

## ***Siddhartha* as a Journey of Self-Discovery**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper deals with the protagonist, Siddhartha's dissatisfaction with his life, mental turmoil, inquisitiveness in knowing his existence and his quest for self-Discovery in the novel **Siddhartha**. This novel was written by Hermann Hesse and was published in 1922. It was his masterpiece, which shows his journey to the East, the influence of Buddhist philosophy upon him and his autobiographical elements that pave a way for one's journey to Spiritual knowledge in this physical world. As the novel was written in the first world war years, the search for spiritualism would naturally be the interest of most of Europeans who found Europe devoid of it. So, Hesse made his journey to the East (India) in quest of spiritualism as the protagonist of the novel does. One major objective of the research work is to explore different factors that enable Siddhartha to discover his self. Why Siddhartha is in search of self is the research question. Siddhartha is in search of self since he is not happy and satisfied with love of his parents and friend and finds his life meaningless and devoid of freedom. Like the writer, Siddhartha comes across a lot of illusions that human beings encounter in their daily life. He passes through multiple vicissitudes and experiences in his life through sufferings and salvation. His such self-actualization with social life and nature ultimately leads him to attain nirvana. Thus, his quest for self-discovery indicates elements of autobiographical elements, existentialism, and self-actualizing tendency which is based on Carl Rogers' humanistic psychology. As for the theoretical modality, Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of Existentialism is applied to explore Siddhartha's search for self, which is like Europeans' search for self due to devastation made by world war and Siddhartha Guatam's search for self due to his dissatisfaction with the world.*

**Keywords:** Buddhist philosophy, spiritualism, nirvana, self-discovery, autobiographical, self-actualization, humanistic psychology

### **Introduction**

This paper aims at describing Autobiographical elements, Strains of Existentialism, and Self-Actualization which help to understand Siddhartha's journey of self-discovery in the novel *Siddhartha*.

Hermann Hesse, the nobel prize winner of literature in 1946 and novelist of *Siddhartha* was born in Calw in Germany in 1877. He was a German born, Swiss poet, novelist, essayist and painter. His notable works that are novels are *Demain* (1919), *Siddhartha*(1922), *Steppenwolf* (1927). His novel *Siddhartha* which has been translated into different languages is one of the most popular Western novels set in India. Siddhartha's story has been used as widescreen film in India and Spain. He had been a keen and strict observer of theological practices from his early life as his parents were

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missionaries in India. As he found it difficult to fit himself in pietistic education, he left his school to materialize his dream as a poet. He published so many literary works that influenced so many young generations in spirituality and non-violence. His works explored an individual's search for self-knowledge and spirituality. He was a pacifist who studied Eastern and Western philosophy, in particular the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita.

### **Autobiographical Elements in *Siddhartha***

His novel *Siddhartha* is because of the influence of the Buddhist philosophy on him. It is about the Enlightenment of the East, the glory of the self and self-realization without mixing in Western thought. His childhood was highly influenced by his visit to India. He was deeply affected by the Spirituality of India. His grandfather had done scholarly enterprises on Indic languages returning Germany from India. Similarly his father also published works regarding his years in the Orient. He found the East like the paradise full of primitive innocence. So, his novel *Siddhartha* reflects his autobiography. Mark MacWilliams writes:

Hesse constructed his own mysterious Orient out of his literary imagination. This imaginary India, which forms the timeless mytho-poetic world of *Siddhartha*, owes its genesis in part to Hesse's study of the sacred books of the East—the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Theravada Buddhist Suttas*. Passages from *The Upanishads*, in particular, are quoted in the novel. (14)

It means the novel has autobiographical elements. To support more, Julie Armstrong's lines can be taken. She writes:

He was like the Beats, a rebel, an outsider, a man who revolted against materialism and the decline of culture. Inspired by Buddha, he was concerned with the individual's inner journey to discover one's true self and overcome suffering by listening to one's inner voice. Consequently, his literary works were steeped with Eastern philosophy and were a record of this spiritual journey to a place within. The works of Hesse, for example, *Steppenwolf*, *Siddhartha* and *The Glass Bead Game*, all explored an individual's search for self-knowledge and spirituality and informed the works of the Beats. (70)

What Julie Armstrong wants to make clear is that Hesse is highly influenced by Buddhism and life of *Siddhartha* that had even influenced Beats and the Beat movement in the forties. Hence, *Siddharth*, the protagonist of Hesse's novel *Siddharth* reflects the writer's personality.

Like the novelist, *Siddhartha* is about the young Brahmin *Siddhartha* who has been portrayed as the protagonist. During his search for self-discovery, he is disturbed by contradictions between his comfortable life and the harsh reality around him. He passes through many trials and temptations on his way to purification. The different stages of his spiritual quest are represented by the various roles he takes such as wanderer, lover, merchant and hermit.

Thus, the spiritual elements that appear in both Siddhartha's life in the novel and Hermann Hesse's life show autobiographical elements that indicate the significance of spirituality through Hesse's representation in his work.

### **Existential Elements in *Siddhartha***

Secondly, the paper deals with Siddhartha's problems of existence in *Siddhartha*. His search for self-discovery is like European's search for individual freedom due to Europeans' traumatic experiences caused by the first world war. Hesse states how Siddhartha's inner dissatisfaction becomes clear:

Siddhartha had begun to feel the seeds of discontent within him. He had begun to feel that the love of his father and mother and also the love of his friend Govinda, would not always make him happy, give him peace, satisfy and suffice him. He had begun to suspect that his worthy father and his other teachers, the wise Brahmins had already passed onto him the bulk and their wisdom that they had already poured the sum total of their knowledge into his waiting vessel not at peace, his heart was not still. (5)

Thus, because of social boundary and meaninglessness of his day to day family life, a state of disappointment and a mental turmoil are created. So, Siddhartha thinks about freedom and meaning in his life.

Siddharth's search for meaning refers to the Existentialism in the then Europe. Jean Paul Satre defines Existentialism, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (28). Although the father of existentialism is the early 19<sup>th</sup> c philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, the movement became effective after the first world war. This philosophy supports making life meaningful through self-realization and experiences. In this context, Victor E. Frankl argues in his work:

Man is not primarily a quest for pleasure, as Freud believed or a quest for power as Alfred Adler taught, but quest for meaning. The great task for any person is to find meaning in her or his life. Frankl saw three possible sources for meaning: in work (doing something significant), in love (caring for another person), and courage in difficult time. Suffering in and of itself is meaningless; we give our suffering meaning by the way in which we respond to it. (8)

These lines reflect that the journey of human life is in quest of meaning as Siddhartha's life is shown in *Siddhartha*. The novel beautifully depicts the existential plight of the protagonist. In this context, Muhammad Imran and Hashir Iftikhar write in the abstract of their article:

Basic tenets of Existentialism are framed as benchmarks against which the novel has been studied and analyzed. In the protagonist's quest for self-discovery and spirituality, existential elements are quite noticeable. For instance, seeking wisdom through practical experience, exercise of free-will to bring meanings to his life, sublime faith in concrete existence, through deviation from the teachings of conventional religion

and strong sense of individuality are key factors in Siddhartha's life which give an existential look to his outlook. (77)

Both Imran and Iftikhar argue that Siddhartha's life in *Siddhartha* reflect existential elements.

Likewise, it is clear that existentialists are against following social customs and others' commands blindly that affect their life negatively. They are in favour of making life meaningful through self-realization and personal experience. They believe in taking responsibilities of their own actions for the sake of freedom. Regarding people's freedom, Douglas Mann argues:

For Sartre, every time we make an excuse for not doing something we desire or feel obligated to do, we are living in bad faith. On the other side, if we blindly follow the dictates of social custom or the commands of others and refuse to take responsibility for our actions, we are once again in bad faith. Because we are responsible for creating our own actions, we are responsible for creating ourselves. We need to wake up to the reality of this act of creation, of our personal freedom. So the wake-up call here is to freedom, to the acceptance of a transcendent *being-for-itself* that is not enchained by the grimy materialism of the body or by the slightly less grimy socialization of our economic and social roles. (24)

It indicates Sartre's vision of existentialism, which is especially for the personal freedom of human beings that is a must for searching one's self. In this context, a researcher Ellychristian D Hutubessy's claim "In a perspective of the philosophy of existentialism in general, human beings are born free. Man does not create himself, but he also determines his fate" (62) adds to the importance of freedom for the existence of human beings.

Thus, the way Siddharth searches for his self reflects his search for his existentialism and hence the novel reveals the elements of existentialism.

### **Self-Actualization Process**

Thirdly and mainly this paper discovers Siddhartha's journey of Self-Discovery like the process of achieving self-actualization. The title of the novel *Siddhartha* is itself the given name of Gautam Buddha according to Buddhist philosophy. Siddhartha, the handsome son of a Brahmin lives with his father in ancient India. He is expected to be a successful Brahmin like his father, but despite his attempts to practise all necessary religious rituals and practices, he finds dissatisfaction in place of happiness and peace. He finds most of his learning full of hypocrisy and hollowness. He finds himself lost, so he has questions about his self. What he finds is his father and the other elders have not achieved enlightenment. Staying with them will not enable him to discover who he really is or what his self is. He realizes well that what his father and community have to provide him in the form of knowledge has been provided, but it does not work and he has a mental turmoil reflecting his dissatisfaction. Therefore, he makes his journey in search of discovering his self with his friend Govinda. Hesse writes, " Siddhartha had one single

goal to become empty, to become empty of thirst, desire, dreams, pleasure and sorrow- to let the Self die. No longer to be Self, to experience the peace of an emptied heart, to experience pure thought- that was his goal” (11-12). So, he joins Samanas, but realizes that the Samanas’ teachings do not answer his questions. Then he even meets Buddha. In his “Book Review: Siddhartha, A Journey of Self Discovery”, Spandan Ghose Chodhury writes, “Listening to his teachings, Govinda settles on becoming a monk. But, Siddhartha concludes that even the Buddha himself does not have the answers he seeks and hence he leaves Buddha saying . . .” (1). It indicates that Govinda, Siddhartha’s friend becomes Buddha’s disciple, whereas Siddhartha is doubtful of Buddha’s teachings. He realizes that Buddha has learned to discover Atma, but his discovery or realization can not be explained in words. So, unlike Govinda, he decides to continue his journey. Before leaving, he visits Buddha and expresses the reason for his leaving: “You have learned nothing through teachings, and so I think. O illustrious One, that nobody finds salvation through teachings. To nobody, O illustrious One, can you communicate in words and teachings, what happened to you in the hour of your enlightenment” (28). Siddhartha’s talk to Buddha shows how no one can discover self or get enlightened through teachings. Even Buddha did not get enlightenment through teachings but through self-discovery.

Siddhartha’s desire in continuing his journey indicates his search for his self. He knows how Buddha came to be enlightened. However, Buddha’s ecstasy of getting enlightenment can not be explained in words. Siddhartha wants to experience so himself. This paper shows his self-actualization, which can be explained by Carl Rogers’ theory of self. About Rogers’ theory of Self- actualization, Ahmad Nik and Mustafa Tekkewrite:

Rogers’ personality theory is basically focusing on the notion of self or self concept. The self concept is defined in a wide way as the individual’s tendency to act in ways which actualize himself lead to his differentiation and a good of experiences, accordingly, are differentiated and symbolized in conscious awareness as self experiences, the sum of which establishes the individual’s self-concept. (30)

Thus, even applying Rogers’ theory of self it becomes clear that Siddhartha wants to experience anything rather than believe even established Buddhist philosophy.

After leaving Buddha’s grove, he realizes that he must be his own teacher. He finds that the world which is the supernatural place of Gods according to Brahmins, Vedas and Upanishads is actually a rational place of cause and effect. Therefore, he rejects these beliefs and decides to rely upon himself embracing his own identity. Then, he becomes a newborn child who is ready to experience anything in actualization process. So, he says, “But I, who wished to read the book of the world and the book of my own nature, did presume to despise the letters and signs. I called the world of appearances, illusion. I called my eyes and tongue, chance. I have indeed awakened and have only been born today” (33). Thus, Siddhartha has indeed awakened. He is now only Siddhartha.

Siddhartha’s awakened self enables him to continue his journey. He comes in contact with Kamala who teaches him about sex and love. She finds a job at a rich merchant Kamaswami. Siddhartha goes on experiencing so many things such as love, sex,

and wealth in course of his journey, but he feels isolated and lost. Hesse writes, “His real self wandered elsewhere, far away, wandered on and on invisibly and had nothing to do with his life” (59). Thus, due to the dissatisfaction from material and lustful world, he decides to depart from Kamala and Kamaswami.

Siddhartha’s wandering and dissatisfied soul is actually affected by his daily activities which are full of problems and suffering. His such dissatisfaction and mental turmoil is similar to Siddhartha Gautam’s experiences before his enlightenment according to Buddhism. In ‘Buddhists, Existentialists and Situationalists: Waking up in *Waking Life*,’ Douglas Mann writes:

The main Eastern influence on *Waking Life* is Buddhism. The Buddha was the Awakened One. He believed that all life was suffering, but this could be limited by limiting our cravings or desires. We suffer because we are too attached to the past, the future, others, material things, and ourselves as unchanging entities. Buddhism asks us to wake up from our false belief in and attachment to the permanence of things, including the permanence of the individual ego, and to embrace the reality of the now. (23)

Thus, the above quoted passage reflects Buddhist philosophy which can be applicable in Siddhartha’s life in *Siddharth*.

In one way, Siddhartha’s way of searching self is searching divine energy according to Tao, which is in the universe and is in flux. Douglas Mann claims again, “The Taoists see the universe as held together by *ch’i*: breath or life energy. It is in constant flux, balanced by the Tao. The self has no fixed identity—as in Buddhism, it is constantly changing, constantly flowing. We should live in the moment, and not be overcome by our desires. Too much attachment breeds unhappiness” (22). It reveals that according to Taoism as well as Buddhism self suffers a lot because of excessive desires and greed. Once the self is free from such worldly desires, the person becomes fully contented one and the person lives tension free life.

Wandering through the forest, Siddhartha arrives at the river he had crossed before. He feels guilty being ashamed of the sinful life he had lived in Sansara. Therefore, he attempts to commit suicide in the river. When he sees his reflection in the water, he utters the word ‘Om’. When the sound reaches his soul, he is suddenly awakened. Immediately, the river water enlightens him. He has a realization of foolishness of committing suicide.

The river is a powerful symbol. It is the symbol of life, realization, eternity and enlightenment. The river guides him in his spiritual journey and grants him salvation. It teaches him how everything moves in a cycle, which he had not understood while living among the people. Hesse writes: “‘You will learn it’, said Vasudeva, but not from me. The river has taught me to listen; you will learn from it, too. The river knows everything; one can learn everything from it” (86). Vasudeva’s such revelation about the river is a new discovery of his self that makes Siddhartha happy. This is the second time that the river teaches him that life is a returning cycle of birth and death. As the water of the river flows

into the ocean and returns in the form of rain, all forms of life are interconnected in a cycle without beginning or end. Similarly, birth and death are all parts of a timeless unity. This time Vasudeva teaches Siddhartha how to listen to the voices of the river. What Siddhartha had failed to understand living with people, he does from the river. Hesse writes: That the river is everywhere at the same time, at the source and at the mouth, at the waterfall, at the ferry, [---- ] everywhere, and that the present only exists for it, not the shadow of the past, nor the shadow of the future [-----] the Siddhartha the boy, Siddhartha the mature man and Siddhartha the old man were only separated by shadows, not through reality. Siddhartha's previous lives were not in the past, and his death and his return to Brahma are not in the future. Nothing was, nothing will be, everything has reality and presence. (88)

This discovery of symbolic meaning of the river makes him happy. Thus, he knows the great riddle of life. When Siddhartha becomes determined to bring his son back from Sansara and looks into the water, the river laughs at him. Hesse points out: "Siddhartha tried to listen better. The picture of his father, his own picture and the picture of his son all flowed into each other. Kamala's picture also appeared and passed on. They all became part of the river" (108). Thus, it was the third time the river enlightened him. When he realizes, "All the voices, all the goats, all the yearnings, all the sorrows, all the pleasures, all the good and evil, all of them together was the world" (109).

Thus, Siddhartha has achieved self-actualization that he has been seeking since the beginning of his journey. He reaches Nirvana. He achieves salvation discovering his self. In the final part of the novel, after Siddhartha discovers his self-achieving salvation, Govinda, Siddhartha's friend observes a radiance glowing in Siddhartha that he has seen only in Buddha before. So, Govinda is sure Siddhartha has discovered self or got enlightenment. Therefore, Govinda asks Siddhartha to teach him how to get self. In this context, Hesse writes:

" But I think it is only important to love the world, not to despise it, not for us to hate each other, but to be able to regard the world and ourselves and all beings with love, admiration and respect." "I understand that," said Govinda, "but that is just what the Illustrious One called illusion. He preached benevolence, forbearance, sympathy, patience—but not love. He forbade us to bind ourselves to earthly love." "... ,for I will not deny that my words about love are in apparent contradiction to the teachings of Gotama [the Buddha]. That is just why I distrust words so much, for I know that this contradiction is an illusion. I know that I am at one with Gotama. . . . Not in speech or thought do I regard him as a great man, but in his deeds and life"(118–19).

Thus, it indicates how Siddhartha rejects Buddha's teaching in discovering his self, but follows his own guidance, which he tells his friend Govinda.

Siddhartha's realization gets reflected in the book that Buddha can't quench his thirst for discovering spiritualism. V. Asha Kumari writes, "Siddhartha realizes Buddhism will not give him the answers he needs. Sadly, he leaves Govinda behind and begins a search of life, the achievement of which he feels will not be dependent on religious

instruction” (654). To show the difference between his way of getting enlightened and Buddha’s way, Catherine Benton’s views are very suitable. According to Benton, “Hesse/Siddhartha still dismisses any “greatness” in the words or thoughts of Sakymuni Buddha. Govinda is advised simply to respect the stature of Sakyamuni Buddha as “a great man,” and to forget his teachings” (11).

Hesse argues very critically: “Seeking means : to have a goal; but finding means: to be free, to be receptive, to have no goal. You worthy one , are perhaps indeed a seeker, for in striving towards your goal, you do not see many things that are under your nose” (112). Thus, the quoted lines indicate the significance of the process of self- Avay Joshi reviews, “The author actualization for getting enlightenment. In this context, seems to conclude that no amount of second hand knowledge and learning can give you the real sense of peace or happiness until it is enlivened by real first hand experience.”

### Conclusion

This is how the idea that Siddhartha discovers his self through personal experiences in place of Buddha’s teaching is obvious

The novel ends with Govinda’s returning to the river searching his friend Siddhartha who is now an enlightened one like Buddha. Since Govinda has merely followed another’s / Buddha’s teachings rather than discovering his own self, he has not been enlightened, while Siddhartha has

Thus, this paper shows how Siddharth discovers his self in his journey of life in spite of different hurdles and suffering which had tried to deviate him from his mission of success. The novel is fully based on the theme of spirituality reflecting spiritual elements. Hesse’s autobiographical elements, existential elements and self-actualization process clearly help us to understand Siddhartha’s self-discovery.

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