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Salvation in *Siddhartha* by Herman Karl Hesse

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ABSTRACT

In his Nobel Prize-winning novel *Siddhartha*, Nobel laureate Hermann Hesse explores salvation as a central topic. It is abundantly evident from the book that the protagonist, Siddhartha, a young kid, is never content with his lived experience and is always on the lookout for something more. In his quest to find the missing link, he leaves his family behind with his friend Govinda. His journey toward self-discovery lies at the heart of the story.

Keywords: Enlightenment, spirituality, salvation, Nirvana.

Hermann Hesse was a novelist, poet, and painter of German Swiss origin. He received the esteemed Nobel Prize in literature in 1946 for his profound works that exemplified timeless benevolent ideals and exceptional literary quality. *Siddhartha* (1922) stands as one of the most significant novels authored by him. The central motif of the current narrative revolves around the pursuit of inner tranquility. The characters within the novel appear to grapple with profound inner turmoil as they struggle to achieve tranquility in their lives and embark on a quest for redemption.

Salvation is the innermost tranquility or spiritual ecstasy that alleviates the soul of the individual who attains it. Indian culture refers to it as 'Nirvana' and 'Moksha.' The Merriam-Webster Dictionary describes it as, "Deliverance from the power and effects of sin". Associate Professor Indrani Singh Rai of Amity University, Chhattisgarh, eloquently articulated 'Nirvana' in her research work titled "Meeting Me at Horizon: In Search of Life through Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*":

'Nirvana', according to Buddhist notion means 'ultimately empty' (paramasunnya) or the highest emptiness" (aggasunnya). It means the Nirvana-Existent is empty of self because of the nonexistence of self' and specifies that both Conditioned Existents and the Unconditioned Existent are all empty of self because of the absence of a person to be classified as a self. It refers to a place (metaphorically), state or condition where there is no death, because there is also no birth, no coming into existence, nothing made by conditioning, and therefore no time. It is actually cut off the bonds of passion and hatred. (IRA)

Siddhartha's father is a pious Brahmin who diligently conducts different Vedic rituals and imparts the similar knowledge to his son. However, despite diligently performing these rites throughout his life, he was unable to achieve redemption, as evidenced in the subsequent lines of the novel, Hesse aptly says, "Siddhartha knew many venerable Brahmins, chiefly his father, the pure one, the scholar, the most venerable one. But even he who knew so much, did he live in blissfulness, did he have peace, was he not a searching man, a thirsty man?" (Hesse 07).

Siddhartha observes his father's pursuit and concludes that if his father cannot achieve tranquility despite studying numerous religious texts and adhering to rituals, then he too cannot obtain salvation through similar methods. He departs from his father's residence and aligns himself with the Samanas (wandering ascetics) alongside his companion Govinda. Siddhartha acquires three essential abilities from the Samanas: (1) Contemplation, (2) Patience, and (3) Fasting, while engaging in self-denial and meditation alongside them. He masters the technique of dissociating from his corporeal form to inhabit the bodies of various animals and birds; therefore, he experiences their suffering and joy. Siddhartha recognizes that all these abilities, meditations, and acts of self-denial are ineffectual because they do not lead to enlightenment. He expresses his concerns to Govinda, questioning how they can attain redemption if the eldest Samana cannot. The author has eloquently articulated it in the following lines:

He has lived for sixty years and has not reached Nirvana. He will turn seventy and eighty and you and me, we will grow just as old, and we will do our exercises and will fast and will meditate. But we will not reach Nirvana, he won't, and we won't. (18)

Siddhartha asserts that the Samanas instruct individuals to pursue enlightenment by disregarding the physical realm; however, renouncing the material world cannot lead to true salvation. He persuades his companion Govinda, and together they depart from the society of the Samanas. Scholar Le Hong Linh delves into this viewpoint in his research, "Journey to Enlightenment in Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha":

The Samanas teachings, aimed at allowing people to seek knowledge out of the material world, but Siddhartha discovered that real enlightenment could not come from ignoring the world around. He explained that Samanas did like the drunkard people. They temporary escape the ego. Just as drunkards continue to suffer and do not find enlightenment even though he continually escapes from his body. (ISJR)

Siddhartha and Govinda arrive at the camp of Gautama Buddha, the enlightened one. His teachings significantly influence Govinda, leading him to embrace Buddhism. Initially, Siddhartha finds contentment in the philosophies of Buddha, such as the Eightfold Path and various other elements of Buddhism. Subsequently, he begins to question the teachings of Buddha. He inquiries about Buddha's teachings regarding how one can contain the unity of all things while needing to transcend the material world. Siddhartha is not content with Buddha's responses. The novel presents a captivating portrayal of his discussion with Buddha:

You have found salvation from death. It has come to you in the course of your own search, on your own path, through thoughts, through meditation, through realizations, through enlightenment. It has not come to you by means of teachings. (Hesse 32)

Siddhartha chooses to depart from his life of meditation and spiritual exploration, intending to gain insights from the physical desires found in the sensible world. He departs from his friend Govinda and travels to a city. He encounters Kamala, a young and captivating courtesan. Siddhartha seeks her guidance in mastering the art of physical love. She recommends that he pursue a career as a merchant to support his living expenses and contribute to hers as well. He approaches Kamaswami and begins collaborating with him as a business partner. Siddhartha will soon accumulate significant wealth and

inherit substantial property. Kamala enters a romantic relationship with him and begins to educate him on different aspects of physical enjoyment. Siddhartha engages in gambling and drinking, resulting in significant financial expenditure on these activities. At first, he remains detached from worldly pleasures; however, he eventually becomes engaged in them, like others who exhibit a childlike disposition in the physical realm. Siddhartha also experiences unhappiness, like others in the world. To fulfill his desires, he engages in activities such as gambling, drinking, and pursuing intimate relationships. These activities burden him with sins and suffering. Eventually, he understands that the material world is gradually undermining his pursuit of salvation. He relinquishes all his financial assets and real estate, choosing to relocate from the city. A ferryman named Vasudeva crosses his path, who assists him in discovering the significance of his life. Vasudeva tells him to watch the river; the water will speak to him and show him the world's mysteries. The organization is the setting in which Siddhartha finds enlightenment. Later, he becomes Govinda's sage and helps him reach the state of everlasting bliss.

Siddhartha faces significant challenges on his journey to Nirvana. Neither his father's company nor that of the Samanas or the Buddhists leads him to salvation. Like everyone else, he spends his time gambling, drinking, dancing, and engaging in personal pursuits, often making mistakes in his material world engagements. Unfortunately, Siddhartha laments his plight as he leaves the earthly world for the jungle. The act of repentance frees his spirit from the false feeling of superiority. Previously, he regarded himself as superior to those in the world and viewed them with disdain. However, as time progresses, his worldly experience fosters a greater sense of consideration and sympathy toward them. Siddhartha is now able to empathize with their pain and suffering. This understanding renders him deserving of redemption.

On his journey towards enlightenment, Siddhartha experiences significant mental anguish, like that of ordinary individuals. Following the passing of his cherished Kamala, he diligently attends to the needs of his son. However, his son does not have a favorable opinion of him, and he chooses to abandon him. Siddhartha embarks on a quest to locate him but is ultimately unsuccessful in his search. He experiences profound sorrow in his heart due to the loss of his son. Looking at other people with their children makes Siddhartha envious. This allows for an additional level of purification. He exhibits strong sentimentality, as evidenced by his estrangement from his child. Previously, he exhibited a lack of emotional engagement and connection to the external environment. Siddhartha is now acutely aware of the constraints imposed by 'Maya' and seeks to understand the underlying causes of his pain and suffering. He seeks answers from the river. He gazes at his father in the river, who has also endured the pain of his son's separation. He understands that he must endure this suffering, as he has inflicted similar pain on his father, whose death resulted from their separation. This is the final stage of learning he must complete before achieving salvation. Despite his extensive education in religion, philosophy, and the natural world, he is emotionally far from the common people who lose loved ones in a tragic event. It is an essential requirement for salvation. Salvation does not imply a lack of sensitivity to the pains and pleasures; rather, it signifies that an individual becomes acutely aware of the pains and suffering experienced by others. Siddhartha achieved enlightenment following a prolonged period of struggle. It demonstrates that one cannot achieve spiritual bliss solely through teachings, religious ceremonies, fasting, or retreating from the material world to the forests. Engaging with the physical world and understanding the challenges faced by the general populace can accomplish it.

Siddhartha receives significant support from various individuals throughout his journey of enlightenment, with Vasudeva, the ferryman, being the most prominent among them. Unlike Siddhartha's father and the Samanas, Vasudeva does not teach formal knowledge. Along the journey, he guides him through the necessary steps while allowing him to make his own decisions. Vasudeva tells Siddhartha to pay close attention to the river because it can provide him the key to unlocking the mysteries. Vasudeva takes on the persona of a devoted ferryman, carrying him safely from this realm

to the next in his quest for enlightenment. Upon Siddhartha's attainment of salvation, Vasudeva takes his leave and offers his farewell. The novel eloquently describes this incident:

I have been waiting for this hour, my dear. Now that it has come, let me leave. For a long time, I have been waiting for this hour; for a long time, I have been Vasudeva, the ferryman. Now it is enough. Farewell, but, farewell, river, farewell Siddhartha. I am going into the forest; I am going into the oneness. (125)

Vasudeva's tenure on the river and earth comes to an end when Siddhartha attains liberation. He sets out on his last adventure, abandoning everything behind him. He has accomplished his goal, and there's no reason for him to stay. During his difficult times, when Siddhartha considers terminating his life, he offers him support. He paves the path to enlightenment for him. He comforts Siddhartha, a parent who has lost his kid and is suffering from extreme sadness, by offering him his wise counsel.

A major character in the book, Govinda is on a quest for inner calm as well. Passionate about learning more about Buddha's teachings, he is a devoted follower. He lives a largely nomadic existence, dedicated to the Buddhist path, yet he never finds inner peace. Although they set out on their trip together, Siddhartha comes to salvation and Govinda does not. Siddhartha, being an individual, chooses his own way. Conversely, Govinda is an individual who relies on others to assist him in gaining wisdom. This fundamental difference in their approaches to enlightenment ultimately shapes their destinies. Siddhartha learns to embrace his experiences, both joyful and painful, while Govinda remains tethered to the teachings of others, seeking fulfilment through external validation rather than inner discovery. In his article "An Existential Journey within: Siddhartha by Hermann Hesse," scholar Anshuman Sharma deftly distinguishes between Govind and Siddhartha's methods of seeking spiritual bliss:

Siddhartha got his salvation most probably because he led an authentic life, whereas his friend Govinda found himself failed in doing so. Govinda was still agitated because he followed someone and did not live authentically. Only after this event, Govinda realized that Siddhartha had found his true existential self and had experienced emptiness, selflessness, and nothingness. (M.S Journal)

Siddhartha serves as a mentor to Govinda in the concluding chapter, like how Vasudeva guided him toward achieving salvation. By confronting his uncertainties, he seeks to elucidate the genuine definition of enlightenment. All around us, he says, is Nirvana. There is no one on this planet who does not have some mix of good and bad qualities. An individual who has erred can embark on the journey toward becoming a virtuous person. A person is neither entirely sinful nor wholly virtuous. He embodies elements of both. He warns him against being too analytical and about leaving too little room for chance discoveries. Hesse effectively illustrates his point in the following sentences from the book, "What should I possibly tell, oh venerable one? Perhaps you are searching far too much? That in all that searching, you don't find time for finding" (Hesse 125).

He elaborates on the relationship between Sansara and Nirvana. They work together. He then tells him to kiss his forehead. A turning point in Govinda's life is upon him. He notices different points of view in the world. Like Arjuna's experience when Lord Krishna granted him knowledge via the teachings of the Gita, Govinda now receives glimpses of the world. Govinda was worthy of salvation since, after a lengthy journey, he reached Nirvana with Siddhartha's help. If Govinda hadn't been worthy, Siddhartha would not have been able to provide him everlasting serenity. Numerous individuals, such as Kamala and the young Siddhartha, came into his sphere of influence; however, he was unable to guide them toward the ultimate path, despite his diligent efforts, as they did not possess the requisite qualities for such guidance. Their souls bear the weight of transgressions and hardships. Nonetheless, Govinda possesses a pure soul, which is the reason he attains spiritual bliss through

Siddhartha's guidance. Vasudeva, Siddhartha's mentor, has transported numerous individuals across the river, yet he is uniquely capable of guiding Siddhartha on the journey toward enlightenment.

In conclusion, the narrative deeply focuses on the theme of salvation. Siddhartha, Vasudeva, and Govinda are only a few of the prominent characters with important goals. Various other personalities are also profoundly affected by it. Those who follow Samanas, Kamala, and Buddha also seek it. Samanas devote their lives to perfecting their technique in the hopes of reaching nirvana. To reach enlightenment, adherents of Buddhism follow the eightfold path and other teachings of the Buddha. Achieving enlightenment was an innate desire for Siddhartha's father as well. Throughout the story, Kamala places great importance on meeting Gautama Buddha, believing it to be the key to achieving eternal peace. She embarks on her final journey with her son to experience the tranquil presence of Buddha, who is believed to be nearing the end of his life. During her final moments, she discovers profound eternal peace in the presence of Siddhartha, who, like Buddha, has also attained enlightenment.

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