



# A Woman's Journey towards Self- Realization: Portrayal of Kamala in Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*

Ruchi Rani, Research Scholar, Central University of Haryana

## Abstract

The present paper focuses on the study of Hermann Hesse's famous female character Kamala portrayed in his well known novel *Siddhartha*. Though *Siddhartha* deals with the spiritual journey of self-realization of a man named Siddhartha during the time of Gautama Buddha but it also explores the journey of two other characters and one of them is Kamala. The novel came in 1922 in German and was published in English in 1951 and became influential during 1960s. In this novel, Siddhartha learns that enlightenment cannot be reached through teachers because it cannot be taught- enlightenment comes from within. He uses external sources for his quest of self- discovery but these sources fail to teach him wisdom and he learns that he must find wisdom on his own and ultimately this realization comes from within. Influenced by the characteristics of Siddhartha and his talks about Buddha, Kamala also leaves her work as a courtesan and decides to devote her life to Buddha.

**Key- words** – Self, Self- Realization, enlightenment, wisdom.

India, a land of culture and religion, has always been an inspiration for the people throughout the world. It is the origin country of world's famous religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Other than these particular religions, there are followers of many other religions like Christianity, Islam etc. So, this is how, being a home of different religions, India is known as a secular country. In literature too, India, Indian culture, Indian philosophy have great impact. Since ages, it has been attracting writers from all over the world. Hermann Hesse is also one of those writers who are highly influenced by Indian philosophy, Indian culture, Bhagavad Gita, Upanishads and also is amazed by the teaching of Buddhism. In many of his works, we can notice the character, the setting, any Indian philosophical concept, or symbols and motifs are straightforwardly taken from India. His novel *Siddhartha* is a perfect example of this.

Hermann Hesse was a German born Swiss author, artist and painter. He was born on 2nd July 1877 in Calw at Wuttenberg, Germany in a missionary family. His father Johannes Hesse, a specialist's son, worked as Baltic teacher to India. His mother Marie Hesse, likewise a Baltic evangelist and born and brought up in India, was a daughter of Hermann Gundert who was broadly known as "Indian Expert". From his youth, Hesse was extremely forceful and had a disobedience sort of nature, so he was difficult to deal with for his family just as for people out there. He did his schooling in Calw from 1880-1891. Hesse had an extraordinary impact of his maternal grandfather who was a speaker of a few dialects and a doctor of philosophy. He began to work in his publishing house and he got the entrance of his grandfather's library where he read broadly. In the early day of his career he was a lot of energetic with regards to music and verse yet he chose to be an author. In 1895, Hesse began to work in a bookshop where he read numerous philosophical and religious books including the scholars Goethe, Schiller, Nietzsche and so on and different works of German folklore and German Romantics. In 1896, his first sonnet *Madonna* was distributed in a nearby periodical and in 1898, came his first poetry collection. His first novel *Schweinigel* came in quite a while, in 1899, written in German. He got attention of publishers through his articles and reviews and furthermore acquired popularity outside Germany.

Hermann Hesse emerged with his first well known work *Peter Camenzind* which was pre-distributed in 1903 and the finally published in 1904. This novel brought him instant recognition by the renowned personalities and he was granted by Bavernfeld Prize for this. With this artistic achievement he got married with Maria Bernouill in 1904 and moved in Gaienhofen on the Lake Constance with her. Here, in 1906, he got published his second novel *Beneath the Wheel* that depicts the appalling story of a scholarly kid Hans Giebenrath. During 1906-07, he wrote many poems and came up with a series of short stories. *Gertrude*, his next novel, published in 1910, the story spins around Kuhn, a prestigious music writer and Gertrude, a drama artist and Kuhn's companion Heinrich Mnoth, additionally a show artist. Hesse's scholarly vocation includes eleven novels, some compilations of short stories, poetry and essays and some intriguing articles in regards to theory. Hesse's works are initially written in German, yet a large portion of his works is converted into English just as into different dialects from everywhere the world. For example, his novel *Siddhartha* is converted into in excess of 70 dialects from each corner of the world.

Throughout his literary career, Hesse was awarded by several awards but the most precious was Nobel Prize which he got in 1946. In the same year he got Goethe Prize was Germany's important literary prize. After receiving these awards no major work was published by him. He was suffering from cerebral hemorrhage due to which he died in his sleep on August 9, 1962.

The present paper focuses on Hermann Hesse's famous philosophical novel *Siddhartha*. After visiting India in 1911, he got interest in Indian philosophy and started studying it. And as result of it he created his most wonderful novel *Siddhartha*. Though the title character is the protagonist of the novel and the whole plot revolves around his journey towards self- realization but Kamala also plays a vital role

in the novel and also takes her own journey of self discovery. Though one can notice a few female characters in Hesse's novels but he comes close to genius in the portrayal of Kamala. Kamala is among those women characters of Hesse whom he has drawn with attentive care and fascination. Although her story begins as a courtesan, she ultimately becomes one of the most dynamic characters in the story.

Before discussing her journey towards self-realization in the novel, it is necessary to know that what self and self-realization is. Man's life passes mainly through three episodes which are absolute truths- birth, living period and lastly the inevitable death. The most important and mysterious phase is living phase which demands to solve the mystery of his own existence. The questions which hunt man beyond his routine life are- Is this life only to get birth, act and die or there is something else to achieve? He wants to investigate these universal queries like where he comes from and what he lives here for, what is going to happen after his death and what was presented there before his birth and what is his role and goal in this life. In the process of solving these riddles, man makes every possible effort to achieve the purpose and goal of his life by the ways of different experiences of his life's journey. The greatest contentment lies in knowing this goal and fulfilling it. "Worldly knowledge and True knowledge"- these are the two types of knowledge before man and learning about the right one is the first step towards the contentment. Worldly knowledge is all about the material and corporal things which are temporal in nature. But the science behind the true knowledge is to acknowledge the spiritual reality. True knowledge is to know about one's own self or spirit. And to achieve the goal of his life man must keep the distance from this materialistic world. As Dr. Radhakrishnan also says:

"Man is turned outward by his senses and so loses contact with his own deepest self. His soul has become immersed in outer things in power and possession. It must turn round to find its right direction and to find the meaning and realities it has missed. To hear the melodies of spirit we must shut off the noise of the world (Radhakrishnan, *Religion* 24-25).

However, "It is not a question of embodied life but it is the nature of the soul to be always active. Without the presence of the spirit soul, the material body cannot move. The body is only a dead vehicle to be worked by the spirit soul, which active and cannot stop for a moment" (Prabhupada 205). Hence, this is not about this visible and fleshly body but about the immortal and perpetual rider which is called Truth, the ultimate Reality, Soul, Atman or Self. "As the driver of a car is different from the body of the car so also the self, dehi, purusha, atman or the soul has a separate identity. The body is material and physical whereas the soul is non-physical; it is metaphysical" (Chandra 14). According to Radhakrishnan also "the unreal is the body and the real is the soul" (Bhagavad- Gita 119). Hence, the knowledge of the self is considered as the highest kind of knowledge.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary offers the definition of Self-Realization as "the fact of using your skills and abilities and achieving as much as you can possibly achieve" (1378) for the growth of Self. Giving a more extensive definition of Self-realization, G.Hendrick says that "The highest goal of spirituality is self-realization, but what does that mean? It means to feel your Self as a living reality in

this moment and, there is always only this moment.”

The goal of this paper is to explore the role and the journey of this most important female character in Siddhartha, Kamala. Siddhartha is set in India, the story concurs with the life of Gotama the Buddha and therefore is estimated to take place around the 5th-6th century B.C. Many female characters play a part in Siddhartha's journey. Siddhartha's mother, the nameless young woman in the forest that attempts to seduce him and Vasudeva's deceased wife. However the only female character that plays a significant role in the plot is Kamala, a courtesan who encounters with Siddhartha for the first time outside the city and leaves a deep impact on him. The name Kamala is a Sanskrit compound comprising two terms – “Kama” and “la”. Kama is the Hindu god of love and desire; which perfectly represents her profession and somehow her character as well. Kamala first appeared in the second part of the novel as well as in the eponymous chapter. Siddhartha happens to meet Kamala outside the city when she was being escorted by her servants. Immediately, Siddhartha is dazzled by her beauty and decides to see her again in the city. He saw “beneath heaped- up black hair he saw a bright, very sweet, very clever face, bright red mouth like a freshly cut fig, artful eyebrows painted in a high arch, dark eyes, clever and observant...” (Siddhartha 42). The immediate circumstances in which we meet Kamala give us the impression of her being a very beautiful and rich, yet mysterious and out of reach for an ordinary person. Siddhartha then enters into the city and inquires about her. His decision to visit Kamala brings about a turning point in the plot where Kamala becomes an object of desire for Siddhartha, and also he views her as someone capable of tutoring him the art of love.

However Kamala initially rejects Siddhartha as he has no possessions and wears ragged clothing. Her boldness and intelligence can be seen when Siddhartha asks her, is she not at all afraid of the samana from the forest, who has come to learn about love and she replies,

“Why should I be afraid of a Samana. A stupid Samana from the forest, who comes from the jackals and does not know anything about women... Has a Samana or a Brahmin ever feared that someone could come and strike him and rob him of his knowledge, of his piety, of his power for depth of thought?” (Siddhartha 44-45).

She, however, gives Siddhartha a kiss for a poem he presents for her. She introduces Siddhartha to Kamaswami, who is a well known merchant and a regular client of her. She advises Siddhartha to work with Kamaswami and learn the techniques of the business in order to make money for himself as well as to fulfill his desire to meet her. This becomes significant to see Siddhartha becoming a successful businessman like Kamaswami changing him into a respected and wealthy man of the town. Eventually Kamala has to accept him and shows him the world of physical love and sex. “[Siddhartha] learned the art of love in which, more than anything else, giving and taking become one. He talked to her, learned from her, gave her advice, received advice” (Siddhartha 56). She has understood him better than anybody else. For Siddhartha, just like him, she has this exceptional quality of being herself. He once told her that,

“You are like me; you are different from other people. You are kamala and no one else, and within you there is a stillness and sanctuary to which you can retreat at any time and be yourself, just as I can. Few people have that capacity and yet everyone could have it” (Siddhartha 57).

This continues for several years as Kamala deliberately maintained her relationship with Siddhartha, but it all comes to an end when the Siddhartha becomes disillusioned with the material world and again runs away from the People.

Initially, we see Kamala as a temptress who seems to seduce Siddhartha and distracts him from his journey to enlightenment. She does however indirectly lead Siddhartha to his enlightenment first by teaching him the values and limitations of the material world, and also by bearing his son who gives Siddhartha the most difficult test on his path. Kamala is the master tutor of the material world; this makes her the opposite of Gotama who is the master tutor of the spiritual world. Whilst Gotama teaches his followers the virtues of patience and inner peace, Kamala focuses on a lifestyle of “living in the moment”.

There is no doubt that Kamala has played a vital role in the journey of Siddhartha’s enlightenment and she has been a great teacher to him when he was amongst people. But as it is said that teaching is also a learning process; Kamala also learns so many things from Siddhartha. Her curiosity to know about the Samanas and the qualities they are attributed with show the deep impact on her later journey. She was utterly impressed when Siddhartha said,

“Listen, Kamala, when you throw a stone into the water, it finds the quickest way to the bottom of the water. It is the same when Siddhartha has an aim, a goal. Siddhartha does nothing; he waits, he thinks, he fasts, but he goes through the affairs of the world like the stone through the water, without doing anything, without bestirring himself; he is drown and lets himself fall. He is drawn by his goal, for he does not allow anything to enter his mind which opposes his goal. That is what Siddhartha learned from the Samanas” (Siddhartha, 49).

As a result of this, Kamala eventually leaves her profession of prostitution and gives her entire property to Buddha’s monks and becomes a disciple of him.

Kamala’s journey as a seeker progresses from materialism to spirituality. Here, Hermann Hesse has outstandingly presented the conflict between materialism and spirituality through the character of Kamala. Kamala, who initially is deeply indulged in materialistic world or we should say in sensual world, turns her way towards spirituality after meeting Siddhartha. Hesse, in almost all his novels, presents the idea that the way to spirituality passes through materialism. The fact that we need to accept here is that a human being is not here just to eat and live his life. For a meaningful life, one has to pursue a spiritual evolution also. Here the conflict is that whether one should overlook or take a permanent leave from materialism or is that

possible to attain spirituality through materialism. As this conflict and the solution for this conflict is presented in Hesse's novels, it can be asserted that if someone is on the path of enlightenment or spirituality, he must pass through the materialistic world too. As it is also mentioned by Sri Aurobindo in his book *The Life Divine* that, "Materialism has served the ends of the Divine... We shall preserve the truths of material Science and its real utilities in the final harmony, even if many, or even if all of its existing forms have to be broken or left aside" (*The Life*, 28). Thus, before beginning her journey towards self-realization, Kamala is also all indulged into the materialistic world. She even becomes the guru for the protagonist Siddhartha and teaches him the art of love. Siddhartha also passes through the same process in his journey. The young Brahmin boy who leaves his family and loved ones in the beginning and joins Samanas; he also after sometimes enters into the world of Maya and gets spoiled but ultimately he leaves this materialistic world behind to achieve his goal of enlightenment which he finally achieves.

Hermann Hesse has used several terms and concepts in his works to achieve the desired result. Epiphany, a modern fiction's technique, is one of them which is beautifully used in the present novel. An epiphany, according to Wikipedia, "is an experience of a sudden and striking realization" which is used to "describe a scientific breakthrough or a religious or philosophical discovery." But epiphany can also be applied to the situation in which a person experiences an enlightening realization that allows him to understand a situation or a problem from a different and deeper perspective. According to Theodore Ziolkowski, "In the epiphany the protagonist perceives the essence of things that lies hidden behind their empirical reality, and as such the epiphany is another symptom of the modern turn away from realism toward a new mysticism" (Ziolkowski, 172-173). In the novel the most evident example takes place in the chapter 4 which is entitled as "Awakening" where after getting up from a deep sleep he suddenly feels awakened and decides to leave Buddha and continues his journey towards self-realization. Though Kamala does not experience such situation yet she absolutely fits into the other characteristic of the epiphany in which a character's feelings are given much more importance than the words, phrases, and concepts written in the novel because all these things lie as a veil between the reader and the true reality. We find this attitude of overpowering feeling upon word severally in Hesse's works. The same happens in case of Kamala and Govinda when they achieve the self-realization.

In her last meeting with Siddhartha, when she is on death bed, she sees totality and simultaneity in Siddhartha's face. She is actually on her way to see the dying Buddha when bitten by a snake and eventually ended up seeing Siddhartha. It has been revealed that it is her ultimate desire to see the Illustrious One to obtain some of his peace but instead "she had only found him [Siddhartha], and it was good, just as good as she has seen the other [the Illustrious one]" (Siddhartha, 89). This is how her ultimate goal was achieved with seeing Siddhartha's face.

Through her relationship with Siddhartha, she eventually discovers a path to enlightenment. We see not only the role she played early in the story as a courtesan but also how, very probably, meeting Siddhartha made her set out on a completely different path that took her back to him. When Siddhartha

leaves, she decides to become a disciple of Buddha, giving up her courtyard house. She does keep one reminder from the past- her son.

The last time when she meets Siddhartha, she is on her journey to meet dying Buddha and also on her journey to find peace. According to her, finding peace is the ultimate goal of one's life. Hence satisfaction is everything. She also gets satisfaction when she meets Siddhartha on her death bed and also introduces him to their son. She happily hands over their son to him and dies a peaceful death. She realizes her existence and fulfills the goal of her life with this ultimate satisfaction.

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