

## Existential Search for Identity in Siddhartha by Hermann Hesse

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### Abstract

Though Cartesian philosophy of “**I think therefore I exist**” sums up the philosophical underpinnings of the existentialist thought, Existentialism as a Western thought has its roots in the writings of several 19 and 20 century philosophers like Frederic Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Soren Kierkegaard. Existentialism deals with the finding meaning in the existence of man; from this perspective, there are no meanings or structures that precede one’s own existence, as one finds in organized religion. Therefore, the individual must find his identity or create meaning for his or her self. It is difficult to find ‘this meaning’ in man’s life and to find the reason of the ‘existence of man’ and hence it might lead to pessimism and nihilism. So the investigation might lead to the meaninglessness in the existence of man and therefore to Absurdity in existence. Hence, popular existentialist trends like boredom, angry, fear, depression and pessimism and suicide or death becomes a common feature of the 20 century literature.

However, nothing in the philosophical trait of existentialism dictates a negative thought or the negative view of humanity or reality. In fact, much of the philosophy revolves around the limitless capacity for ethically and intellectually engaged persons to enact change in the world. Positive change is an imperative for a true existentialist; otherwise existence is a complete void. So, it is not simply enough to “be” but has to be something with a “choice” or “decision”-otherwise life lacks meaning or purpose. From this point of view, existentialism is highly positive means for approaching reality. The present paper attempts to discuss the search for identity from the existentialist point of view in Hermann Hesse’ Siddhartha.

### Introduction

Soren Kierkegaard’s concern was how people responded under crisis and the choices one made in shaping one’s life; while Jean-Paul Sartre, the key figure in the philosophy of existentialism and phenomenology, and one of the leading figures in 20th-century French philosophy and Marxism talks about the principle philosophy of ‘Being and Nothingness’. Sartre believes in complete freedom of an individual as an imperative to action; given ultimate freedom, humans also should be ultimately responsible for their own actions to establish their identity.

Identity is the distinguishing character or personality of an individual and individuality is the relation established by psychological identification. Identity also can be understood as the sameness of essential or generic character in different instances; the sameness in all that constitutes the objective reality of a thing: ONENESS. Beyond the basic need for a sense of control, man is deeply driven by the sense of identity, of who a person is from within. “Who am I?” is the central question that every individual faces in some phase of his/her life or the other. As the Cartesian philosophy gives absolute importance to the mind and thinking and hence Francis Bacon says, “It is thinking that maketh a man”. Many Western social

theories are to do with creating or preserving man's sense of identity in such a physical plan of growth.

The Eastern metaphysical world, especially Indian the way of life, looks at the same question from a different perspective. It believes in the philosophy of "I exist; therefore I think", giving essentialism to existence. The ultimate existence of man enables him/her where s/he may choose to think. It also promotes the understanding of 'oneness of all-living and non-living; plant, animal and human with the five basic elements of life which are- ether, air, fire, water and earth. The entire cosmos is made of these five basic elements in different permutations and combinations, and hence the variety in existence. At the bottom of such multiplicity, one needs to see the oneness and integrity is the true essence of Indian thought of identity.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow in his hierarchy of needs, talks about the lower needs and higher needs of man to understand man from the existential point of view. Physiological needs (health, food, sleep), Safety needs (shelter and removal from danger), the needs of belonging (love, affection and a sense of being a part of groups) and the needs of esteem (self-esteem and esteem of others) are the basic needs of man. When the physiological and safety needs, which are the lower level needs are satisfied, then begins the higher needs of belonging and esteem which slowly leads to the still higher needs of self-actualization and self-realization of one's own self. Through self-realization, man moves inside his/her own self to understand the existential and identity problem, understanding which the individual potential in the true sense is achieved. What can be clearly seen is that the upper three levels are about the person and their sense of self. This is in contrast to the bottom two levels, which are about control.

Psychologists like Freud and Lacan talk about the identity formation in terms of mirror image, individual identity, multiple identity, group identity, social identity and identity paradoxes, but Indian School of thought talks about existence and identity in terms of oneness of all and unanimity in cosmos.

Hermann Karl Hesse (1877 –1962) was a German-born poet, novelist, and painter. His best-known works include *Siddhartha* (1922), which explores an individual's search for authenticity, self-knowledge and spirituality. He was influenced by Schopenhauer and theosophy along with Indian culture and Buddhist philosophy that had already developed earlier in his life. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1946 for his contribution of the eastern thought in the western world.

### **Siddhartha(1922)**

Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* is one of the most popular Western novels set in India, which deals with the spiritual journey of self-discovery of a man named Siddhartha during the time of the Gautama Buddha. The word Siddhartha is made up of two words in Sanskrit language, *siddha* (achieved) + *artha* (what was searched for), which together means "he who has found meaning (of existence)" or "he who has attained his goals". In fact, the Buddha's own name, before his renunciation, was Siddhartha Gautama, Prince of Kapilavastu. In this book, the Buddha is referred to as "Gotama".

The novel is set in the Nepalese district of Kapilavastu. Siddhartha is the protagonist of the novel and Govindais a friend and follower of Siddhartha. Siddhartha's Father is a traditional Brahmin who was unable to satisfy Siddhartha's quest for enlightenment.

Siddhartha himself was not happy...Siddhartha had begun to feel the seeds of discontent within him...He had begun to suspect that his worthy father and his other teachers, the wise Brahmins, had already passed on to him the bulk and best of their wisdom (05)

Siddhartha was not happy with the books, sacrifices and Brahmin discourses. He feels that one must find the source within one's own self, and everything else is a mere seeking and an error. Siddhartha decides to leave behind his home in the hope of gaining spiritual illumination by becoming an ascetic wandering beggar of the Samanas. Joined by his best friend, Govinda, Siddhartha fasts, becomes homeless, renounces all personal possessions, and intensely meditates, eventually seeking and personally speaking with Gotama, the famous Buddha, or the Enlightened One. Afterward, both Siddhartha and Govinda acknowledge the elegance of the Buddha's teachings. Although Govinda hastily joins the Buddha's order, Siddhartha does not follow, claiming that the Buddha's philosophy, though supremely wise, does not account for the necessarily distinct experiences of each person. He argues that the individual seeks an absolutely unique, personal meaning that cannot be presented to him by a teacher. He thus resolves to carry on his quest alone.

Siddhartha crosses a river and the generous ferryman, whom Siddhartha is unable to pay, merrily predicts that Siddhartha will return to the river later to compensate him in some way. Venturing onward toward city life, Siddhartha discovers Kamala, the most beautiful woman he has yet seen. Kamala, a courtesan, notes Siddhartha's handsome appearance and fast wit, telling him that he must become wealthy to win her affections so that she may teach him the art of love.

Siddhartha says, "I can think, I can wait, I can fast" (56) for Kamala. He even composes poetry for her. But Kamala asks, "Cannot you do anything else besides think, fast and compose poetry?" (57) Although Siddhartha despised materialistic pursuits as a Samana, he agrees now to Kamala's suggestions. She directs him to the employ of Kamaswami, a local businessman, and insists that he have Kamaswami treat him as an equal rather than an underling. Siddhartha easily succeeds, providing a voice of patience and tranquillity, which Siddhartha learned from his days as an ascetic, against Kamaswami's fits of passion. Thus Siddhartha becomes a rich man and Kamala's lover, though in his middle years he realizes that the luxurious lifestyle he has chosen is merely a game that lacks spiritual fulfilment.

This game was called samsara, a game for children, a game which was perhaps enjoyable played once, twice, ten times-but was it worth playing continually? (84)

Leaving the fast-paced bustle of the city, Siddhartha returns to the river and thinks of a new existence. He lies down under a coconut tree on the river bank and decides to go and lie down in the river current of water. Inside the river water, he heard the sound of OM that reached his consciousness and realized the wretchedness of his crime.

"Om", he pronounced inwardly, and he was conscious of Brahman, of the indestructibility of life; he remembered all that he had forgotten, all that was divine. (90)

The very next morning, Siddhartha briefly reconnects with Govinda, who is passing through the area as a wandering Buddhist.

The wheel of appearances revolves quickly, Govinda. Where is Siddhartha the Brahman, where is Siddhartha the Samana, where is Siddhartha the rich man? The transitory soon changes, Govinda. You know that. (94)

Siddhartha now realized that too much knowledge hindered him and so he struggled with this self when he was a Brahmin and an ascetic. Knowledge had brought within him arrogance as he was the best at every walk of life, even as the businessman. Siddhartha understood and realized that the inner voice had always been right, that no teacher could have brought him salvation. The priest and Samana in him died after he became a materialistic business man and lover; the pleasure-monger in him died after the horrible years of madness of worldly life. And now, after leaving the city life, the new Siddhartha is born, and he was very happy.

Siddhartha thus reunites with the ferryman, named Vasudeva, with whom he begins a humbler way of life. Although Vasudeva is a simple man, he understands and relates that the river has many voices and significant messages to divulge to any who might listen. Siddhartha shares every incident in his life with Vasudeva, who listened patiently.

Vasudeva listened with great attention; he heard all about his childhood, about his studies, his seekings, his pleasures and needs...he knew how to listen—he only listened. (104)

Siddhartha also shares his experience in the river and the sound OM that he listened deep inside the river. Vasudeva understands that Siddhartha listened to the river and the river has spoken to Siddhartha; and so asks Siddhartha to stay with him. Hence Siddhartha decides to live the rest of his life in the presence of the spiritually inspirational river. Siddhartha becomes the ferryman and starts listening to the river as the river knows everything; one can learn everything from it. Vasudeva says, “The rich and distinguished Siddhartha will become a rower; Siddhartha the learned Brahmin will become a ferryman. You have also learned this from this from the river. You will learn the other thing too.” (105) The other thing is to be found out by each individual by himself/herself by listening to nature; it can't be expressed in thought or language. Slowly, Siddhartha learnt to listen, to listen with a still heart, with a waiting, open soul, without passion, without desire, without judgments, without opinions and lived happily with Vasudev.

That the river is everywhere at the same time, at the source and at the mouth, at the waterfall, at the ferry, at the current, in the ocean and in the mountains, everywhere, and that the present only exists for it, not the shadow of the past, nor the shadow of the future...(107)

Siddhartha understood that there is nothing like TIME and his life also is like the river. He understood that the various stages of his life were only separated by shadows and not reality. Nothing was and nothing will be, everything has reality and presence-HERE and NOW. This discovery of presence made Siddhartha happy. Neither he was bothered by the humiliation of the past nor was he worried about the future. Similarly, Siddhartha could listen to many voices in the river, the voice of a king, of a warrior, of a bull, of a night bird, of a pregnant woman and a thousand other voices; after listening to its ten thousand voices, one can hear the river pronouncing OM. The voice of the river to both Siddhartha and Vasudeva became the voice of life, the voice of being, of perpetual becoming.

Some years later, Kamala, now a Buddhist convert, is travelling to see the Buddha at his deathbed, accompanied by her reluctant young son, when she is bitten by a venomous snake near Siddhartha's river. Siddhartha recognizes her and realizes that the boy is his own child. After Kamala's death, Siddhartha attempts to console and raise the furiously resistant boy, until one day the child flees altogether. Although Siddhartha is desperate to find his runaway son, Vasudeva urges him to let the boy find his own path, much like Siddhartha did himself in his youth. Listening to the river with Vasudeva, Siddhartha realizes that time is an illusion and that all of his feelings and experiences, even those of suffering, every relation, everything as part of a great and ultimately jubilant fellowship of all things connected in the cyclical unity of nature.

Siddhartha saw life, vitality, the indestructible Brahman in all their desires and needs...With the exception of one small thing, one tiny little thing, they lacked nothing that the sage and the thinker had, and that was the consciousness of the unity of all life. (130)

Within Siddhartha there slowly grew and ripened the knowledge of what wisdom really was and the goal of his long seeking. It was nothing but a preparation of the soul, a capacity, a secret art of thinking, feeling and breathing thoughts of unity at every moment of life. It lead to the understanding of harmony and knowledge of eternal perfection of the world and unity.

The only trouble torturing Siddhartha was his son's disappearance and running away from him. In his anguish, Siddhartha rowed across the river to go to the town and fetch his son. He could feel the river to laugh at him. When carefully seen into the river, Siddhartha saw his face reflected in water, slowly changing into his father, getting changed into many other faces. Siddhartha also left his father when in young age; and now his son has done exactly the same. Siddhartha confesses everything to Vasudeva; disclosing his wound to this listener was the same as bathing it in the river, until it became cool and one with the river.

As he went on talking and confessing Siddhartha felt more and more that this was no longer Vasudeva, no longer a man who was listening to him. He felt that this motionless man was the river itself, that he was GOD himself, that he was eternity itself... that Vasudeva had long ago, almost always been like that, only he did not quite recognize it, indeed he himself was hardly different from him.(133)

Siddhartha could see many pictures in the flowing water; all characters that he had been acquainted on his life, his father, Kamala, Kamaswami, his son, Govinda, each with their own earning, desiring and suffering and accordingly the voice of the river also was sorrowful.

All the waves and water hastened, suffering, towards goals, many goals, to the waterfall, to the sea, to the current, to the ocean and all goals were reached and each one was succeeded by another. The water changed into vapour and rose, became rain and came down again, became spring, brook and river, changed anew and flowed anew. But the yearning voice has altered. It still echoed sorrowfully, searchingly, but other voices accompanied it, voices of pleasure and sorrow, good and evil voices, laughing and lamenting voices, thousands of voices. (135)

Siddhartha listened to all the voices; he could no longer distinguish the different voices- the happy voice, the weeping voice, the childish voice and the manly voice- they all belonged to each other. And all the voices, all the goals, all the yearnings, all the sorrows, all the pleasures, all of them together was the world. The great song of a thousand voices consisted of one word: OM—perfection. There after Siddhartha's pain for his son dispersed and his self has merged into unity. Siddhartha ceased to fight against destiny, surrendering himself to the stream, belonging to the unity of all things. There after Vasudeva leaves Siddhartha and goes to the forest into the unity of all things and Siddhartha becomes the ferryman of all things.

Toward the end of his life, Govinda hears about an enlightened ferryman and travels to Siddhartha, not initially recognizing him as his old childhood friend. Govinda asks the now-elderly Siddhartha to relate his wisdom and Siddhartha replies that for every true statement there is an opposite one that is also true; that language and the confines of time lead people to adhere to one fixed belief that does not account for the fullness of the truth. Because nature works in a self-sustaining cycle, every entity carries in it the potential for its opposite and so the world must always be considered complete. Siddhartha simply urges people to identify and love the world in its completeness.

Samsara and Nirvana are only words, Govinda. Nirvana is not a thing; there is only the word Nirvana...(146)

He also adds,

It is important to love the world. It may be important to great thinkers to examine the world to explain and despise it. But I think it is only important to love the world, not to despise, not for us to hate each other, but to be able to regard the world and ourselves and all beings with love, admiration and respect. (147)

Siddhartha then requests Govindato kiss his forehead and, when he does, Govinda experiences the visions of timelessness that Siddhartha himself saw with Vasudeva by the river. Govinda bows to his wise friend and Siddhartha smiles radiantly, having found enlightenment.

### **Discussion:**

In Hesse's novel, experience, the totality of conscious events of a human life, is shown as the best way to approach understanding of reality and attain enlightenment—Hesse's crafting of Siddhartha's journey shows that understanding is attained not through intellectual methods, nor through immersing oneself in the carnal pleasures of the world and the accompanying pain of samsara. It is the completeness of these experiences that allows Siddhartha to attain understanding. Thus, the individual events are meaningless when considered by themselves—Siddhartha's stay with the Samanas and his immersion in the worlds of love and business do not lead to nirvana, yet they cannot be considered distractions, for every action and event gives Siddhartha an experience, which leads to understanding. A major preoccupation of Hesse in writing Siddhartha was to cure his "sickness with life" and understand existential notion of life by immersing himself in Indian philosophy such as that expounded in the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita.

The second half of the book took very long to write and the reason was that Hesse "had not experienced that transcendental state of unity to which Siddhartha aspires. In an attempt to do so, Hesse lived as a virtual semi-recluse and became totally

immersed in the sacred teachings of both Hindu and Buddhist scriptures. His intention was to attain to that 'completeness' which, in the novel, is the Buddha's badge of distinction."

The novel is structured on three of the traditional stages of life for Hindu males - student (brahmachari), householder (grihastha) and recluse/renunciate (vanaprastha) through the character of Siddhartha. Buddha's four noble truths—

**1. The Truth of Suffering (Kutai)**

The Buddha declared that this world is full of suffering; that actual existence including birth, decrepitude, sickness and death is suffering and sorrow. This is called the Truth of Suffering.

**2. The Truth of the Cause of Suffering (Jutai)**

The cause of human suffering lies in ignorance and Karma. Ignorance and its resulting Karma have often times been called "desire" or craving. The Buddha declared:

Verily it is this thirst or craving, causing the renewal of existence, accompanied by sensual delight, seeking satisfaction now here, now there - the craving for gratification of the passions, for continual existence in the worlds of sense.

**3. The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering (Mettai)**

The extinguishing of all human ignorance and Karma results in a state known as Nirvana. This is the Truth of the Cessation of Suffering.

**4. The Truth of the Path to the Cessation of Suffering (Dotai)**

The Truth of the Path to the Cessation of Suffering is the Noble Eight-fold Path.

Siddhartha's journey from his father's home till the river forms the Part One of the text. **Buddha's Noble** and eight-fold path forms the second part of the text. The four nobles and the eight fold path of Buddha form twelve chapters, the number in the novel.

**1. Right Views** - to keep ourselves free from prejudice, superstition and delusion and to see aright the true nature of life.

**2. Right Thoughts** - to turn away from the evils of this world and to direct our minds towards righteousness.

**3. Right Speech** - to refrain from pointless and harmful talk to speak kindly and courteously to all.

**4. Right Conduct** - to see that our deeds are peaceful, benevolent, compassionate and pure; to live the Teaching of the Buddha daily.

**5. Right Livelihood** - to earn our living in such a way as to entail no evil consequences.

**6. Right Effort** - to direct our efforts incessantly to the overcoming of ignorance and selfish desires.

**7. Right Mindfulness** - to cherish good and pure thoughts for all that we say and do arise from our thoughts.

**8. Right Meditation** - to concentrate our will on the Buddha, His Life and His Teaching.

The eight paths can be put into the categories of **precepts, meditation and wisdom**; that the path of practice of Buddhism is the Three Vehicles of Learning. By following the precepts one learns to control the body and mind. Through meditation one learns to unify the mind. Wisdom is attained by the practice of the above two and through this wisdom all ignorance and passions are cut off and true state of Enlightenment is then realized. Siddhartha enunciates these twelve principles of Buddhism in a simple and straight forward way.

Ralph Freedman mentions how Hesse commented in a letter "[my] Siddhartha does not, in the end, learn true wisdom from any teacher, but from a river that roars in a funny way and from a kindly old fool who always smiles and is secretly a saint."

In a lecture about Siddhartha, Hesse claimed "Buddha's way to salvation has often been criticized and doubted, because it is thought to be wholly grounded in cognition. True, but it's not just intellectual cognition, not just learning and knowing, but spiritual experience that can be earned only through strict discipline in a selfless life".

Freedman points out how Siddhartha described Hesse's interior dialectic: "All of the contrasting poles of his life were sharply etched: the restless departures and the search for stillness at home; the diversity of experience and the harmony of a unifying spirit; the security of religious dogma and the anxiety of freedom."

Eberhard Ostermann has shown how Hesse, while mixing the religious genre of the legend with that of the modern novel, seeks to reconcile with the double-edged effects of modernization such as individualization, pluralism or self-disciplining.

### **Conclusion:**

**Hermann Hesse' Siddhartha** deals with the spiritual journey of self-discovery of Siddhartha. Hesse dedicated the first part of it to Romain Rolland, a French dramatist, novelist, essayist, art historian and mystic who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1915 "as a tribute to the lofty idealism of his literary production and to the sympathy and love of truth with which he has described different types of human beings" and the second part to Wilhelm Gundert, his cousin. The simple story of Siddhartha's journey unfolds the spiritual path of individual identity and oneness with the cosmic union of man which alone is the true meaning of existence. Herman Hesse is well acclaimed for this East-West union of thought and experience; being and becoming; individual identity and cosmic unanimity.

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