
Appropriation and Fictionalisation of Buddha's Life by the West

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Abstract

Siddhartha, a novel written in 1992 by a German author Herman Hesse, is an appropriation and re-telling of the Gautama Buddha's story of enlightenment in a much simplified manner. The novel has mystified its readers and critics everywhere in the world. This is because Gautama Buddha's life history has been appropriated by a German writer in ways that not only personalise and naturalise what the Eastern followers of Gautama Buddha might consider 'revelation' but also Westernise it to a great extent. The East considers the Buddha as a visionary religious leader with divine powers, but Hesse has shown him as a modern man who validated his own experience, observation, and analysis over others and tradition. So Hesse's Siddhartha is a triumph of 'reason' and 'experience' over superstitious reverence for the supernatural. This view or perception of the Buddha has implications for the epistemological claims of the postcolonial world. This paper aims to explore, argue, and establish the hidden implications of Hesse's Siddhartha for the postcolonial world we inhabit.

Introduction

Appropriation in the postcolonial world has various meanings and interpretations. It changes meanings from time to time, situation to situation, and context to context, as per the necessities of civilisation.¹ The word means adaptation, recycling, re-contextualisation, borrowing, and recreation. Hesse's *Siddhartha* is based upon the borrowing of Buddha's story from historical and religious accounts of the East.² A closer examination of the text shows that appropriation and recreation gives a modern outlook to various incidents of Buddha's life.

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Appropriation and adaptation of culture is taking place since the development of the Mesopotamian civilisation. Sometimes, writers appropriate and borrow things for their own interests and sometimes for the interest of their audience and readers. Appropriation depicts a deeper interest of the writers, as well as a conscious borrowing.³

Postcolonial theorists and writers have appropriated the English language and used it as a tool to convey their grievances to the West. They have tried to convey that colonisation was evil in the name of good, which has not only destroyed the religion and culture of the natives but also crushed the identity of the colonial masses. Some of the postcolonial writers are in favour of appropriation of language, while others are against it. Postcolonial theory is based upon the appropriation of the English language. Developing and colonised nations are quite astonished that the West has appropriated anything from the East. The appropriation of Buddha's life by the German novelist has significance and deeper meanings.

Adaptation and appropriation take place in many forms such as the appropriation of language, symbols, culture, sounds, artefacts, objects, and styles from one culture to another.⁴ Eastern history is a witness that Buddha was a spiritual leader who has followers. Writers across the world have appropriated Buddha's life in different ways. Hesse's narration of *Siddhartha* is very interesting in a way that it not only resents the different selves of Siddhartha but also signifies the different selves of individuals. Hesse portrays that there are two sides of the human mind: spiritual and rational. All these sides and selves work simultaneously and are characteristic of human beings. On the basis of the common instinct, the writer signifies himself with Buddha. He thinks that every individual goes through different experiences of life through the process of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of different thoughts. Hesse saw his picture in Buddha and that is the reason for the appropriation of Buddha's life. Buddhists are of the view that writing the biography of Gautama Buddha is un-Buddhist. The fictionalisation of the story gives a new colour and significance to Buddha's life.

The art of fictionalisation is very old, which universalises a specific character, situation, and culture for all the ages. The writers used to fictionalise the historical and religious figures. Shakespeare and

Chaucer had great command in this art.⁵ On the same lines, Hesse has appropriated and fictionalised Buddha's life in the form of the novel *Siddhartha*. This fictionalisation also represents the journey of every individual in the world to intellect and wisdom. Sir Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* is a recent example of fictionalisation of the Indian history.⁶ *Siddhartha* reflects Western interest in Buddha's life and philosophy. Other than the appropriation of Buddha's life by the Western writers, some natives have also fictionalised Buddha's life, such as Hanif Kureishi in the *Buddha of Suburbia*.⁷ The writers have also discussed Buddha according to their own angles and interests quite contrary to so many others. Representation and fictionalisation of one's own history have a different meaning from interpreting the history of other nations. Western fictionalisation seems to be a direct judgment on the East. There are differences between Orientalist's and Occidentalists' representations. Shakespeare's and Waris Shah's representations of their own history and culture are not the same as Hesse's and Arnold's interpretations of the cultures of other civilisations; the latter two works fictionalised the history of others. The aforementioned two representations generate the concept of self and other, which is considered a 'coloniser's view'.

Hesse has discussed the life and philosophy of Gautama Buddha in a very systematic way in the form of the novel *Siddhartha*. This adjustment and fictionalisation may uncover the self-portraying component Hesse has used to make an analogy for his own particular translation and comprehension of Siddhartha.

Appropriation of incidents

Buddhists and Eastern writers have not used the original name of Buddha in their stories, which is Siddhartha, except in the introductory chapters of history books.⁸ Historians and religious scholars have introduced Buddha in a spiritualist fashion. Religious scholars and historians of the East have spiritualised Buddha's birth, family life and disappointment with family life, companionship with monks, and search for truth and enlightenment.⁹ Hesse has told the story of Siddhartha, a young man who left home just for his mental satisfaction because he was unhappy. According to Hesse's account, Buddha became a rebel against the existing realities and left the house of his father to search for 'truth'.

Hesse portrays the biography of this excursion—disappointments and triumphs, impediments and inversions, and tests and tribulations. Most importantly, Hesse portrays the procedures of his idea, i.e., how his great ideas transpired with reference to his own encounters of life. It is not possible for anyone to have knowledge of the thinking inside the brain of Buddha who left his home for the wilderness. Moreover, the novelist also narrates his own experiences through his mouthpiece, Siddhartha. Sometimes, the *Siddhartha* reflects the struggle, experiences, and the conquests of the writer himself. That is the reason, it is argued, that Hesse saw himself in Buddha.

Siddhartha has been divided into two sections, which present the spiritual and intellectual sides of Siddhartha's mind. Further division into different chapters makes the novel more systematic. All this division makes it more delightful in understanding the enlightenment of Gautama in a more systematic way. It also signifies the different hurdles and steps towards the spiritual growth of individuals. To a large extent, Hesse has appropriated all major incidents from the Eastern history and fictionalised them in various forms. The first representation of Hesse's Siddhartha has a great resemblance with the Eastern accounts. But when the child grows up and begins to see things from an independent perspective, the story takes a different turn. The turn has different meanings and reasons for the intellectuals, as well as followers of Buddha. The first section of the novel is totally based upon his spiritual experiences, while the second section shows Siddhartha's fight against his desires.¹⁰

The second section of the novel revolves around the learning of Siddhartha from nature because it is considered that nature is the best companion of human beings on earth. It not only provides food to the living but also performs the role of an educator. Some people have the ability to learn from nature, while others remain ignorant for the whole of their lives. Buddha had the ability to learn from nature. The otherworldly separation from the physical is, in this mission, just a misleading statement, insufficient and inadequate. The body is nothing without a soul and a soul is nothing without a body. In any case, the occurrences include two sorts of characters: anecdotal and the fictionalised.

Fictionalisation of characters

The novelist has introduced many new characters in *Siddhartha*, which are unseen in historical and religious accounts of Gautama's life. There are many fictionalised characters such as Kamala, Child, Ferryman, Kamaswami, and the best friend of Siddhartha named Govinda. The writer signifies the Samanas¹¹ with monks, which is also very remarkable. It seems to argue that Buddhism is derived from Hinduism. Govinda starts his journey with Siddhartha and becomes his disciple in their first meeting, which is also very significant. But he joins Siddhartha again after his enlightenment, which signifies the existence of idealism and realism in the world. Every character has played its role in the novel but Govinda is the most significant.¹² Moreover, fictionalisation has created generalisation, which has universalised the story and preaching of Siddhartha.

Spiritual quest

According to historians and religious scholars, the journey of Buddha starts towards spiritualism when he leaves his home. However, Hesse considers it a journey towards realism. The novel shows that Siddhartha leaves his home in the companionship of his friend Govinda just for the search of truth. They spend time with the Samanas and also meet with the chosen one Gautama. Govinda chooses to live with the chosen one but Siddhartha restarts his journey towards enlightenment. The character goes through different experiences to reach enlightenment. The awakening comes in Siddhartha's life after a lot of experiences.¹³

The son of Brahmins

In the introductory chapter, the novelist has presented Siddhartha as a Brahmin son who is not satisfied with all that he has. His family and society have great expectations of him. Hesse has drawn a complete picture of Siddhartha's life. The writer narrates that the parents are proud to see the child because it reflects their future. They want to see him as a great man. "There was happiness in his father's heart because of his son who was intelligent and thirsty for knowledge; he saw him growing up to be a great learned man, a priest, a prince among Brahmins."¹⁴

Religious books represent Buddha as a chosen one who was born with spirituality and intellect. The father called several fortune-tellers to ascertain the future of his five years old son. They told him that the child had amazing future and that he could possibly progress towards becoming the Buddha, who will get profound edification, or a general ruler, a saint of mainstream legend. The child's identity, the father was told, would lead the entire world. The fortune-tellers also told Buddha's father, according to the historical accounts, that four things will try to change the mind of the child: a dead body, a monk, a sick man, and an old man. These things will cause the child to leave home, the father was told. According to historical accounts, the father tried to save his child from these four things predicted by the Brahmins. The novelist has fictionalised the incidents for the generalisations of the themes. He has demonstrated the insubordinate state of mind of Siddhartha only for his inward fulfilment, which runs parallel with his defiant mentality. He needs to scan out the way for himself rather than dazzle confidence. Hesse has fictionalised this exceptional occurrence just to demonstrate that the advancement of individuals depends upon their common sense and a comprehension of things through various encounters. The Eastern accounts of Gautama's life narrate that it was fated for Siddhartha to become the Buddha. They are of the view that Siddhartha was born as a prophet.

Hesse negates the notion and narrates that Siddhartha became a Buddha through his own hard work and experiences. Siddhartha leaves his home in the company of his friend Govinda after getting permission from his father. Things automatically change at home because it was the death of the expectations of the father and mother. Here, Hesse portrays that he only visits his mother's room before leaving the house. He touches her feet and starts his journey.

History is a witness that when Buddha decided to leave home, he had a son and a wife. But Hesse's fictionalised account narrates that Siddhartha got married during his journey towards self-conquest. Historical accounts show that before leaving his home to start the journey, Buddha goes to see his child and spouse around the evening time. Hesse has portrayed that Siddhartha just visits his mother's space to see her. This is the principal episode of fictionalisation. Hesse has endeavoured to fictionalise the adventure of Buddha just to naturalise it

for every single individual. The reality and fiction are joined in such a way as to influence them to look one. Hesse's fictionalised Siddhartha leaves home as Buddha had left. The love of the parents and friends was unable to provide mental satisfaction to the character. He starts thinking that wisdom varies from person to person and that he should search out his own ways to acquire wisdom for his mental satisfaction.¹⁵

Its comparison with Karen Armstrong's *Buddha* shows to what extent the two accounts match or differ. Armstrong is of the view that all things that happened in Buddha's life were spiritual. The picture presented by Armstrong shows that Buddha was a revealed prophet as it was already written in his fate.¹⁶

The two introductions appear to be fundamentally the same. Hesse has given Siddhartha a craving for involvement and information, while Armstrong has presented Buddha as having innate rebelliousness, which created discontent in his life. Armstrong gives a spiritual touch to the situation and her presentation is loaded with particular insights about the names of individuals and spots, while Hesse's depiction is generally anonymous, aside from a couple of Indian characters.¹⁷

Killings one's wants or forbearance isn't conceivable through training and preparing alone. The practice of self-control is temporary and hence this experience goes in circles. The natural self cannot be killed at all, leading to scepticism and questioning. Hesse's fictionalised Siddhartha always questions existing realities because the realities change with the passage of time. Realities and truths are relative terms. That is the reason for Siddhartha's negation of the experience he gets from the Samanas. He is of the view that experience from the prostitute is better and faster than the experience from the Samanas.¹⁸ He further expresses a belief, which appears common to both Eastern and Western mystic thought, i.e., about knowledge of the self. He presents that knowledge is the worst enemy of the man. Knowledge is present everywhere in the world.¹⁹ This awareness is the turning point that self cannot be ignored or killed.

Gautama

Gautama is actually another name of Buddha that Hesse has fictionalised as a different character in the novel named Gautama. The novelist has presented Siddhartha as an ordinary character who gets

enlightenment through his own hard work and experiences. In this story, Siddhartha, the youthful individual, meets Gautama as a man not exactly the same as him. Gautama is a standout amongst the most vital developments in the story of the novel. Siddhartha watches everybody intently. He sees the monks in their yellow robes under and besides the trees, like bees, while they are busy with their supernatural things, performing meditations and also begging with bowls.²⁰ Some of the monks go for begging and Gautama himself is shown engaged in such type of activities in the novel.

In the novel, Siddhartha describes Gautama through his critical eye—Gautama is learned as well as the illustrious one who got enlightenment through his own experiences. He developed the eightfold path on the basis of his own experience to overcome the sufferings of the humanity. That is the reason his voice works like light and star to his listeners.²¹

And then Siddhartha raises a question to which Gautama responds that such questions are a result of the contradiction between idealism and realism. He says that opinions mean nothing because they vary from person to person. On the same lines, teaching means the salvation of human beings from their problems and sufferings. He is of the view that Gautama teaches nothing beyond the salvation from sufferings.

To which Siddhartha replies politely to Gautama, “O Illustrious One... You have learnt nothing through teachings.”²² Since Siddhartha believes that experience and wisdom cannot be communicated through words, he asks Gautama whether he can express his feelings about the events that led to his enlightenment.²³ After meeting with Gautama, the character adopts the policy of selection and rejection because he is of the view that worldly progress depends on construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of different theories.

The theory of choose and reject portrays the concept of Westernisation, which is based on the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of different thoughts. The character Siddhartha is the mouthpiece of the novelist and portrays his philosophy. He gets enlightenment through his own experiences by rejecting the existing ones. Having said that, however, all the prophets and the theorists have shown some form of rebelliousness before the projection of their own

religion or theory, respectively. Similarly, Siddhartha rejects the instructions of the instructors.

Awakening

Siddhartha of the novel goes through all the experiences himself. All the companions and seniors leave him in the way. This is simply the beginning of getting to be one with the goal that he has set for himself in life. It is only an internal monologue. So Siddhartha constructs the realities, then after some time, he rejects the realities he had once constructed himself. This is the most unmistakable Westernisation of Siddhartha's story, the essential issue of the adjustment of Buddha's life. This directly alludes towards the circumstances where Gautama conflicts with the religion of his ancestors. Hesse has endeavoured to demonstrate that enlivening is the aftereffect of the refusal of acknowledgement of the substances built by others.²⁴

Beyond any doubt, the self and its wants vary from individual to individual and the entire world exists in a person. Each individual attempts to take in the appropriate responses of the fundamental inquiries that are considered beyond his own capacity for reasoning. So what Buddha has said with regard to these exceptionally essential inquiries is that everybody ought to take in the appropriate responses of these extremely fundamental inquiries.²⁵ None of the individuals can predict the experiences of Siddhartha in its true sense because truth and experience are relative terms, which vary from person to person.²⁶

At the beginning of the journey of Siddhartha in the novel, he is deprived of the companionship of his friend Govinda. For the fulfilment of the desire and achievement, Siddhartha gets rid of his friends, society, parents, and home. Buddhists' customs, however, not only depend on the self but are related to the eightfold path of Buddha. The Buddhist customs aren't about the affirmation of self; they are tied in with following the rules. Hesse has appropriated the story in a Westernised style and has changed it from medieval to modern.

All these four segments show how he has gone through different experiences quite contradictory to the existing ones. Each chapter of life is a step towards a spiritual journey that ends in frustration and realisation that one must return to life and to 'self' for its understanding.

Hesse's interest in the East

Hermann Hesse has written *Peter Camenzind* (1904) and *Demian* (1919) before the publication of *Siddhartha*. However, he got more name and fame after the publication of *Siddhartha*, where he has tried to encompass his philosophical thoughts regarding spiritualism, naturalism, idealism, and realism. *Steppenwolf* also presents the philosophy, which is much nearer to *Siddhartha*. *Siddhartha* is well-equipped with the philosophical points of Hesse that could be relevant in the modern age. In any case, he authored a few different books other than these.

The German writer's visit to Indonesia has greatly affected his writings. The books he published after his visit to the East (perceived as his journey to India) have some customary subjects. For instance, the twofold nature of individuals, various selves of a man's soul, and change in these distinctive selves with the passage of time.²⁷ Moreover, he has also expounded the theory that soul and body is one thing, not two.

Conclusion

Among all of Hesse's novels, *Siddhartha* is the best representative of all the notions that have been described above. Additionally, this is in light of the fact that he had second thoughts before writing it. Before the documentation of *Siddhartha*, Hesse wrote a letter to his friend George Reinhart in August 1920, in which he communicated. "My huge Indian work isn't prepared yet and may never be. I'm putting it aside until further notice since I would need to delineate next a period of advancement that I have not yet completely experienced myself."²⁸

The novel is a fictionalised representation of Siddhartha's enlightenment and a story of his friend's idealism. He feels dissatisfaction and hopelessness, despite the fact that he has all the luxuries of life in his palace. He leaves all these things for the search for truth. He gets experience and learning through his own struggle and hard work. His self moulds after getting different experiences and his preferences also change with the passage of time. Change and self are common themes of the novel.

Nature is a powerful source of inspiration and guidance for the character in the novel. Under the shadow of this nature, he joins Govinda

and meets with Gautama. All the transformation takes place just because of his interaction with nature. Siddhartha adopts various strategies to kill his desire and to get rid of the suffering in one way or another but remains unsuccessful. First, he adopts the way of the Samanas and remains hungry to get rid of his suffering. Later on, he realises that it is not a proper way to get rid of sufferings. He leaves the Samanas and searches for the holy one.

Spiritualism is not enough to get enlightenment, materialism is also required; that is what makes the second section of the text interesting. Siddhartha meets different personalities for the conquest of material needs. He realises after a lot of experiences that material needs cannot be suppressed. He meets Kamala for his mental satisfaction, who is a prostitute. The learning from Kamala has its own importance. Siddhartha learns a lot from ferrymen and businessmen and later on realises that all these segments are part and parcel of the enlightenment of the individual. At every stage, he constructs reality, then he himself deconstructs the constructed one. The journey of Siddhartha signifies different stages of worldly progress. Various theories have been constructed for the benefit of the human beings. But later on, these theories were replaced with modern ones.

Hesse has appropriated and fictionalised Buddha's story. The kind of individual freedom that Hesse proposes for a discoverer and follower of the spiritual path has tremendous political consequences. This debate also has food for thought for the postcolonial writers. Through the narration of the story of Siddhartha and Govinda, Hesse has tried to create a difference of thinking between the East and the West. He is of the view that through the process of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction, the West reached postmodernity and dominance over the East.

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