeva threw a radiant smile, which was similar to that of Buddha’s beatific smile. This smile was reflected in Siddhartha’s and Govinda’s after their realization. The beatific smile is a symbol of Absolute satisfaction. As the radiant smile of Vasudeva, Siddhartha and Govinda was apparent with Buddha’s, it signifies that the legacy of Buddha’s smile has been passed on to the Self- Realized people.

Ananda and Govinda

Buddha had a disciple named Ananda, who was also His care-taker for twenty years. In the novel Govinda, the friend, servant and lance – bearer of Siddhartha, could be compared to Buddha’s disciple Ananda. Buddha’s childhood was witnessed by Ananda like Govinda, who witnessed Siddhartha’s childhood. Ananda was a cousin to Buddha where as Govinda was a Brahmin’s son and good friend of Siddhartha. As soon as Buddha attained Nirvana, Ananda became His disciple. Govinda joined a firm-hand with Siddhartha at a young age and they adopted the same decision to quit their parents and to live a detached life in the forest with Samanas. They assiduously learned to lead a life of a Samana. When Buddha was in death-bed, he said that Ananda had been prepared to attain Realization and he would attain it. Buddha’s words as expressed in Buddha Dharma Meditation Association Incorporated says,

Ananda, for a long time you have been in my presence, showing loving- kindness with body, speech and mind, helpfully, blessedly, whole-heartedly, and untiringly. You have made much merit Ananda. Make an effort and very soon you will be free from defilements (58).

After the Death of the Buddha

After Buddha's death, 500 enlightened monks convened a Council to collect Buddha's teachings and they wanted Ananda to be present because he knew very well about Buddha. Unfortunately Ananda did not attain Nirvana until the previous day of the Council despite his continual efforts to meditate. That evening Ananda was determined to attain nirvana, so he meditated sincerely till night. As he did not taste the fruit of it, he decided to sleep and when his head touched the pillow, he attained enlightenment. Ananda attained enlightenment after Buddha's death, whereas Govinda was illuminated by Siddhartha. Govinda had compassion towards humanity like Ananda. Both Ananda and Govinda lived for many years.

Siddhartha, like Buddha shows an untrammelled individuality. They gave up their princely stature and realized the Ultimate Truth. Through the glasses of Buddha's life, Hesse has visualized Siddhartha. Thus the life history of Buddha is reflected in Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*.

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