

A Comparative Study of Hesse's Siddhartha and the Historical Siddhartha

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Abstract

In this paper, on the basis of Hesse's fictional Siddhartha and the historical Siddhartha Gautam, Herman Hesse's novel Siddhartha has been interpreted analyzing convergences and divergences between them rigorously. This paper satisfies the curiosity of understanding the novel comparing and contrasting various aspects of both the fictional and the historical characters. This paper has used primary as well as secondary sources to fulfil its queries and objective through interpretation of both the fictional and the historical characters analyzing qualitatively in descriptive form using the qualitative design and the comparative method. The analysis of the paper benefits the researchers for future research, for the writers to write novels with such existential theme and the readers to understand the subject matter of the novel comparatively through existential and intercultural philosophy.

Key Terms: Convergences, Divergences, Existentialism, Historical, Salvation, Spirituality.

Introduction

Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922) is a modern novel that reflects Buddhist tradition contradictorily. Hermann Hesse, a German-born Swiss writer, poet and novelist, was honored with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1946. Although the novelist has given a title to his novel *Siddhartha*, it does not represent the historical Siddhartha Gautam. Hesse's protagonist *Siddhartha* follows a distinct spiritual and diverges from Buddhist orthodoxy. This article examines the relationship between Hesse's fictional *Siddhartha* and the historical Siddhartha by exploring points of convergences and divergences through the historical, cultural and philosophical interpretation. This paper interprets the convergences and divergences between Hesse's fictional *Siddhartha* and the historical Siddhartha Gautam qualitatively using primary and secondary sources i.e. library. The statement problem going to be explored is to evaluate and analyze the convergences and divergences between Hesse's fictional *Siddhartha* and the historical Siddhartha Gautam through interpretation of both Hesse's fictional *Siddhartha* and the historical Siddhartha Gautam's birthplace and family background, desires for spirituality, support by their friends, fathers' love for their sons, belief in experiential learning, symbolic teachers and gaining spirituality qualitatively.

A novel is one of the major forms of literature with long fictional narrative written in prose that presents characters, events and experiences in a structured and imaginative way to explore themes, conflicts, and human emotions. This novel has been interpreted in various ways applying various methods and principles but, its interpretation on the basis of convergences and divergences between Hesse's fictional Siddhartha and the historical Siddhartha the Gotama is still lacking, therefore, the researcher analyzes as aforementioned. To solve the research problem as mentioned for this paper is, 'what are the convergences and divergences between Hesse's fictional *Siddhartha* and the historical Siddhartha Gautama?' and its objective is to evaluate and analyze the convergences and divergences between Hesse's fictional Siddhartha and the historical Siddhartha Gautam.

After the analysis of the novel as forementioned, its relevancy gets increased for the researchers for further analysis, for the writers for writing novel with such existential theme, for the readers to understand and follow norms and values of the fictional Siddhartha's way of living. It assists the researchers, writers and readers to think differently and live differently rather than following someone being orthodox. Interpretation of both Hesse's fictional *Siddhartha* and the historical Siddhartha Gautam's birthplace and family background, desires for spirituality, support by their friends, fathers' love for their sons, belief in experiential learning, symbolic teachers and gaining spirituality are its areas of research and others not mentioned above are its limitations.

Method and Procedure

To achieve the objective of the study, the following sample of data collection, theoretical framework and method of interpretation and analysis have been followed.

Sample of Data Collection

In the present article, materials have been collected from library sources, using Hesse's novel *Siddhartha* as the primary source. Previous studies conducted by various writers and scholars have been utilized for the theoretical foundations of Buddhism and Existentialism along with methods and frameworks of interpretation as the secondary sources. In the selection of primary source, the purposive sampling method has been applied.

Theoretical Framework

The theories of Buddhism and Existentialism have been applied to achieve the objectives of the study interpreting the research tools as mentioned. The social nucleus of Buddhism is the order of monks and nuns (sangha) founded by the Buddha. (Keown, 2013). Buddhism is a philosophy based on the teachings of the Buddha who offers a path to overcome the suffering through wisdom, ethical conduct, and mental discipline. It makes us enlightened to get nirvana through ultimate liberation from suffering and cycle of rebirth.

In any case, we can begin by saying that existentialism, in our sense of the word, is a doctrine that does render human life possible; a doctrine, also, which affirms that every truth and every action imply both an environment and a human subjectivity (Satre, 1946). Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism (Satre, 1946). To present the view that a person makes their own decisions and also takes responsibility themselves in order to establish selfhood (Baral and Atam, 2009). It can be clarified further by the given text:

When, in the nineteenth century, due to the prevalence of various inventions and theories, the influence of scientific rationality and social order on human life began to increase significantly, the individuality and freedom of the person started being neglected. In reaction to this, a philosophy developed that gave the highest importance to individual freedom while strongly opposing scientific rationality and social conformity. This philosophy came to be known in the fields of philosophy and art as "Existentialism." (Gupt, 2021)

Existentialism is essentially the philosophy of individuality. Its starting point is the question, "*What am I?*" It considers only this "I" to truly exist. Existentialism is the philosophy of the awareness of the existence of the "self" or the ego. Acting in the form of the ego is possible only through free will. (Mishra, 2011)

Existentialism is a theoretical perspective which emphasizes on the individual experience of existence, freedom and responsibility in creating meaning in life.

The characteristics or factors of either Buddhism or Existentialism or both of them have been adopted as research tools to compare Hesse's Siddhartha and the historical Siddhartha showing similarities and differences to achieve the objectives of the study as aforementioned.

Method of Interpretation and Analysis

The comparative method has been followed to interpret Hesse's fictional novel *Siddhartha* comparing it with the historical Siddhartha.

Max Müller has said that the highest knowledge can be achieved through comparison, and it is sustained only in comparison. The very beginning of human intellect lies in comparison. This can also be observed in literature—one poet/writer with another poet/writer, the literature of one tradition with that of another tradition, one literary era with the corresponding era of another tradition, and so on. In this way, it is found that literary critics compare two or more writers of the same tradition or compare them with foreign writers. (Adhikari, 2009)

The comparative method in research is a systematic approach used to analyze and evaluate similarities and differences between two or more subjects to gain deeper

understanding. This article, strengthened through the application of qualitative research methodology, engages in an analysis grounded in Buddhism and Existentialism, particularly addressing the depiction of Hesse's fictional Siddhartha and the historical Siddhartha Gautam's birthplace and family background, desires for spirituality, support by their friends, fathers' love for their sons, belief in experiential learning, symbolic teachers and gaining spirituality. On the basis of these parameters of analysis of Buddhism and Existentialism, Hesse's novel Siddhartha has been critically evaluated, thereby situating the study within a qualitative framework that emphasizes multiple truths. The examination of the novel has been conducted with reference to established theories of Buddhism and Existentialism, and by adhering to the criteria outlined within these theories, relevant facts and quotations have been extracted from the text. These have been interpreted and analyzed in order to draw conclusions, thus employing a text-analytical research approach.

Discussion and Result

Hermann Hesse's novel *Siddhartha* is a seminal modernist novel that draws heavily on the Buddhist Philosophy in contrary way. This novel presents various similarities and differences for gaining spirituality and nirvana by Hesse's fictional character *Siddhartha* and the historical Siddhartha Gautama. Here presents the researcher both characters' birthplace and family background birth place, desires for spirituality, support by their friends, fathers' love for their sons, belief in experiential learning, symbolic teachers and gaining spirituality in detail.

Birthplace and Family Background

Hesse's *Siddhartha* gets born in a Brahman family whereas historical Siddhartha gets born in Shakya dynasty, a ruler class family in Kapilvastu. Hesse narrates,

In the shade of the house, in the sunshine of the river bank near the boats, in the shade of the Sal-wood-forest, in the shade of the fig tree is where Siddhartha grew up, the handsome son of the Brahman, the young falcon together his friend Govinda, son of a Brahman. (Hesse, 2024)

Keown mentions,

The Buddha was born in the Terai lowlands near the foot hills of the Himalayas just inside the borders of modern-day Nepal. (Keown, 2013)

Both characters, by their birth are scholar, curious and extraordinary. Both of them are brought up in well to do families. Both of them are taught by gurus and scholars at home. Hesse, through the mouth of Govinda (*Siddhartha's* friend) states that in ways to come, he would not become a common Brahman, not a lazy official, not a greedy merchant, not a vain speaker, not a deceitful priest and not a stupid person among many (Hesse, 2024). In the same way, E.B Noble in his work, " *The story of the Buddha* " states that the prince *Siddhartha* surpassed all his class fellows among five hundred and

even seemed to know as much as his teacher (Noble, 2008). Only difference is that Hesse's *Siddhartha* takes birth in a Brahman family, but historical Siddhartha in a royal family. However, both of them share the Buddhist doctrines of teaching and learning while living in their birthplace and family.

Desires for Spirituality

Hesse's novel *Siddhartha* reflects somehow a spiritual journey in experiential way. Both characters - the fictional and the historical one have desire to gain something which is missing in their life from childhood. Their fathers try their best to provide all sorts of knowledge and needs at home, however, they are not satisfied. Hesse narrates,

He had started to suspect that his venerable father and his other teachers, that the wise Brahmans had already revealed to him the most and the best of their wisdom, that they had already filled his expecting vessel with their richness, and the vessel was not full the spirit was not content, the soul was not calm, the heart was not satisfied. (Hesse, 2024)

Noble states,

Suddenly the prince said to himself, "I will do as this man has done, give up everything I possess and go into homelessness; so shall I find peace of mind and learn the wisdom which shall teach mankind how to overcome the miseries of mortal life." (Noble, 2008)

Both of them feel something is missing in their life. Only after leaving their homes, they can gain that spirituality, so they decide to leave their home. But after having permission formally with great urge from his father, Hesse's *Siddhartha* leaves his home whereas the historical Siddhartha, without having permission and giving any information, leaves his home. Hesse's *Siddhartha* is a bachelor whereas historical Siddhartha is a married one. The first one follows existential ways to proceed ahead to get enlightened, on the contrary, the second one follows the pre-determined doctrine of meditation, fasting and penance.

Support by Their Friends

Hesse's novel *Siddhartha* presents friendship, between *Siddhartha* and Govinda, which proves fruitful for *Siddhartha* in gaining his final spirituality. Hesse narrates, 'But more than all the others he was loved by Govinda, his friend the son of a Brahman' (Hesse, 2024). Govinda's friendly relation plays a vital role in Hesse's *Siddhartha*'s life though *Siddhartha* himself leaves his friend Govinda on his midway of destination. Likewise, the historical Siddhartha gets companionship and support of his charioteer Chhandak who managed him to encounter with an old man, a diseased man, a dead man and a Samana eventually. Noble writes, 'But one day the prince called Channa, his faithful

charioteer, to make ready his chariot, because he wished to drive to the beautiful pleasure gardens.' (Noble, 2008)

Both characters get companionship of some nears and dears to proceed in their way to spirituality. But both of them leave them on their way before reaching to the missing point. Spiritually Govinda remains follower of Siddhartha in Hesse's *Siddhartha* throughout his whole life, but Chhandak doesn't follow the historical Siddhartha spiritually. However, in existential point of view, it clarifies that one should struggle himself/herself to reach the determined destination.

Fathers' Love for Their Sons

In Hesse's *Siddhartha*, *Siddhartha*'s father doesn't like to let his son go away from his home. After knowing his desire to become a Samana, he becomes worried but *Siddhartha* becomes stubborn and eventually, he is bound to give him permission to leave home.

Hesse writes,

The first light of day glanced into the room. The Brahman saw that Siddhartha's knees were trembling softly. But in Siddhartha's face he saw no trembling; his eyes were fixed on a distance spot. Then his father realized that Siddhartha no longer dwelt with him in his home that he had already left him. (Hesse, 2024)

Correspondingly, Suddhodhan provides all sorts of cozy facilities to Siddhartha at home so that he won't leave his home. Even he has his son get married to a beautiful princess for worldly pleasures to stop him at home. Noble writes, 'The king hoped that by providing his son with all the pleasures that his world could give he would prevent the fulfilment of the prophecy that the prince would leave his home and go into homelessness.' (Noble, 2008)

Both characters' fathers try their best to hold their sons at home but can't. It shows that by nature, parents love their children and expect that they should stay with them at home. Only difference is that the Brahman (Hesse's *Siddhartha*'s father) never tries to search and know about his son after he leaves his home, on the other hand, Suddhodhan (the historical Siddhartha's father) sends some of his nobles to search and get his son Siddhartha back but fails eventually. Existentially, this comparison makes obvious that people take interest to live their lives in their own way to make it meaningful.

Belief in Experiential Learning

Hesse's *Siddhartha* strictly believes in experiential learning rather than taught by Samanas while living with them. Even he encounters with Siddhartha Gotama in real in person. However, he doesn't get satisfied and his missing lesson of getting enlightenment. Hesse writes, "I want to learn from myself, want to be my student, want to get to know myself, the secret of Siddhartha." (Hesse, 2024)

Similarly, the historical Siddhartha also doesn't get pacified by his teachers and preceptors, like Alara and Udaka, and others through their preachings. He also comes in contact with so many scholars who can't solve his queries that he wants to. Burchett mentions, 'For many years he strove to gain from hermits and ascetics of all kinds the answer to his problem, patiently examining and testing the complicated systems of salvation which they taught, but none could lead him to the end of suffering' (Burchett, 2005). Pranay states, " Religion is about finding transformation within your being through yourself movement into compassion and live" (Pranay, 2021). Keown also mentions, " Buddhism regards the religious life as essentially a course in self - transformation." (Keown, 2013)

Regarding existential philosophy,

The philosophical premise is that temporality and historicity - a situation in one's present that looks back to the past and anticipates the future – is in separately a part of each individual's being; that the process of understanding something, involving an act of interpretation, goes not only in reading verbal texts but in all aspects of human experience; and that language, like temporality, pervades all aspects of that experience. (Abrahams and Harpham, 2020)

The both characters don't follow any teachers and preceptors rather they learn through their own experiential way. Hesse's *Siddhartha* goes through earthly affairs whereas the historical Siddhartha follows penance and meditation to continue their spiritual journey to enlightenment. It shows that life can be made meaningful through existential principle of experience as Hesse narrates rather than predetermined doctrines.

Symbolic Teachers

Hesse's Siddhartha never gets satisfied with teachings and preachings of teachers and preceptors in his boyhood life, but later he encounters with symbolic teachers from whom he learns the essence of life and spirituality in real sense. In fact, his relation and worldly activities with them teach him what he desires for. Hesse writes,

Nevertheless, I have had many teachers since then. A beautiful courtesan has been my teacher for a longtime, and a rich merchant was my teacher, and some gamblers with dice. Once, even a follower of Buddha, travelling on foot, has been my teacher; he sat with me when I had fallen asleep in the forest, on the pilgrimage. I've also learned from him, I'm also grateful to him, very grateful. But most of all I have learned here from this river and from my predecessor, the ferryman Vasudava. (Hesse, 2024)

But the historical Buddha never learns from such symbolic teachers. He follows various spiritual norms and values in his life through which he becomes able to gain his missing lesson, salvation. Actually, meditation, penance, fasting and such other ways of his life teach him the essence of his objective. In this sense, meditation, fasting etc. may be taken his symbolic teachers who supports him to reach his destination. Dahal mentions,

In the state of deep meditation Siddhartha gazed into the hearts of all beings and came to know the condition of each mind, no matter how far away it was. As a result, he could hear the sounds of every person's joy and sorrow. In this way, he attained divine vision, divine hearing, and the ability to remain in his own place while being able to go anywhere. (Dahal, 2015)

Both characters achieve their objectives, the essence of life i.e. enlightenment in different ways. The fictional *Siddhartha* gains his search through worldly activities whereas the historical Buddha gains in ideal way, i.e. meditation and penance. Hesse, through his protagonist, opines that people should enjoy freedom of choice and taking decision, another principle of existentialism, to learn meaning of life rather than torturing themselves running behind old doctrines.

Gaining Spirituality

Hesse's *Siddhartha* gains spirituality eventually in existential way. His search for missing learning gets stopped in his old hood after he gets it through experiential search. Hesse writes,

I've had thoughts, yes, and insight, again and again. sometimes for an hour or for an entire day, I have felt knowledge in me, as one would feel life in one's heart. There have been many thoughts..... (Hesse, 2024)

In the same way, the historical Siddhartha also gets pacified after he gets solution to all problems in human life in Bodhgaya under a peepal tree. He becomes ascetics after his long awaiting great achievement through fasting, penance and meditation. Noble states,

Gotama remained seated under the peepal tree, and before night fell there came upon him the peace which passeth understanding - called by the Buddhist "Nirvana" like a man who comes forth from a dark prison into a glorious light where each object appears in clearness and certainty, so the mind of the perfectly enlightened Buddha

passes into the region where all truth becomes clear, all secrets of life and death stand revealed in the light of the supreme wisdom." (Noble, 2008)

Both characters Hesse's *Siddhartha* and the historical Siddhartha get enlightened - one through going earthly activities and other one through meditation and penance. The fictional *Siddhartha* follows existentialism which is a modern philosophical movement that emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice. He doesn't follow pre-determined essence and principles. But the historical Siddhartha goes through the pre-determined essence and doctrines as fasting, meditation and penance as other ascetics followed in past to get enlightened.

Conclusion

Hesse's *Siddhartha* embodies a literary and philosophical reinterpretation of the life of the historical Siddhartha Gautama, but with a modern existential emphasis. The novel acknowledges similarities with the Buddha's life—family background, curiosity for truth, struggles with worldly attachments, and a search for ultimate fulfillment. However, Hesse distances his protagonist from the Buddha's path by underscoring the inadequacy of doctrines and emphasizing direct experience. In the novel, Siddhartha learns through his encounters with earthly experiences—love, wealth, gambling, despair, and finally the river—suggesting that wisdom is not a matter of instruction but of lived realization. His refusal to accept the Buddha's four noble truths and the eightfold path as transferable teachings reflects Hesse's critique of dogmatic systems. Instead, the novel advocates the existential view that truth cannot be taught but must be discovered personally. The historical *Siddhartha*, by contrast, insisted that liberation is attainable through disciplined practice, meditation, and detachment from worldly pleasures, after which he systematized his realization into doctrines for others' guidance. This marks a fundamental divergence: whereas the Buddha universalized his enlightenment into a path of salvation for humanity, Hesse's *Siddhartha* individualizes it, treating enlightenment as an incommunicable personal achievement. Critically, this reveals Hesse's philosophical project rather than a faithful retelling of Buddhist history. His *Siddhartha* becomes an existential figure—rejecting predetermined frameworks, exercising individual freedom, and assuming responsibility for meaning-making. In this way, the novel highlights the modern tension between collective religious doctrines and the existentialist valorization of personal autonomy. Yet one might also question whether Hesse overstates the ineffability of wisdom, since Buddhist tradition itself acknowledges that while words cannot fully capture truth, guidance and practice remain vital for progress. Thus, Hesse's *Siddhartha* is best understood not as an account of Buddhism, but as a Western literary-philosophical exploration of existential self-realization through the metaphor of the Buddha's life.

The divergences help intercultural philosophy as addressed by Hesse with Western misconceptions presenting issues of cultural appropriation, stereotyping, and distortions through his emphasis on individual self-discovery versus Buddhist emphasis on non-self. The convergences encourage appreciations of shared human values across cultures showing how literature can serve as a bridge between different world views expanding

human understanding of existence through narrative and philosophy together. It helps academicians design curricula that show how ideas travel and transform between cultures on the basis of cross-cultural philosophy. It shows history, religion, philosophy can be transformed into fiction with artistic re-imagination and creative freedom to blend fact, myth, and philosophy to reach universal truths presenting Eastern philosophy into Western literature to the readers as well as the writers. Such sort of study broadens the tools for the literary critics to interpret the text in a network of cultural exchange.

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