

American Journal of Literature Studies (AJLS)



From Hinduism to Pantheism: An Existentialist Study of
Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha

Muhammad Adeel Ashraf



From Hinduism to Pantheism: An Existentialist Study of Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha

Muhammad Adeel Ashraf

Abstract

Siddhartha is a novel about the long journey of an *existentially frustrated* individual in search of ultimate reality and meaning of existence. The protagonist Siddhartha, a Hindu Brahman is inquisitive in nature and never satisfied with the religious, ontological and philosophical teachings of Brahmins. There are similarities between Siddhartha's journey from Hinduism to Nirvana and Jacques Lacan's journey from "symbolic order" to "The Real". (Lundell) The objective of both Lacan and Siddhartha is to discover the real essence of human life. Siddhartha called it nirvana while Lacan called it *The Real*. Siddhartha's journey is existential because he starts his journey by rejecting the social, religious and cultural norms and beliefs of his society. He rejects the teachings of Hinduism and Brahmanism and follows his *subjective* and *authentic* understanding in search of reality. In existentialism the individual free will is more important than the societal norms and ideologies. (J. P. Sartre) No meaning is beyond the existing subjective understanding of a free individual as is most briefly explained by famous Sartrean slogan; "existence precedes essence" (J.-P. Sartre). The journey of Lacan is also existential because he was an atheist and went in search of reality with no *essentialist* beliefs and relied on his own subjective understanding and freewill. This essay is aimed at an explanation and exploration of Siddhartha's experiences in the novel in the light of ideas of Jacques Lacan and Jean-Paul Sartre. Moreover, the objective is to draw an easily comprehensible line between the real human existence and its political, *discursive*, ideological, "hyperreal" and false representations. (Baudrillard)

Keywords: *Existentialism, Symbolic order, Imaginary order, The Real, Nirvana, Atman, Authenticity, Self, Ideologies, The law of the father, Big Other, Mirror Stage, Reflection, Image, Pantheism.*

Siddhartha was written in 1922 by German novelist and poet Hermann Hesse who was awarded Nobel Prize for Literature in 1946. Hesse belonged to a religious family and his grandparents spent long time in India as Christian missionaries. He himself was a devoted Christian but after witnessing the horrors of World War 1 became interested in spiritual, mystic, existentialist and Buddhist philosophies. Most of his novels like *Steppenwolf* (1927), *The Glass Bead Game* (1943), *Demian* (1919), *Gertrude* (1910) and *Siddhartha* (1922) narrate the stories of individual characters who can't accept the established beliefs about the human existence and go on a spiritual journey to discover the real essence and meaning of life. During World War 1 Hesse stayed neutral and received strong criticism from his German nationalists. He wrote an essay titled "Oh Friends, Not these Tones", in which he advised the fellow writers not to use the nationalistic and jingoistic tones in their writings and criticized this practice. He believed in humanity, love, kindness and peace and was a strong proponent of humanitarianism which is richly expressed in his masterpiece *Siddhartha* (1922). Novel is set in ancient India of the times of Gautama Buddha. Siddhartha is the protagonist in the novel whose spiritual journey in search of Nirvana is the main theme of the novel.

According to Jacques Lacan human existence consists of three interlinked orders that are *the symbolic order*, *imaginary order* and *the real*. These three orders are also called *Lacanian Triad*. Symbolic order is the system of symbols, signs and signifiers such as language, law, norms, religions, nations and other socially constructed ideologies. The Imaginary Order is the false sense of *ego* or one's own *self* based on a misperception or misrecognition of one's self. It is the identification of self by associating it to an *image* and not the real self. *The Real* is the authentic, pure and indescribable self that is free of all expressions, definitions and "ideologies". (Althusser) This Lacanian *Real* is identical with Siddhartha's Nirvana and Atman. The journey of Siddhartha starts with his skepticism. He has an existentialist nature and finds it difficult to adapt to the common ideas of Brahmins. In early childhood his friend Govinda identifies his nature and thus narrates;

He would not become a common Brahmin, not a lazy official in charge of offerings; not a greedy merchant with magic spells; not a vain, vacuous speaker; not a mean, deceitful priest; and also not a decent, stupid sheep in the herd of the many. (Hesse 10)

Here we can see existentialist and skeptic nature of Siddhartha. Here Siddhartha is not skeptic simply of the nature of his religious doctrines but the object of doubt is actually the *symbolic order* and *the law of the father*. (Lacan) His doubt is based on his identification of the *signifiers* mistaken as *signifieds*. While doubting his religious teachings Siddhartha says;

The sacrifices and the invocation of the gods were excellent—but was that all? Did the sacrifices give a happy fortune? And what about the gods? Was it really Prajapati who had created the world? Were the gods not creations, created like me and you, subject to time, mortal?

These are the existential questions that lead Siddhartha to doubt his religion and join the Samanas in search of the actual reality. The person who opposes Siddhartha the most for his agnosticism and his quest for reality is his father. This hurdle in the form of father itself is a

manifestation of the symbolic order. This is the reason that in Lacanian philosophy the “symbolic order” is closely linked with the concept of “the law of the father” because it is the protector and executer of the symbolic order. Siddhartha’s insistence compels his father to allow him to leave home and join the *Samanas* who are wandering ascetics who live away from all worldly matters in search of the self-actualization. This is the first step that Siddhartha takes towards the discovery of the ultimate reality, the Atman, the self. Siddhartha at this point has a vague idea about the reality and Atman. Repeatedly he uses the words Atman, self and nirvana interchangeably and feels that Atman can be found in one’s own self. But the problem is that firstly he is not sure that it is the inner self where the Atman resides and secondly, he does not see any definite way to find that inner self because he knows that self is based on the reflections of others. However, this obsession with the self and rejection of the meanings imposed from the outer world is Siddhartha’s existentialist angst that is an important part of the existentialist philosophy. Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist philosophy proposes that a person must live according to his authentic self and should be free from any outer influence. Though this authenticity should have a sense of responsibility but still it must come from inside, from the self.

After joining the *Samanas*, Siddhartha starts to deny worldly pleasures to himself. He endures hunger, thirst, pain, tiredness and thus tortures his worldly self to get rid of it. He denies all desires to himself because desires are the traps of symbolic order that separate a person from his real self and indulge him in the unreal and socially constructed understanding of the world. By getting rid of his desires Siddhartha hopes to get closer to his real self. This self-denial is a part of the teachings of the *Samanas*. By negating his desires and urges Siddhartha learns to deny his self but this self is different from the real self. This self, that he is trying to get rid of, is the false self. This false self is explained by Jacques Lacan as the *imaginary order*. According to Lacan the construction of this false “self” or “subject” starts at the “mirror stage”. (Homer) The mirror stage is a crucial idea in Lacanian philosophy. It says that when a child at around six months of age, sees his or her image in a mirror, he identifies himself with that image in the mirror while actually that is an *image*, a *reflection* and not his own *self*. After this the child starts building his sense of “self” or “subject” on the basis of this false, alienated and misrecognized *image*. This idea does not have its meaning in its literal form but it is highly metaphoric. The mirror is not necessarily the literal mirror, though it can be literal mirror too in some cases, but it is the symbolic order or in simple terms it is the society that gives the child a reflection of what he expresses in any form. Initially the child expresses himself in his real and original ways because he is not yet indulged in the symbolic order and has his innocence. Later on child starts altering his behaviors and actions according to the likes and dislikes of the outer world. He starts building his understanding of his self, based on the outer reflections, the reflections from the mirror of society. The self that is based on these outer reflections is not authentic but it is inevitably political and discursive. This political and discursive self is that which Siddhartha tries to deny after becoming a *Samana*. He goes through long and deep meditations. To deny and get rid of his self, Siddhartha imagines himself to be -or identifies himself with- other things. Sometimes he imagines himself to be a heron. He flies over the forests and mountains, eats fishes and dies a heron’s death. Then he slips into a dead jackal’s body, lies on the bank, stinks, decays, gets eaten by the hyenas and vultures. But every time when Siddhartha gets rid of his self, at the end he comes back to his old self again.

No matter for how long Siddhartha manages to get rid of his false self but at the end he is his old, false self again. To get rid of the symbolic order is not easy. As Fredrik Jameson says that

“we live in the prison house of language”, getting rid of the false ego or imaginary self is impossible because it started at a very young age at the mirror stage and then we continue to believe in it as our real self. This copy of self after repeated practices becomes a real in its own self. When a person like Siddhartha tries to be his real self, he gets back to the false self because to express that real self he again falls prey to the languages, discourses and ideologies. Siddhartha is not satisfied with these temporary escapes from the self and while arguing with Govinda says;

What is meditation? What is leaving one’s body? What is fasting? What is holding one’s breath?

“It is fleeing from the self, it is a short escape of the agony of being a self, a short numbing of the senses against the pain and the pointlessness of life. The same escape, the same short numbing is what the driver of an ox-cart finds in the inn, drinking a few bowls of rice wine or fermented coconut-milk. Then he won’t feel his self any more, then he won’t feel the pains of life any more, then he finds a short numbing of the senses.” (Hesse 23)

Siddhartha is not satisfied at all with the temporary escape from his false self. The word “self” mentioned in the above excerpt is implied as the false self and not the one desired by Siddhartha. He compares these meditations with the temporary ecstasy of a drunkard who is out of the symbolic order but this escape is irregular and temporary. While Siddhartha is comparing the holy teachings of the Samanas with the pubs and wines, Govinda gets annoyed but Siddhartha is right to point out the imperfections of these teachings. As “the Kingdom of God lies within” Siddhartha is not satisfied with escaping from his false self but feels that the real self can only be found by facing this false self and not escaping it. Siddhartha finds out that desire to escape the self, itself is a desire. To escape the self he needs to get rid of every desire. The knowledge of self has no worse enemy than the desire for the knowledge of self. He realizes that meaning is the freedom from the illusion of meaning. Siddhartha realizes that more than searching and discovering he needs to accept things as they are. By thinking about the self and trying to explore it, he cannot find it. As Jacques Lacan once said, “I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think I think of what I am where I do not think to think.” By this Lacan means that the real self or “I” cannot be understood in the realm of thinking or knowing. Thinking and knowing cannot be based on our personal understanding but it is based on the reflections of others. This can be explained by famous quote of Charles Cooley that goes; “I am not what I think I am, and I am not what you think I am. I am what I think you think I am”. So, the act of discovering the self is inevitably an act of going away from the self. This revelation is important in Siddhartha’s journey of self-discovery. He realizes that he is still far from the meaning of life that he is after. At this point he is disillusioned with the teachings and teachers. As he was skeptic of the religious and social teachings of Brahmins and Samanas, now he is skeptic of his own desire for the real knowledge. He realizes that the desire for the real inner self is itself a hurdle to the attainment of real inner self or nirvana.

When Siddhartha and Govinda learn about Gotama (fictional representation of Gautama Buddha) and about his great knowledge and his real teachings that lead to ultimate knowledge according to the popular opinions, Govinda is excited to go and join the followers of Gotama. However, Siddhartha is not much enthusiastic about it and agrees to meet Gotama only for the

sake of knowing his ideas and does not intend to become one of his disciples as Govinda plans. The reason behind this lack of interest in such a holy deity is Siddhartha's realization that knowledge of the self cannot be learned from any prophet, deity or religion. When Siddhartha meets Gotama Buddha, he explains his feelings to him that nirvana cannot be learned or taught but it needs to be experienced by one's own self. Siddhartha leaves Gotama Buddha and his childhood friend Govinda. Now he realizes that the self needs not to be discovered but experienced and accepted.

How deaf and stupid have I been! "When someone reads a text, wants to discover its meaning, he will not scorn the symbols and letters and call them deceptions, coincidence, and worthless hull, but he will read them, he will study and love them, letter by letter. But I, who wanted to read the book of the world and the book of my own being, I have, for the sake of a meaning I had anticipated before I read, scorned the symbols and letters, I called the visible world a deception. No, this is over, I have awakened. (Hesse 46)

Siddhartha makes a very interesting analogy between reading a text and his search for meaning of life. When reading the text we try to find out the hidden meaning behind it. We try to know its contexts, its history and its standard interpretation among many interpretations but these things are not the essence or meaning of the text but the text itself is the meaning of itself. Same is the idea of formalist school of thought that proposes the concepts such as "form is meaning" and "art for art's sake". (Eagleton) Siddhartha regrets undermining and ignoring the experiences of life in search of life. Siddhartha tried to find life in the net of thoughts that was actually a hurdle to the real life. After this awareness Siddhartha goes to experience life instead of searching it. First he starts a relation with the courtesan Kamala and experiences this relation. He feels and enjoys his feelings for her. Then he meets Kamaswami, a merchant and becomes his manager. He experiences the materialistic life of people but does not let their ideas influence his conception of life. He does not get entangled in the worldly pleasures but experiences them from his own authentic perception. He accepts everything to be not only the part of life but life itself. He becomes a true existentialist and lives life according to his own authentic view. While explaining this to Kamala he says;

Most people, Kamala, are like a falling leaf, which is blown and is turning around through the air, and wavers, and tumbles to the ground. But others, a few, are like stars, they go on a fixed course, no wind reaches them, in themselves they have their law and their course. (Hesse 76)

These words explain the existentialist nature of Siddhartha that is free of all ideologies and social constructs. He has achieved his authentic self. He is not influenced or dictated by the outer world to make his decisions but he lives according to his freewill. This attitude is the essence of the existentialist philosophy. However, at this point Siddhartha is threatened that he has started to get indulged in the worldly matters or *Sansara*. His desire for Kamala, his caring for the profits and loss in business and his power that he had over the workers who were under his authority as Kamaswami's manager, all these things part him from his real self. At this stage he dreams that the bird that Kamala has with her is lying dead. This bird is the symbol of Siddhartha's authentic

and innocent self that is free of the worldly influences. This self of Siddhartha is in danger. At this stage Siddhartha decides to leave this world of pleasures and comforts. As long as he could maintain his authentic self he continued but when he feels the threat he leaves this life of Sansara. When Kamala learns about Siddhartha's sudden departure, she goes to her window and frees the bird held in a golden cage. This action is a symbol of Siddhartha's escape from the symbolic order and his preservation of authenticity. Siddhartha after leaving the Sansara is disappointed and thinks that there is no meaning in life at all and thoughts of suicide surround him. This is his encounter with the idea of surrender to the meaninglessness of life by committing suicide that Albert Camus talked about in his works. Siddhartha almost commits suicide by drowning but at the eleventh hour a strange voice from inside stops him.

After escaping the worldly pleasures of life with Kamala and Kamaswami, and suicidal thoughts Siddhartha develops an interest in the river that he was going to drown in. He thinks about the existence of this river comparing it with his own. He desires to learn the secrets of life from this river. In past he has crossed this river while going to Kamala. He remembers the kind ferryman who helped him cross the river and guided him. Siddhartha now makes this river center of his interest. As the text goes;

He wanted to learn from it, he wanted to listen to it. He who would understand this water and its secrets, so it seemed to him, would also understand many other things, many secrets, all secrets (Hesse 104).

He is tired of teachings of the humans who are slaves of their own selves. He has been to every possible door in search of nirvana but no living being could complete his quest and teaching could extinguish his thirst. Now he ties all his hopes with this river, a non-human entity. His past experiences are not useless. He learnt important things in past. But his search for Nirvana, self, God and Atman was incomplete. This river gives him hope of discovering these things. The first thing that Siddhartha learns from the river is that "there is no time". (Hesse 110)

River is everywhere at once, at the source and at the mouth, at the waterfall, at the ferry, at the rapids, in the sea, in the mountains, everywhere at once, and that there is only the present time for it, not the shadow of the past, not the shadow of the future. (Hesse 111)

At this point, Siddhartha's journey moves to another direction that is close to the pantheistic philosophy. Pantheism is the belief that all is God. Everything that exists is manifestation of and a part of God. (Mander) Siddhartha compares his existence with the existence of the river that he explains in these words;

I looked at my life, and it was also a river, and the boy Siddhartha was only separated from the man Siddhartha and from the old man Siddhartha by a shadow, not by something real. Also, Siddhartha's previous births were no past, and his death and his return to Brahma was no future. Nothing was, nothing will be; everything is, everything has existence and is present." (Hesse 111)

These are important words to understand Siddhartha's state of mind. He thinks of time as a false concept. The circle of childhood, youth and old age appears to him just like the flow of the same river at different places. These stages in life are different locations of a single life. In the above excerpt the "previous births" and "return" does not mean the birth of the same Siddhartha with same consciousness in the past and then returning, as is believed in Hindu religion. But according to Siddhartha's revelation the whole universe is the single existence that is flowing like a river. Individuals are part of that one existence and keep on recycling in different shapes. They don't come into this world from outside but they come out of this world again and again. They are water of the same river. As the water in the river keeps on mixing and reshaping, same is the case with individual humans. Here Siddhartha gets out of the awareness or the consciousness of the self as some distinct entity and starts seeing himself as a part of the One, the Atman, and the God. A part that is indistinguishable from the whole, that is indefinable apart from the whole, that is eternal, that can never die and that was never born. This whole is the Atman, the God and this whole is Siddhartha, this whole is each living being. This reminds of Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of The Eternal Return that says that the universe and its functionality has been reoccurring since ever and will keep on recurring forever in the same fashion. Siddhartha starts believing in oneness of everything and stops believing in the separate definitions and individual identities that are based on the *system of binaries, othering* and misunderstandings. This has been explained thus in the text;

"The opposite of every truth is also equally true(At the end when Govinda looks into Siddhartha's face) He no longer saw the face of his friend Siddhartha, instead he saw other faces, many, a long sequence, a flowing river of faces, which all came and disappeared, and yet all seemed to be there simultaneously, which all constantly changed and renewed themselves, and which were still all Siddhartha. He saw the face of a fish, a carp, with an infinitely painfully opened mouth, the face of a dying fish, with fading eyes, he saw the face of a new-born child, red and full of wrinkles, distorted from crying--he saw the face of a murderer, he saw him plunging a knife into the body of another person--he saw, in the same second, this criminal in bondage, kneeling and his head being chopped off by the executioner with one blow of his sword--he saw the bodies of men and women, naked in positions and cramps of frenzied love--he saw corpses stretched out, motionless, cold, void-- he saw the heads of animals, of boars, of crocodiles, of elephants, of bulls, of birds--he saw gods, saw Krishna, saw Agni- -he saw all of these figures and faces in a thousand relationships with one another, each one helping the other, loving it, hating it, destroying it, giving rebirth to it, each one was a will to die, a passionately painful confession of transitoriness, and yet none of them died, each one only transformed, was always re-born" (Hesse 154)

At the end Siddhartha is one with the universe. He ceases to be as a separate and individual person but becomes the whole. He becomes the God, the Atman and the One. He is the universe. The pains and sorrows of others are his own. For him there are no enemies or friends anymore because there are no others anymore. It is similar to what John Donne says;

No man is an island, entire of itself.

Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main...
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know
For whom the bell tolls;

References

- Althusser, Luis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)." 1970.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Paris: Semiotext(e), 1983.
- Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Hermann Hesse." Encyclopædia Britannica, 05 08 2020. <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hermann-Hesse>>.
- Cuncic, Arlin. *Coping with Existential anxiety*. 23 03 2020. 14 04 2020. <www.verywellmind.com>.
- Donne, John. "No Man is an Island." n.d. online.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Basil Blackwell, 1983.
- Hesse, Hermann. *Siddhartha*. Trans. Hilda Rosner. New York City: New Directions Publishing, 1922, 1951. 06 12 2020.
- Homer, Sean. *Jacques Lacan*. New York: Routledge Publishers, 2005.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1964. 21 05 2020. <nosubject.com/Jacques-Lacan>.
- Lacan's Symbolic Order*. 13 May 2012. 20 May 2020. <www.culturalstudiesnow.blogspot.com>.
- Lundell, Michael. "Imaginary/Symbolic/Real." n.d. *Onlinelibrary.Wiley.com*. 2020.
- Mander, William. "Pantheism." 2012. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 06 12 2020. <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/pantheism/>>.
- Neuter, Patrick De. *Law of the Father*. 11 05 2019. 18 06 2020. <Encyclopedia.com/psychology>.
- P.V.RAJLAKSHMI. "DECONSTRUCTIVE ELEMENTS IN HERMANN HESSE'S SIDDHARTHA." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)*, 2017.
- Sartre, Jean Paul. *Existentialism is Humanism*. Methuen & Co, 1948.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. London: Methuan and Co, 1948. Online source.
- Symbolic Order: Lacan*. 02 07 2002. 19 06 2020. <<https://cla.purdue.edu/academic/english/theory/psychoanalysis/definitions/symbolicorder.html>>.