



Original Article

Decontextualizing Buddha: Western Appropriations of Eastern Spirituality in Hesse's *Siddhartha*

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Abstract

Most postcolonial writers agree that colonizers have historically mistreated the colonized and often distort facts to favor themselves. However, some writers, like Herman Hesse in his novel *Siddhartha*, view the colonized differently. Published a decade after Hesse's visit to India, the book depicts Indians as audiences of blind faith, with *Siddhartha*—representing Buddha—criticizing unquestioning adherence to religion. Hesse suggests many Indians follow faiths without reason, stuck in superstition, though critics argue his portrayal decontextualizes Buddha's life, emphasizing spiritual over cultural aspects. The novel's subtitle, "Ein Indische Dichtung," underscores its poetic, Indian inspiration, but its Western interpretation remains debated.

Keywords: post-colonialism, spirituality and east, modernity and west

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Introduction

Hesse seems to greatly admire Gautama Buddha's wisdom, intellect, and rebellious spirit. Buddha's mind was enlightened with modern thinking, which sharply contrasts with the medieval period to which Gautama Buddha belonged. A striking fact that has always fascinated the West about Buddha (Hesse, 1922) is that Buddha himself did not seek any tribute from his followers or others for his ideals and enlightenment (Queen, 1996). The plot of the novel *Siddhartha* (1922) is significant because it illustrates the discovery of reality through a search of nature (Roberts, 1982). This quest enhances human knowledge and experience, fundamental to the development of society (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the author's view, reality has nothing to do with miracles, predictions, revelations, or supernatural forces (Berger, 1969). Belief in the supernatural or paranormal does not benefit nations, communities, or civilizations (Freud, 2005). Perhaps this is why Western theorists and intellectuals are reconstructing Eastern characters and discourses (Mandaville, 2003). For example, India and the Indians have become central topics in Western academic discourse. Given these facts, one might ask if Hesse uses the title character, Siddhartha, to express his own vision, share his perspective, and critique Indian ways of thinking (*Siddhartha*, 1922). The plot could also serve as a wake-up call for the world to abandon outdated ways of thinking and to act wisely. It might also help explain why India appears medieval to Western travelers and intellectuals.

This medieval view of Indian natives is not limited to the novel *Siddhartha* (1922); many other biographical and non-fictional writings also attest to this projection. Hesse depicts a very dark picture of the land, which, in his view, is soaked in blind faith. Magic appears to be the core of Eastern knowledge, or more specifically, Indian philosophy on life (Hesse, 2003). Faith in paranormal forces overrides logic and reason. This is the core idea that underpins the plot of the novel *Siddhartha* (1922), which carries deep meaning.

The foundation of Hesse's interest in Indian culture and religion is based upon his protestant vision. He was a follower of mystical Christianity and disliked the preaching of the Catholic school of thought (Hesse, 1974). His characters show no interest in religion or the supernatural world of spirits (Hesse, 1963). They seem to have no bearing in this sense. *Siddhartha's* journey through self-discovery metaphorically represents Hesse's journey to the east. Whether Gautama Buddha's vision has influenced the native Indian's view of life is a question Hesse appears eager to find out. He is keen on uncovering if native Indians construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct realities as Gautama Buddha did centuries ago.

This study is qualitative, based on the data derived from literary writings that bear on the novel in question. The interpretation of various texts and discourses collected from different sources is employed as a research method to understand the connotations underlying the title character, Siddhartha (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). An analysis of various situations, incidents, and characters has also been carried out to achieve the main purpose (Martin & Rose, 2003).

Theoretically, Hesse is in concordance with the anti-postcolonial notion that asserts colonization is a result of the backwardness of the natives and their beliefs in supernatural things (1922). He negates the postcolonial phenomenon that colonization was evil in the name of good and that the colonizers were nothing more than butchers (Fanon & Farrington, 1969). They have not only destroyed the culture of the natives but also generated identity crises (Achebe, 2010).

Hesse's Views on India

Hesse seemed well aware of his western self, where Indians are others for him. Edward Said has discussed the concept of self and othering in his book, *Orientalism* (Said, 1995). He is of the view that self and othering give different meanings to the same cultural context. The character Gautama remains unsuccessful in hiding anything from Siddhartha, who is a symbol of logic and reason. Reason is portrayed to have an upper hand over revelation, on one hand (Russell, 2013), and a sense of othering for Indians, on the other hand. The illustration of the latter is toned up with many scattered references in his writings, laying bare Hesse's sense of othering in the Indian environment. Siddhartha's attitude to Samanas is also significant in this regard. He rejects the life of Samanas with disgust. This rejection symbolizes the rejection of the medieval thinking of the natives.

In the place from which I escaped, there was always an atmosphere of pomade, spice, excess, and inertia. How I hated the world of riches, carousing and playing! How I hated myself, thwarted, poisoned and tortured myself, made myself old and ugly. ... but one thing I have done well, which pleases me, which I must praise – I have put an end to that self-detestation, to that foolish empty life (Hesse, 1922, pp. 97-98).

Asceticism vs Colonization

It seems surprising that he rejects asceticism and associates it with "inertia, spice, and excess" (Banerji, 2008). Such remarks about the periphery are highly significant. There is a tinge of disgust. It shows that the Indian way of

thinking and their attitude towards life are not realistic. That remark embedded on the periphery of discourse is highly significant. They have a hermit's way of life. Hesse is unaware of the fact that Siddhartha does not need to create a link among spices, excess, and inertia. It is purely a colonizer's way of thinking and interpretation of an oriental culture. Even the Western Siddhartha does not need to interpret things in such a way. Asceticism has nothing to do with *spices*. It will be difficult to say that those who renounce the universe do so just because of *inertia* and *excess*. These are the judgments of the colonizers/imperialists about the colored races, negating the postcolonial theory and authenticating that colonization was beneficial for the natives. It not only transformed the natives but also gave them basic necessities. The colonial writers are of the view that the natives of the colonized lands have been responsible for their subjugation by the foreign powers because they never thought in a realistic way (Hesse, 1965).

The relationship between Siddhartha and Govinda signifies that of the colonizer with the colonial Indian. The writer critiques Indian culture and thought through a portrayal of the relationship between the two characters. Siddhartha is an independent mind that constructs, deconstructs, and reconstructs realities with the passage of time, whereas Govinda always follows the teachers, preachers, and Gurus. Govinda is a follower by birth. First, he follows Siddhartha like a shadow. Then he gets inclined toward monks. Later on, a stage comes when he decides to live with Gotama. The former wants to enlighten himself by following the enlightened ones. This attitude of Govinda's seems childish to Siddhartha. The latter asserts that anyone can achieve enlightenment by sheer keen observation of life, as well as *self*, an entity in the broad, unforgiving world (Hesse, 1922).

Govinda is a seeker of a spiritual and intellectual personality. In the end, Govinda again becomes a follower of Siddhartha after his enlightenment. It is not wrong to say that Govinda remains stagnant in time, with no progress or prosperity. Through his mouthpiece, Siddhartha, the writer conveys that the universe is undergoing an evolutionary process where everything changes over time, and the realities conveyed through language are one-sided. He believes that truth is a relative concept, which is why everyone is Buddha (Enlightened) in their own sense. The writer aims to show that the element of enlightenment exists even in robbers, sinners, and pious individuals. A pious person can become a sinner, and a sinner can become pious. Buddha expresses that we live in illusions. Siddhartha narrates that Gotama divided teachings into three categories: Nirvana and Samsara-illusion and truth, suffering and salvation. The writer describes the binary oppositions (Hesse, 1922, P.143).

Materialism vs. Development

Paradoxical teaching cannot be understood by everyone. These teachings are nothing more than words to people who will not try to search for the truth through struggle and experience for their own enlightenment.

The entire story of the novel *Siddhartha* is metaphorical. Siddhartha, the main protagonist, symbolizes a divergent mind and soul similar to Gautama Buddha's. Govinda, Siddhartha's best friend, represents a common person's everyday mentality toward the essence of enlightenment. Besides these characters, Hesse uses other characters and objects to symbolize hard truths of life. Kamala, Siddhartha's lover and companion, signifies the alluring ways and pleasures of the world. The ferryman symbolizes a guide to self-enlightenment. The river represents the very source of enlightenment. Siddhartha learns from the ferryman that everything comes back. The ferryman *states*, "Certainly. I have learned that from the river too; everything comes back" (Hesse, 1922, p. 49).

The friendliness of the ferryman resembles the friendship of Govinda with Siddhartha. Siddhartha believes that people who prefer to live submissively are enemies of their own selves. They do not dare to think beyond the usual boundaries of knowledge. He thinks these people are like children. "*All are grateful, although they themselves deserve thanks. All are subservient; all wish to be my friend, to obey and to think little. People are children*" (Hesse, 1922, p. 49). Undoubtedly, this reflects the opinion of the author, a lay Indian or possibly a lay Asian, expressed through his character Siddhartha. Through his protagonist, Hesse suggests that the people of the East are often submissive and naive.

They think little, independently, and tend to follow. It also seems that, for Hesse, this attitude largely contributes to the stagnation of many Eastern nations, as subservience creates a significant obstacle to progress and enlightenment. To become Buddha, one must think beyond the limits of common knowledge. Buddha and the ferryman fascinate Siddhartha because each, in their own way, analyzes the realities of life and the world around them. He constructs, deconstructs, and reconstructs these realities through his own experience and vision. Conversely, Govinda is a blind follower of spiritualism—a subtle critique by the author of ancient India and Indian culture in the novel *Siddhartha*.

However, Hesse directly criticizes the East in his other novel, *The Journey to the East* (1956), where he portrays the East as a reflection of the Europeans' past. He compares the Europe of his senseless childhood with the East. He declares that the East is the union of all the ages, where one can capture

medievalism even in the postmodern age. The people are not willing to think divergently as they are too afraid to venture into the undiscovered realms of knowledge. Hesse comments: "*We not only wandered through space, but also through Time. We moved toward the East, but we also traveled into the Middle Ages and the Golden Age*" (The Journey to the East; 1956).

Most of the Indian philosophers and thinkers will not agree to this concept. However, East as the "union" of all times signifies the broad vision of the intellectual person whom the West considers modern on the basis of their scientific truths (Hesse, 1956). But on the other hand, East associates realistic thinking with the spiritual ones. Hesse seems very interested in Indian's spirituality. Modern Europe considers spiritualism a waste of time because both the idealist and realist schools of thought have their own problems. Directly or indirectly, the writer wants to convey that over-inclination of the East toward religion makes it medieval. The writer's concern with Indian religions and medievalism aims to draw a line between the East and the West. He thinks that religious quest is something of a secular and rational sort (Hesse, 1922).

The novel, Siddhartha (1922), primarily explains the spiritual reality which the writer has developed because of his protestant beliefs and background, but on the basis of his own thinking and experiences (Hesse, 1976). He has chosen Siddhartha because he saw some parallels between his own experiences and the experiences of Gautama Buddha. It will not be wrong to say that he has found his reflection in Gautama Buddha, who validated the knowledge through his own experience. What seems more common between Gautama and Hesse is the thirst for knowledge and the search for reality. Hesse was dissatisfied with traditional customs and religions, which became the reason for war and political conflicts. The sufferings of humanity intensified Hesse's quest. Like Buddha, Hesse was also keen about the sufferings of others.

Still, Buddha's search for truth was impersonal from the very beginning of his journey compared to Herman's. Gautama's quest started with very basic questions about sickness, old age, and death. He wondered if people could eliminate all three of these sources of suffering (Kumar, 2002). Why and where do these three forms of suffering originate? It is also true that Hesse's perspective became more impersonal over time. Why does a civilization become a refuge for evil and also the cause of its own downfall? European civilization nurtured the same evil, which led to two great world wars. This truth deeply affected and obsessed the writer's mind, just as it did Buddha, as he observed the suffering around him. Over time, Hesse concluded that European civilization is much better than Asian civilization, and that these two

civilizations are quite opposite. He saw the East as the 'Others' surrounding the European self.

There are many contradictions about Buddhism, and among these contradictions, Hesse found that a natural religion is created by a person through his own thinking (Hesse, 1974). The secularity of Buddhism was the main attraction for Hesse (Schober, J., 2011). Gautama Buddha did not claim any “revelation,” unlike Christianity and other monolithic religions where angels and supernatural beings play a vital role. Christianity emphasizes monastic life, but Gautama places equal importance on material life. Buddha not only experienced a hermit’s life but also lived as a man of the world. On the other hand, Hesse also came from a religious family that believed the living reality was much beyond worldly realities. His view of the worldly spirit, good, and evil seems untraditional, political, and religious, raising many questions in his mind.

Hesse believes that the East has not dealt with evil as aggressively as the West has (Hesse, 2003). The East is caught between Idealism and Realism. They are not willing to separate the ancient religious and cultural boundaries that the West deconstructed during the Renaissance (East & West, 1966). Gautama Buddha discusses the search for the self, which is also a concept in the West. Buddha's life story reflects the developmental process of the West, a fact that the East is not ready to accept. Buddha developed the idea, over a thousand years ago, through his experiences, that a person has many selves instead of just one. This teacher guided ancient India and the East.

The underlying meanings of Hesse’s writings suggest that the West has overcome medieval thinking through cultural and scientific advancements, while the East has not. The spiritual inclination of the East and its inspiration from Western science and technology have hybridized the Indian mindset, leading to confusion about what is right and wrong. This may reflect a shortcoming of Eastern societies in not progressing as the West has, even though there was a time when Asian civilizations were considered among the most modern in the world. Historically, the East produced visionary figures, such as Gautama Buddha. Buddha demonstrated that a person has more than one self, a discovery made thousands of years ago, while the West only recently uncovered this truth. Though this discovery guided medieval India, its people failed to understand it. The concept of multiple selves is often seen as Western, but history shows that Gautama Buddha understood it centuries ago. The story of Siddhartha shows that even an evil person has the potential for salvation and redemption. Life can transform a sinner into a saint and vice versa. Through the ups and downs of time, new systems emerge in the universe as a result of human experiences.

The interpretation of Hesse's writings illustrates many possibilities—Siddhartha and Hesse share common thinking. They talk about many selves and possibilities—rebelliousness or contradiction is one of these possibilities. It is also true that the concept of ONENESS can be better understood through questioning, reasoning, logic, will, and experiences. The person who pursues all these traits is known as a leader. Eastern people tend to follow instead of trying to become like distinguished individuals. Every rational thing seems spiritual to them.

Conclusion

Hesse has established the idea that the natives blindly believe in supernatural things, which is the main reason behind their backwardness and colonization. In the beginning, most Eastern countries resisted Western advancements in science and technology and tried to oppose them through supernatural powers, but remained unsuccessful. The writer wants to convey that Indians should follow reason and logic instead of becoming blind followers. He attempts to present an anti-postcolonial theory where he directly and/or indirectly rejects the claims of postcolonial writers that colonizers destroyed the culture and religion of colonized people. He argues that colonized people are victims of colonization because they have not developed their culture and wisdom on logical and rational foundations.

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