

EXISTENTIALIST THEMES IN HERMAN HESSE'S *SIDDHARTHA*: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS WITH ALBERT CAMUS' *THE STRANGER*

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Abstract:

Herman Hesse is one of the most influential writers of the 20th century. His works, which explore the complexities of human existence, are known for their profound philosophical themes. Throughout his career, Hesse remained committed to his belief in the transformative power of literature and the importance of personal reflection and introspection. His works continue to be read and studied by scholars and readers around the world, and his legacy as a master of philosophical and spiritual fiction remains secure. Hesse's writings are heavily influenced by existentialist philosophy, which emphasizes the individual's search for meaning and purpose in life. In this research paper, I will examine the existentialist themes in Hesse's stories and their impact on the literary world.

Keywords:

Existentialism, Isolation, Identity, Power, Spirituality

Methodology:

1. Close reading and analysis of primary sources: This approach would involve a close examination of the primary text, *Siddhartha*. Analysing specific passages and chapters to identify the existentialist themes present in the text. Examining character development of the

protagonist in *Siddhartha* and how it relates to existentialist ideas of self-discovery and personal transformation.

2. Comparative analysis with other existentialist works: This approach involves comparing and contrasting *Siddhartha* with other notable works of existentialist literature, Albert Camus' *The Stranger*. The researcher will analyse the similarities and differences in the portrayal of existentialist themes across these two works, and identify the unique contributions of Hesse's novel to the genre.

Background:

Hermann Hesse (1877-1962) was a German-Swiss novelist, poet, and essayist known for his introspective and deeply philosophical works. Born in Calw, Germany, Hesse grew up in a family of missionaries and was deeply influenced by his early exposure to Eastern spirituality and philosophy.

Hesse's literary career began in the early 1900s, and his early works were largely influenced by his experiences as a young man struggling with mental illness and social alienation. His novels and poems often explored themes of self-discovery, personal transformation, and spiritual awakening, and were characterized by their lyricism, introspection, and attention to psychological detail.

One of Hesse's most famous works is the novel *Siddhartha*, which tells the story of a young man's quest for enlightenment and self-discovery in ancient India. The novel has been widely read and studied as a work of spiritual and philosophical fiction, and has been translated into dozens of languages.

Another notable work by Hesse is *Steppenwolf*, a novel that explores themes of isolation, self-destructive tendencies, and the search for meaning and purpose in life. The novel has been hailed as a landmark work of modernist literature and has been adapted into multiple stage productions and films.

Hesse's later works, including *The Glass Bead Game* and *Journey to the East*, continued to explore themes of spirituality, mysticism, and personal transformation. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1946 in recognition of his contributions to the literary and cultural landscape of Germany and Europe.

Existentialism:

Existentialism is a philosophical and literary movement that emerged in the 20th century. It is characterized by an emphasis on individualism, freedom, and the search for meaning and purpose in life. Existentialists reject the idea that there is an objective meaning to life and instead emphasize the importance of personal experience and individual choice.

Existentialist Themes in Herman Hesse's Stories:

Hesse's writings are heavily influenced by existentialist philosophy. His stories often focus on characters who are struggling to find meaning and purpose in life, and who are searching for a sense of identity in an uncertain world. The following are some of the existentialist themes that are prominent in Hesse's stories.

The Search for Identity:

One of the most prominent existentialist themes in Hesse's stories is the search for identity. Many of his characters are struggling to understand who they are and what their place in the world is. In *Siddhartha*, the main character spends his entire life searching for enlightenment and

a sense of self. Similarly, in *Steppenwolf*, the protagonist struggles to find a sense of identity and belonging in a world that he feels is hostile and meaningless.

Alienation and Isolation:

Another common existentialist theme in Hesse's stories is the sense of alienation and isolation that many of his characters experience. In *Demian*, for example, the protagonist feels isolated and disconnected from the world around him, and he struggles to find a sense of connection with others. Similarly, in *Narcissus and Goldmund*, the two main characters are portrayed as being isolated from the rest of society, and they must find their own way in the world.

The Absurdity of Life:

Hesse's stories often explore the idea that life is inherently absurd and meaningless. In *Steppenwolf*, for example, the protagonist struggles to find meaning in a world that he feels is devoid of purpose. Similarly, in *The Glass Bead Game*, Hesse suggests that the pursuit of knowledge and enlightenment may ultimately be futile, as there is no objective meaning to life.

Freedom and Choice:

Freedom and choice are also important existentialist themes in Hesse's stories. In *Siddhartha*, the main character ultimately finds enlightenment by rejecting the constraints of society and following his own path. Similarly, in *Steppenwolf*, the protagonist learns to embrace his individuality and reject the conformity of society.

Siddhartha:

Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* is a novel that tells the story of a young man's spiritual journey towards enlightenment and self-discovery in ancient India. The novel was published in 1922 and has since become one of Hesse's most widely read and studied works.

The protagonist of the novel, Siddhartha, is the son of a Brahmin who lives in a small village in India. From a young age, Siddhartha is deeply curious about the world and seeks to understand the nature of existence and the meaning of life. He leaves his home and embarks on a journey of self-discovery, joining a group of ascetics and learning about the nature of suffering and the importance of self-denial.

However, Siddhartha eventually becomes disillusioned with the ascetic lifestyle and decides to leave the group. He then meets a courtesan named Kamala and becomes a wealthy merchant, indulging in material pleasures and accumulating wealth. Despite his success, Siddhartha realizes that he is still unhappy and unfulfilled.

After a chance encounter with his childhood friend Govinda, who has become a disciple of the Buddha, Siddhartha becomes interested in the teachings of the Buddha and decides to seek him out. He eventually meets the Buddha and listens to his teachings, but ultimately decides that he must find his own path towards enlightenment.

Siddhartha eventually meets a ferryman named Vasudeva, who teaches him the art of listening and helps him to find inner peace and wisdom. Siddhartha becomes a ferryman himself and spends the rest of his life by the river, meditating and helping others. The novel ends with Siddhartha experiencing a moment of enlightenment and realizing that all things are interconnected.

Close-Reading of the text:

Siddhartha explores several existentialist themes, including the search for meaning and purpose in life, the nature of suffering and the human condition, and the importance of self-discovery and personal transformation. There are some of the many references from the text that highlight the existential quest of Siddhartha,

I have had to experience so much stupidity, so many vices, so much error, so much nausea, disillusionment and sorrow, just in order to become a child again and begin anew.

I had to experience despair, I had to sink to the greatest mental depths, to thoughts of suicide, in order to experience grace.

In these lines Siddhartha highlights the importance of personal transformation and the need to overcome suffering in order to find enlightenment. Siddhartha had to go through a great deal of pain and despair before he was able to find peace and happiness. In another of his quotes he says, "I can think, I can wait, I can fast." This quote emphasizes the importance of self-discipline and the willingness to sacrifice immediate pleasures in order to achieve greater goals. Siddhartha's willingness to fast and endure physical pain in his quest for enlightenment shows his commitment to finding meaning and purpose in life.

In another example "You are Siddhartha!... You have learned nothing through teachings, and so I think, O Illustrious One, that nobody finds salvation through teachings." This quote highlights the importance of personal experience and self-discovery in finding enlightenment. Siddhartha rejects the teachings of the Buddha and instead chooses to follow his own path towards enlightenment. "Wisdom cannot be imparted. Wisdom that a wise man attempts to impart always sounds like foolishness to someone else... Knowledge can be communicated, but not wisdom." This quote emphasizes the idea that true wisdom cannot be taught or learned through intellectual means. Wisdom must be gained through personal experience and self-discovery.

"He had begun to suspect that his worthy father and his other teachers, the wise Brahmins, had already imparted to him the bulk and best of their wisdom, that they had already poured the sum total of their knowledge into his waiting vessel; and the vessel was not full, his intellect was not satisfied, his soul was not at peace." This quote highlights the idea that true wisdom cannot be

gained through external means, such as education or intellectual pursuits. Siddhartha's dissatisfaction with the knowledge imparted to him by his teachers shows his desire for personal experience and self-discovery.

Hesse's *Siddhartha* and Camus' *The Stranger*:

The Stranger (*L'Étranger*) is a novel by the French author Albert Camus, published in 1942. The book tells the story of Meursault, a French Algerian who kills an Arab man and goes through a trial for his crime. The novel is written in the first-person perspective, and Meursault is portrayed as an emotionally detached and apathetic individual who shows little remorse for his actions.

The book is often seen as an exploration of existentialism, a philosophical movement that emphasizes individual freedom and choice in a world that is fundamentally meaningless. Meursault's indifference towards his own life and the lives of others, as well as his rejection of societal norms and values, are seen as reflections of this philosophy. *The Stranger* has been widely acclaimed for its spare, straightforward writing style and its powerful portrayal of existential themes. It has become one of the most influential works of twentieth-century literature and is still widely studied and discussed today.

Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* and Albert Camus' *The Stranger* are both notable works of literature that explore existentialist themes, but they approach these themes in very different ways. *Siddhartha* is a novel about a man's spiritual journey towards enlightenment, set in ancient India. The protagonist, Siddhartha, rejects traditional teachings and instead seeks out his own path to wisdom. Through his experiences, he comes to understand the interconnectedness of all things and achieves a sense of inner peace and enlightenment. The novel highlights the importance of personal experience and individual choice in the pursuit of meaning, as Siddhartha is able to find wisdom only through his own journey and not through traditional teachings or dogma.

On the other hand, *The Stranger* is a novel about a man named Meursault who kills an Arab man and goes through a trial for his crime. The story is set in colonial Algeria and is told from Meursault's perspective. The novel explores themes of existentialism, such as the meaninglessness of life, the rejection of societal norms and values, and the absurdity of human existence. Meursault is portrayed as emotionally detached and apathetic, showing little remorse for his actions, and is ultimately sentenced to death. The novel is often seen as a critique of the judicial system and a commentary on the human condition.

Despite their differences, both novels remain important works of literature that deal with the fundamental questions of human existence. *Siddhartha* takes a more spiritual and contemplative approach to these questions, emphasizing the importance of individual experience and choice in the pursuit of meaning. In contrast, *The Stranger* takes a more nihilistic view of existence, portraying a world in which meaning is elusive and human actions ultimately absurd. Both novels challenge readers to confront these questions and come to their own understanding of the human experience, making them enduring works of literature that continue to be studied and appreciated by readers around the world.

Significance of Hesse's Stories:

Hesse's stories have had a significant impact on the literary world and on readers around the world. His exploration of existentialist themes has inspired countless readers to reflect on the deeper questions of human existence, and his emphasis on individualism and freedom has resonated with many.

One of the most notable impacts of Hesse's stories has been on the counterculture movement of the 1960s. In particular, his novel *Siddhartha* was embraced by many in the hippie movement as a spiritual guidebook. The novel's emphasis on individualism and the search for enlightenment

resonated with the counterculture's rejection of mainstream culture and its emphasis on personal freedom.

Hesse's stories have also been influential in the field of psychology. The psychologist Carl Jung was a friend and correspondent of Hesse's, and his ideas on individuation and the collective unconscious are reflected in many of Hesse's stories, particularly in *Demian* and *Steppenwolf*.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Herman Hesse's stories are notable for their exploration of existentialist themes such as the search for identity, alienation and isolation, the absurdity of life, and freedom and choice. His emphasis on individualism and personal freedom has resonated with readers around the world, and his stories have had a significant impact on the literary world and on the counterculture movement of the 1960s.

While Hesse's stories are often complex and philosophical, they are also deeply human and relatable. They speak to the universal experience of searching for meaning and purpose in life, and they remind us that the journey to self-discovery is never easy, but always worth pursuing.

Overall, the enduring appeal of Hesse's stories lies in their ability to capture the human condition in all its complexity and beauty, and to remind us that even in a world that often seems chaotic and meaningless, there is always the possibility of finding meaning and purpose in our lives.

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