



# Treatment of Salvation as a Major Theme in Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*

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## Abstract

**Aim:** The present research paper is a humble attempt to discuss salvation as a major cause of concern into the novel 'Siddhartha' by Nobel Laureate Herman Hesse. As it is evident from the beginning of the novel, the boy Siddhartha is not at inner peace into his worldly life and is always in search for something missing. He leaves his home, along with his friend Govinda to find out that missing link. The whole story of the novel revolves around his search for the inner peace.

**Methodology and Approach:** The qualitative research has been done to write the present research paper and the novel 'Siddhartha' (1922) by Herman Hesse, has been taken as a primary text for this purpose.

**Outcome:** The novel presents many occasions of the inner conflicts to which the lead character Siddhartha goes through. He leaves his home as he is unable to get peace by following various religious ceremonies with his father. Then he joins Samanas and practices their hard rituals by remaining without food for many days. Here also he does not get the spiritual peace and finally returns back to the worldly life. He leaves that life too, and finds solace in the company of Vasudeva the ferryman, who guides him to inner peace by learning from the river.

**Conclusion and Suggestion:** The present research paper suggests that true inner peace cannot be achieved by mere teachings and pilgrimage. It can be attained by travelling to the inner soul and realizing the truth oneself. Siddhartha follows many persons in his life to attain salvation, starting from his father a devotee Brahmin, to

Samanas and the worldly people like Kamala and Kamaswami, but he does not get spiritual peace in his life. When he stops wandering and starts observing and learning from the river along with Vasudeva, the ferryman he attains spiritual peace.

**Keywords:** Salvation, inner peace, ferryman, self-discovery, spirituality etc.

Herman Hesse was a German-Swish poet, novelist and painter. He was awarded prestigious Nobel Prize in literature in 1946 for his inspired writings that demonstrated classical humanitarian ideals and high quality literature. Siddhartha (1922) is one of the most influential novels written by him. The main theme of the present novel is the attainment of inner peace. Most of the characters of the novel seem to face the inner conflict because they could not attain peace in their lives and they are in quest of salvation.

Salvation is the inner peace or spiritual bliss that soothes the soul of the person who achieves it. It is also called 'Nirvana' and 'Moksha' in Indian culture. Merriam – Webster dictionary defines it as: “Deliverance from the power and effects of sin” (Webster). Associate Professor Indrani Singh Rai of Amity University, Chhattisgarh defined 'Nirvana' beautifully in her research paper 'Meeting Me at Hkhorizon:In Search of Life through Herman Hesse's Siddhartha' published in IRA-International Journal of Education & Multidisciplinary Studies:

'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 devout Brahmin, who performs various Vedic Rituals religiously and embarks the same knowledge to his son. But he himself could not attain the salvation despite practicing all these rituals throughout his life as one can find into the novel in following lines:

Siddhartha knew many venerable Brahamans, 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 notices the quest of his father and realizes that if his father cannot attain peace after reading so many religious scriptures and following religious rituals then how he himself can attain salvation by following these practices. So he leaves his father's home and joins the Samanas with his friend Govinda. Siddhartha learns three fundamental skills from Samanas (1) Think (2) Wait and (3) Fast and practices self denial and meditation along with the Samanas. He learns the art of leaving his body and entering into the body of different animals and birds to realize their pains and pleasures. Siddhartha realizes that all these skills, meditations and self denial are futile because he cannot get enlightenment from it. He tells his concerns to Govinda if the oldest one among Samana could not get salvation then how can they get in their company. The author has beautifully described it in 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 says that Samanas teach people to seek lessons by ignoring the physical world but the real salvation cannot come by leaving the material world. So he convinces his friend Govinda and both of them leave the company of Samanas. Research scholar Le Hong Linh writes about this perspective in his research paper '**Journey to Enlightenment in Herman Hesse's Siddhartha**' published in an international journal named as 'IJSR':

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 visit the camp of Gautama Buddha, the enlightened one. Govinda is very much influenced by his teachings and accepts Buddhism. In the beginning Siddhartha is also happy with the teachings of Buddha e.g. Eightfold Path and other aspects of Buddhism. Later on he becomes doubtful on Buddha's teachings. He questions Buddha about his teachings that how one can embrace the unity of all things, if he has to overcome the physical world. Siddhartha does not feel satisfied with the answers of Buddha. His discussion with Buddha is delightfully covered into the novel:

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 decides to leave the life of meditation and spiritual quest and plans to learn from the physical pleasures in the material world. He leaves his friend Govinda and goes to a city. There he meets with Kamala a young and beautiful courtesan. Siddhartha requests her to teach him the art of physical love. She suggests him to take up the job of a merchant to earn his livelihood and bear her expenses too. For this he goes to Kamaswami and starts working with him as a business partner. Very soon, Siddhartha earns a lot of money and inherits huge property. Kamala becomes his lover and starts teaching him about various physical pleasures. Siddhartha is involved in gambling and drinking and he wastes a lot of money on these things. Initially he is detached from all these worldly pleasures but later on he also becomes involved in it like other childlike people of the physical world. Siddhartha too, becomes the victim of unhappiness like other worldly people. To satisfy himself he passes his time in gambling, drinking and sexual pleasures. These activities make his soul heavier with sins and sufferings. One day he realizes that the material world is slowly killing him and his larger aim of salvation. So he abandons all his money and property and moves away from the city. He meets a ferryman Vasudeva, who helps him in finding out the meaning of his life. Vasudeva tells him to observe the river, which will talk to him and open the secrets of the world. In his company Siddhartha attains enlightenment. Later on he becomes the torchbearer for Govinda and helps him in obtaining the eternal peace.

Siddhartha has to struggle a lot in his path of Nirvana. He does not get salvation either in the company of his father or in the company of Samanas and Buddhists. He goes into the material world and makes mistakes like common people and passes his time in gambling, drinking, dancing and sexual activities. When Siddhartha departs from the material world to the forest; he weeps at his pitiable condition. The repentance purifies his soul

from the false ego of supremacy. Earlier, he has considered himself superior to the worldly people and looked them with contempt. But later on the worldly experience makes him more considerate and sympathetic towards them. Now Siddhartha can feel their pains and sufferings. This realization makes him worthy of salvation.

Siddhartha has to suffer a great deal of mental pain like the common people into his path of enlightenment. After the death of his beloved Kamala, he takes great care of his son. But his son does not like him and deserts him. Siddhartha goes in search of him but does not succeed in finding him. He becomes deeply pained at his heart for the bereavement of his son. Siddhartha envies people, when sees them with their children. It causes another level of purification. The separation of his son makes him an emotional person. Earlier he was without much of the emotion and connection to the outer world. Now Siddhartha feels the bondage of 'Maya' and tries to find out the reasons for his pains and sufferings. For this he turns to the river to seek the answers from it. He sees the image of his father into the river, who too has suffered due to the separation of his son. He realizes that he has to go through this pain because he himself has caused similar pain to his father, who died because of his parting. It is the last learning through which he has to go through before salvation. Because he has gained spiritual, religious and worldly knowledge, but he is still devoid of emotions of common people, who weep and cry on missing their dear ones. It is also a necessary prerequisite for salvation. Salvation does not mean being insensitive to the pains and pleasures, but it means a person becomes overtly sensational to the pains and suffering of everyone. One can find out that Siddhartha obtained enlightenment after a long struggle. It proves that spiritual bliss cannot be obtained by mere teachings or religious ceremonies or fasting or moving away from the materialistic world to the forests. It can be achieved by going into the physical world and feeling the pains of the common people.

Siddhartha is duly supported by many persons during his journey of enlightenment but the chief of them is Vasudeva, the ferryman. Vasudeva does not teach the formal knowledge like Siddhartha's father or Samanas. He just shows him the way and lets him find out the way himself. Vasudeva tells Siddhartha to listen to the river calmly, as it may impart him the necessary knowledge that he is searching out. Vasudeva acts like a true ferryman, who ferries him across this world to the spiritual peace. When Siddhartha achieves salvation, Vasudeva departs and bids him adieu. This incident is beautifully mentioned into the novel:

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)

Siddhartha's attainment of salvation leads to the end of Vasudeva time on the river and the earth. He leaves everything behind and moves to his final journey, because his purpose is accomplished and he does not need to stay any longer with him. He supports Siddhartha during his distressful life when he wants to end his life. He leads him towards the way of enlightenment. He lends his soothing counsel to relieve Siddhartha, a mourning father, who went into deep sorrow because of the departure of his son.

Govinda is another prominent character in the novel; he is also in search of spiritual peace. He is a true follower and seeks learning into the teachings of Buddha. He spends most of his life in travelling and following the teachings of Buddhism, yet he does not obtain spiritual bliss. Although both of them start their journey together but Govinda does not gain salvation, while Siddhartha does. The reason behind this is that Siddhartha is an independent person, who seeks his way by himself. On the other hand Govinda is a follower, who needs others to help him in attaining wisdom. Research Scholar Anshuman Sharma has beautifully mentioned the difference between the approaches of Govind and Siddhartha in finding out the spiritual bliss in this research paper '**An Existential Journey within: Siddhartha by Hermann Hesse**' published in **Mukt Shabd Journal**, an international journal:

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 acts as the mentor of Govinda into the concluding chapter, like Vasudeva acted as his mentor and led him to attain salvation. He tries to explain him the real meaning of enlightenment by clearing his doubts. He says that Nirvana is going on all around us. All the persons in the world have both evil and good qualities in themselves. A sinner can be on the path to be holy person. A person is neither sinner nor holy person completely. He is a mixture of both. He further tells him that he is searching too much and is not giving time to find. Hesse has delightfully depicted this in following lines in the novel: "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 further explains that Nirvana and Sansara are one. They are not separate. He then tells him to kiss his forehead. Now Govinda attains the experience of his lifetime. He sees many faces of the world. Hesse has delightfully depicted his vision in following lines in the novel:

He saw the face of a new-born child, red and full of wrinkles, distorted from crying—he saw the face of a murderer, he saw him plunging a knife into the body of another person—he saw, in the same second, this criminal in bondage, kneeling and his head being chopped off by the executioner with one blow of his sword—he saw the bodies of men and women, naked in positions and cramps of frenzied love—he saw corpses stretched out, motionless, cold, void—he saw the heads of animals, of boars, of crocodiles, of elephants, of bulls, of birds—he saw gods, saw Krishna, saw Agni—he saw all of these figures and faces in a thousand relationships with one another, each one helping the other, loving it, hating it, destroying it, giving re-birth to it, each one was a will to die, a passionately painful confession of transitoriness, and yet none of them died, each one only transformed, was always re-born, received evermore a new face, without any time having passed between the one and the other face—and all of these figures and faces rested, flowed, generated themselves, floated along and merged with each other. (Hesse 136)

Here Govinda sees the visions of the world like Arjuna saw when Lord Krishna granted him enlightenment through Gita Gyan. One can find out that Govinda too attained Nirvana by the guidance of Siddhartha after a long wandering, which made him worthy of salvation. Siddhartha might not have been able to gift the eternal peace to Govinda, if he has not been worthy of it. Many other persons like Kamala and young Siddhartha also came into his contact but he could not show them the ultimate path despite working hard on them, because they were not worthy of it. Their souls are heavier with sins and sufferings. However, Govinda's soul is pure, that is why he gets spiritual bliss through the guidance of Siddhartha. Siddhartha's mentor Vasudeva has ferried many persons from one side to the other side of the river, but he can guide only Siddhartha to the path of enlightenment.

To conclude, the whole story is obsessed with the theme of salvation. It is one of the biggest aims of its main characters like Siddhartha, Vasudeva and Govinda. Other characters are also affected by it in a great deal. Samanas, Kamala and Buddha's followers are also searching for it. Samanas are practicing very hard throughout their lives to attain 'Nirvana'. Buddha's followers are practicing the eight fold path and other doctrines of Buddhism to obtain enlightenment in their lives. Siddhartha's father too had a deep inner desire to achieve the spiritual bliss. Kamala is also too much concerned to see Gautama Buddha throughout the story, as she expects to find eternal peace by seeing him. She embarks on her final journey along with her son to get a peaceful sight of Buddha, who is heard to be in his final days. She does not reach to him but finds great eternal peace in the lap of Siddhartha in her last moments, who is also awakened like Buddha.

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## Certificate

It is certified that present research paper is the original outcome of my research work. It has not been published in whole or part anywhere.

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