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A Study of Self in Conflict, in Hesse's masterpiece *Siddhartha*

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Introduction:

Published in 1922 *Siddhartha* is a Western version of the self in conflict in the life of the protagonist Siddhartha. It is necessary to know how and to what extent Hesse was influenced by the conflict of self in the life of Siddhartha; and equally important it is to know what self-conflict is according to Indian Philosophy. In the following few passages the researcher intends to highlight the concept of the self in conflict in the context of in the Indian Philosophy and Buddhism as a brief background to understand apply in the novel *Siddhartha*:

Hesse had read Schopenhauer; he had experienced what he believed was genuine Indian culture throughout his childhood, and psychologically he was open to the meditative practices which he believed were the steps to achieve his goal of unity. Hesse found the inspiration to renew his interest in Hinduism and Buddhism in the writings of Schopenhauer, whose work he now preferred to that of Nietzsche. His reading of Schopenhauer's confirmed for him the significance of Indian ideas for understanding epistemological issues. (Boulby 1967 121-123)

Hesse turned to the in-depth study of the *Bhagavad-Gita* as a reaction to reading various theosophical writings. He read the standard German works on the subject of Buddhist and Hindu philosophy. (Ziolkowski 1965 147) Moreover, he embarked on his so-called "Trip to India" from September 1911 to December 1911, which was actually a trip to Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Sumatra, as they were called in 1911. Initially Hesse was drawn to pursue his study of Indian philosophy concept of unity;" the ultimate oneness of all reality." At this point Hesse was looking for a philosophical and religious system that would allow him to escape the fragmented and disenchanted view that permeated Western society. In Ziolkowski's view, Hesse approached Indian thought with his characteristic critical stance. In an important journal entry in 1920 Hesse writes:

"My preoccupation with India, which has been going on for almost twenty years and has passed through many stages, now seems to me to have reached a new point of development. Previously my reading, searching and sympathies were restricted exclusively to the philosophical aspects of India — the purely intellectual, Vedantic and Buddhistic aspects. The Upanishads, the sayings of Buddha, and the Bhagavad-Gita were the focal point of this world. Only recently have I been approaching the actual religious India of the gods, of Vishnu and Indra, Brahma and Krishna. And now Buddhism appears to me more and more as a kind of very pure, highly bred reformation — a purification and spiritualization that has no flaw but its great zealotness, with which it destroys image-worlds for which it can offer no



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replacement. (Ziolkowski 1965, 149-150)

With these judgments that Hesse makes of the religions of India — and in particular Buddhism — it would look that his criticism is based on the intellectualizing nature of these religions. Hesse further elaborates on his image of Indian religions as overly intellectual. There are some significant points concerning Hesse's stance regarding Buddhism in particular and the religions of India in general. While he initially had looked to India and Indian philosophy, as a means of overcoming the fragmentation and disenchantment in Western thought, eventually he arrived at the conclusion that the same conditions were present in Indian religions.

The realization - that he had not found the perfect, unified system - and contributed to the difficulty that Hesse had in completing the novel Siddhartha. The problem that he faced was; where does one look in the construction of a religious vision, once external authority is absent, teachers and teachings are primarily involved with the intellect - and as such devoid of any religious authority - and the cardinal question - whether world of experience only speaks to desires.

On the basis of his readings and the stories he had heard at his home, Hesse had probably concluded that the East would somehow provide an answer to his dilemma. Even after he had made his conclusions that Buddhism was "too intellectual", he embarked on his journey to India. The India that he wanted to experience was the neo-romantic view of India found in his reading of both Jung and Nietzsche, which he had absorbed and refined.

This was to become the ideal view of complete harmony of all the polarities that brought about the realization of the fully individuated person. An ideal that Hesse truly believed was possible in India, but impossible in the West. Mileck identifies this characterization as Hesse's "exotic" image of India. Edward Said in his work on Western approaches to the East, labels this type of view as "essentializing", meaning that it becomes devoid of the actual lived experience of the people. This process of essentializing often created images of the East that were romantic, in the sense of one-sided in emphasizing what came to be seen the pleasing and delightful aspects of Westerners, as they "learned" about the East. When these images were shattered by the actual experience of the many sides of life in the East as anywhere else, it often created revulsion in those who were convinced that the East actually was represented in these "exotic" images.

Hesse experienced twice reactions to his experiencing of "India", significantly, neither of those



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involved actual contact with India. He read translations of Buddhist and Hindu texts, was very interested at first, and then lost interest as the study of the texts would require more effort than he deemed worthy. Even the practice of meditation, which he had encountered as part of his study of the life of St. Francis, as well as his readings on Eastern religion, he did not follow to any great depth.

And when he finally went on his trip to India, as mentioned earlier, he never actually set foot in India itself. He aborted his trip, as he suffered from dysentery and general fatigue. (Freedman 1963)

Moreover, Hesse was attempting to overcome dualities in his search for a unified vision of life; and thus he needed to find some kind of a resolution to the dichotomy that he had experienced since childhood; namely, between the world of imagination, pleasure and sensuality and that of the rigidity of reason. Hesse turned to India and the religions of India as a source for a solution to his problem of harmonizing the polarity of sensuality and reason. On the basis of his readings of the Indian sources, as well as the work of western philosophers such as Schopenhauer, we believed he had found in the religion of India the inner way to individuation, which he believed was the source of authentic religion. This was to be the unity of life that he had seen as necessary to overcome the chaotic philosophy and rigid religious turn that now marked Western society. While this was indeed the way he constructed the novel *Siddhartha*, Hesse's own views of Indian religions and Indian way of life took a different turn. Particularly, Hesse came to recognize that the harmony that he desperately longer for in terms of the polarity between emotion and reason, he would not find its solution in the Indian way of life. In order to understand why such was the case, we need to turn to an analysis of the novel itself and then an examination of Hesse's views of the East.

In the following passage from *Siddhartha* one can feel the lyrical poignancy of the conflicting notions of the self. The body language with confused movements is connotative of the protagonist's self in conflict. It is both poetic and powerful:

The river laughed. Yes, that was how it was. Everything that was not suffered to the end and finally concluded, recurred and the same sorrows were undergone. Siddhartha climbed into the boat again and rowed back to the hut, thinking of his father, thinking of his son, laughed at by the river, in conflict with himself, verging on despair, and no less inclined to laugh aloud at himself and the whole world. The wound still smarted; he still rebelled against his fate. There was still no serenity and



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conquest of his suffering. Yet he was hopeful and when he returned to the hut, he was filled with an unconquerable desire to confess to Vasudeva, to disclose everything, to tell everything to the man who knew the art of listening. (Siddhartha 107)

At the end of this struggling conflict with the self, there is repose, the awakening of the self, the enlightenment by which we know “a Siddhartha” turning into “a Buddha”. It is moment of Siddhartha’s being victorious in the incessant conflict with the self, and achieving the “Buddhatva”:

From that hour Siddhartha ceased to fight against his destiny. There shone in his face the serenity of knowledge, of one who is no longer confronted with conflict of desires, who has found salvation, who is in harmony with the stream of events, with the stream of life, full of sympathy and compassion, surrendering himself to the stream, belonging to the unity of all things. (Siddhartha 111)

Being “The Buddha” from the princely Siddhartha is a life-long process. It is a perennial struggle of a great soul (Mahatma) with the conflicting selves. In order to know this journey of a prince to becoming the mahatma here is an attempt to sketch life and work of Siddhartha leading him from the kingly state to the consummate state of the Buddha. “The Buddha” is a designation name for the historical king known as Siddhartha Gautama when he was a prince. He lived a life of refinement and luxury. Yet Siddhartha yearned to know about the world outside the walls. He finally succeeded in persuading his charioteer, Channa, to take him for trips through the streets. Here he was shocked to see misery and pain. In particular he saw feeble old people, sick people, and some who had died. These images did not match the narrow picture of the world he had constructed through his education. They troubled him so much that he resolved to leave home and seek truth by himself. Siddhartha decided to join ascetics for spiritual understanding.

During this time Siddhartha underwent ascetic practices such as fasting, extreme physical deprivation in order to overcome the influence of the physical body. But Siddhartha finally concluded this form of practice was simply another extreme that would not lead to true wisdom. He then chose to leave his small group and ponder the way of achieving truth by him. Siddhartha settled in a forest grove and began to meditate on his life experiences. This individual avoided the extremes of careless hedonism and cruel asceticism to find a balanced view of the world and his place in it. He concluded that humans must develop wisdom and compassion in equal measure. And he taught others the results of his quest.

Hesse wrote that all his books were in some way autobiographical, and Siddhartha can be



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interpreted as autobiography thinly screened. In it Hesse revisits an India that, as he hinted elsewhere, never existed in reality even in ancient times, but it was the India he imagined, in his childhood, in his parents' house filled with Indian artefacts and in the picture books about India in his grandfather's library. As in a dream, all the features of this landscape have symbolic meaning, as do its characters. They are the figures that dominated Hesse's childhood. Siddhartha's father and the learned Brahmins represent Hesse's father and his fellow missionaries, and the Brahministic rituals symbolize the stern commands and prohibitions of their Pietist faith. Siddhartha's struggle of will with his father and his eventual escape into the forest are Hesse's escape from his parents' expectations. Like Siddhartha's flight into the Samana struggle with the self, Hesse's flight led him into a lifelong struggle with his bourgeois background and his artistic self.

Siddhartha's immersion in the world of the senses and pleasures was also Hesse's. The intense self-exploration by the river might be compared with Hesse's psychoanalytic experience, substituting Vasudeva (the wise old man) for the psychoanalyst. That Hesse's life story is set in a dreamlike Indian landscape and told through Indian characters is seen as one of Hesse's artistic triumphs. *Siddhartha* is considered by a number of Hesse scholars as his most perfect novel. Siddhartha rejects first the Brahministic teachings of his father, then the self-denying practices of the Samanas, and finally the teachings of the Buddha, greatest of all teachers. At this point Siddhartha has rejected all teaching, believing that one must find one's own way. Knowledge can be taught, but not wisdom, he says. He notes that the Buddha achieved his blissful understanding not through any teaching but by way of his own patient search.

Conclusion:

Accordingly, the Buddha's teachings contain all the knowledge necessary for living a good life, but omit the secret of enlightenment, which can only be experienced, not taught. So Siddhartha goes on alone. He discovers the beauty of nature, which in Hindu belief must be ignored because it is Maya, illusion. In Christian teaching, the world and everything in it is God's creation and therefore to be embraced and respected. But this also suggests the unity of all things, which is a Hindu concept, and the All of Buddhism, so that Siddhartha's discovery of the natural world may be a first step toward the wisdom that all life is one.



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