

## STRAINS OF EXISTENTIALISM IN HERMANN HESSE'S *SIDDHARTHA*

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### Abstract

The work selected for this research is Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*. The present paper deals with the exploration of several strains of Existentialism in the novel. 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, thorough 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.

**Key-words:** Existentialism, Experience, Spirituality, Self-realization.

### INTRODUCTION

Hermann Hesse (1877 - 1962) was a German-born Swiss poet, novelist and painter. In 1946, he received the Nobel Prize in Literature. His best-known works include *Steppenwolf*, *Siddhartha*, and *The Glass Bead Game* each of which explores an individual's search for self-realization, self-knowledge and spirituality. Both of Hesse's parents served in India at a mission under the auspices of the Basel Mission, a Protestant Christian missionary society. *Siddhartha* was written in German. It was published in 1922; was translated into English by Hilda Rosner and was published in the USA in 1951. The word Siddhartha is made up of two words in the Sanskrit language, 'siddha' which means 'achieved' and 'artha' that means 'what was searched for'; that is, "he who has found meaning (of existence)" or "he who has attained his goals". In fact,

Buddha's own name, before his renunciation, was Siddhartha Gautama, Prince of Kapilvastu, Nepal. In this book, the Buddha is referred to as "Gotama". According to the standard Indian legend, the founding master of Buddhism got the name Siddhartha at birth (Gotama was his family name), and became Buddha Shakyamuni ("the sage of the Shakya clan") through a spiritual re-birth, after several years of asceticism and contemplation. He reached perfection through severe fasting and contemplation, and managed to attain complete spiritual insight, which yielded to him the sense of pure concentration of the self and the possibility of transcendence towards the heavenly beauty of Nirvana. The novel is set in ancient India. The central character, Siddhartha is the son of a Brahmin. He decides to leave his home in pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. Joined by his best friend Govinda, he says good-bye to all personal possessions and worldly pleasures. The novelist takes him through a series of situations, at different places, meeting many people including Buddha but heading towards the seemingly unknown and the unique. Deeply impressed by Buddha's teachings, his friend joins Buddha's group but Siddhartha doesn't stay there. Although he deems Buddha's philosophy as wise but he doesn't stick around it, for he thinks that to achieve that kind of spiritual heights as Buddha has, he himself will have to undergo the experience. He believes that a teacher can't inculcate the unique and personal meaning into a person's head. It is the individual himself who alone can bring meaning to his/her life. So he resolves to carry on his quest. In fact, both the friends have longing to seek 'nirvana', but each follows his own course. Reshma A. Dave in the research article titled *Quest for Enlightenment: Hesse's Siddhartha's Spiritual Journey through Cinema Siddhartha* writes, "The truth for which Siddhartha and Govinda search is a universal understanding of life, or Nirvana. Siddhartha and Govinda both have a fundamental desire to understand their lives through spirituality, seek to do this by reaching Nirvana, and start with the conviction that finding Nirvana is possible" [Dave, 2012, p.3]. For Govinda, the destination comes when he hears Buddha's teachings and meets his clan. He therefore, ceases to move ahead with Siddhartha and decides to live as one of the disciples of Buddha. Siddhartha's thirst for self-discovery is not quenched; the discontent not eliminated, so he carries on his quest for truth. It shows the relative nature of spiritual experience: end of spiritual journey might be the beginning for the other.

#### **STATEMENT OF RESEARCH QUESTION:**

Given that the novel is about the spiritual journey of Siddhartha who passes through a number of vicissitudes and experiences of life until he grows old and ultimately attains nirvana, so it is about giving meaning to one's life through sufferings and salvation. The question emerges, then, "In Siddhartha's experiences whether the strains of existentialism are present or not and whether his journey can be termed as existential?"

#### **METHODOLOGY AND PLAN OF RESEARCH:**

The present study falls in the category of qualitative research and it will make use of the 'chief elements of existentialism' as perspective. These elements will serve as benchmarks against which the novel will be judged to seek answer to the research question i-e whether or not the strains of existentialism present therein. A close textual analysis as well as analysis of the secondary sources on the work concerned will be carried out. I intend to carry out close reading of the suggested text to sort out relevant passages to support the thesis statement.

## EXISTENTIALISM:

*"Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself.  
Such is the first principal of existentialism."  
[Jean Paul Sartre]*

Existentialism refers to a set of ideas about human existence. The term "existentialism" is used both for philosophical concepts and for literary works. The early 19th century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, regarded as the father of existentialism, maintained that the individual has the sole responsibility for giving one's own life meaning and with living life passionately and sincerely, in spite of many obstacles and distractions including despair, angst, absurdity, choice, boredom, and death. Existentialism became fashionable after World War II, as a way to reassert the importance of human individuality and freedom. According to the Dictionary of Philosophy, Existentialism stresses that "Being can't be made a subject of objective inquiry; it is revealed to the individual by reflection on his own unique concrete existence in time and space. Each self-aware individual understands his own existence in terms of his experience of himself and of his situation" [p.115]. Precisely, the main tenets include the following:

- Freedom of choice.
- Sense of unique self and individuality.
- We live; we experience, rather than just *be*.
- Every existence is unique; we have no universal humanity, but must create ourselves individually through experiencing the world.
- We are not human except through what we *do*.
- Existence precedes essence. We are not human [essence] until we act [existence].
- Making life meaningful through self-realization and experience.

These tenets certainly provide a perspective to analyze the novel, especially the journey of its central character. The protagonist Siddhartha confronts an internal conflict right from the word go. He is discontent with a meaningless life and wishes to bring meaning to it. He utterly hankers after learning about his 'self' as he is obsessed with the questions about existence: who he is? Where he has come from? What is his place in the universe? And what is the role of 'soul' in seeking self-realization and spiritual enlightenment? Anxious to uncover the truths about existence, he sets off on a spiritual quest with his friend Govinda. Although both the friends have a keen desire to attain nirvana but the nature and means of seeking it have relative significance for them. For Govinda, the destination seems clearer and more straightforward compared to that of Siddhartha, for whom the act of journeying is more important than reaching at a fixed point. They join Samanas, the wandering ascetics but leave them after some time. Both of them travel together until they meet Gautama. Govinda's journey is completed and he joins the group of Gautama. "At that point, Govinda decides for himself that he had reached his destination; he had found a home for his soul – the Sangha of Gautama's disciples. So, Govinda separates from his life-long friend and allows him to continue his journey" [Joshi, 2011].

## SIDDHARTHA'S SPIRITUAL QUEST:

To Siddhartha the key to initiate a journey towards attaining spirituality is to have a sublime faith in one's self and the ability to respond to the inner voice. The pursuit of self-realization and self-discovery is the root of Siddhartha's journey in this novel. His confusion as he delves into

himself to find meaning in his life causes him to leave a comfortable Brahman household to first follow the sterile, denial-based life of an ascetic, then to break away from this in favor of a rich, worldly life, and then to end up as a ferryman learning his final lesson from the comings and goings of the river. Spirituality to him is not self-effacement, nor is to live the life of a recluse. Rather it is about giving meaning to one's life through experiential learning. That's why Siddhartha feels dissatisfied even with Gotama's teachings. He tells Buddha that the latter has reached the highest level of spirituality through thought, meditation, knowledge etc. but he can't communicate the essence of his experience. Siddhartha firmly believes that teaching in this regard is of no help. "O Illustrious One, 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" [Hesse, p.27]. It is individual himself who by putting himself through his paces can grasp the nature of spiritual experience that is often beyond words to describe. Siddhartha's focus is on both experiential and existential learning; former, in the sense that subjective experience counts in the attainment of spiritual enlightenment and latter, because stress is laid on uniqueness of individuality, exercising freewill and worth of concrete existence. "As a child I learned that pleasures of the world and riches were not good. I have known it for a long time, but I have only just experienced it. Now I know it not only with my intellect, but with my eyes, with my heart, with my stomach" [p.80]. The words clearly encompass existential thought that "We live; we experience, rather than just be". S.B. Bhambar's remark is noteworthy: "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" [Bhambar, 2010, pp.150.151]. Existentialism maintains that the knowledge of a situation by an individual who is actively involved in it is far more reliable and significant than that of the objective onlooker. And the first-hand experience of the things or situations tends to add much more to the individual's learning since he/she has a chance to observe and understand closely the otherwise ordinary and commonplace things. As Joshi remarks, "The author seems to conclude that no amount of second-hand knowledge and learning can give you the real sense of peace or happiness unless it is enlivened by real first-hand experience" [Joshi, 2011]. Siddhartha's outlook may well be thought of as existential: "Seeking means to have a goal; but finding means to be free, to be receptive, to have no goal. You, O worthy one, are perhaps indeed a seeker, for in striving towards your goal, you do not see many things that are under your nose" [p113].

Siddhartha, while heading forward, capitalizes on his freewill and exercise it to the best. Unlike his friend who submits himself to the teachings of Buddha, the protagonist does not want to be simply affiliated with any school of thought until and unless he experiences the thing himself. In fact, his strong freewill doesn't let him be driven. For him it is the most valuable possession. "I'm certainly without possessions, but of my own free will, so I am not in need" [p.52]. He, therefore, becomes his own source and his own guide. No past memories can hamper his way and he doesn't get apprehensive of the future. Exercise of freewill leads to self-confidence and it empowers him to face the reality. "No other virtue but "self will" is avowed by Hesse in his novels. For him "self will" is the only virtue that takes no account of obedience to laws" [Chotaliya, 2013, p.25]. Hesse seems to draw a line between the people who are easily impressed and driven and those who keep their freewill and belief in existence intact and go on to carve meaning to their life. Siddhartha certainly belong to the latter category. "Most people, Kamala, are like a falling leaf that drifts and turns in the air, flutters, and falls to the ground. But

a few others are like stars which travel one defined path: no wind reaches them, they have within themselves their guide and path” [p.58].

The sense of individuality and individual thinking is so dominant on Siddhartha’s part that he gives any other thing less or no importance. His quest for self-realization is triggered by purely subjective frame-of-reference where even conventional religion and morality have no place. As Rayarama Das mentions: “Indeed the dialogue between Siddhartha and his lifelong friend Govinda at the end of this book is an item-by-item refutation of every principle of religion, morality and spiritual life ever handed down by the great Teachers of Mankind” [Das, 1968, p.4]. His search for truth is characterized by his striving for higher values which, he thinks, can’t be gleaned out from the mere religious teachings. “Siddhartha feels that theoretical knowledge of scriptures or mere verbosity of Vedantawould not lead one toward God or self-realization” [Bhambar, 2010, p.144]. This in a way affirms the protagonist’s existential outlook which ultimately enables him to understand ‘self’ and attain nirvana. His friend, the devout disciple of Gotama remains unchanged, for he follows other’s teachings throughout his life rather than understanding the meaning of life himself. Bhambar maintains that because of his individual journey, Siddhartha seeks the same enlightenment that Buddha has achieved. “Thus Siddhartha has become wise, while Govinda remains ignorant. 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” [p.149]. He finally realizes that the meanings of life and the answers to the questions related to existence lie in listening to the flow of river – a symbol of life. All the elements of Siddhartha’s being come back to the river symbol.

## CONCLUSION

The work selected for this research is Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*. The study has been conducted to seek answer to the research question mentioned earlier. Basic tenets of Existentialism have been framed as benchmarks against which the novel has been studied and analyzed. The analysis shows that education opens many doors for the protagonist, Siddhartha, especially in his worldly ventures, but he finds that his experiences and faith in individuality are just as valuable in his quest for true wisdom. It has been found out that a few elementary notions pertaining to Existentialism are very much present in the spiritual quest of the central character of this novel. Siddhartha prefers seeking wisdom through experience to mere teachings. Like an existentialist he believes that the individual’s own observation passing through an experience is far more reliable than following others’ teachings and path. The focus is laid on his own individuality and free-will. He follows his own mind, not listening to his friend who becomes Gotama’s follower. He even avoids sticking to Gotama’s philosophy, for he sincerely believes that to gain Buddha-like enlightenment, he will have to undergo that experience himself. In fact, learning wisdom through practical experience, exercise of free-will to bring meanings to his life, sublime faith in concrete existence, thorough deviation from the teachings of conventional religion and strong sense of individuality are key factors in Siddhartha’s life which give an existential colour to this novel.

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