

Sublime and the quest for Self-actualization in Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*

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Herman Hesse's seminal text, *Siddhartha* is the story about the journey of a man on his path to Self-Actualization. The story deals with the life of the protagonist, Siddhartha, who along with his friend, Govinda embarks on a journey for the search of the authentic Self. Each of them follows a distinct path, leading to vastly different experiences. *Siddhartha* focuses on the events that happen with the character of Siddhartha and the ways in which they influence and alter him. The book in itself takes the form of a quest and it is only in the end when Siddhartha meets Govinda that he hints at the knowledge that he has acquired. This, however, is not the entirety of his understanding but only a segment of his discovery. The objective of this paper is to underline Siddhartha's journey of Self-Actualization and to emphasize on his reflections. The paper will try to prove how the journey of Self-actualization in the text is both an ontological and epistemological question. It also tries to describe that sublime moment of understanding which fulfils Siddhartha's quest of Self-actualization.

The term 'Self-actualization' has been the epicenter of theological discourse since the beginning of time. Thus, the term has been moulded and appropriated by different religions and practitioners of faith in myriad ways. It is, therefore, that the term has different meanings for different people. It, thus, becomes essential to understand what the term implies in the ambit of this paper, (in particular) and Hesse's text, (in general). To arrive at the understanding of the signification of 'Self-actualization' in this text, it must be kept in mind that any text is open to interpretations and there is no concretized set of meaning that can ever be ascribed to any text with any certainty. Thus, my interpretation of 'Self-actualization' is entirely subjective and may or may not correspond with other thinkers. However, with the course of my reading of the text I have come to believe that 'Self-actualization' in simpler terms, is the quest for the 'I'. This 'I', which can be confined to a single syllable of the English alphabet, has connotations that belong to both the world of materiality and metaphysics. That is, the 'I' is both the corporeal body, made up of flesh and bones, as well as, the soul (or *Aatma* as popularized in the Eastern theological discourses). Siddhartha's quest for Self-actualization, thus, undertakes such a course that it affects both his outer-life as well as inner-life. It is, thus, that he surrenders himself to the world of material and sensual pleasures as well as to the world of River which reverberates with the timeless sound of 'Om'.

Siddhartha's quest for Self-actualization can be condensed and comprehended in broadly two encounters. One, being the encounters that alter his relationship with the physical body and the other being the events that shift and mould his relationship with his soul, or *Aatma*. However, this is not to project that these encounters happen in a teleological manner

but rather they have a simultaneous existence and each is dependent on the other.

Even though, at a cursory glance, the text *Siddhartha* appears to be the journey of one man's realization of his being. However, taking Siddhartha as the vector, the text raises the pertinent questions of the nature of being. Siddhartha engages in a life which is a blend of both, abstinence and hedonism. In order to discover his real 'I', he has to shut his eyes to the outside world and analyse his life as an objective observer. This reverse methodology of comprehending life as it has been lived, enables him to bring into question the epistemological understanding of the real Self or the 'I'.

The text *Siddhartha* is replete with instances that are aimed to hint at the path that Siddhartha undertook in order to understand his 'I'. This path is a rocky one which includes a number of instances that shape his understanding of 'I'. Firstly, it begins with disillusionment, as a young man, when he cannot make peace with his outside world. This bafflement is put across in the text in terms of disgust with the material world, which pushes him to the brink of relinquishing it in order to take up the path as propounded by the Samanas. However, as readers of the text, we know that this disgust with the material world is also manifested as disgust with one's own corporeal Self. The disgust with the Self initially takes the form of abject.

Julia Kristeva in her seminal essay, "Powers of Horror" describes abject as that human reaction when faced with the plausible threatened breakdown of the binary between the subject and the object; or the Self and the Other. In the book, it translates to the experience which Siddhartha experiences as a young

man when he sees the world as filled with sorrow, and through it, he is able to arrive at the conclusion that he too will meet a similar end; even though it may differ in degree and magnitude. This realization of the ephemerality of human existence makes him despise the world which exists only in the present and has the potential to be destroyed and be reduced to nothingness with the blink of an eye. It is, thus, that his initial response to his surrounding is to abandon it.

“His glance became icy when he encountered women; his lips curled with contempt when he passed through a town of well-dressed people. He saw businessmen trading, princes going to the hunt, mourners weeping over their dead, prostitutes offering themselves, doctors attending the sick, priests deciding the day for sowing, lovers making love, mothers soothing their children- *and all were not worth a passing glance, everything lied, stank of lies; they were all illusions of sense, happiness and beauty. All were doomed to decay.* The world tasted bitter. Life was pain.”

(Hesse 1922: 11; emphasis mine)

It is, thus, that Siddhartha's journey of discovering the essence of his being (or the quest of his understanding 'I') begins with disgust and abhorrence with the materialistic world. However, the abject doesn't stop here but is also reflected in his treatment of his corporeal body when he wants to do away with it. This desire to self-annihilate, to sever all ties with the material world and its occupants come across in different ways. Initially, it takes the form of asceticism, when he joins the Samanas. Once he is one of them, he deprives his body of any form of pleasure (through fasting and penance).

“Instructed by the eldest of the Samanas, Siddhartha practised self-denial and meditation according to the Samana rules.”

(Hesse 1922: 12)

“Siddhartha learned a great deal from the Samanas; he learned many ways of losing the Self.”

(Hesse 1922: 13)

He is so sick of the material world that he believes that the only way that he can escape his assigned role and break the circle of *karma* is by metamorphosing into another lifeform. Consider the following text in this light,

“A heron flew over the bamboo wood and Siddhartha took the heron into his soul, flew over forest and mountains, became a heron, ate fishes, suffered heron

hunger, used heron language, died a heron's death. A dead jackal lay on the sandy shore and Siddhartha's soul slipped into its corpse; he became a dead jackal, lay on the shore, swelled, stank, decayed, was dismembered by hyenas, was picked at by vultures, became a skeleton, became dust, mingled with the atmosphere. And Siddhartha's soul returned, died, decayed, turned into dust, experienced the troubled course of the life cycle. He waited with new thirst like a hunter at a chasm where the life cycle ends, where there is an end to causes, where painless eternity begins. He killed his senses, he killed his memory, he slipped out of his Self in a thousand different forms. He was animal, carcass, stone, wood, water, and each time he reawakened. The sun of moon shone, he was again Self, swung into the life cycle, felt thirst, conquered thirst, felt new thirst.”

(Hesse 1922: 12)

At a cursory glance, this episode seems to be magic-realist and deals with the aspect of transfiguration and is propelled by the empathy that Siddhartha feels for other life forms. Yet, given the context of the text, it hints at the building desire of Siddhartha to escape the clutches of his corporeal body and escape it by becoming the other, the unknown. As we know that this quest is impossible in nature and, hence, it does not bring him any fulfilment. It is then, that driven by disillusionment and propelled by the force to leave the materiality of his body behind that he has to resort to steps that even though are not transcending in nature yet will enable him to get rid of the Self. This results in his suicide attempt, where he wants to relinquish his body with the belief that it would lead to an end to his endless sufferings.

“With a distorted countenance he stared into the water. He saw his face reflected, and spat at it; he took his arm away from the tree trunk and turned a little, so that he could fall headlong and finally go under. He bent, with closed eyes- towards death.”

(Hesse 1922: 72)

Siddhartha is not a book which aims to provide a general answer to mankind about Self-actualization. It is not a Self-help book aimed to give answers to the masses. It is the journey of a single-man and Hesse does not shy away from saying that it is his alone, and, as readers, we must not fall into the trap of aping him and his journey. Just like Govinda, who couldn't benefit from Siddhartha's understanding of the Self, we must not aim to ascertain any benefit from his enterprise. Just like Govinda, all of us will have to take our own path in order to discover our 'I'. With this,

Hesse brings into consideration the epistemological understanding of the Self. With the figure of the Siddhartha, he manages to bring into court all the theological discourses which aim at signifying 'One path' to ascertain "true" knowledge. Through Siddhartha, he brings home the point that subjectivities are in play when it comes to Self-actualization and, hence, it cannot be generalized. There are several pertinent points that are raised in the text and it comes through both the instances which result in Siddhartha's failure of comprehending his real Self, whereas the final path which brings him closer to the truth.

To begin with, let us look at the paths that Siddhartha took that did not bring him closer to the truth. Siddhartha, as a young man, had to leave the comfort of his home as the model of religion practiced by his family did not answer his questions. It is through this that Hesse criticizes religion in the way it is practiced, where the God is reduced to an idol to be revered, feared, and thoughtlessly believed. It is this model of practiced religion that he denies and leaves in order to join the Samanas.

Even though the Samanas followed a strict code of conduct, it did not bring Siddhartha any peace as he saw them moving in circles with no end in sight. This practiced methodology couldn't quench his thirst to attain the knowledge of real self and, thus, he had to desert the group and later on, even his companion, Govinda.

"I have no desire to walk on water.' said Siddhartha. 'Let the old Samanas satisfy themselves with such arts.'" (Hesse 1922: 20)

He also comes to understand that the 'I' that the Samanas aspire to recognize and understand is the 'I' which is narcissist in nature as it only fills one with a sense of superiority.

"But he always felt different and superior to others; he had always watched them a little scornfully, with a slightly mocking disdain, with that disdain that a Samana always feels towards the people of the world." (Hesse 1922: 63)

It is, thus, that when later in life Siddhartha begins to live in town, he could feel certain hostility towards himself because of his past associations with the Samanas.

"Although he found it so easy to speak to everyone, to live with everyone, to learn from everyone, he was very conscious of the fact that there was something which separated him from them- and this was due to the fact that he had been a Samana" (Hesse 1922: 58)

Another path that did not bring him closer to the discovery of his real Self was the preaching of the Illustrious One. Theology has always placed great emphasis on knowledge that is acquired and passed on from a teacher to a pupil. Siddhartha rejects such an understanding of the knowledge of real self because it is devoid of lived experiences and the fact that such a knowledge cannot possibly be transferred through any language or books. Hesse problematizes the role of language in terms of knowledge acquirement and highlights its limitations. This also becomes a larger commentary on the book *Siddhartha* itself and warns the reader of making the mistake of understanding it in terms of hands-down knowledge and a rulebook. Consider the following quotations from the book with reference to the inadequacy of language to propound the truth.

"O Illustrious One... nobody finds salvation through teachings. To nobody, O Illustrious One, can you communicate in words and teachings, what happened to you in the hour of your enlightenment." (Hesse 1922: 28)

Later, when Siddhartha acquires the knowledge of his Self and is pushed by Govinda to reveal the secret, he cannot help but tell him that this knowledge cannot be put into language. Reflect on the following quote from the text in this light,

"The wisdom which a wise man tries to communicate always sounds foolish. Knowledge can be communicated, but not wisdom." (Hesse 1922: 114)

Thus Siddhartha makes a difference between acquired knowledge ("knowledge") and knowledge which is learned through one's own experience ("wisdom"). It is, thus, that he believes in the inadequacy of sermons as a vehicle for transfer of knowledge because of its dependence on language.

"Words do not express thoughts well. They always become a little different immediately they are expressed, a little distorted, a little foolish....Therefore

teachings are of no use to me; they have no hardness, no softness, no colours, no corners, no smell, no taste—they have nothing but words. Perhaps that is what preventing you [Govinda] from finding peace, perhaps there are too many words, for even salvation and virtue, Samsara and Nirvana are only words, Govinda.”

(Hesse 1922: 116)

The path that helps Siddhartha on his journey of Self-actualization is the path that comes to him through his lived experiences. This lived experience includes his abject with the material world, his subsequent renunciation of it, his experiment of joining the Samanas, his encounter with the Illustrious One and the realization that knowledge cannot be acquired through someone else's Enlightenment, his understanding of the limitation of language to communicate wisdom, his subsequent hedonism, and finally his attachment to his son. It is these experiences that help him to understand his own Self. These realizations and their meanings are communicated to the readers towards the end of the book where Siddhartha is forced by Govinda to reveal the mechanism through which he achieved Enlightenment. It doesn't come across as a surprise to the readers that even when Siddhartha is putting into words his experiences, he cannot help but reemphasize on the fact that the medium of language is a hindrance, and that he can never put into words what he has felt within his soul.

Siddhartha achieved self-actualization through the river which becomes a constant companion in his life. It is this river, which speaks to him and reveals to him the secrets that he has been running after all his life. It is the moment of sublime that opens up his eye to his inner world and reveals him the secret of his 'I'. Dejected with the loss of his son, he is filled with despair and feels bitter towards the people of the world who have it all (particularly, the happiness that comes with an offspring). It is then, that the river speaks to him and that moment of sublime which helps him finish his quest. This is the moment in the text:

“Siddhartha listened. He was now listening intently, completely absorbed, quite absorbed, quite empty, taking in everything. He felt that he had now completely learnt the art of listening. He had often heard all this before, all these numerous voices in the river, but today they sounded different. He could no longer distinguish the different voices- the merry voice from the weeping voice, the childish voice from

the many voice. They all belonged to each other: the lament of those who yearn the laughter of the wise, the cry of indignation and groan of the dying. They were all interwoven and interlocked, entwined in a thousand ways. And all the voices, all the goals, all the yearnings, all the sorrows, all the pleasures, all the good and the evil, all of them together was the world. All of them together was the stream of events the music of life.

When Siddhartha listened attentively to this river, to this song of a thousand voices; when he did not listen to the sorrow or the laughter, when he did not bind his soul to any one particular voice and absorb it in his Self, but heard them all, the whole, the unity; then the great song of a thousand voices consisted of one word: Om- perfection.

”(Hesse 1922: 109)

It is this sublime moment of understanding that reveals to him the truth of his Self. It is then, that he realizes that there is no yesterday, no today, no tomorrow. The being that we see and consider is not a being in isolation but an association with proclivities before becoming the real Self. So, the human form does not exist in isolation but rather is a cumulative entity which carries traces of its previous existences within it. However, this must not be understood in terms of progression but as simultaneity of existence.

“This stone is stone; it is also animal, God and Buddha. I do not respect and love it because it was one thing and will become something else, but because it has already long been everything and always is everything. I love it just because it is a stone, because today and now it appears to me a stone.”

(Hesse 1922: 116)

Such an understanding is essential to understand the Self in all its totality. It is only through the understanding of the Other that one can comprehend the Self. True Enlightenment is not achieved through religion or asceticism, which invariably (due to the bedrock of its formulation), will fall into the trap of creating the barbarous figure of the Other- one that must be feared and simultaneously, is also inferior. It is only through love for all entities that one can come to understand oneself.

“And here is a doctrine at which you will laugh. It seems to me, Govinda, that love is the most important thing in the world.”

(Hesse 1922: 117)

It is, thus, through familiar love (for his son) and for the love of a woman (Kamala) that Siddhartha achieves the sublime moment of self-actualization.

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