



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

RELIGION IN HERMAN HESSE'S *SIDDHARTHA*

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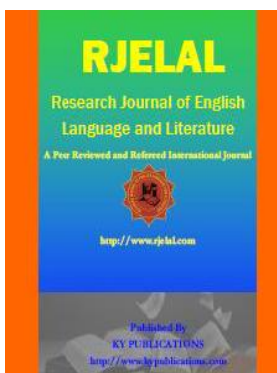
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ABSTRACT

Influence of Indian philosophy on Herman Hesse and elements of autobiography in *Siddhartha*. The novel reflects Hesse's preoccupation with India at a time of personal crisis and his search for complete freedom which he could not find in his Occidental sensibilities which he found too intellectual and far from reality. Hesse's final conclusion on religion and his idea of enlightenment are beautifully assimilated in this masterpiece which is widely read in American curriculum. The article looks at Hesse's life and events which propelled him to write *Siddhartha* and his own view which finds voice in his protagonist Siddhartha. The novel in many ways is autobiographical and analysis the inner struggle of a man brought up in a comfortable house but takes up individualistic path to find salvation.

Key words-Eastern Philosophy, Buddhism, autobiography, spiritual quest, Religion

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INTRODUCTION

It's not a new phenomenon that a westerner gets attracted towards Eastern philosophy. But to present it in a form of a novel requires an in-depth knowledge of sea deep reservoir of religious scriptures and certainly a skilled hand to write it as poetically as Herman Hesse endeavoured and succeeded too. A novel like *Siddhartha* tells as much about the author as it tells about the spiritual quest of its protagonist, Siddhartha. Herman Hesse himself was disillusioned with life when he took to reading Indian Philosophy and took interest in the Eastern religious texts.

Born in Germany, Herman Hesse, a novelist and a painter won Nobel Prize for his literary work. The impressions of India in his works and his own personal philosophy were inevitable as Hesse parents had spent some considerable time in India owing to their mission under a Christian missionary society. His grandfather had a deep interest in Sanskrit. So since childhood more or less young Herman grew up on stories about India and they

deeply influenced him. The impact was such that Herman would return to India many years later in his life to find answers to his inquisitive mind. "Everything returns like the river" is a famous refrain from his novel *Siddhartha*. A man of learning who was deeply influenced by his grandfather who introduced him to the world of literature from across the world and defined young Herman's idea of world citizenship defying all national boundaries and by 1890 he knew what he wanted to do in his life. All he wanted was to write. And not to forget that both his mother and father used writing in their religious preaching as well and that had an impact on Hesse as a child. It ran in his family but Herman had a lot more in store for him. Showing streaks of rebellious nature quite early in his life troubled his parents especially his mother. He found the same monotonous life too obvious for his curious mind which wanted to explore unseen very much like the *Siddhartha* from his novel of the same name written in 1922. *Siddhartha* was in many ways a goal that

Herman wanted to accomplish. Siddhartha literally means "one who has attained his goals".

But it wasn't easy as he lost touch with India once he left home. It was only renewed when he started studying German Philosopher Schopenhauer and found striking similarities of his ideas with those of Hinduism and Buddhism. The idea that this real world is just an illusion and time is not the only reality. At the same time he was disillusioned with occidental decadence, its nearly perfect culture industry and of course the world war. Hence, a political crisis along with a failing marriage led him to a trip to India which lasted from September 1911 to December 1911. But a more profound reason for him was religious. As he said in his "Remembrances of Asia",

"In the end the human experience 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 spirituality of the Asia 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."

So it's clear that *Siddhartha* was a religious trip for Hesse to find a cure to his soul suffering from the miseries of the West. He was deeply influenced by the Brahmanas and Upanishads. It took him four years from 1919 to 1922 to complete

his spiritual journey with *Siddhartha*. But what final conclusion does Hesse arrive at; one needs to look at *Siddhartha* from his perspective.

THE PROTAGONIST'S SPIRITUAL QUEST

Siddhartha is a story of a boy very much like Herman who is born in comforts but gets, restless by the comforts of his palatial home and seeks to unveil the mystery of life which had been baffling him for long. Although he has learnt the art of contemplation and meditation the great knowledge, his soul is still thirsty. He confides in his best friend Govinda who suspects that Siddhartha's father may not allow his son to wander in jungles like an ascetic longing for freedom of the soul. Siddhartha has an uneasy road ahead to make his father understand his feelings because he didn't want to leave without his father's permission. His father upset with his incomprehensible plans about wandering in jungles to know the higher truth finally relents by telling him,

Go in the woods and be a Samana. If you have found blessedness in the woods, then come and teach me how to be blessed. If you find disappointment, then return once more and let us once again sacrifice to the gods together. (23)

And so Siddhartha leaves behind a comfortable life and wanders homelessly with his friend Govinda. They join a group of ascetics. From herein starts one part of Siddhartha's journey. The only goal of Siddhartha is to become empty, devoid of any wish, dream, thirst, joy and pain. He went through immense physical pain to lose himself but it was only momentary. He starts to doubt the path he had chosen as he tells Govinda,

"It doesn't look that way to me, my friend. The things that I have learned with the Samanas up to the point, O Govinda, I could have learned even easier and more quickly. I could have learned it in any pub located in the whore's district, there among the labourers and the gamblers, my friend." (28)

And the three years spent with the Samanas seems futile to Siddhartha much to the bafflement of Govinda who tries his best to affirm in his friend what he has learnt and accomplished so far. Still in the robe of a sadhu, they meet Gautama Buddha, like many people who eagerly wanted to join his league of followers, Govinda too joins him.

Siddhartha on the other hand reveres the Gautama but he firmly believes that the journey to enlightenment is a solo journey. What Gautama Buddha experienced under the Buddha tree cannot be explained as that mystic experience is individual and cannot be shared and he tells Gautama Buddha,

“Not for one moment did I doubt that you were a Buddha, that you have reached the highest goal...You have done so by your own seeking, in your own way, through thought, through meditation, through knowledge, through enlightenment. You have learned nothing through teachings; no body finds salvation through teachings. To nobody Illustrious One, can you communicate in words and teachings what happened to you in the hour of your enlightenment...That is why I am going on my own way-not to seek another and better doctrine, for I know there is none, but to leave all doctrines and all teachers and to reach my goal alone-or die.”(46)

So he leaves his dear friend Govinda who plays an important role in his journey of self discovery and it is only his parting from Govinda Siddhartha learns about the biggest lesson of his life and that is non attachment. Siddhartha finally embarks on his journey all alone without any guidance from any teacher. This is also reveals Hesse’s own take on religion. Siddhartha refusal to learn anything from the teachers is symbolic of Hesse’s individualism. After his experience of church, European culture and finally travelling to Asia to study its philosophy, Although Indian Philosophy had a deep impact on him but he refused to take shelter in any one form of religion. In that case Hesse was pluralistic in his religious opinion that is why Siddhartha leaving behind all the teachers is symbolic of Hesse’s idea of God whose existence he never doubted. This is summed up in his own words in his conversation with Miguel Serrano,

“You should let yourself be carried away, like the clouds in the sky. You shouldn’t resist. God exists in your destiny just as much as he does in these mountains and in that lake. It is very difficult to understand this, because man is moving further and further away from nature, and also from himself.”

The next meeting point for Siddhartha turns out to be the turning point in his life as he will meet an old ferryman who would become his real teacher but only after his wandering soul stops searching.

THE TURNING POINT

Siddhartha meeting with a boatman who ferries him across the river is very intrinsic to plot. Siddhartha couldn’t pay him for his service as he is penniless but the ferryman comforts him by saying “I have learnt from the river: everything comes again! You too will come again. Now farewell!”(61)

Later Siddhartha meets Kamala, a courtesan. He is enamoured by her beauty and wants to be her lover but she wants him to be rich to win her. On her question about his capabilities Siddhartha replies, “I think, I wait and I fast.” Kamala is too smitten by the innocence and appearance of this young man. She arranges a meeting with a merchant, Kamaswami, so that he could get some work, become rich and come back to him. This is a new world of materialism for Siddhartha and he suddenly forgets all his years as Samana,

“The life which people lead here in this world is easy “thought Siddhartha.”It presents no difficulties. Everything was difficult, toilsome, and ultimately hopeless, when I was still a Samana. Now, everything is easy, and easy like that lesson in kissing which Kamala is giving me. I need clothes and money, nothing else; this is a small, near goal, and nobody would lose sleep over it.”(72)

This leads him to a world of passion and material prosperity. Years passed by in lust, desire, riches, power but at the bottom of his heart Siddhartha remained a Samana guided by his art of thinking, fasting and waiting. He did extremely well both as businessman and a lover winning Kamala’s heart. His soul became trapped in this world of rich which he had disdained all his life. He took to drinking, gambling until one day one he became sick of this world and his soul yearned for the same asceticism that had been his way of living for a long time. And so he leaves all his material comfort to find the truth that had been evading him for years, hence non attachment that he learned during his ascetic days makes him leave Kamala without any remorse that had become pregnant from their last

meeting. She never asked anyone to search for Siddhartha as she knew him more than anybody else and thereafter never any visitor, closing her gates to the world.

Unable to understand life and its ultimate goal, Siddhartha is full of disgust and suffering. He loses himself by the shore of the same river where he met that ferryman and is on the verge of taking his life but is saved by the sudden remembrance of 'Om' and everything flashes back to his memory, the Brahman, the indestructibility of life and all that is divine which he had forgotten. Had a deep long sleep without worries of the world that he had left. But it was for a moment and he collapsed due to fatigue and hunger. When he opens his eyes, he finds a man sitting close to him, in yellow robes. It was none other than his friend Govinda who had become a monk and was an old man like Siddhartha. Govinda was on a pilgrimage when he halted to guard over Siddhartha whom he did not recognise. On revelation he's overcome by same love for his dear friend who tells him about all his worldly experience and his despair over them and his final renunciation of that miserable world, as he listened to the bird in his heart,

"Siddhartha now had some notions of why his flight against this self had been in vain while he was a Brahmin and a penitent. Too much knowledge had been holding him back, too many holy verses, sacrificial rules, self castigation, and striving for this goal. He had been full of arrogance, the most intelligent, the most zealous worker, one step ahead of others, the knowing and spiritual one, the priest or the wise one. His self had retreated into this arrogance...He had died, and a new Siddhartha had awakened out of the sleep. He would also grow old and eventually have to die; Siddhartha was mortal, and every physical form was mortal. But today he was young and a child; he was the new Siddhartha and was full of joy." (112)

And this new Siddhartha comes to understand that suffering and misery are as integral to life as happiness. He had the knowledge since childhood that lust for the world and wealth were not the best things in life, but it was only after experiencing it which no teacher could teach him, he voluntarily leaves it for the good.

THE FINAL LESSON

The ferryman again appears on the scene and is united with Siddhartha who went in search for him to learn the lessons which nobody could teach him. In return he offers to work with him. The ferryman had lost his wife and had been living alone for many years happily welcome him. On being asked by Siddhartha about time he says,

"..The river is everywhere at once, at the source and the mouth, at the waterfall, the ferry, the rapids, the sea, and the mountains. It is everywhere at once, and there only the present exists for it—not the shadow of the past not the shadow of the future." (120)

Siddhartha spends many years with Vasudeva, enjoying the stillness and eternity of time. It's time for Kamala to return now, an old woman now with a son named Siddhartha whom she conceived with Sidharth. She was no longer a courtesan but had taken shelter in the teachings of the great Gautama whom she had come to see as he was on his death bed. But she was bitten by a snake. Vasudeva comes to her rescue, taking her to her hut where Siddhartha who is surprised to meet Kamala at this conjecture of his life. Kamla dies but she leaves her son to Siddhartha who is just a reflection of his father, more rebellious and stubborn. Blind love overtakes Siddhartha who does everything to please the boy who is averse to everything his father said. Siddhartha tries to be very calm with him but one day the boy runs away to his mother's home. Siddhartha runs after him but finally Vasudeva stops him and tell him to let the boy go on his solitary journey the way he did. And thus wisdom prevails on him,

"Filled with sadness, he sat down; he felt something dying in his heart and felt empty, no longer seeing any joy and having no goal. He was lost in thought as he sat and waited. He had learned this one thing by river: how to wait, how to have patience, how to listen attentively. He sat and listened to his heart as it beat tiredly and sadly, and he waited for a voice. He crouched and listened for many hours, but saw no visions any more. He fell into emptiness, and let himself fall without seeing a path. When he felt this wound burning, he silently spoke the "Om" and filled himself with "Om"

Siddhartha learns about the illusionary nature of life and how everything is transient including all the happiness and suffering. There is no end, everything moves in a circle and comes back to you. He came to believe that "worldly people were of equal rank to the wise men, and were often far superior to them in the same way that animals can, in some moments, seem superior to humans because of the tough, unrelenting pursuit of necessities"(144)

The realization of wisdom ripened within in him and he acknowledged the unity of life. His longing for his son made him remember his own father who had gone through the same suffering."The same pain was suffered time and again."(145)

Once Siddhartha is illuminated on the higher goal of life, Vasudev leaves his earthly abode, leaving Siddhartha alone but much wiser and calmer.

The novel ends with another meeting of Siddhartha with his friend Govinda who had heard about his friend as a mystic sage imparting wisdom on life .It was only after meeting he recognises his friend It is with Govinda, that Siddhartha shares what he had learnt all his life, First wisdom cannot be passed on but only knowledge, secondly; the opposite of every truth is as true! Which means a person is never completely holy or sinful, "the future Buddha is within the sinner now" (156) and lastly time is not real. Here he illustrates with the help of a stone which will become soil and then a human being and then soil again. So there is the unity that exists over time. Before Govinda leaves after listening to his friend of whose words baffle him and are quite contradictory to the preaching of Gautama.

The novel sums up Herman Hesse idea of religion .His upbringing as a Christian and later his study of Buddhism and Hinduism leads him to a broader picture of the world as he says in the novel, "Everyone is special and prays to the "Om" in its own way, and each one is a Brahman..."

This clearly illustrates his belief in the unity of all religion and his refusal to accept any teacher but to experience the world as it is without loving or

hating it. This experience can best be described when Govinda bents down to kiss his friend,

"He saw the face of his friend Siddhartha no longer, but instead saw a long sequence of many other faces-a flowing river of hundreds or thousands of faces-all come and disappear, and yet seem to be there simultaneously. The faces were constantly changing and renewing themselves, and yet they were all still Siddhartha."

These are Hesse's final word on religion, he believed in different ways for different people to reach God .And the spiritual journey is primarily individual; It all depends on one's seeking spirit but unity of all sentient and insentient beings is the essence of *Siddhartha*.

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