

## **A Journey from Exterior to Interior in Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha**

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### **Abstract**

*This project tries to study the ways that lead Siddhartha- a character in the novel of the same name by Hermann Hesse, to a state of liminality. It is a transitory moment in which a person realizes a perfect nothingness. It is a place neither outside nor inside, but a new journey starts from here. It is a phase in which a person forgets the present state of existence. It is a point of transition which is often accompanied by ritual. In the novel, Siddhartha undergoes a situation in which his dissatisfaction with his present state of being leads him to meditate, through which he attains nothingness. This paper studies those moments of Siddhartha's journey from the peripheral to the center from the perspective of Performance Studies. The finding of the study suggests that every one of us should try to find the essence of life within our own self for spiritual development. It makes a thematic analysis of the text with the insights of Turner Victor, Richard Schechner, Arnold Van, Tanya Goodman, Michelle Foucault, etc. It brings sources from the articles and books conceptually similar to Liminality or Transition.*

### **Keywords**

Liminality, Transition, Performance, Creative, Ritual, Meditate

### **Introduction**

The present paper studies the moments of Siddhartha's journey from exterior to interior from the lens of Performance Studies. It locates its interest on the performances of different rituals and the phases of transition of Siddhartha in his social life. Concentrating on *Siddhartha*, a philosophical novel written by the German writer Hermann Hesse, it examines how Siddhartha's total spiritual efforts of attaining enlightenment are coherently performed. It traces the moments of liminality in the life of Siddhartha and how this liminality leads him to the ultimate enlightenment. It explores the stages of struggle Siddhartha comes across during his recluse. It investigates why he realizes that learning from a teacher can never enlighten him. And

finally it tries to find out how the state of liminality enhances a potential transformation of a character and the development of humanity as a whole.

*Siddhartha* has got quite a number of scholarly attentions from different literary critics. Here, this part revisits several critics and their opinions relevant to this project. It tries to see the areas of work that have already been done on this particular text. And then it seeks a gap to work upon in this project. Reviewing the comments made by the critics so far, it makes a point of departure to make its way ahead.

The novel has been variously analyzed. Hesse (2004) talks about how *Siddhartha* is bewildered by the superficiality in the process of understanding the true self.

Often, it seemed near; the heavenly world, but never had he reached it completely; never had he quenched the ultimate thirst. And among all the wise and wisest men, he knew and whose instructions he had received, among all of them there was no one, who had reached it completely, the heavenly world, who had quenched it completely, the eternal thirst. (14)

In the novel, the protagonist is seen struggling inwardly with himself. As the son of Brahmin of a Hindu family, he is expected to practise from the Holy Scripture convincing himself that he is the part of Om and finally mingles with it. He is compelled to set his thoughts and beliefs as the doctrine of his religion. He has been taught that Om dwells in him and he should try to feel it through himself. But for him this is just a word communicating nothing beyond a sound. He asked himself the meaning of Om, self, Atman. He wandered here and there. He thought that none of the wisest of the practitioners had yet quenched the thirst of transcendental meaning of life and the universe.

Eugene F. Timpe (2020) compares *Siddhartha* with the *Bhagvat Geeta*. Both the works are about the ways of understanding the intrinsic essence of this universe and the self. Timpe says that Hesse was deeply influenced by the teachings of the *Geeta* during his stay in India and therefore his novel *Siddhartha* parallels greatly with the *Bhagvat Geeta*.

Hesse's, typically, is from innocence to worldly knowledge to higher innocence; the *Gita's* is from action to knowledge to wisdom. Seeking the soul's freedom from the tangled ethics of duty, works, and practicality, and honoring the divine obligation of the Brahmic consciousness, both Arjuna and *Siddhartha* transcended the practical and apparently ethical by renouncing loyalties to friends and relatives. Whereas *Siddhartha* demonstrates that the path to the goal is experiential and individual, not revealed by the teachings of others, the *Gita*, although it originally defined the goal and marked out the path, shows the

way along it pedagogically. Thus Siddhartha was largely an actualization of the concepts of the Gita. (350)

But the difference between Siddhartha and Arjun is that Arjun gets the highest level of understanding of the essence of the self from the mouth of Lord Krishna whereas Siddhartha chooses his path independently. He departs with his teachers and realizes that enlightenment is never a matter of teaching; it is rather a quest within himself. In this sense Siddhartha is a manifestation of the idea of Geeta.

Abdul Gafar Bhati, Rana Tahir Naveed and Mahammad Imran (2018) make a psychoanalytical reading of Hesse's *Siddhartha*. They describe Siddhartha's action in terms of integration theory. They write ahead:

In Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* the young man shows a yearning for knowing the meaning of existence through personal seeking and is ready even to break away with existing structure. Siddhartha feels an inner conflict that motivates him to think and act differently at a very early stage of his life. He shows his discontent towards the Brahmin ways of life which, according to him, lack 'something' that he aspires for.... He has no wish to lead a stereotypical life of Brahmin as his father wants him to do. Sense of inner void and an urge to fill this lack compel him to bid farewell to his household and the Brahmin doctrine. (74)

Siddhartha is not easily attracted by any established ways that claim to lead one to the understanding of the inner self. He, like a scientist experimenting with chemical reactions in the lab before coming to the conclusion, tests things and questions them critically.

Colin Butler (2020) remarks that Siddhartha's involvement with Kamaswami and his relationship with Kamala is an insignificant portion of the novel. He writes ahead:

His relationship with Kamala-a courtesan, is an irretrievably comprised by dint of the fact that it is basically a deliberate and artificial course of instruction. Neither trading, nor sexual expertise, nor gambling is per se of sufficient teleological significance to provide Siddhartha with the feeling that here at last has found the way. (p.120)

Butler comments that the part of Siddhartha's relationship with the courtesan and the business man are not contributing at all in portraying Siddhartha in the positive light and in the direction he wants to move forward.

The critics mentioned here in the literature review section have expressed their

opinions about *Siddhartha* from various perspectives. Some of them have analyzed the novel from linguistic theory of dialogic. Others have looked it from a psychoanalytical lens. This paper attempts to discover in the novel how rituals like fasting, living an ascetic and prolonged meditation can help maintain harmony in human behavior and especially in the life of Siddhartha and his friend Govinda. It concerns how meditation in the lonely place can take these mediators to a liminal state and transform it into a potential path to enlightenment.

### **Methodology**

This study uses concentrates on ‘liminality’ and ‘rituals’ which are the key variables of the study. It analyzes how these key variables mark the major phases of transformation. It uses Hesse’s novel *Siddhartha* as a primary data. Using analytical method, it makes a thematic interpretation of the text to come to the conclusion. It uses the insights of different critics related to this issue.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study exploits the performance studies as its theoretical base. This part summarizes the major theorists and their insights it is going to use in the discussion section below. It interprets Hesse’s *Siddhartha* on the basis of these frameworks.

For performance studies, all human activities are performances and these activities are consciously carried out. These performances are made with a purpose of influencing the audiences, observers, participants and total community behaviors. Schechner and Brady (2013), putting together the ideas drawn from various sources talk about seven functions of performances as to entertain, to create beauty, to mark or change identity, to make or foster community, to heal, to teach or persuade, and to deal with the sacred and the demonic (p,46). Hesse’s *Siddhartha* can be analyzed in this light.

Tanya Goodman (2013) examining the role of Truth Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa, talks about the importance of ‘talk’ rather as performance than as healing the wound of apartheid. She says ahead:

In contrast to earlier theories of ritual and social drama, recent work has shown that cultural performances take place not only to remind us of what we already agree on, but also as a way of dealing with disaster, both natural and human, and during major social transitions. During such times of upheaval, cultural performances can either serve to rekindle and affirm, or to create and generate, fundamental values and beliefs. And they do so via the simplifying and sacralizing mechanism of ritual. (169)

Tanya gives more importance to cultural performances as a way to deal with

the social problems caused either by nature or humans. She believes that the wounds of apartheid can be best cured by performing rituals that reflect the way of life of the people suffering from injustices and social discrimination. She admits that these performances can serve humanity by creating a social harmony. They possess the power of bringing positive impact on the individual or collective level. This study concerns the power of ritual performance that has led Siddhartha to a liminal phase which ultimately enables him to attain enlightenment.

Focusing on the liminal stage of transformation rituals, Victor Turner (2013) developed the concept of liminality and the *communitas*. Things are moving in a liminal state. Liminal moments are precious ones which cannot be shared or expressed in any language. At the time we try to share them, they diminish as they are fragile in nature. Liminality is like a phase in which the persona who realizes it loses his/her consciousness of everyday behavior. The actor is neither passive nor active. S/he is unable to cope with the new station of life. S/he stands separate from the dominant social institutions, at least for a while. Such character is challenging the existing social structure for establishing a new social political order or change. All systems have breaches. To resolve them there are redressive mechanisms. These mechanisms, in the form of rituals, are potential dynamics facilitating a renewed energy of the community. As the dominant social institutions lose redressive mechanisms now, we need rituals or performances to mark the liminal moments.

Victor Turner, taking about liminality remarks:

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transition. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon. (p.90)

Realization of liminality is so potential; it has the potentiality of transforming the self and the periphery we live by. The subject goes through a severe and intolerable pain and suffering that it is capable of succumbing any hardships that may arise in its renewed life. The pain it bears is extremely necessary so as to prepare it for the acceptance of any of the worst possible forthcoming events. The rituals that are so painful are believed to give birth to a strong personality acceptable for all. Such character that comes through the ordeal of life, as is often seen in politics, religion or any other social milieu stands most vibrant, active and worthy to establish itself as the hero of the society.

Another theorist Arnold van Gennep (1960) defines human life in terms of rituals that surround each individual and society from birth to death. He explains each ritual we perform is aimed to function as a means to transformation of life from the older one. Clifford Geertz, in a review article of Arnold van Gennep urges:

Gennep saw the life of any individual in society as being marked by a series of transitions from one social status to another, from youth, to maturity, to old age; from single to married; from childlessness to motherhood; from life to death, and so forth. And for each of these events there are in all societies' special ceremonies whose function it is to enable the individual to pass successfully from the status he is leaving to the one he is attaining. (181)

The rituals that begin from before our birth and continue even after death possess the power of making individuals and the community responsible, controlled and progressive. In the absence of such ritual performances the power of society to hold its members in harmony is lost. The performances of ceremonies function as tools to help individuals to bear the severe hardship in life in the hope of attaining better things later.

*Siddhartha* can also be interpreted from another angle of the power dynamics of society. The French philosopher Michel Foucault (1991) has talked about the relationship between power and knowledge in several of his books. According to his understanding of power, it is based on knowledge and makes use of knowledge; on the other hand, power reproduces knowledge by shaping it in accordance with its anonymous intentions. Power (re-) creates its own fields of exercise through knowledge. For him the relationship between power and knowledge has always been a central theme in the social sciences. (Segev, 240)

For Herold Innis (2007), empires over history exploited information and communication resources to produce exclusive knowledge and power... Michel Foucault has contributed to the popularity of the term 'Power-knowledge.

Now with these insights Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* is discussed below in detail.

### **Textual Analysis/ Discussion**

*Siddhartha* is the retelling of the life story of Lord Buddha with some modifications enjoying the creative freedom. It was written by Hermann Hesse, a German author who was greatly influenced by the orient philosophy of Buddhism and Hinduism. It deals with the protagonists' search for the inner self. The protagonists Siddhartha and Govinda abandon the traditional stereotypical Brahmin ways of life in the novel. It is about a journey from the physical world to the spiritual one. Siddhartha

together with his friend ultimately reach their destination though their ways to reach it differ after a certain period of togetherness. This study focuses more on Siddhartha rather than Govinda.

### Siddhartha and His Journey to Self Discovery

In this age of capitalism, people seek to fill their thirst by accumulating abundant amount of wealth. They seem to be content with their ability to purchase their basic and additional needs. Very few people actually tend to earn knowledge. However, when we go through *Siddhartha*, we see a son of Brahmin leaving home for finding the true nature of his inner self. He first goes to the Samanas dissatisfied with the Brahmin way of everyday life. After some time, he feels he cannot get enlightenment even with the ascetics. So he takes a different path to the city where he meets people worried for their everyday haste. He meets a courtesan named Kamala, who instructs him to work with a rich merchant named Kamaswami and to earn property to win her favor. Siddhartha does accordingly to gain her love and this course leads him to the material world. But after fulfilling his erotic thirst with Kamala, he realizes this path too is not leading him to his goal. But taking lesson from what he learnt from both Kamala and Kamaswami, he changes the course of his life again. He listens to Buddha's teachings but feeling that inner self cannot be discovered with the help of any teachers, he bids farewell to the Buddha and goes to a lonely place for meditation. A ferry man named Basudev suggests him to listen to the sound of the river. He masters an art of fasting and meditating. Finally one day he realizes he has now met the answer of all the questions which nobody had yet answered to him. He attains the enlightenment with his own attempt without anyone's guidance.

Ralph Freedman (1979) mentions Siddhartha does not, in the end, learn true wisdom from any teacher, but from a river that roars in a funny way and from a kindly old fool who always smiles and is secretly a saint. (233)

Siddhartha cannot adopt even Buddha's teaching wholly.

Hesse (2004), in one of his speech on *Siddhartha* spoke that Buddha's way to salvation has often been criticized and doubted, because it is thought to be wholly grounded in cognition. But it is not just intellectual cognition, not just learning and knowing, but spiritual experience that can be earned only through strict discipline in a selfless life (p. 233). Siddhartha not only immerses himself with the Buddhist philosophy but bears a confidence even to modify it.

After leaving home and his parents, Siddhartha experiences many things. First he believes that severe discipline, physical pain, the practice of fasting, sleeping on thorns and practice of meditation are the fundamental paths to enlightenment. So

he becomes an ascetic. But later, he understands that the nature of the truth of the universe and the human soul can be discovered differently from what he was practising for. He feels one has to be open and flexible to new experiences without staggering one's goal. Such people who are flexible to new experiences can receive flames of enlightenment time and again in the course of wider socialization. He has a humanistic approach with the people of all walks of lives. Hjelle and Ziegler (1998) opine that humanistic approach does appreciate every individual as organism. People with such character have an urge for self actualization. Human beings who have acquired such self actualization have five criteria, namely openness to experience, existential life, belief in the organism, feelings of freedom and creativity. (416-417)

Siddhartha seems to have fallen in the trap of Kamala, the courtesan and his involvement in the business and accumulation of property together with Kamaswami look irrational as his goal is not related to spend a materialistic life. But his decision to change that track of life later proves that he is not at all shaken by his goal of making an interior journey to the self. It rather strengthens his self determination.

Siddhartha's movements are circular. He ignores the chanting of 'Om' in the beginning and returns to it at the end. But he is confident that he is moving forward from the darkness to light. He takes each steps of his ladder as moving to his goal. He is so determined to his purpose that no temptation can hold him at a place until he meets his destination. He is dissatisfied with his present way of life. He has a thirst for further knowledge. Mere information cannot satisfy him. He wants to free himself and the humanity from the sorrows of life. He wants enlightenment for this. This desire of enlightenment can be interpreted from the Foucauldian notion of power and knowledge. For Foucault power is wielded by people or groups by way of 'episodic' or 'sovereign' acts of domination or coercion...power is everywhere and comes from everywhere (Foucault, 1998: 63).

Siddhartha is not content that the present state of his life is powerful. He realizes he should struggle further to gain power which he believes comes from the discovery of the intrinsic self. He does not hesitate to leave home and parents in search of knowledge which then can make him more powerful. Like Foucault said power comes from everywhere, Siddhartha feels to gain it by means of enlightenment which is expected to secure his position even higher than that of Gotama Buddha whom he previously eagerly listened to.

Foucault believed in the organic intellectual role to recognize and question socialized norms and constraints. He thought challenging power is not a matter of seeking some 'absolute truth' but detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time



(Foucault, "In Rainbow", 75).

Siddhartha, who feels dominated in the strict rules of the Brahmin way of everyday life at home under the strict control of his father, wants to break control first from home. He is so determined to leave home he asks his father's permission and keeps standing beside him until the father is compelled to grant him the permission.

Quoth Siddhartha: "With your permission, my father. I came to tell you that it is my longing to leave your house tomorrow and go to the ascetics. My desire is to become a Samana. May my father not oppose this?" The Brahman fell silent, and remained silent for so long that the stars in the small window wandered and changed their relative positions, 'ere the silence was broken. Silent and motionless stood the son with his arms folded, silent and motionless sat the father on the mat, and the stars traced their paths in the sky. Then spoke the father: "Not proper it is for a Brahman to speak harsh and angry words. (Hesse, 13-14)

These lines show how Siddhartha's will to power is forcing him to question the stereotypical strict Brahmin ways of living a life. He surprises his father by abandoning his familial hegemony. Similarly he also departs from the Samanas, Gotama Buddha and his childhood friend Govinda for the independent way of his life. Here his desire to power is clearly reflected.

#### Liminality in *Siddhartha*

Liminality is a space between the most important happening and the period just before that happening. There occurs a strong resolution on the part of the major character before the real event takes place. When we closely evaluate the character of Siddhartha, he goes through a number of liminal phases. Before he leaves home, a vacuum pervades the atmosphere. He feels his father's recitation of mantras from the Hindu Holy Scripture is not going to end the sorrows of humanity. He therefore takes a resolution to come out of it. And there happen the series of liminal moments in his further steps. His decision to join the ascetics shocks his father. Though he tries to avoid his son from repeatedly asking his permission to leave home, Siddhartha forces him until he gets permission.

Liminality is a void, null, a period of vacuums and discomfort just before the transformation takes place. In this phase the protagonist loses his/her previous identity for a completely new one.

All communitas have some problems; there are redressive mechanisms for resolving those problems and the performances of social ritual and dramas satisfy these

purposes. Every community has a positive character who is supposed to establish new structure and social norms. This results only after going through the liminal phase. Liminal, here refers to the 'threshold', a middle line between a wound and the healing which is held by going through a ritual. These rituals, though sometimes also violent, are very important in the life of the one who comes across them. They are supposed to establish a social acceptance by working as the bridge between the character and the communitas. The community Siddhartha lives in is a Brahmin led unit. It conducts its everyday activities based on the Vedic or Buddhist philosophy. Siddhartha realizes the enlightenment is not going to flow this way as the Hindu and Buddhist scriptures suggest. A search within the self is the only path to enlightenment. Siddhartha finds problem in his society and takes determination to resolve it. For this he needs to undergo the severe ritual practices in the direction of Samanas like fasting, holding breath, taking bath, meditating and many other practices to keep the body detached from comforts.

Transformation springs only after the severe sacrifice or even the death of the existing dead belief. And therefore the new one becomes acceptable. Liminal phase can therefore be said to be destructive. It may push the character to a suicidal mood. In the process of meditation, Siddhartha reaches by the side of the river. He meditates there for long but with no symptoms of any light illuminating him. He feels the dullness of his life. There he comes to a thought of committing suicide. A ferry man named Basudev suggests him to listen to the sound of the river. He hears the sound of the 'Om' which prevents him from his wrong thoughts. Basudev had earlier reminded Siddhartha of everything coming to reunite into the river as he was unable to pay him the fare for the boat. Finally his movements bring him back to the place he had left earlier. This very return movement to the river ultimately leads him to the path of enlightenment.

### **Conclusion**

This study has answered a lot of questions that Siddhartha wanted to find out in the beginning. It comes to the conclusion that human life has a purpose and everyone should try to find the purpose of his/her life. We all must search for the meaning of our lives. There are different ways of finding the essence of life; but the study suggests that Siddhartha's interior journey to the self is the best way to achieve it. He listens to all but realizes that it could provide him only a tint of satisfaction. It stresses that one must set a journey from external world to the inner to understand the purpose of life.

The project also depicts that attaining enlightenment is not that easy. It follows only after different social rituals that a community has set. These performances have the potential to lead one to a liminal state which finally inspires the performers to

transform into a new image. In the case of Siddhartha, he performs different rituals from the beginning to the end. He practices recitation of 'Om' at home as he comes from a Brahmin family. He follows his father's ways of gaining knowledge. Then he joins the Samanas. With the group of ascetics he conducts different performances like keeping the body away from comforts. He takes fast, learns the art of controlling breath and meditation. Then he performs the role of a disciple of Buddha. Finally only his self recluse from the teachers showers him with the bliss. He is able to transcend the exterior world to make a journey within his inner self. This liminal moment inspires him to reflect on the sound of the sea. He hears the sound of the Lord that is the 'Om' in the flowing of the river. He realizes the nirvana and becomes enlightened after being absorbed in the meditation. He realizes the real blissful transformation within himself. This kind of spiritual upliftment takes place as a result of coherent ritual performances. *Siddhartha* thus passes a message that our journey to the discovery of the self can contribute to the spiritual development of humanity. The study unfolds the key to transcendence and it adds a brick to the field of scholarly discourse.

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