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**Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* -
A Dualist Spiritual Journey**

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The Eastern Connection

The Nobel Prize winner German poet and novelist Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* depicts the duality of spirit and nature, body verses mind and the individual's spiritual search outside the restrictions of the society. Flesh and spirit are two conflicting components in all of Hesse's novels.

His novel *Siddhartha* is about the Enlightenment of the East, the glory of Atman, the self and self-realization without mixing in Western thought. India was one of the most influential conditioning factors in Hesse's childhood. He was deeply affected by the spirituality of India, as he himself mentions: "From the time I was a child I breathed in and absorbed the spiritual side of India just as deeply as Christianity" (Zilkowski, 1965: 147). His *Siddhartha* is the manifestation of it. Henry and Garland Mary observe "In *Siddhartha* Hesse gives poetic expression to Indian philosophy" (Henry, 1976:381). Thus, the whole book has symbolic undertone that provides the novel its final meaning.

Symbolic Images

The provision of symbolic or metaphorical images within a work of art is essentially a matter of invention or of technique. Hesse has used certain symbols and images to convey his vision of spirituality. In *Siddhartha* through the journey of Siddhartha a whole range of the philosophy and thought of the East is subtly explored as a way of life, as a breath of existence by Hesse. Through the journey of Siddhartha Hesse makes us

have an over-view of both the cultural and religious codes of our land. Symbolism in one form or another has been used by nearly every great novelist and poet.

According to W.H. Alden, “A Symbol is felt to be much more before any possible meaning is consciously recognized, i.e. an object or event which is felt to be more important than reason can immediately explain” (Auden, 1950: 21). This is true with Hesse. The true success of Hesse’s symbolic presentation of ideas is that it stimulates the unconscious or sub-conscious apprehension of ideas. It takes us to different heights and depths of meanings.

A Transcendental Vision

In *Siddhartha* Hesse presents a transcendental vision where Siddhartha’s journey acquires a symbolic undertone and the spiritual quest theme culminates into a transcendental experience which is quite difficult to communicate in ordinary words. Hesse, an eminent personality in the sphere of German literature had an innate zeal to help ordinary people move towards some awareness of the depths of spiritual development which forms the central symbolic theme of the novel *Siddhartha*.

In spite of living among adverse conditions and various kinds of temptations Siddhartha ultimately reaches his goal of self-realization. As already mentioned earlier this process of self-realization or spiritual fulfillment is quite difficult to convey in ordinary words. Hesse has turned to nature symbolism to communicate the same. This lends the novel a deep spiritual vision. Hesse projects it through the use the symbols and images. The major symbols used by Hesse are namely water, river, and the symbolic names of characters as well as other similar devices.

Spiritual Conflicts and Self-realization

The self-realization of Siddhartha becomes possible only after intense spiritual conflicts and moral awareness. Many obstacles and distractions come in the way of Siddhartha’s spiritual journey, which are dispelled finally. Siddhartha attains spiritual liberation and balance of mind only after self-examination, self-exploration and heart- searching, which is very similar to the Hindu belief as explained in Patanjali’s Yoga-sutras. His *Siddhartha*, thus, shows the influence of Indian thought and sensibility. Henry and Garland Mary express the same view: “In *Siddhartha* Hesse gives poetic expression to Indian philosophy” (Henry, 1976:381). Thus the whole book has symbolic undertone that provides the novel its final meaning.

Symbolism of the title *Siddhartha*

First of all it is necessary to make it clear that the title of the novel *Siddhartha* itself is symbolic. Gautam Buddha’s original name before becoming enlightened was Siddhartha, but the protagonist Siddhartha depicted in the novel is not the great prophet Goutama, the

Buddha. He is a type of Buddhist Everyman. But the title itself determines the character of the novel.

There is no doubt that Hesse has intentionally given the title *Siddhartha* to the novel. Thus the protagonist Siddhartha emerges as a 'Buddha image' in the novel. The title itself is symbolic of the search for the fundamental truth of life, the Reality embedded in the complex fabric of existence. Through the spiritual journey of Siddhartha a whole range of the philosophy and thought of the East is subtly explored as a way life, as a breath of existence.

In the novel Siddhartha is presented as an intellectual pilgrim in the quest for reality, the quest for truth, the search for the eternal verities implicit in India's great spiritual heritage. The life journey of Gautama Buddha, the great and that of Siddhartha, the hero of the novel, are remarkably identical. Siddhartha, thus dramatically re-enacts the spiritual adventure of Gautama, the Buddha in his quest for truth.

Hindu Stages of Life

Paul Edwards observes "In Hinduism, the high caste Hindu's life is divided into four periods first, he is a pupil or student, second, a householder and family man, third, he begins to relinquish his family ties, to be become a *vanaprastha*, (literally "forest dweller") finally he becomes a *sannyasin*, devoting himself entirely to the spiritual quest" (Edwards , 1976 : 4) In Hindu way of life these four stages are called the four ashrams- *Brahamchary ashram*, *Grahashta ashram*, *Vanprastha ashram* and finally *Sansyans ashram*.

Adopting Hindu Stages for the Evolution of Buddha

In the novel Hesse has symbolically presented the different stages of Siddhartha's spiritual development by the various roles he takes on; wanderer, husband and merchant, and hermit. These stages represent *brahmacharya* (bachelorhood) *grahashta* (householder), *vanprastha* (detached life) and *sannyasa* (life of renunciation) through which Siddhartha first attains his identity with perfection, fit to attain salvation. He passes from his egoistic identity through a series of failures, loses it and attains the ideal spiritual identity in selfless service (*nishkamkarma*).

It is the process of surrendering the personal ego to the almighty spirit that is something central in the Hindu philosophy. After surrendering the personal ego the man is supposed to dedicate the rest of his life to the service of the society because man cannot abandon any action.

Significantly enough, Hesse has indicated clearly that the two major characters of the novel namely Lord Gautam Buddha, the great and Vasudeva have already gone through the four stages of life (four ashrams), and have surrendered their personal egos to the

almighty spirit. Yet vasudeva continues to work as a ferryman because of the necessity of *karma* but his *karma* is a *nishkama* (selfless dedicated service to society).

Merging of the Personal Ego with the Spirit

Hesse has significantly and very skillfully depicted this symbolism of the four ashrams and merging of the personal ego with the spirit in the novel. Siddhartha with his *niskamkarma* (performing actions, without any desire for the fruits) transforms into yogi following the ways of Vasudeva.

Thus in the novel Vasudeva's selfless service is symbolically shown to be equally valuable way for self-realization similar to the various ways shown by Lord Krishna in the *Bhagavad-Gita*.

Striving for the Higher Values of Life

Since the childhood, Siddhartha strives for the higher values of life. It is really true that "things exist in their essence even before they are materially realized and named" (Desai, 1995: ix). His striving for higher values of life itself symbolizes his spiritual quest. The lines "he had begun to feel the seeds of discontent within him [- - -] his soul was not at peace" (5), and, he wanted "to become empty, to become empty of thirst, desire, dreams, pleasure and sorrow to let his self die. [- - -] to experience the peace of an emptied heart, to experience the pure thought" (12), show his striving for higher values of life.

The Role and Process of the Unity of All Things

One cannot have the spiritual fulfillment unless his ego merges into "the unity of all things" (110). To have the spiritual experience one should have to surrender his self, and become merely a part of everything else. In this context Roy observes "Spiritual exploration leads to the struggle of the soul to purify it and transcend the temporal and seek the Eternal. He does not reject life or the world; he rather loves both because in them he observes the immanence of God" (Roy, 1979: 247).

Hesse has intentionally presented Siddhartha as an egoistic boy. As a boy the egoistic Siddhartha feels that theoretical knowledge of scriptures or mere verbosity of Vedanta would not lead one toward God or self realization. He leaves home and joins the ascetic Samanas, with whom he spends three years and realizes that asceticism and yoga are only leading him away from himself. This is his second misfortune or failure.

Then he goes with Govinda, his friend, to hear the teachings of Gautama, the Buddha. Even there his goal remains unfulfilled. He realizes that the Buddha has learned to recognize *Atman* but this realization is not something that can be conveyed in words.

Buddha as an Example

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So, rather than worshipping the Buddha like his friend Govinda, Siddhartha only sees the Buddha as an example of what he may become later in life. It is very significant to note that this meeting of the two Siddharthas (one the hero of the novel, and second the Buddha) communicates to the readers the symbolic significance of the title of the novel.

This episode in the novel is highly symbolic. It is symbolic in the sense that during his brief stay at the Buddha's grove, Siddhartha learns that he must become his own teacher. Thus the first stage of his life – student or pupil – is over.

Sansara

The second stage of his life is depicted in a town named *Sansara*. Hesse has presented two more symbolic characters – Kamala and Kamaswami living in a symbolic city – *Sansara*.

Sansara is, according to Hindu philosophy, full of temporary sensuous pleasures of the body attached with the evils and suffering. Significantly enough, Hesse has given symbolic names to the two major characters in the *Sansara* episode, namely, Kamala and Kamaswami. These two names indicate sensuous bodily pleasures.

Crossing a river on a ferry he reaches a large city – *Sansara* where he falls in love with Kamala, a famous courtesan, and wins her love and admiration. Kamala helps him and he becomes a wealthy merchant, earns huge profits and squanders money in fulfilling his carnal desires.

The seekers of truth are believed to pass through a very critical transitional stage before they attain perfection and so the life 'fulfilling his carnal desires' is a necessary step before he attains the fulfillment.

Songbird in a Small Cage and Ultimate Release

Hesse has purposefully given the name to the town as *Sansara*. However, even the life in *Sansara* does not satisfy him. After some years he realizes that this path was just as futile as that of asceticism that his luxurious life has lulled his true self to sleep as perniciously as the exercises of yoga had done before.

One night he dreams about Kamala's "rare songbird in a small golden cage" (67). Here golden cage is the image of *Sansara*. The bird is trapped in the cage, though the cage is made of gold. In the same way human being is trapped in *Sansara* which is as attractive as the golden cage. Siddhartha's life in *Sansara* is no more significant than the life of the bird in the golden cage, since both are trapped and kept away from the eternal joy.

Thus, the image of ‘songbird in a small golden cage’ is highly symbolic. He goes up to the cage and looks inside, finds the bird dead and throws it away on the road. At the same moment, he is filled with a sense of loss within himself, as if “he had thrown away with this dead bird all that was good and of value in himself” (68).

Now, he feels that his own goodness and purity has died with the bird and he becomes sad. He laughs at the absurdity of what he has become. Kamala’s dead songbird makes him believe that it is his self that has been killed due to his own ignorance and pride.

Now he learns that the game of *Sansara* and steals secretly away from the city and returns to the river, which he crossed years ago to reach the town. The concept of crossing the ‘world of *Sansara*,’ suggests release from the allurements and dangers that the sensory world holds for Siddhartha, the seeker.

Crossing the Ocean of Sansara: A Pervasive Symbol

This symbol or concept is all pervasive in Indian philosophical literature. Indian ordinary language is full of sayings that relate to the ocean of *sansara*. Every time *sansara* is mentioned, the need for making earnest effort to cross this deep and wide ocean is also emphasized. In both *Mahabharata and Ramayana* and in classics of traditional worship verses, there are plenty of references to the endless process or endless journey of crossing the ocean of *sansara*. In the episode of Kevat, Kevat prays Rama to grant him a safe passage across the ocean of *Sansara*, for a safe spiritual voyage back to the soul’s permanent abode in heaven.

When Siddhartha breaks his way out of the world of *Sansara*, this also reminds us in fact Buddha’s life story.

In order to search for happiness, Siddhartha Gautama left his home, wife, children and every worldly luxury. Siddhartha, too, leaves Kamala and all other things, for people like Buddha can’t love the world of family, wife and children. Now, Siddhartha decides to stay by the river and try to learn, to understand himself again, leaving him once again in his original state of innocence with the added dimension of knowledge of good and evil.

A Success in Failure

It is a ‘success in failure’ or glided success for that becomes the beginning of the final loss of his proud identify. Evil is a necessary stage in the process of realization of good.

In this context Paul Edwards’s observation is noteworthy:

“Evil is explained as the ground eliciting the self-will of man in order to awaken him to the distinction between good and evil which originally united in one identify. Thus evil is

a necessary stage in the progress toward the total realization of good. Imperfection in being is perfection in the process of becoming” (Edwards, 1967: 308).

Thus Siddhartha of Hermann Hesse relinquishes his family ties and becomes a *vanprastha* (forest dweller).

The River That is Perennial

The last and very significant symbol that Hesse has used in the novel is the ‘river’.

At the riverside, under a coconut tree, Siddhartha falls into a deep sleep. His friend Govinda, now a Buddhist monk, on his way to the town sees him and wakes him up.

All this is highly symbolic from the mystical point of view. Any awakening is fortunate regression to childhood. Any awakened man is reborn and like a child. Siddhartha feels as if he has been reborn into another life. Thus the ‘deep sleep’ is highly symbolic. The soul must pass for its purification before it attains “illumination” which is followed by its union with the Divine.

The Deep Sleep

Now, Siddhartha is renewed and changed. His pride and arrogance are destroyed now. A new Siddhartha has awakened from his sleep. He does not regret the sinful life he led in the *Sansara*, for it was necessary in order to learn from his own mistakes. His inward voice has been right for “no teacher could have brought him salvation” (81).

Why This Coconut Tree?

The ‘deep sleep’ of Siddhartha under the coconut tree proves to be a turning point in the life of Siddhartha. Gautam Buddha received the intimations of the immortality under the famous tree called ‘*Bodhivriksha*.’ In the same way, the hero of the novel Siddhartha receives the intimations under the coconut tree on the bank of the river.

It is interesting to note that Hesse adopts the coconut tree. The purpose, perhaps, is to indicate the universality of the experience our hero Siddhartha undergoes. Coconut tree is a rarity, if not totally absent, from the traditional geographical territory associated with the *nirvana* and subsequent spiritual ministry of Gautama Buddha. Hesse does use the same geographical territory, or at least we feel so. Then suddenly, the coconut tree is the tree under which our hero Siddhartha goes under deep sleep, perhaps indicating the universality of the possibility of this experience anywhere around the world.

Adding Further Complexity to the Experience and Personae

This parallel symbolism is further developed by Hesse in the form of the significant meeting between Siddhartha and his friend Govinda. The very name 'Govinda' suggests Lord Krishna, because Govinda is another name of Lord Krishna. What is more suggestive and symbolic is that the man who has awakened Siddhartha from his deep sleep is Govinda and nobody else. This is significant. It is likely that Govinda, the disciple of Lord Buddha might have brought the blessings the Buddha to Siddhartha when he tried to awaken Siddhartha.

The whole context and the relationship between and among three major characters namely Siddhartha, Govinda and the Buddha are highly symbolic that provide the novel its spiritual grandeur. This has been enhanced by adding one more character to this symbolic relationship in the form of Vasudeva.

The River as the Guru

In the novel the river emerges as his teacher, his guru. He learns from the river "that there is no such thing as time" (88). Thus the river becomes the symbol of 'timelessness'. The river teaches him of how everything moves in a cycle, a thing he had not understood when living amongst the people. He learns from the river that the present only exists.

Even after the long sleep at the riverside and after listening to the voices of the river Siddhartha tries to go back to *Sansara* in search of his own son. It is here the river plays its most significant part in the life of Siddhartha. This time when he sees the reflection of his father's face in the river and when the river laughs at him he crosses the last hurdle in the pursuit of spiritual reality.

It is this final part played by the river that makes Siddhartha to accept and welcome Vasudeva's symbolic retirement in the woods. Thus the role of the river in the life of Siddhartha is of vital importance in the journey of Siddhartha towards the spiritual realization.

Thus the symbol of the river in novel is a vital device Hesse has used to convey his vision of life.

The Three-fold Function of the River in the Life of Siddhartha

The symbolic part played by the river in the life of Siddhartha is of three fold nature.

First, when he sees his reflection in the river the river prevents him from committing suicide.

Secondly, the river communicates the intimations of immortality to Siddhartha through Vasudeva, because it is Vasudeva who teaches Siddhartha how to listen to the voices of the river.

Thirdly, finally, when Siddhartha is tempted to go to *Sansara* again in search of his own son, the river laughs at him.

What is more significant is that the river presents the image of his own father (to whom he had left when he was a child like his son) when he looks into its water. After staying with Vasudeva near the river and only after his ego is destroyed, Siddhartha realizes that *Atman* is his sense of self as it connects to the rest of the world.

Thus, the part played by the river is highly symbolic.

The Significance and Impact of Kamala's Death

As the episode of the boy is invested intentionally by Hesse the episode of Kamala's death, too, has its own significance. After Kamala's death Siddhartha is not sad as "In this hour he felt more acutely the indestructibility of every life, the eternity of every moment" (94). Everything is eternity to him now. He understands that Kamala's death is simply a part of greater cycle. He understands it and remains peaceful.

Govinda's Meeting with Siddhartha

Further, the last meeting between Siddhartha and Govinda is also symbolic. It is invested by Hesse to convey his perception of spirituality. It is interesting to note here that Govinda has remained a devout follower of Buddha for many years and remains unchanged, forever seeking to understand the meaning of life because he has followed another's teachings rather than discovering knowledge for himself. Because of his individual journey, Siddhartha reaches the same enlightenment that Buddha has achieved.

Thus Siddhartha has become wise, while Govinda remains ignorant. Finally, Siddhartha finds peace and wisdom, recognizing that everything in the world is a recurring cycle. He experiences the same enlightenment as the Buddha by experiencing the world for himself instead of following others teachings. He achieves the absolute state of bliss, Nirvana, by listening to the river.

Thus he achieves the spiritual peace. His journey in search of spiritual quest is over. The earlier Siddhartha torn by the inner struggle ensuing from his spiritual hunger at last achieves 'absolute peace'. He comes very close to the ideal of the *Sthita Prajna* of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. He attains spirituality through the belief in river, i.e. nature.

Methodological and Logical Composition

Hesse's readings in Oriental literatures and philosophy, his tour of India (1919), his preoccupations with religious India, and his perceptions of the gospel of *Gita*, Vedanta, and Upanishads and Buddhism are presented in *Siddhartha* symbolically. The whole novel is composed methodically and logically. The four stages of Siddhartha's life

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suggest the methodology and logic Hesse has used to convey his spiritual perception. He has followed a definite method and definite discipline by which he has developed his characters in the novel.

Positive Philosophy

Siddhartha is an artistic embodiment of the affirmative vision of life. In the novel Hesse expresses a positive philosophy of life which controls and affects the thematic and technical aspects. The central philosophy of the novel is an affirmation of transcendental principles like Truth and Beauty through a delineation of pursuit and practice of higher values like love, compassion and the concurrent negation of lower material values.

Thus, the acceptance of higher values and the concurrent negation or rejection of lower values naturally pave the way for the attainment of the highest 'joy' or 'bliss'.

Siddhartha feels a supreme kind of 'joy' of life when he is reunited with nature. In *Siddhartha* there is an experience of ultimate joy of life which corresponds to the 'joy' or 'bliss' of life taught by all the saints, prophets, philosophers and mystics of the world. The novel, thus, affirms the highest ideals of life thereby assuming the stature of an epic.

Hesse seems to suggest that 'you cannot teach or learn wisdom, you must earn it on your own, by way of your own path'. Truly, a leaf out of Buddha's teaching. That's why he says, 'knowledge can be communicated but not wisdom; wisdom is not communicable.' One must be his own teacher based upon one's own experience. It is essential to experience everything oneself.

Anyone may potentially become as enlightened as the Buddha, as the potential Buddha exists in everybody. Siddhartha loves 'stone' because love is the most important thing to have in the world, to love a person, a place and the world. The spiritually enlightened Siddhartha loves the 'stone' because in the stone he observes the immanence of God, a pantheistic view, adumbrated in Hindu philosophy.

But even here the basic spiritual perception of Hesse is the process of losing the self or ego in order to qualify oneself and then experience the spiritual bliss by merging the ego with the spirit of nature. Hesse indicates that the spiritual blissful experience is to be acquired by the individual concern with special efforts and for that the individual has to qualify himself or herself for that spiritual fulfillment. The reality experienced by Gautama made Gautama a fully enlightened one, a Buddha. It cannot make a Buddha unless one realizes it for oneself. In the same way the reality experienced by Jesus made Jesus the Christ not anybody else.

Each individual has to experience the truth, the reality. Hesse is of the view that if you want to experience the truth, then the truth must be within the framework of your body.

Govinda, Siddhartha's friend, remains stagnate in spite of following the Buddha for many years because 'the truth' was not within the framework of his body.

Siddhartha, in a sense, is a novel of pilgrimage, of people's quest for some sustained power or peace in nature which stretches back to prehistory. This pilgrimage involves an alienation from society, since the purpose of the journey is to attain a new relation to nature as the springhead of energy, peace and a meaningful life. The conscious act of getting cut off from society helps the persona in the novel to get related to the cosmic power of nature and get regenerated through it with reinforced life.

Hesse's spiritual perception makes one to remind Wordsworth's theory of poetic pantheism.

Theologically speaking, *Siddhartha* is more a blend of Hindu and Buddhist views of life and religion. As there is a lot of similarity between the two religious faiths, the novel takes advantage of this similarity and the author tries to weave a story that adopts both the views. However, there are also dissimilarities between the two faith systems, but these differences are not focused or highlighted.

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