

**The Multi-faced Siddhartha in Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, An
*Indian Tale***

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Abstract

This research article is about Siddhartha's journey towards salvation and his efforts to leave behind his self. It also throws light on the segments of his life, the various roles he plays in his journey to ward off self. *Siddhartha* is a tale of a Brahman who is thirsty for wisdom as what he learns and taught proves to be inadequate to him. The titular protagonist has many unanswered questions and unsolved mysteries in his mind which he slowly begins to understand in the due course of life. In the journey of life he takes up various roles, and also learns to approach and appreciate life for what it is.

Keywords- *Siddhartha, Salvation, Buddha, Self, Kamala, Samana, Brahman, Atman, Soul.*

Introduction

Siddhartha as a Brahman follows all the customs and religious duties which were entrusted and said to him. He performs his daily ablutions with utmost dedication, performs yoga, meditations and recites mantras with effortless ease. He is considered and seen more of a prince among the Brahmins, smart and intelligent, and is thirsty to know more and tries to learn as much as he can. His parents are very proud of him as he is the cynosure of all eyes and make them happy in everything that he does. He is also the perfect embodiment of how a Brahman should be. Siddhartha had the perfect companion in the form of Govinda, who loved way too much, but for a personality as good as Siddhartha, nothing is way too much.

Siddhartha, the unhappy lad

“Siddhartha had started to nurse discontent in himself, he had started to feel that the love of his father and the love of his mother, started to feel that the love of his father and the love of his mother, and also the love of his friend, Govinda, would not bring him joy forever and ever, would not nurse him, feed him, satisfy him.” (*Siddhartha*10-11) Even though Siddhartha is taught a lot by his father and all the elders he doesn't feel complete. He isn't happy inwards and people loving him isn't enough for him. His soul is not at peace and he at heart yearns for something.

“They knew everything, the Brahmins and their holy books, they knew everything, they had taken care of everything and of more than everything, the creation of the world, the origin of speech, of food, of inhaling, of exhaling, the arrangement of the senses, the acts of the gods, they knew infinitely much—but was it valuable to know all of this, not knowing that one and only thing, the most important thing, the solely important thing?” (*Siddhartha*11) The holy books from which Siddhartha learned except one important thing that is getting rid of Self. It was the only missing link in the holy books that which Siddhartha rated on top of all. He wanted to master the art of ridding Self which was nonexistent in the books that he read. “Often, it seemed near, the heavenly world, but never he had reached it completely, never he had quenched the ultimate thirst.” (*Siddhartha*12-13)

Siddhartha, the Samana

“A goal stood before Siddhartha, a single goal: to become empty, empty of thirst, empty of wishing, empty of dreams, empty of joy and sorrow. Dead to himself, not to be a self any more, to find tranquility with an emptied heart, to be open to miracles in unselfish thoughts, that was his goal.” (*Siddhartha*17) Siddhartha has this ultimate goal of killing the Self and wants to live a life of no needs. He takes the toughest route to achieve his goal by practicing as a Samana. He starts the process by being adamant with his father for not approving of him to become a Samana. Siddhartha wins over his father by standing unmoved till he gets his father's approval. “The first light of day shone into the room. The Brahman saw that Siddhartha was trembling softly in his knees. In Siddhartha's face he

saw no trembling, his eyes were fixed on a distant spot. Then his father realized that even now Siddhartha no longer dwelt with him in his home, that he had already left him.” (*Siddhartha*16)

"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, it is a short numbing of the senses against the pain and the pointlessness of life."(*Siddhartha*20) Siddhartha feels that Yoga, Meditation, Fasting are all temporary cure from the Self. He wants to find a way where he can be completely removed from the Self. He feels what he has learned from the Samanas as inadequate and says that even a common man experiences being away from Self temporarily. Siddhartha points out that there isn't any major difference between them and the common folk as they both get detached from their Self for only a short period.

"He has lived for sixty years and has not reached the nirvana. He'll turn seventy and eighty, and you and me, we will grow just as old and will do our exercises, and will fast, and will meditate. But we will not reach the nirvana, he won't and we won't. Oh Govinda, I believe out of all the Samanas out there, perhaps not a single one, not a single one, will reach the nirvana. We find comfort, we find numbness, we learn feats, to deceive others. But the most important thing, the path of paths, we will not find." (*Siddhartha*21) The temporary escape from the Self is no more than tricks to 'deceive' as Siddhartha says. Siddhartha feels that it isn't of much value as the purpose of attaining Nirvana is not fulfilled; rather they fool themselves and their mind by finding a temporary cure which does no good to them or their goal.

" I'm suffering of thirst, oh Govinda, and on this long path of a Samana, my thirst has remained as strong as ever. I always thirsted for knowledge, I have always been full of questions. I have asked the Brahmans, year after year, and I have asked the holy Vedas, year after year, and I have asked the devote Samanas, year after year. "(*Siddhartha*21-22) Siddhartha's mind is filled with questions and his yearning to learn things beyond a man's imagination is unmatched. He feels being a Samana would do nothing to quench his thirst which is way too lesser compared to his goal of attaining Nirvana. His quest for a life without Self couldn't be attained by being a Samana or that's what he thinks. He also gets occupied with this idea that one cannot learn anything from someone, so he leaves being a Samana and walks the path that life offers.

Siddhartha and the Illustrious One (Gotama Buddha)

"But attentively he looked at Gotama's head, his shoulders, his feet, his quietly dangling hand, and it seemed to him as if every joint of every finger of this hand was of these teachings, spoke of, breathed of, exhaled the fragrant of, glistened of truth. This man, this Buddha was truthful down to the gesture of his last finger. This man was holy. Never before, Siddhartha had venerated a person so much, never before he had loved a person as much as this one."(*Siddhartha*29) Siddhartha's

encounter with Gotama (Buddha) is more of a fan boy moment as he is overwhelmed at the sight of him. He is stunned to see a man whose entire body spoke of his worldly wisdom. Gotama was calm, composed and completely at ease in whatever he did. Siddhartha fell in love with the illustrious one, and never had Siddhartha loved and worshipped a man before.

“I have not doubted for a single moment that you are Buddha, that you have reached the goal, the highest goal towards which so many thousands of Brahmans and sons of Brahmans are on their way. 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 realizations, through enlightenment. It has not come to you by means of teachings! And—thus is my thought, oh exalted one,—nobody will obtain salvation by means of teachings!” (*Siddhartha*33-34) Even though Siddhartha is very much impressed with the amount of knowledge Buddha possesses, he is not interested to be a part of Buddha’s teaching process as he firmly believes that one cannot learn anything from other’s teachings. Siddhartha feels that he has to take his own route to attain Nirvana. He is not going to accept anyone as his teacher but life. And is ready to learn from life and takes the course of life as learning from others doesn’t work according to him. Siddhartha feels that he has wasted time by leading a life of Samana and doesn’t want to waste more as a follower.

“It is not my place to judge another person's life. Only for myself, for myself alone, I must decide, I must choose, I must refuse. Salvation from the self is what we Samanas search for, oh exalted one. If I merely were one of your disciples, oh venerable one, I'd fear that it might happen to me that only seemingly, only deceptively myself would be calm and be redeemed, but that in truth it would live on and grow, for then I had replaced myself with the teachings, my duty to follow you, my love for you, and the community of the monks!” (*Siddhartha*34-35) Siddhartha considers Gotama more of an inspiration rather than a person he can learn from. He, in future wants to be one like him and conquer his Self. He takes inspiration from the illustrious one but takes his own route to salvation.

Siddhartha, the realist

“I wanted to free myself from, which I sought to overcome. But I was not able to overcome it, could only deceive it, could only flee from it, only hide from it.” (*Siddhartha*37) Siddhartha seems to have understood the harsh reality in this phase of his life. He was running from his Self all the while. He could hide and fly away from it but he couldn’t conquer it, and it never turned out the way he wanted to.

"now I would not let Siddhartha escape from me again! No longer, I want to begin my thoughts and my life with Atman and with the suffering of the world. I do not want to kill and dissect myself any longer, to find a secret behind the ruins." (*Siddhartha*38) Siddhartha realizes the fact that no one can teach him or lead him to salvation. He is not going to hurt himself by going through yoga,

meditation, fasting and by reading holy books to attain Nirvana. He wants to be his own pupil and he wants to learn all by himself. He quits being a follower of other's teachings.

Siddhartha, the lover

This is the segment where Siddhartha moves from being a Samana to Samsara with the introduction of a beautiful courtesan who goes by the name Kamala. Siddhartha falls for her at the very first sight and he badly wants to court her and be around her which is clear from the lines "You are the first woman whom Siddhartha is not addressing with his eyes turned to the ground. Never again I want to turn my eyes to the ground, when I'm coming across a beautiful woman." (*Siddhartha*49) The lines demonstrate Siddhartha's shift in character from a loin clothed Samana to a man who yearns for the affections of a beautiful woman. He who had previously given up worldly pleasures and desires now sets his sight on a woman.

With Kamala entering Siddhartha's life everything enters into his life. He enjoys company, drinks, eats to his heart's content, wears rich men's clothes, gambles, does business, is overcome with greed and envy as all other common folk. "That high, bright state of being awake, which he had experienced that one time at the height of his youth, in those days after Gotama's sermon, after the separation from Govinda, that tense expectation, that proud state of standing alone without teachings and without teachers, that supple willingness to listen to the divine voice in his own heart, had slowly become a memory, had been fleeting; distant and quiet, the holy source murmured, which used to be near, which used to murmur within himself." (*Siddhartha*67) Siddhartha gets drowned in the life of a commoner. He has become a normal human being, the great Siddhartha; the Brahman who was once adored by all is not the same anymore. His early days remain just a memory, memory of a past so distant.

Siddhartha and the river

Siddhartha shares a special connect with the river, he almost decides to kill himself in the river but then he hears 'OM' which revives him. He realizes that life has been tough and the path he has walked has not been a cakewalk for him. He has transformed and has sported different avatars about which he says, "but what a path has this been! I had to pass through so much stupidity, through so much vices, through so many errors, through so much disgust and disappointments and woe, just to become a child again and to be able to start over." (*Siddhartha*82)

"Was this not his self, his small, frightened, and proud self, he had wrestled with for so many years, which had defeated him again and again, which was back again after every killing, prohibited joy, felt fear? Was it not this, which today had finally come to its death, here in the forest, by this lovely river? Was it not due to this death, that he was now like a child, so full of trust, so without fear, so full of joy?" (*Siddhartha*84) The lines describe the struggles of Siddhartha to remove his Self. He

had been fighting his Self for so many years, but now at the side of this beautiful river his Self has died and it has made him a child again. "Cheerfully, he looked into the rushing river, never before he had like a water so well as this one, never before he had perceived the voice and the parable of the moving water thus strongly and beautifully. It seemed to him, as if the river had something special to tell him, something he did not know yet, which was still awaiting him." (*Siddhartha*85)

Siddhartha, the listener

"You will learn it," spoke Vasudeva, "but not from me. The river has taught me to listen, from it you will learn it as well. It knows everything, the river, everything can be learned from it" (*Siddhartha*90) Siddhartha has learned enough life lessons and now it's time to listen to the voices of the river and learn from it. It is going to be a wholly new experience for Siddhartha as Vasudeva (ferryman) has listened to the voices of the river and has learned a great deal from it.

Many who've crossed the river has seen it merely as a hindrance but few listen to the voices of the river and take a deep look into it. Siddhartha is one among the few who have listened to the river. Vasudeva exclaims how holy the river appears to him and the others who have listened to its voices in the lines that follow. "But for some among thousands, a few, four or five, the river has stopped being an obstacle, they have heard its voice, they have listened to it, and the river has become sacred to them, as it has become sacred to me. Let's rest now, Siddhartha." (*Siddhartha*91)

Siddhartha, the father

"I knew it. You don't force him, don't beat him, don't give him orders, because you know that 'soft' is stronger than 'hard', Water stronger than rocks, love stronger than force. (*Siddhartha*101) Siddhartha who was previously chided by Kamala for not being able to love anyone is a completely changed man towards his son. He loves his son so much and wants to change him with the love and affection which he showers upon him. Siddhartha is so good to his son and is not strict even if he's at fault. Siddhartha tries his best to win over his son's affection with all the love he can.

"Would you think, my dear, anybody might perhaps be spared from taking this path? That perhaps your little son would be spared, because you love him, because you would like to keep him from suffering and pain and disappointment? But even if you would die ten times for him, you would not be able to take the slightest part of his destiny upon yourself." (*Siddhartha*102) Siddhartha doesn't want his son to go through what he has experienced in his life. Love for his son has blinded him that he fails to realize pain and suffering is a natural process, and everyone has to go through it as there is no escape from it.

"Indeed, he had never been able to lose or devote himself completely to another person, to forget himself, to commit foolish acts for the love of another person; never he had been able to do this, and this was, as it had seemed to him at that time, the great distinction which set him apart from

the childlike people. But now, since his son was here, now he, Siddhartha, had also become completely a childlike person, suffering for the sake of another person, loving another person, lost to a love, having become a fool on account of love.” (*Siddhartha*103) Siddhartha has remained detached all through his life and has never loved someone. That was a thing of past as he has gone through a sea change with the arrival of his son. With this the difference between Siddhartha and the common folk has been closed.

Siddhartha, the ultimate

“Though he was near perfection and was bearing his final wound, it still seemed to him as if those childlike people were his brothers, their vanities, desires for possession, and ridiculous aspects were no longer ridiculous to him, became understandable, became lovable, even became worthy of veneration to him” (*Siddhartha*107) Siddhartha who early considered pain, love, suffering, hunger, sadness, sufferings and much more as illusions has now realized he had been living in an imaginary world of illusions. Now, Siddhartha could relate very well to people’s feelings and their sufferings after his son has deserted him.

“In this hour, Siddhartha stopped fighting his fate, stopped suffering. On his face flourished the cheerfulness of a knowledge, which is no longer opposed by any will, which knows perfection, which is in agreement with the flow of events, with the current of life, full of sympathy for the pain of others, full of sympathy for the pleasure of others, devoted to the flow, belonging to the oneness.” (*Siddhartha*112) Siddhartha finds salvation by living life as it is presented to him. He accepts none as teacher and treads the path of life without anyone’s guidance. He experiences lust, passion, envy, greed and all the pleasures that the world has to offer. Siddhartha also plays various roles that are offered in human life, finds peace at last by taking life as it is and detaches himself from the all-important Self.

Conclusion

Siddhartha’s road to salvation isn’t an easy one and either is one’s life, that’s what we learn from this novel which is more of a book which falls under the category of lesson-for-life. No one is perfect as Oscar Wilde puts it “The only difference between the saint and the sinner is that every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.” Siddhartha who once restricted himself from the worldly pleasures and desires calling it an illusion falls into the mainstream life and gets choked with aplenty of it. He kills desire and pleasure with desire and pleasure respectively. He ran away from Self for so many years but in the end overcomes Self by understanding it.

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