

Reading Hesse's *Siddhartha* through the Lens Of The *Bhagavad Gita* in the Present Day Context

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ABSTRACT : This paper is an attempt at tracing the thematic and metaphysical affinities between Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922) and the timeless Indian epic *Bhagavad Gita* and to draw attention to the significance of reading and teaching the novel in the present global context.

KEYWORDS: *allegory, spiritual, enlightenment, river, transcendental*

I. INTRODUCTION

Herman Hesse (born 1877), Noble Laureate for Literature (1946) was a German Swiss poet, novelist and painter whose best known works are *Stephenwolf*, *Siddhartha*, *Glass Bead Game*. Hesse was exposed to Indian culture, theology and philosophy by his parents right from his childhood who had served for many years in the Protestant Mission Station of India. Also he was much attracted towards Schopenhaur's philosophical ideas which were attaining much popularity in India. Schopenhaur himself had been influenced by the *Bhagavad Gita* and had greatly appreciated the teachings of Buddha. *Siddhartha* (1922) is an allegorical novel which deals with the spiritual journey of an Indian named Siddhartha during the time of Buddha. The word "Siddhartha" means "one who has attained his goals and is victorious". Doing justice to his name Siddhartha attains his goals turning the novel into a bildungsroman. As Bacon had aptly put it, "Travel in the younger sort is a part of education and in the elder a part of experience". The essence and goal of pilgrimage is considered to be the purification of the soul in the *Gita* which is achieved by Siddhartha. He attains wisdom through a physical journey and a simultaneous spiritual journey.

II. ANALYSIS

Both in the novel *Siddhartha* and the *Bhagavad Gita* a triadic development can be seen. Siddhartha grows from innocence and thirst for knowledge and experience and finally to wisdom. This can be seen as an actualization with variations of the triad Karmayoga, Bhakthiyoga and Jnyanayoga which is imparted by Krishna to Arjuna. Krishna during his discourse to Arjuna teaches about the meditation and control of mind and senses in Chapters II (Slokas 60-63, 67), III (Sloka 36-41), V (Slokas 22-24,26), XII (Slokas 13-19). To quote the Slokas from the chapter 'Transcendental Knowledge':

O son of Kunti, the forces of the senses are so powerful that they can even dissuade a very discriminating person... thinking about sense objects brings an attachment towards them. Attachment breeds desire and desire leads to frustration which in turn leads to delusion.

(133)

So Krishna implores Arjuna that mind is to be controlled and death of desire is necessary for the selfless performance of work which Buddha had also preached in his Noble Truths. Correspondingly in the novel we can see Siddhartha practicing self-denial and meditation according to the Saman rules, inspired by the eldest of Samanas. His goal was to experience the peace of the emptied heart, to experience pure thought and desires, to let the Self die and attain salvation. But Siddhartha later realize that to attain wisdom and salvation one cannot kill the self as it is the supreme indestructible being as mentioned in the *Gita*. Though Siddhartha gains much knowledge from the samanas, he doesn't succeed in attaining peace and Nirvana. So along with his bosom friend Govinda he leaves the Samanas to listen to the teachings of the Illustrious Buddha only to be disillusioned again as Gotama's teachings do not contain the secret of his experience at the time of his Enlightenment. Later he realizes that his self is unique and the responsibility of finding his self through his personal quest is entrusted in himself. From this very decision he had begun to gain wisdom as given in *Gita's* Chapter III Sloka 43 which deals with 'Yoga of Action' in which Krishna imparts to Arjuna that " knowing one's self is superior to everything else.." (202).

Siddhartha in his "quest" experiences lust, greed, anger which corrupts the soul according to the *Gita*. He was often disturbed by his inner voice and he felt that he was leading a strange life. But finally the inner voice became silent. To quote the words from the novel *Siddhartha* "... that bright and inward voice that had once awakened in him and had always guided him in his finest hours had become silent." (65). He gets gripped by sadness and nausea and realizes that the game of Samsara he had played had finally come to an end. As the melancholy Jacques aptly utters in *As you like it* which is one of the most quoted and memorable lines of Shakespeare, "All the world's a stage/And all the men and women mere players. They have their exits and entrances and one man in his time plays many parts." (Act II Sc VII pg 173). Thus Siddhartha is inspired to play a new role in the drama of his life. After serious contemplation and meditation he bids goodbye to his present life and wanders into the forest where he is gripped by "Death consciousness". He goes across the long river where the ferryman Vasudeva had taken him earlier. There he is strongly filled by the desire to get submerged in it while he looks into the water when from the remote part of his soul, he hears the holy word, the syllable "OM" the beginning and ending of all Hindu prayers and thus his soul is suddenly awakened and he realizes the folly of his action. In the *Gita* it is said that OM is chanted by the student of Vedas to attain the supreme and its chanting is said to lead to liberation or 'Moksha' in due course. Timelessness within time and unity through multiplicity are represented by the traditional way in which OM is uttered. Hesse gives much significance to the syllable OM and Krishna in the *Gita* too explains in detail about the significance of the sacred syllable. In verse 3 of chapter 7 of the *Gita*, Krishna says to Arjuna that he is the sacred syllable 'Om' in the Vedas. The protagonist Siddhartha in the novel after chanting OM has a very rejuvenating sleep and after waking up he is filled with joyous love towards everything he sees.

River is another prominent symbol in the novel. Siddhartha is totally enchanted by the river and the newly awakened voice in him says, "Love the river, stay by it and learn from it" (83). Siddhartha recapitulates the progress of his life and realize that his life had also been a river and Siddhartha – the boy, the youth and the man were only separated by shadows and not through reality. In the *Gita* Chapter 2- Transcendental Knowledge, verses 12 and 13, the unity of life is explained. To quote:

There was never a time when I or you did not exist. Just as the embodied soul experiences the different stages of the body like the childhood, adulthood and old age, so will it acquire another body after death. (73, 74)

Correspondingly Siddhartha too realizes the same, to quote:

The river is everywhere at the same time, at the source and at the mouth, in the oceans and in the mountains, everywhere and that the present only exists for it, not the shadow of the past, not the shadow of the future.

(88)

Thus the river can be compared to the all pervading soul which is "eternal", "birth less", "deathless", "without a beginning on an end". In the Hindu mythology Vasudeva was the father of Krishna and in the novel we can see the ferryman Vasudeva acting as a foster-father to Siddhartha. His advice to Siddhartha that a father has to let go and his son should experience his own suffering just like how Siddhartha's father had once experienced, which illustrates one of the important themes of the novel that knowledge can be taught but wisdom comes from experience. From the river Siddhartha hears various different voices which 'were all interwoven and interlocked and merged to form the one word 'OM'. In the process he attains peace and his self had merged with the unity. Ultimately he realizes that the world is constituted of all the voices, goals, yearnings, sorrows, pleasures, good and the evil and fused to form the music of life. Towards the end of the novel, Siddhartha's friend Govinda still a Buddhist monk searches for Enlightenment, meets him and enquires about the teachings that had brought him peace. To this Siddhartha replies that knowledge can be communicated but wisdom cannot and whatever that exists on earth is good and imperative death as well as life, sin as well as holiness, wisdom as well as folly. By lifting up a stone from the ground, Siddhartha explains to Govinda that the stone within a certain length of time will perhaps become soil and from the soil becomes plant and man. Therefore he respects and loves it because it always is everything. In the *Gita* Chapter 14 'The Gunas' verses 22-25, Chapter 16, 'Liberation by Renunciation' Krishna talks about the same. To quote from the *Gita*:

One who remains unwavering, who treats sorrow and success equally, to whom a lump of earth, a stone and gold are one and the same, who regards equally the desirable and the undesirable is said to have transcended the three modes of nature and attains Brahma.

(659)

In Chapter 6- 'Yoga of self control' verse 8, Krishna imparts, "Immersed in scriptural knowledge and control of senses, one who is able to see that a stone, a piece of gold and this earth are one and the same, attains yoga" (303). Hence we can say that Siddhartha's quest has been fulfilled and he has attained yoga and the self or Brahman. Govinda when finally is asked to kiss on the forehead of Siddhartha, he sees a thousand of faces evolving and disappearing and yet seemed to be there at the same time. This vision can be compared to Arjuna's

mystic vision of the cosmic universe in one place within the body of Krishna. Govinda is overwhelmed with awe and love by seeing the mystic form of Siddhartha just like what Arjuna had experienced.

III. CONCLUSION

To conclude, it can be said that it is this faith and love of oneself and everything in the universe that Siddhartha realizes and experiences, which is most crucial in today's modern society which is beset with grave concerns like environmental crisis, various kinds of violence in all walks of life, war, strife, despair and depression. Hesse's philosophy of love and life that is beautifully depicted in *Siddhartha* can be said as having its thematic and spiritual anchor in the *Bhagavad Gita* the epitome of the Indic culture and heritage, can also be discerned in Walker's animism, Emerson's 'Over Soul', Transcendentalism, Paulo Coelho's *Universal Soul* and in the recent theoretical formulations of Ecocriticism and Ecospirituality, thus hailing the universality and timelessness of the novel.

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