

WORKS OF HERMANN KARL HESSE: A QUEST FOR SPIRITUALITY

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Abstract

Hermann Karl Hesse was born on 2 July 1877 in the Black Forest town of Calw in Wurttemberg, German territory. He is considered as one of the most creative German psychic traveler, poet, critic, painter and novelist. He is one of the most extensively read German language authors. He is one of the most famous 20th century writers. His best-known works include *Demian*, *Steppenwolf*, *Siddhartha* and *The Glass Bead Game*. All of his books discover an individual's search for authenticity, self-knowledge and spirituality. He travelled almost all the Continents for a conscious human evolution into higher magnitude of awareness. Much of the current appeal of Hesse can be endorsed to the fact that his writings invite his readers to identify their quests for an integral inner life with that endless struggle for self-realization. To a large extent Hesse achieves this effect by addressing himself to just those channels which communicate most directly with our deepest reactive processes-archetypal forms, the most basic personal and social conflicts, and universal philosophical and religious quests. In 1946, he received the Nobel Prize in Literature. He died on 9 August 1962. This paper, through Hermann Hesse's tremendous works, tries to scrutinize the ultimate goal of the journey that is to attain spirituality and the path through which Nirvana can be attained.

Keywords: Authenticity, Self-Knowledge, Self-Realization, Social Conflict, Nirvana and Spirituality.

INTRODUCTION

Hermann Hesse (1877-1962) was born in Germany and later became a citizen of Switzerland. He was a German-Swiss poet, novelist and painter. As a Western man profoundly affected by the mysticism of Eastern thought, he wrote many novels, stories, and essays that bear a vital spiritual force that has captured the imagination and loyalty of many generations of readers. In 1946, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. His best known works include *Steppenwolf*, *Siddhartha*, and *The Glass Bead Game* (also known as *Magister Ludi*) which explore an individual's search for spirituality outside society.

Hesse's writings were inspired by India and strongly influenced by the inward-looking philosophy of Buddhism and theosophy. His

India connect was deep. His grandfather Hermann Gundert was a missionary who lived for many years in Tellichery in Kerala. His way of thinking is based on a variety of ideas which only partly derive from Indian religion and philosophy.

"Hesse's confrontation with Indian culture was unreflected and preconscious. It started from his birth in 1877 and lasted until 1904, the year in which he moved to Gaienhofen and started a new life as a professional writer. One can say that he inherited his interest in India and its tradition and culture. In 1904, when he was 27 years old and when he started studying the German philosopher Schopenhauer he found himself again in this Indian atmosphere, read translations of *Bhagavad-Gita* and since then

never lost touch with this spiritual world". (Baumann 1)

This period of Hesse can be characterized as a time of intellectual confrontation with the Indian way of thinking, a time of spiritual quest. He himself often pointed out that his grandfather, his mother and his father had lived in India for many years as missionaries, that they were able to speak different Indian languages and that they possessed many Indian things such as clothes and pictures. At the turn of the century Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were fashionable authors and like the young Thomas Mann Hermann Hesse was much attracted by this intellectual world. According to Schopenhauer salvation can only be gained when selfishness and restrictedness are overcome by compassion and the discovery that all beings are brothers and sisters. So it is quite obvious that Schopenhauer led Hesse to a new approach to the Holy Texts of India.

Another motivation for Hesse's new interest in a systematic occupation with the religious tradition of India was surely his former dislike of Christianity. He was bored and disgusted by its theory and practice and by his parent's narrow-mindedness. Therefore he was looking for a deeper and more personal spirituality and India offered this to him.

"The writings of Hermann Hesse, the German writer, have a deep and firm root in the Vedas, the Upanishads and in the Buddhism. In this contemporary worldly fringe, his writings compel to re-think and unveil the mystery of the self, urge to make a shift from periphery to centre to Know Thyself". (Timpe 349)

Hesse, a German who sought his own path to enlightenment, traveled to India to study the culture's dominant religions. The journey most likely inspired him to write *Siddhartha*. His novel *Siddhartha* is a true critique of life and it explores the intrinsic flow to reach Enlightened State. In the novel, an inexorable search for truth is exhibited for creating a harmonious bond with the world.

Siddhartha

Siddhartha does not novelize the origin of Buddha but Hesse tells the story of another *Siddhartha* who lived during the alleged period of *Siddhartha Gautama Buddha*. This other *Siddhartha*, though he agrees that all of the Buddha's teachings are of value, challenges the completeness. *Siddhartha* insists that the path to true enlightenment is ultimately unteachable and comes from something intrinsic and unquantifiable; thus, enlightenment is impossible to teach. The same idea is encapsulated by Victor E. Frankl in his very famous work *Man in search for Meaning*:

"Life 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 any 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." (Frankl 8)

Being a son of brahmin, *Siddhartha* leads a journey towards spirituality not in terms of outer sense but in the depth of Knowledge. From the very beginning of his life, he knew how to connect oneself with the spirituality through meditation as described in the book:

"He already understood how to speak the Om silently, that word of words, how to speak it silently in his inner being as he inhaled, how to pronounce it silently out of himself as he exhaled, how to do so with his whole soul while his forehead was enveloped by the radiance of the clear thinking mind. He already understood how to recognize Atman within this inner essence of his that was indestructible and one with the universe." (Hesse 14)

The story resembles the lifespan of historical incarnation of Lord Buddha. The hero's auspicious name *Siddhartha* echoes the Sakya clan crown prince *Siddhartha*. Hesse sets his story at the same time and the protagonist meets the Buddha himself. Here he finds a conflict between practical experiences of an

individual and a knowledge passed to disciple by his teacher though respectfully announces his innate desire for the supreme fulfilment of enlightenment of self that must be original from the deep within the individual and by the individual. The emancipation of Siddhartha is divine peace of self that has been depicted already in the various theosophical literatures. He talks Lord Buddha in this voice,

“You have found salvation from death. It has come to you in the course of your own search, on your own path, through thoughts, through meditation, through realization, through enlightenment. It has not come to you by means of teaching”. (Hesse 46)

For the quest of self, Lord Buddha has exiled alone and experienced divinity from ‘Atman’ himself. So protagonist Siddhartha abandons Buddhism to realize the quest for truth in his own conscience and experiences shining ephemeral life.

The thematic study of Siddhartha demonstrates a cyclic movement to our life. Siddhartha finds himself at a crossroad at every movement. He believes in God but cannot leave worldly affairs. Siddhartha hardly believes in the traditional path of spiritual journey. His own quest and conclusions attract him more than anything else. He believes in pleasure but penance pays deeply in experiences.

Deduction and perceptions run together in his life. He left his house so his son followed the same path of roamers. Our life is a delusion to explain the duality of enlightenment of east and materialism of west. Hesse was deeply affected by the spirituality of India just as Christianity of Europe. The journey of Siddhartha in whole is a philosophical quest of the east and subtly handled by western mind. Self-realization of Siddhartha becomes possible only after intense, spiritual conflict and moral awareness. Siddhartha faces many obstacles of socio-economic needs and earns the self-actualization of ‘Atman’. The duality in his spiritual journey offers him priorities of spirit and nature, calm and quarrelsome, Buddhism and self-quests.

Steppenwolf

Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf* gives message from a wise, old soul to every soul in search of wisdom. Hesse wrote to strengthen the will and the value of the individual, not toward selfish ego gratification, but toward a greater understanding of life. Hermann Hesse teaches from experience, from wisdom acquired through many trails and tribulations, many great adventures, and deep, inner explorations. The novel *Steppenwolf* describes an intense contest between a sensitive soul trying to unfold and brings its message into the world on the one hand, and on the other hand, the suffering from the oppressive, authoritarian discipline which Harry Haller experiences as a loveless, cold, dictatorial despotic code of control that came very close to breaking his spirit and will to live. Hermann Hesse preferred solitude and privacy, a life closer to nature in a contemplative atmosphere.

The internal conflict in life of Harry Haller is the major theme in *Steppenwolf*. The two characters Harry Haller and Hermine illustrate this conflict. Harry Haller illustrates the duality through an inner conflict and an outer conflict. Harry Haller, feels battle within him between his two selves, a man and a wolf, a high and low, spirit and animal. While he longs to live as a wolf free of social convention, he lives as a bourgeois bachelor, but Harry Haller's wolfish nature isolates him from others until he meets Hermine.

Steppenwolf believes that he is an individual divided against himself and society. He has determined to end his life. He must disassociate himself from society. *Steppenwolf* was content to separate himself from others and live quietly in isolation. *Steppenwolf* is offended by the pompous, noble and respectable portrayal of Goethe. Hermine changes Harry's views regarding his conflict between his soul and body. She advises him that the best thing to do in the silly mediocrities of the world is merely to laugh. Hermine succeeds in motivating Harry to get in touch with and take pleasure in executing his more sensuous side. After the Black Eagle through the Tea Dance:

“Oh! How stiff you are! Just go straight ahead as if you were walking, dancing, don't you see, is every bit as easy as thinking, when you can do it, and much easier to learn. Now you can understand why people won't get the habit of thinking”. (Hesse 29)

Hermine speaks these lines to Harry at their first dance lesson. Harry has never bothered to learn how to dance and is utter beginner, while Hermine a frequenter of restaurants and night clubs is well versed in all the newest steps. Below the surface however dance is a stand for the compatibility between the life of body and the life of the spirit.

Hermine teaches him to dance and Maria teaches him to love, Harry develops the various personalities that lie latent within each person. He himself begins to see his so called soul as never growing collection of the souls. Maria is total incarnation of the Physical aspects of human life. Harry has made up his mind; the only two options for people like him are a life of beautiful suffering or a noble, paradoxically immortal death. He believes that suicide is the only solution to his fractured nature, because the wolf and the human cannot coexist peacefully. Eventually, Steppenwolf discovers that suicide is not the answer to his problem, because it will only deny existence to all other selves that are part of him. Steppenwolf must accept the fact that he is internally divided and he must incorporate humour so that all selves can coexist peacefully. It is about the adventure or journey of a man, where at some point man starts asking himself pertinent questions regarding life and self.

CONCLUSION

Hermann Karl Hesse is one of the most remarkable European authors of the 20th century, who surmised in his thoughts of idealism and practicality, the great treasure of a deliberate mind and spiritual power. He, who grew up being deeply thoughtful, developed an expression of experiential knowledge not from anywhere else but from his inheritance. The novel *Siddhartha* follows the life journey of Siddhartha through various stages with

different people- with Gautama the Buddha, Kamala the courtesan and Vasudeva the ferryman who teach him specific purposes in life. He yearns for his son's love but is agitated by his indifference when he leaves him and goes away. This reminds him of his younger days when he had left his father alone to pursue his own goal. He goes through various phases in life and is satiated with both the spiritual and material world. Finally, Siddhartha stops looking for his son and returns to Vasudeva the ferryman and living by the side of the river finds solace and spends the rest of his days ferrying people across the waters. Here living by the side of the river he finds enlightenment and learns an important lesson that knowledge can be taught but wisdom comes from experience. In *Steppenwolf*, Hesse perceives that man has more than one self; one human and other animalistic. He has a model of immortals before him that of Goethe and Mozart. But ultimately Hermine, Maria and Pablo teach Harry important lessons regarding physical bodily life. That bodily life can be transcended only through thoroughly satisfying the bodily demands. As it was said that Hermann Hesse's novels were always about soul searching and finding the true meaning of life which began with his visit to India, followed by the finishing of his one book to another, where all explored an individual's search for genuineness, self-knowledge, and spirituality.

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