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Hesse's *Siddhartha*: A Spiritual Salve to Global Conflict

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History's nozzle sporadically spews wars that are tragically cyclic and repetitive. Hysteria and homelessness plague war ravaged countries. Here, brutal bloodshed is a baffling paradox in contradiction to desperation for peace and solace. Hermann Hesse wrote during the most catastrophic period(s) in history when unprecedented violence ripped the globe. The devastation wreaked by the World Wars in the twentieth century was beyond the worst imagined cauchemar ever. Across the planet, humans could not rationalize the pain and the grave political myopia of the superpowers. It was in this nadir that Hesse brought hope and a passage through conflict that scarred and appeared to do nothing but scar. Through his novels, Hesse provided a spiritual prism and compass – that pulse whereby one could feel, fathom and accept. It is a statistical fact that Hesse's readership witnessed a phenomenal leap during his lifetime. He continues to be a universal inspiration even after a lapse of hundred years. And today, while we are caught in the eddy of a European conflagration, we need to be cognizant of Hesse's *philosophy that centers around acceptance of the self and the other – both in their myriad forms*. Superimposition of any singular ideological process always stifles and asphyxiates, leading to endless backlash. This does appear to make more sense in 2022 when Western Europe does not leverage any allowance to let a multicultural Eastern Europe flourish because of fear of potential anarchy. Is Eastern Europe to survive only in the shadow of the West?

Hesse had moved out of Germany and traversed through India and Ceylon in search of peace. He came to the realization that homelands can only be homelands when diversity is allowed and each individual is ensured safety, irrespective of their choices – that may or may not be in tandem with the accepted normative. By re-casting the story of Siddhartha's spiritual life, Hesse's imaginative trajectory helped the West assimilate the Oriental doctrine of *Nishkam Karma* – detached involvement, i.e. living through the destined and yet rising over and above the inevitable fated good or bad. Hesse's *Siddhartha* has vicarious experiences, gratifying as also seething with disappointment, to eventually gain the insight that all objects, animate or otherwise, carry within them the seeds of their destruction which is in consonance with preordained divine plan so that the world remains alive and we create afresh. The backdrop of the novel, *Siddhartha* is ancient India where Gautam Buddha was leading people unto the path of peace and enlightenment by helping them understand that every being carries the seeds of death within him as he does potential new beginnings.

Herman Hesse did not ascribe to any formal doctrine in the traditional paradigm. His was the *inward* way,¹ wherein to achieve equilibrium an individual had to surcharge the *self* with conviction in one's views, and so eventually burnout and neutralize the manifest personality which was transient and mutable. Religion rooted in ideology was passe to him. His ethos was distinctively romantic and spiritual, while the values he espoused were progressive. The World Wars were marked by widespread social and cultural hysteria. Culture *per se* was traduced as a parody of values. Writers had now become misanthropic Jeremiads. To them the modern man was "the center of... a world inhuman in every respect... Nothing made to the rhythm of the human heart..."² Plays like *Look Back In Anger* (1956) by John Osborne and *Shadow Of A Gunman* (1923) by Sean O' Casey highlighted the tragedy of idealism. Scarifying pictures of a horrific future were painted by Aldous Huxley and George Orwell. In *A Brave New World* (1932) man was seen as a mechanized automation *ex consequo* conditioning techniques. Diseased psyches were probed and man's alienation was keenly analyzed. The universe was projected as Godless, God as an illusion or an indifferent *First Cause*. In this real-life dystopia, Hesse's works were an axiomatic redemptive lifeline. He interpreted the wars as cathartic, not apocalyptic. He created a godhead, Abraxas who affirmed everything and condemned nothing. Hesse advocated an unquestioning acceptance "of the depths of despair," and not striving after "some imaginary vision of perfection."³ This was an attitude to life – a state of mind – inspired by the Hindu philosophy of *Nishkarma* – wholehearted commitment but with indifference toward the outcome. It could be achieved through active engagement with the dynamic ever-evolving world. Hesse's contention was that true enlightenment is the realization that everything is part of God's divine plan. Many a neoterist finds Hesse's philosophy a naïve and retrogressive attempt at revoking a prelapsarian society of primal innocence. However, Hesse repeatedly stresses that the world as it exists must be destroyed to be rejuvenated as destruction and rebirth are two inevitable extremes of any civilization. One cannot and should not regress to naïve innocence. Destruction signals that traditions have outlived their salubriousness and must be done away with. The egg "must be rent asunder"⁴ for a new world to be born. In order to evolve into a more intelligent species, a race must not fear extinction. In *Demian* Pistorius tells Sinclair that if the fish had remained content to be merely aquatic, evolution would never have occurred. Many a fish died while trying to adapt to land life. Hesse's criteria for happiness requires a conscious credendum whose foremost tenet is belief in personal potential, an avowal of the Hindu philosophy of *I Am*, the cornerstone of Buddhism. And it is Buddhism which pervades the entire texture and thought stream of *Siddhartha*.

Hesse is a pantheist who saw the reflection of the Immanent Soul in every being and felt that only by closely aligning with inner consciousness and instinctual life could humans discover their true selves. This philosophy of *I am* is distinct from the *Descartean* European Enlightenment which is largely solipsistic and proscribes the *other*. Hesse's temperament is not anti-science for even in a metaphysical novel like *Siddhartha*, he incorporates statements on evolution and indestructibility of matter: "there are stones that feel like oil, or soap, that look like leaves or sand... and each one is different... each one is Brahman. And at the same time, it is very much stone..." In his signature style, Hesse argues for a closer integration of science and philosophy, imagination and reality, the transcendental and the temporal. *Pragmatically spiritual*, his is a hands-on spirituality where "not speech and thought" but "deeds and life"⁵ are important.

His novels provide resolve to take on the world's malaise and move on. Persons like Siddhartha who embrace everything and condemn nothing are the mainstay of survival for humanity. Like Peter Camenzind, each one of us travels a full circle and still remains unsure for there are circles within circles. The heart grieves over the transience of things but surrenders to it without resistance while the spirit constantly renews its bid for victory by affirming the existence of a transcendental reality, a universal collective unconsciousness. The novels show how despite isolation, man continues his painstaking endeavour to glean meaning from his empty, futile existence. The protagonists live out their personal conviction, a process Hesse calls *individuation* which focuses on harnessing human potential. Individuation is sporadic and erratic, not sequential or logical. However, one can broadly classify the stages through which a man towards maturity as

- a. of complete innocence – a paradisaal state
- b. of active engagement with the world and becoming the solutions, and
- c. of detached maturity – a transcendental state of compassion where differences cease to exist.

Siddhartha, the central character of *Siddhartha* (1922) goes through individuation. This novel was written after Hesse had journeyed through India and Ceylon. Hesse's journey continued to be a quest of self-discovery "even when... ever further away from the paths of joy into the dark and the partially known." It brought him the realization that he was actually in a flight away from himself and no closer to inner liberation. Ten years later he acknowledged that "the real Europe and the real East" lay in his heart and would outlive "years of suffering, restlessness, war and despair;"⁶ only acceptance of outward reality could lead to "self-perfectibility" and bring an equilibrium "between the dynamism implicit in individuation and the passive receptivity to those higher forces whether of fate or... collective unconscious predicative in Carl Jung's theory of universal archetypes... shaping... thoughts and actions."⁷ It was Carl Jung's contention that enlightenment does not come by sitting around visualizing images of light but by integrating the darker aspects of the self into one's conscious personality. To Hesse, everyone who finds his way is a hero.⁸ Heroism is determination to forge ahead in the face of unrelenting odds and to continue to value the emotion of love. Hesse describes these higher stages of autoptic experience as *Mahatma*, God pure existence or *Buddha*.

The conventional *Buddha* epitomizes transcendental detachment which disdains the material, gay human world. Alternatively, Hesse's Siddhartha corporealizes the ideal detached human who experiences *and* accepts the varied and divergent stages of life, ranging from paradisaal innocence to disillusionment and consequent excessive material indulgence. He embraces detachment just like Buddha does. But, unlike the Buddha whom we meet as *Gotama* in the novel, he considers the material and the transcendental as experiential phases of life that are not conflictual but destined. In Sanskrit, Siddhartha means the enlightened one "who has achieved his goal."⁹ Hesse's Siddhartha has the courage to "grapple with the chaotic forces of his own personality... to perceive... and to press forward into what Demian calls the dangerous times." The novel connects with the "phenomenon of eternity... a vital and time conditioned interaction..."¹⁰

Siddhartha introspects and interrogates his inner restlessness. Thereafter he renounces his birthright and inheritance. He starts practicing harsh austerities under the patronage of the ascetic *Samanas*, hoping to attain a peaceful state of mind. However, with austerities comes extreme discomfort which makes him

acutely aware of creature comforts. Subsequently, his quest for peace finds him immersed in sensual pleasures. He consorts with Kamala, a courtesan to “lose himself in lust and power women and money, become a merchant gambler drinker and man of greed, until the priest and Samana in him were dead... a new Siddhartha had awakened from his sleep.”¹¹ Peace however continues to elude him even though his life is replete with hedonistic pleasures. In a contemplative moment during his association with his paramour Kamala, he relives his childhood vision when “he had felt in his heart: a way lies before you... the gods await you. Go further Go further! You have been summoned.”¹² Once again, asphyxiated by conventions he moves on.

His search for inner liberation leads him to a boatman who is a mystic and a seer. He becomes an apprentice to Vasudeva. It is here, after having lived an involved, even convoluted existence that Siddhartha realizes the true meaning of existence. His life is now simple and follows a repetitive pattern. Like Vasudeva, he starts to ferry passengers across the river and communes with nature to finally come to terms with his restlessness. As time passes by, Siddhartha evolves. He learns to hear the rhythm of the sea and eventually feel its inclusive amorphous vastness. Like the seers, who sat and continue to sit at the banks of rivers and shoreless seas, he fathoms that life is uroboric – cyclic and repetitive. He understands that renunciation or abnegation cannot provide relief from life’s vagaries; one must be accepting like the river which is manifest in various forms – at the banks, or in the waterfall or the brooklet, or as vapours that rise to form rainy clouds, or the rain itself. He accepts the *I* and his restlessness abates. He has a mystical perception of his *Being* in which divinity and the individual are no longer glimpsed in blissful moments but enjoyed as *prolonged experiences*. He rises above the binaries of material and transcendental, evil and good, and the temporal and eternal to the realization that *Atman* or the soul is in all beings. He feels within him “a readiness of the soul, a secret skill of being able at any moment in the midst of life to think the thought of unity, to feel unity and to breathe in it... in the Sinner is found... the future Buddha... in everyone the Buddha... is becoming... is possible... is hidden.”¹³ The Siddhartha whom we engage with henceforth is a *bodhisattva* – the spiritual teacher who does not teach spirituality but imparts wisdom by living it and helping others imbibe it. A humanitarian existentialist, he engages with larger-than-life issues and refuses to ascribe to a *Necessitarian* life-view where humans are but puppets in the hands of destiny. Though every stage in his life is punctuated by a symbolic death, it does not decimate him but helps him evolve by a “submersion into and complete union with om,”¹⁴ – the nameless and the perfect manifestation of spiritual energy. As antinomies cease to exist, Siddhartha comes to the realization that man should be fluid so that life in its various nuances can endure. He gains awareness that “The world is not imperfect or on a slow path to perfection, no it was perfect at any given moment... All little children have their old age already within them, all nursing babies have their death within them, and all those who are dying have eternal life.”¹⁵ According to R. C. Norton, Siddhartha is a “Dynamic, searching western Buddha who sees that the way to the mysteries of transformation must first lead through the world and its times.” He is a fusion of the Western and the Eastern ethos, the result of Hesse’s pursuit of peace in the mystic East where he felt he could never be an insider, no matter what he did. In *From India* (1913) Hesse wrote, “We Europeans come full of yearning to the South and East driven by a vague nostalgia and find there a paradise... our paradise and the

new one which we want to build and have... lies in us..." As such, "far from renouncing his Eastern ideals," Hesse "continued to modify them into a thought structure which would be a synthesis of the East and the West."¹⁶

Towards the end of the novel, Siddhartha tells his childhood friend Govinda that he is now at peace since he has had a revelation of the purpose of his birth: "To see through the world to explain it, to scorn it may be the affair of great thinkers. But my (Siddhartha's) only concern is to be able to love the world, not to scorn it or to hate it and me, but rather to be able to regard it and myself and all living things with love, admiration and respect..."¹⁷ Interestingly, *Govinda* is a metonym for untried, paradisaical innocence while *Siddhartha* is "more a rebellious and unconventional spirit in whom nature and earthliness had made essential contributions."¹⁸ To a great extent, Siddhartha comes across as a Zen artist¹⁹ obtaining enlightenment by intuition and action over and above reason and logic. He picks up a stone and tells his friend, *This is Buddha* implying that peace was a proactive, deliberated state of mind, not an external quest. He epitomizes an inclusive spiritual orientation which does not reject any aspect/facet of experience but accepts, embraces and transcends the negative. Govinda too has a vision. He sees the beatific smile and calmness of the spiritual seer Gotama on Siddhartha's face, and identifies the two Buddhas or the different attitudes to life with the *One Immanent World Soul*. He is also able to imagine *Nirvana* (salvation/liberation) and *Samsara* (worldliness) as one.

Hesse is the proverbial *Samana of the Alps*.²⁰ who finds fecund spirituality everywhere: "Love is the most important thing in the world. It may be important to great thinkers to examine the world, to explain and despise it. But I think it is only important to love the world, to be able to regard the world and ourselves and all beings with love, admiration and respect."²¹ Love preconditions the virtue of great compassion, which is not only the root of the Mahayana path but also the essential quality of the Buddha. Every character in the novel has an inner dignity irrespective of their ethical stand. Largely influenced by Rabindranath Tagore, Hesse courtesans and prostitutes are aesthetic and soulful symbols of transcendental yearnings with an inner dignity unsullied by their profession. Unlike his contemporaries, Hesse believed that the modern spirit was not dismal but in its unique ambivalent way destined to a better tomorrow. *Siddhartha* glorifies not cognition but love by rejecting dogma and embracing the experience of unity. *Siddhartha* ends with Govinda's vision where he sees Siddhartha's face that "contains within it the seething masses of all humanity..."²²

Notes:

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3. Hesse, Hermann. *Siddhartha*. Trans. Hilda Rosner. New Directions: New York, 1951. pp. 146-147.
4. Hesse, Hermann. *Demian*. Trans. W.J. Strachan. Peter Owen: London, 1958. p. 181.
5. Hesse, Hermann. *Siddhartha*. Trans. Hilda Rosner. New Directions: New York, 1951. p. 146-149.
6. Bernhard, Zeller. *Hermann Hesse: The First Biography*. Trans. Mark Hollebone. Herder & Herder Ltd., 1972. pp. 62-75.
7. Norton, Roger C. *Hermann Hesse's Futuristic Idealism: The Glass Bead Game and its Predecessors*. Trans.: Richard, Clara Winston. Penguin Books: Berne, 1972. p. 20.
8. Ibid.
9. Bernhard, Zeller. *Hermann Hesse: The First Biography*. Trans. Mark Hollebone. Herder & Herder Ltd., 1972. p. 103.
10. Norton, Roger C. *Hermann Hesse's Futuristic Idealism: The Glass Bead Game and its Predecessors*. Trans.: Richard, Clara Winston. Penguin Books: Berne, 1972. pp. 22-24.
11. Hesse, Hermann. *Siddhartha*. Trans. Hilda Rosner. New Directions: New York, 1951. p. 69.
12. Hesse, Hermann. *Siddhartha*. Trans. Hilda Rosner. New Directions: New York, 1951. p. 84.
13. Ibid. p. 145.
14. Bernhard, Zeller. *Hermann Hesse: The First Biography*. Trans. Mark Hollebone. Herder & Herder Ltd., 1972. p. 51.
15. Hesse, Hermann. *Siddhartha*. Trans. Hilda Rosner. New Directions: New York, 1951. p. 145.
16. Norton, Roger C. *Hermann Hesse's Futuristic Idealism: The Glass Bead Game and its Predecessors*. Trans.: Richard, Clara Winston. Penguin Books: Berne, 1972. p. 29.
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18. Norton, Roger C. *Hermann Hesse's Futuristic Idealism: The Glass Bead Game and its Predecessors*. Trans.: Richard, Clara Winston. Penguin Books: Berne, 1972. p. 50.
19. Hsu, Hui-Fen. 'Siddhartha: An Encounter of Buddhism and Postmodernism'. *Chang Gung Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. (Vol. 9, Issue 1, April 2016). <http://cgjhsc.cgu.edu.tw> Web.
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22. Norton, Roger C. *Hermann Hesse's Futuristic Idealism: The Glass Bead Game and its Predecessors*. Trans.: Richard, Clara Winston. Penguin Books: Berne, 1972. p. 153-154.