

Upanishadic Way of Journey Within: Hermann Hesse's “Siddhartha”

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Abstract

Hermann Hesse's “Siddhartha” a world classic, translated into English from German, is the life journey of a Brahmin boy Siddhartha, who leaves his house, his religion, and community in search of the inner self. To reach the goal of this journey within, he tries and rejects various religious paths and philosophies. The two major influences on his life as well as the mind of the writer Hesse himself were Hinduism and Buddhism.

This paper presents the influence of Upanishadic thought on Siddhartha's inner journey. As the title of the novel as well as the name of the protagonist is derived from ‘Buddha’, this novel is often examined and discussed as a Buddhist text. The researcher has tried to make it clear that the path followed by Siddhartha reveals more influence of Upanishads and Hindu thoughts rather than any other. It is ultimately the simplified version of Upanishadic philosophy.

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Introduction

Hermann Hesse, the famous German author who was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1946, was deeply influenced by eastern culture, philosophy, and religions. He had thoroughly studied Indian philosophy related to Hinduism as well as Buddhism. Hesse's journey to the east began in his childhood. His parents' personal experience of South East Asia, the Indological expertise of grandfather Hermann Gundert with his specimens, books, and mastery of several Oriental languages, the Asian visitors who came frequently to the house of Calw – the sources were early and variegated.

Hesse's journey to the East began in his childhood. His parents' personal experience of Southeast Asia, the ideological expertise of grandfather Hermann Gundert with his specimens, books, and mastery of several oriental languages, the Asian visitors who come frequently to the house at Calw the sources were early and variegated. This was in any case, the age of the 'Oriental Renaissance' in Europe. (Boulby). Hesse read the translations of Indian scriptures although they seemed to him badly written and translated. Nonetheless, the versions of the scriptures which he read did communicate to him an experience of religion on a par with that which he had received from the faith and practice of his parents.

Hesse's works exhibit these Indian influences largely subordinate to or simply an intensification of the stimuli of the German Romantic tradition. Hesse remarks that "Indian religion offers more food for the imagination than does Protestantism." (Boulby 122)

Hesse always believed East and especially India to be his spiritual home and Siddhartha is the pinnacle of his orientalism. He himself has subtitled it as an "Indic Poetic Work".

Hesse's hero seeks his own path to fulfillment. Although his path is one of trial and error, he is always unconsciously aware of the nature of his quest. On his path, he realizes that seeking a goal will limit his vision. He acquires knowledge of what true action is, from Vasudeva. Finally, he is transfigured and attains wisdom.

In 1932 Hesse published a 'Diary fragment' written some twelve years earlier, during the composition of Siddhartha. In the diary, Hesse acknowledges his long-standing interest in India.

Hermann Hesse : Hinduism Versus Buddhism:

Some of the diary fragments written by Hesse during the time of composing Siddhartha, very clearly show Hesse's inclination towards Hinduism rather than Buddhism. The negativity of Buddhism, the rebellious nature of Buddhism, the idea

of Overt – world denial, extreme rationalism and godlessness of Buddhism, rejection of the concept of Aatma in Buddhism pushed Hesse more and more towards the constructive ideas of Hinduism, the Upanishadic thoughts (Vedanta) and the Bhagavad Gita. In his biographical and autobiographical writings, it is frequently found that for Hesse the Bhagavad Gita and the Vedanta held higher places.

Even if one is not aware of this mental bent of Hesse or this biographical evidences Siddhartha is enough to prove Hesse to be a fan of Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and other Hindu scriptures. Though his knowledge of Buddhism is revealed in the novel, though his respect towards the perfect one can be seen in the novel, his stress upon Hindu scriptures is crystal clear. The protagonist, whose name itself reminds us of the Buddha, whose quest for knowledge resembles the one of the Buddha, is shown to be a Brahmin who acquires the knowledge of all Hindu scriptures, rites, and rituals. Like Buddha, he is not inspired to get knowledge by looking at the pain and suffering of worldly life. His questions rather rose from the scriptures he had studied. His doubts develop on the basis of his knowledge of scriptures. Though, he is impressed by Buddha's achievement, it is on the basis of the knowledge of those scriptures that he rejects his teachings. Though he believes in the perfect one he doubts his teachings and continues his journey on his own. Govinda who accepts the fellowship of Buddha throughout the life is not shown by Hesse to get success in his quest for truth. But Siddhartha who rejects Gotama's teachings and follows Vasudeva (whose name represents the Hindu God Shri Krishna) finds the truth.

Siddhartha, who in his further journey sees life closely and later on lives by the riverside, which represents the softer side of the worldly life, which itself is the symbol of life finds the ultimate truth. But Govinda who rejects life and denies the worldly pleasures does not find this truth. Observing these characters philosophically one can get the symbolic message of Hesse. As per the Hindu scriptures the life, the world is to be accepted as the creation of Brahman. One has to perform his role, his duties, only then, he can go near the 'Brahman'. In a way, Siddhartha follows this ideology and so he succeeds. But as Buddhism denies the worldly pleasures, the life itself, Govinda never comes to know the world, he never accepts the life. When Siddhartha lives by the riverside he lives in the forest. He tries to escape from the world with Buddhist teachings and so he fails to get his goal.

This affirms, Hesse's belief/faith in Hinduism rather than Buddhism. In the last meeting of Siddhartha and Govinda, Hesse exhibits his comprehension of Hinduism, the Vedantic thought of the Brahman pervading all over the universe, the cosmic idea of the universe, the acceptance of each object as Brahman, not Maya very clearly. Moreover, he with the correct open-mindedness of Hindu ideology,

believes Buddhism to be at one with Hinduism. He finds the love in the heart of Buddha for the whole of humankind and that he doesn't differ anymore from him.

Thus, though Hesse was impressed by both the Indian thoughts, Hinduist, thought as well as the Buddhist thought, Siddhartha clearly affirms his inclination towards Hinduist thought.

Upanishadic thoughts and Siddhartha:

Hindu tradition places Upanishads in the same category as the other species of Vedic literature. Upanishads means revelation, rahasya, or secret. Etymologically, the word is equivalent to 'sitting (sad) nearby (Upa) devotedly (ni)'. Which means the secret instruction imparted at private sittings. (Hiriyanna 50.)

As the researcher has already discussed in the second chapter there are over two hundred Upanishads out of which hardly more than a dozen are considered important by the scholars. As they stand at the end of the Veda, they are known as 'Vedanta'.

Among the works of Vedic literature, the Upanishads were the first to attract the attention of foreigners "Several of these works were translated into Persian in Moghul times and were then rendered into Latin about the beginning of the last century. It was through this Latin translation that they came to be known for the first time in Europe and it was through it that Schopenhauer, for instance, learned to admire them. In recent times, numerous translations of them, direct from the Sanskrit, have appeared in Western languages..... and, among the many works published, should be mentioned Deussen's masterly work on the philosophy of the Upanishads, particularly for the wealth of information it contains and for the care and thoroughness of its analysis." (Hiriyanna 52-53)

It was through these works of Schopenhauer and Deussen, that Hesse was attracted towards the Upanishads. What, above all, impressed and attracted these scholars was the monotheism of Upanishads and the enquiring nature of the Hindu faith. Upanishads have provided a complete guidance of the unseen Reality. It has focused upon the secret of human existence. In Deussen's words,

"It has formulated philosophical conceptions unequalled in India or perhaps anywhere else in the world"... "A metaphysical curiosity for a theoretical explanation of the world as much as a passionate longing for liberation is to be found in the Upanishads. Their ideas do not only enlighten our minds but stretch our souls." (Radhakrishnan 18)

The majorly studied ten Upanishads, which are considered to be the most authentic by various scholars, and referred here, by the researcher are the Chandogya Upanishad, the Brihadaranyakopanishad, the Isopanishad, the Katha Upanishad, the Taittiriya Upanishad, the Mundakopanishad, the Kenopanishad, the Prasnopanishad, the Aitareya Upanishad and the Swetaswatara Upanishad. The question that gets raised here is whether all these Upanishads teach the same doctrine or not, and the answer is as complicated as the Upanishads themselves. The Upanishads do not provide a single doctrine but there is a unity of Upanishadic teaching. Though, they sometimes use different words, on the whole, they teach and convey the same teachings. The most prominent and the best-developed teaching may be described as monistic and idealistic.

The common and majorly focused concepts of these Upanishads are about the ultimate reality, the 'Brahman' and 'Aatman', the creation and status of the world, 'Maya' i.e. illusion, 'Avidya' i.e. ignorance, 'Karma' and Rebirth, Life Eternal, the concept of unity, etc. Surprisingly as the researcher has given evidences in the third chapter, most of these concepts form pillars of the philosophy conveyed by Hesse in his novel Siddhartha.

Before giving a summary of the resemblance between Siddhartha and Upanishadic thoughts, it becomes necessary to understand the basic philosophical terms of the Upanishads. As discussed above the Upanishads stress upon monotheism and this supreme power, this ultimate reality is frequently termed as 'Brahman'. Statements like 'there is no variety here, 'All this is Brahman' which insist on the unity of everything that exists, are neither few nor, far between in the Upanishads. Thus, 'Brahman' which basically means 'prayer', is representative of the supreme power or ultimate reality behind the whole universe, the primary cause of the universe.

Another term that is found frequent is 'Aatman': which originally meant 'breath'. This 'Aatman' in Upanishads means self or soul, Thus while the 'Brahman' is the ultimate source of the outer world, 'Aatman' is considered to be the ultimate source of the inner world of man. The Upanishads after defining both these above-referred sources, identify the relationship between them, between the outer reality and the inner reality. And, there comes the philosophical concept of unity.

Now, Siddhartha, whose quest for the knowledge of ultimate reality gets fulfilled at the end of the novel by deriving the message of unity from the river, was initially confused about these two concepts. His journey like the Upanishadic thoughts started with the questions rising in his heart about his real identity of himself. In search of the knowledge of the soul and its relation with the supreme soul, he makes

a long, arduous journey, and at the end of his journey when he comes to know about the unity of life, he understands his self 'Aatman' and the 'Brahman' the supreme reality as well. Thus, like the sages of Upanishads, his introspection leads him to the ultimate knowledge.

The passages at the end of the novel, defining this concept of 'Brahman', 'Aatman' and unity obviously have a strong resemblance to the Upanishadic thoughts. Moreover, the nature of Siddhartha's journey from the knowledge of self to the knowledge of non-self i.e. 'Brahman', very clearly exhibits the influence of Upanishads on Hesse.

"Thus two independent currents of thought one resulting from the desire to understand the true nature of man and the other, that of the objective world – became blended and the blending led at once to the discovery of the unity for which there had been such a prolonged search. The physical world, which according to the atman doctrine is only the not-self, now becomes reducible to the self, The fusing of two such outwardly different but inwardly similar conceptions into one is the chief point of Upanishadic teaching and is expressed in the 'great sayings like 'That thou art, 'I am Brahma'. " (Hiriyanna 56-57)

The Brihadaranyak Upanishad maintains that the ultimate reality is 'Being'. The Chhandogaya Upanishad thoroughly is dedicated to the knowledge of 'Brahman' and its relation with 'Aatman'. The Taittiriya Upanishad, in various ways, try to define the nature of 'Brahman'. The Katha Upanishad describes the self with the same reference. The Swetashwetara Upanishad makes out the same argument regarding Brahman. And thus, they all have a deep influence on the philosophy presented in Siddhartha.

Even the doctrine of 'Maya' and 'Avidya' is beautifully reflected in Siddhartha. Siddhartha, who initially rejects the world considering it to be 'Maya' — an illusion due to the lack of knowledge- 'Avidya', which means ignorance; after his awakening looks at the world with new insight and finds it to be a meaningful play of 'Brahman' instead of Maya. According to the Upanishads, the withdrawal from the world is not the conclusive end of the spiritual quest.

"God does not create the world but becomes it. Creation is expression. It is not a making of something out of nothing." (Radhakrishnan 82)

The Shwetashwatara Upanishad traces the world to the power of the supreme and boldly accepts Maya as the divine art or power. The researcher has already quoted verses from it in the third chapter. Thus, what Siddhartha realizes – 'Brahman' accepts world existence. The Ultimate Reality sustains the play of the world and

dwells in it' – is nothing but the Upanishadic doctrine. The Taittiriya Upanishad also shows this acceptance with the term 'Anna' i.e. matter.

During the first phase of Siddhartha's journey, he is shown to be prey of 'Avidya' i.e. ignorance but later on, he gains wisdom – 'Vidya' enough to identify the supreme power without the universe to be the power within the universe or creation of the world. The Katha Upanishad and the Chhandogya Upanishad distinguished between 'Vidya' i.e. knowledge which is power and 'avidya' i.e. ignorance which is impotence. There is a clear influence of these doctrine in Siddhartha.

In the Katha Upanishad, while guiding Nachiketa a seeker of knowledge of 'Brahman', Yama distinguished between 'Shrey' and 'Prey' which means the eternal and the temporal path. The 'Shrey' path leads the human being to the eternal welfare while the 'Prey' path though looking more attractive, confuses and misguides the human being, ultimately leading to his fall. Siddhartha the protagonist of Hesse's novel gets attracted temporarily towards the 'Prey' path, but finally, he realizes the temporality of it and joins the 'Shrey' path, which leads him to the ultimate knowledge.

Even the concept of knowledge of Brahman being incommunicable comes from the Upanishads. The Upanishads frequently emphasize upon the experience of 'Brahman'. The Mundakopnishad clearly mentions that 'self' can not be learned by teachings. The three characters of Hesse, who have achieved perfection, denies to teach or convey that experience or knowledge of the supreme reality. Buddha just remarks Siddhartha to be aware of intellect, Vasudeva denies knowing the way of teaching anyone, and Siddhartha at the end of the novel declares to Govinda that wisdom is incommunicable. The Kathopnishad also asserts the same concept.

Moreover, 'Om' the symbol used by Hesse, to represent Brahman or the Ultimate reality, shows how far the Upanishads have left an influence on him. The Ishavasya Upanishad, Kathopnishad, Chhandogya Upanishad, Taittiriyopnishad and Prashnopnishad frequently repeat this symbol of 'Brahman' and describe it with its powers in various ways. Hesse, knowing the importance of this Vedic world, with which all the prayers start and end, which is complete in itself, dedicates a whole chapter for it in his novel.

Summing up

Thus, it appears quite safe to state that Hermann Hesse was under a great influence of Indian ideology, philosophy, and religion, especially Hinduism and Buddhism. Among the two mentioned above Hinduism has clearly influenced Hermann Hesse more than Buddhism. Hesse's inclination towards Indian especially Hindu ideology can clearly be proved by the discussion as well as the evidences presented

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in this research study. Upanishads have been focused here as only the representative of Indian ideology as well as other Hindu scriptures.

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