"A Revelation on the River: The Reconciliation of Spirituality and Postmodernism in Hesse's *Siddhartha*." Paper presented at "Utopia, Dystopia, and the Search for Self," a special topics panel at "Utopia/Dystopia: Whose Paradise Is It?", the 88th annual conference of the **South Atlantic Modern Language Association (SAMLA)**, in Jacksonville, FL. Nov. 2016.

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A Revelation on the River:

The Reconciliation of Spirituality and Postmodernism in Hesse's *Siddhartha*

Hermann Hesse's 1922 short novel, *Siddhartha*, is one of many works that precede the ascendance of postmodernism but still exhibit ideas that predict the coming movement in thought and theory. Many critics may argue for a modernist approach to such a work, but Hesse, like the thoughts typically categorized as "postmodern," extends beyond the modernist view into a level of ontology and purpose that is inarguably postmodern. The title character's final transcendence is an exhibition of the liberation possible through postmodern thought, an attempt at freedom from metanarratives and a transcendence beyond the earthly realm of modernist meaning and function. While Siddhartha may not be able to entirely rid himself of the confines of the world around him, he achieves the closest alternative, transcending both time and language in order to understand the concepts of totality and simultaneity. In embracing the interconnectedness of all things, Siddhartha manages to attain peace and harmony in the acceptance of all possibilities and all forms of existence. Throughout the title character's progression toward liberation, Hesse's novel reconciles the two seemingly oppositional worlds of postmodernism and spirituality.

From the opening page of Hesse's novel, the title character is presented as discontent, aware that his identity is formed by his surroundings, that he is nothing more than simulations of people who have preceded him, and so he is unable to understand himself beyond the

constructions of such simulations. It's vital to note that Siddhartha's quest is not simply another common journey toward the modernist ideal of self- fulfillment or a sense of completion. Postmodern scholars, such as Glen Ward, instead argue that such a "desire for some mythical inner unity and stability" (149) is futile. Similarly, Siddhartha remains skeptical regarding the paths laid out before him for achieving some sense of peace. While the Buddhist traditions in which Siddhartha has been raised emphasize harmony and peace, Siddhartha refuses the path such traditions offer, viewing many upon those paths as incomplete or ignorant. Instead of defining "success" or "completion" in terms of the Other, Siddhartha understands the futility of such quests and seeks something more personal and criticizes such reflections: "They knew a tremendous number of things—but what was it worth while knowing all these things if they did not know the one important thing, the only important thing?" (4). The "only important thing" is true transcendence, in which one must no longer be trapped in the structures or conventions or representations of the world. While postmodern theory would suggest such transcendence is impossible, Siddhartha seeks it with determination. Although you might not be able to escape the prison of systems in which we exist, free navigation within the building itself is a decent consolation.

Siddhartha's discontentment is part of a larger awareness, evident in his rejection of metanarratives, language games, and all forms representation. Instead, he seeks the only true reality: his reactions to and reflections upon his own personal experiences. All else is false: "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" (11). Jay L. Garfield explains that a driving force behind postmodern spirituality is the concept that people are "empty of inherent existence" (515), an idea that suggests that personality is created through the impact of social

constructs. If this is true, then personal experience becomes the only possibility for any kind of individual freedom (Ashe).

Even after studying the ways of the Samanas and gaining new miraculous abilities, Siddhartha is not content. The realm of the mystics offers him only petty tricks, not inner peace. In response to his friend Govinda, who praises Siddhartha's new talents, Siddhartha replies disdainfully, "'I have no desire to walk on water…. Let the old Samanas satisfy themselves with such arts'" (19).

Only one person exists whom Siddhartha might accept as an adequate teacher on his path toward peace, Gautama, the Buddha himself. When Siddhartha meets the Buddha, Siddhartha *does* recognize the transcendence and harmony among his features. The Buddha, however, still remains a representation of convention, metanarrative, and language, which Siddhartha continues to distrust, for although the Buddha has achieved transcendence, he is unable to adequately communicate it to another: "You have learned nothing through teachings, and so I think, O Illustrious One, that 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" (27). Although others, including Siddhartha, may emulate the Buddha, an attempt to strictly follow his path is a futile endeavor. Instead, one must follow one's own path toward enlightenment.

The name "Siddhartha" was a name traditionally given to the Buddha, and Hesse is quite possibly emphasizing the contrast between the conventional ideas of spirituality with his own protagonist, the individual as an independent spiritual explorer.

Many critics claim that Hesse is actually creating an allegory for the Buddhist tradition, emphasizing the similarities between the legendary life of Gautama with that of Hesse's title

character. Such an interpretation, however, is implausible and does not fit into the context of Hesse's work or Siddhartha's transcendence of social constructs: Theodore Ziolkowski explains that "Hesse's entire view of life and development is explicitly opposed to that of Gautama. In his diary of 1920 he states categorically that he opposes Buddha's conscious attempt to postulate an established pattern of development" (79).

Siddhartha refuses to accept the idea that there is any one particular solution applicable to every individual. Although he is on a quest for harmony, such a quest is not desirable to everyone, and, for those who are part of that same quest, there is no single method to achieve success, much less even a single definition of that "success." Siddhartha aims for the death of the Self, to rid himself of such conventions and constructs into which he has been indoctrinated so that he might be reborn as a blank slate, open to learn from his own experience, the only way to find enlightenment. The novel states:

> Siddhartha had one single goal—to become empty, to become empty of thirst, desire, dreams, pleasure and sorrow—to let the Self die. No longer to be Self, to experience the peace of an emptied heart, to experience pure thought—that was his goal. When all the Self was conquered and dead, when all passions and desires were silent, then the last must awaken, the innermost of Being that is no longer Self—the great secret! (Hesse 11)

Only in ignoring all else, can Siddhartha open himself up to the world of experience, the world of creation. According to David Ray Griffin, the theology of postmodernism focuses on "panexperientialism," which embraces the experiences of all forms of nature. All experience is a kind of creative experience, and creativity is the ultimate form of reality (5). Siddhartha must open himself up to his own creative forces through experiencing all possible forms of his Self, ridding himself of the one individualized Self that has been doctored through social constructs or tradition. At one point, he asks: "Was it not his Self, his small, fearful and proud Self...which had robbed him of happiness and filled him with fear?" (80). While he may not be able to fully

escape the systems of his world, he seeks to at least get as much of his body out of the door as possible. Opening himself up to all possibilities is the closest he can come to transcending the systems that constrain him and the rest of society, but even this slight movement is a form of liberation and peace.

One of Siddhartha's best hopes for achieving this peace is through the Buddhist traditional chant of "Om," depicted as a symbol of perfection, a mantra that serves as a path for meditation and self-contemplation. This symbol for perfection, however, is imperfect in itself, for it is merely a word, a label or representation that offers only a momentary distraction from the world. Such brief escapes through meditation, in fact, only increase Siddhartha's discontent by reinforcing to Siddhartha the illusory nature of existence: "The world of appearance is transitory, the style of our clothes and hair is extremely transitory. Our hair and our bodies are themselves transitory" (76). On a desperate quest for the real, Siddhartha searches first among the realm of mysticism and then among the realm of the sensual for experiences that may reveal to him the secret of enlightenment. No individual aspect of reality, however, offers the revelation he seeks. He must be made aware of the futility of approaching a purely physical or purely mental life as their own ends. As Joseph Mileck explains, "After exhausting both attitudes, he achieves an affirmation which can accept its existence in totality" (79). Only when he accepts the experiences of both worlds combined, can he attain such a spiritual peace.

This meeting ground is represented in the novel both spiritually and geographically as the river, for when Siddhartha leaves the Samanas and ascetics to go into the city and learn of sensual delights, he must first cross a river, the river to which he is destined to return after abandoning the gluttonous realm of sex and money. Only when the sacred "Om" is combined with the infinity of the river, something that cannot be truly expressed or represented, can true

meaning and true perfection come: “They both listened silently to the water, which to them was not just water, but the voice of life, the voice of being, of perpetual Becoming” (88).

The river becomes a symbol for existence, for creativity, and for experience, and Theodore Ziolkowski explains the significance of Siddhartha’s identification with the river: “In Hesse’s case this symbol of simultaneity is expanded to include the realm...in which all polarity ceases: totality. It is a realm of pure existence in which all things coexist in harmony” (81-82). The river is in constant motion, but it still remains present at all times and in all places. It is simultaneously ever-stable and ever-moving. Ziolkowski continues: “In any system that regards all polar extremes as invalid, as interchangeable, traditional values are indeed in a state of flux” (82). Thus, Siddhartha’s revelation at the river is one of ultimately tearing down the traditions and conventions of society, embracing the All and embracing the Now, even as postmodern spirituality urges the necessity for accepting all possible experiences and events (Ashe).

This final revelation is coupled with the revelation that true knowledge cannot be communicated without being reduced, and thus no longer true. Even as the wisdom of the Buddha could not be passed on to Siddhartha, Siddhartha is unable to teach his son, and when Govinda returns and recognizes the sign of enlightenment upon Siddhartha’s features, Siddhartha’s reply reflects a bittersweet truth: “Wisdom is not communicable. The wisdom which a wise man tries to communicate always sounds foolish” (115). Ziolkowski comments upon this final confirmation of knowledge’s source, not through transmission but through experience:

> Only after he has suffered the torment of rejection can he perceive the final truth, which had hitherto been purely intellectual: no two men have the same way to the final goal: not even the father can spare his son the agonies of self-discovery…. Each man must find his own way in life, that no man’s path can be prescribed. Thus the highest lesson of the novel is the direct contradiction of Buddha’s theory of the Eightfold Path. it is the whole meaning of the book that Siddhartha can attain Buddha’s goal without following his path.

(99)

However, with this revelation, Siddhartha has transcended language, the dividing force for all things. Language is, after all, merely a system of labels, dividing things into categories and limiting things to the characteristics pertaining to each category, creating barriers and distinctions when potentially, everything could be one (Ashe). As Saussure explained, language works only in terms of difference, for one word only has meaning insofar as it is different from another word, both of which have arbitrary connections to their respective referents (6-10). Both postmodernism and the spirituality of Hesse's work attempt to present an awareness of the world of constructs and the world of such barriers, and Siddhartha recognizes the constraining impact that language would have on his epiphany, an impact that would alter and thus falsify his wisdom.

Siddhartha, in recognizing the continuity and timelessness of the river, recognizes the same features throughout all existence, for if such barriers that are created by language are illusory, then all things truly are interconnected: "They all became part of the river...all the good and evil, all of them together was the world" (110). From another perspective, the individual observer and the rest of the world can all be considered as one, for the observation of a subject makes the observer a participant and can change the subject itself. The external world apart from Siddhartha does not really exist, but if there are no true distinctions, Siddhartha—and anyone else—can become a part of everything, and unity can exist throughout everything.

Even time is a result of language and is thus an illusion, an arbitrary division of the Now, which stretches backwards and forwards. From a postmodern perspective, a single moment is infinitely divisible, and thus can be considered to be, itself, infinite and limitless (Ashe). Siddhartha explains the idea to Govinda, struggling to impart at least some wisdom to his friend:

"Time is not real... And if time is not real, then the dividing line that seems to lie between this world and eternity, between suffering and bliss, between good and evil, is also an illusion" (115). Time creates barriers, anxiety, and pain, so Siddhartha's transcendence of time allows him to step outside of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth and attain stability and peace. Ziolkowski explains: "Siddhartha's ultimate goal, as exemplified in the final vision, is to escape the wheel of metempsychosis by realizing that all possible transformations or potentialities of the soul are possible not only consecutively, but simultaneously in the human soul" (82). Such an indifference to time also strikes out at the metanarrative of Progress and again, reflects upon the simultaneity of all events, and so all creation. Siddhartha states, "The world, Govinda, is not imperfect or slowly evolving along a path to perfection. No, it is perfect at every moment; every sin already carries grace within it, all small children are potential old men, all sucklings have death within them, all dying people—eternal life" (116).

Connection without any central, dominant force seems to be the presiding belief behind Siddhartha's spirituality and postmodern theology. Ziolkowski states, "It is through epiphanies that Siddhartha breaks out of the rigid schematism of Buddhism and Brahmanism...and begins to enter into an immediate contact with the world" (98). Revelation and enlightenment are presented in terms of connection and unity, the unity of all beings, the connections between various levels of ontology, whether it be the mystical or the sensual. According to Mileck, Siddhartha, in "acknowledging the reality, the goodness, and the necessity of both realms of experience...knows only unity, affirmation, and humble service" (21). All levels of ontology, all various experiences must be accepted simultaneously. An intent focus on one level must exclude another, but within the river, all flows as one and can be accepted as totality. While none can fully escape the systems of society, postmodernism urges everyone to at least attempt at

transcendence over metanarratives and to realize the fact that there are no truly defined paths (Ashe). The river can flow anywhere and be anything.

In true postmodern style, Siddhartha's revelation does not provide closure or define a specific way toward any kind of enlightenment or completion. In fact, the point is that there is no single path to follow, but a different one for each individual. As a part of this world and still unaware of the systems that imprison society, none can be complete or satisfied. Only through the approximate death of the Self can one be ready to accept all possibilities and all forms of existence. Govinda recognizes Siddhartha's transformation, but Hesse doesn't state whether Govinda is ever able to emulate it. At the closing of the novel, each reader has become Govinda, wondering in awe at Siddhartha's journey and ready to take the first struggling steps down an undefined path to imitate Siddhartha's goal, but not necessarily his methods.

Siddhartha's journey is a postmodern one. He is discontent and aware of the systems and illusions that surround him. He recognizes the futility of communication through language and recognizes that representations influence people's perceptions of reality. He refuses metanarratives and prescribed paths toward perfection, but instead determines to create his own way. He comes to an understanding that time is an illusion created by language and that language creates fictional boundaries dividing all forms of existence. Beyond such labels, all can be one. All forms of experience and creation can become unified, and in this unity, one can attain harmony.

In this way, Siddhartha maintains a sense of spirituality throughout his journey. The river becomes a symbol of transcendence, transcending boundaries between culture and caste, an acceptance of all possible selves or events, and thus all possible creations. While Siddhartha may not be able to step completely outside the system, the river of experience and creativity will

allow him to navigate it through all possibilities successfully, a kind of transcendence that is the closest one can ever get to true liberation. Hesse's approach to Siddhartha upon his final stage of enlightenment seems to suggest that this state is an adequate consolation. Even as Siddhartha's revelation on the river allows for the reconciliation of the world of the spirit and the world of the senses, it allows for the reconciliation of spirituality and postmodernism.

Thank you.

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