QUEST FOR MEANING OF LIFE: A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY OF SIDDHARTHA

By
Devarshi Modi

M.Phil Research Scholar, Gujarat University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India.

Abstract
The present paper deals with the spiritual journey of Siddhartha in search of the meaning of life. The work chosen for this study is Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha. In the novel Hermann Hesse has tried to portray protagonist's quest for self-discovery and spirituality, existential elements are quite remarkable. For instance, seeking spiritual 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 relevant factors in Siddhartha’s life which give an existential look for his life. Influence of Buddhist philosophy on Herman Hesse and elements of autobiography in Siddhartha reflects the spiritual knowledge of one self and this physical world. The novel demonstrates Hesse's engrossment with India at a time of personal crisis and his search for complete freedom which he could not find in his Occidental sensibilities, which he found too intellectual and far from reality. Hesse's final conclusion on religion and his idea of enlightenment are splendidly engulfed in this masterpiece which is widely read all over the world. The novel in many ways is autobiographical and analyses the inner struggle of a man brought up in a comfortable house but takes up individualistic path to find redemption. There is an interminable flow of life which enters and exists at its primary time. Siddhartha’s Journey in search of life represents the question of human existence. Throughout his journey, he met with the lot of illusion which we encounter in our daily life. This paper, through Hermann Hesse’s tremendous novel Siddhartha, tries to scrutinize the essential existence of human being, the reason of this absurd show, ultimate goal of the journey and the path through which Nirvana can be attained. Hermann Hesse’s Siddhartha presents a journey of soul to attain the ultimate truth of universe.

Keywords: philosophy, self-realization, consciousness, salvation, ultimate truth.

Introduction
Herman Hesse’s 1922 novella is a Modernist re-imagining of Buddhism’s generative era. 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. Siddhartha does not novelize the origin of Buddha; rather, Hesse tells the story of another Siddhartha who lived during the alleged period of Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha). Understanding this is critical to understanding the novella and Hesse' purpose for writing it. This other Siddhartha, though he agrees that all of the Buddha’s teachings are of value, challenges the completeness of Buddha’s teachings. Siddhartha insists that the path to true enlightenment is ultimately un-teachable and comes from something intrinsic and unquantifiable; thus, enlightenment is impossible to teach. As this whole 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)

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 at last to wisdom. This can be seen as an actualization with variations of the triad Karmayoga, Bhakthiyoga and Jnayayoga which is imparted by Krishna to Arjuna. Krishna during his discourse to Arjuna teaches about the meditation and control of mind and senses in V (Slokas 29). To quote the Slokas from the chapter “Transcendental Knowledge”:

भोक्तारं यज्ञतपसां सर्वलोकमहेश्वरम्।
सुहृदं सर्वभूतानां ज्ञात्र्ा मां शान्तिमृच्छति।।

5.29।।

(Bhagvad Gita)

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 Siddhartha 14)

Siddhartha was able to please everyone in his life but the thrust of the divine knowledge, the knowledge of Atman, the eternal truth of this universe did not allow him to enjoy his social life as he was dissatisfied with the life he was living. In his heart, he has started to cultivate the seeds of dissatisfaction towards his life. He began to feel like his father, mother, Govinda all this people and their love would not make him happy, it could not bring peace, divine joy, would not be able to satisfy his quest for learning the facts of this universe, the quest for knowing the truth about the meaninglessness of this human life as he discusses with his friend, Govinda;

“O Govinda: that man can learn nothing! The thing that we call ‘learning’ is, in truth nonexistent! It is inherent, oh my friend, in a knowledge that is everywhere, that is Atman; it is in me and in you and in every essence. I am starting to believe that this knowledge has no more aggressive enemy than learning and the desire for knowledge.” (Hesse Siddhartha 31)

In his voyage to satisfy his spiritual quest, Siddhartha met so many illusions of worldly life at the beginning of the novella he decided to leave his home and his relatives in the search of holy life and he convinced his farther for this and started to live life with Samanas. The reason behind joining Samanas is self-dissolution. As indicated in the book;

“One goal loomed before Siddhartha, and only one: to become empty, to be empty of thirst, of wishing, of dreams- empty of all joy and pain. He wanted the self to die, to no longer be an “I”, to find peace with an empty heart. His goal was to stand open to the wonder of thoughts convinced in self-dissolution. When every shared of his self-had been conquered and put to death, when every longing and every inclination of the heart had been silenced, then the Ultimate had to awaken, that which was innermost had to come into being, that which
was nothing less than ago, the great secret." (Hesse Siddhartha 25)

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.” (Hesse Siddhartha 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 merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.”
(Collected works 67)

There are some existential facts also in the novel that shows how Herman Hesse represents the notion of existentialism through Siddhartha. Here in the novel, the central character is on the journey of spiritual quest and meaning of life So he was actually in search of existence of man. So let us see what actually existentialism is and how it is described in the novella. According to the Dictionary of Philosophy, Existentialism stresses that Herman Hesse represents the

“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.” (A Dictionary 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 don’t seem to be [essence] till we have a tendency to act [existence].
• Making life meaningful through self-realization and experience.

These tenets certainly provide a perspective to analyze the novella, especially the journey of its central character. The protagonist, Siddhartha confronts an inside 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’s the role of ‘soul’ in seeking self-realisation and spiritual enlightenment? Anxious to uncover the truths about existence, he sets off on a spiritual quest with his friend Govinda.

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)

To Siddhartha, the key to initiate a journey towards attaining spirituality is to possess an elegant faith in one’s self and also the ability to reply 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 does not facilitate him.

“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 Siddhartha 27).

It is the individual himself who by putting himself through his paces will grasp the character of spiritual experience that is typically on the far side words to explain. Siddhartha’s focus is on both experiential and existential learning; the former, in the sense that subjective experience counts in the attainment of spiritual enlightenment and the 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.” (Hesse Siddhartha 80)

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, and 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.” (Hesse Siddhartha 113)

**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. The journey in the search of truth lead by Siddhartha is
very self-satisfactory. The purpose of his journey is to attain spiritual height. The spiritual discourse of Siddhartha with the people on his journey proves that Siddhartha has reached the at height of spirituality, he met so many illusions and these illusions bring for him the ultimate knowledge of Atman, the truth of human life. And finally at the end, he found ultimate peace. It all depends on one’s seeking spirit but unity of all sentient and insentient beings is the essence of Hesse’s *Siddhartha*. Human being meets with himself at the fringe of known and unknown, in between dawn and dusk at horizon and then starts the voyage to seek truth and transcendental serenity. As indicated in the novella;

“The story revolves around a young man who leaves his home and finally on a quest for the truth. Embarking on a journey that takes him from the austerities of renunciation to the profligacy of wealth. That leads him through the range of human experiences from hunger and want, to passion, pleasure, pain, greed, yearning, boredom, love, despair, and hope. A journey that leads and eventually wisdom.” (Hesse, *Siddhartha*)

### References


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Devarshi Modi is a Researcher and She is perusing her M.Phil from Department of English, School of Languages, Gujarat University. She has obtained Masters Degree with English Honour from Gujarat University. She has presented various research papers at National as well as International level conferences, seminar and colloquial. She has published two research papers in journals. Her major areas of interest are in Gender studies, Diaspora studies, Comparative studies and ELT.