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Transgressing the Moral/Immoral Binary in Superman: A Study of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*

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Abstract:

Morals form an important aspect of human society. With the passage of time, they tend to become sanctified codes upholding a set of values, at the same time denigrating other set of values. In other words, it creates a binary opposition between two sets of values as moral and immoral. The philosophical notion of superman seeks to challenge grand narratives of morals, values and power. Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* presents forth a journey of being from man to superman. It goes to the extent of proclaiming morals as not even means to ends and beckons for revaluation of morals. It is in response to the insufficiency and drawbacks of the prevalent moral philosophies that the notion of superman critiques the existing moral systems and embodies an alternative outlook regarding morality. This paper seeks to study *Siddhartha* in a moral framework and analyze the protagonist's flight into an amoral existence.

Keywords: Dasein, Being, Superman, Morality.

Hermann Hesse's novels are philosophical expositions of the author's personal struggles with the greater questions of life. Hesse's quest for spiritual enlightenment is manifested in most of his works. His protagonists seek freedom from the bondage and limitations of human life and struggle to transcend human weakness to attain spiritual liberation. As far as moral perspective towards overcoming human is concerned, one sees a remarkable shift in moral character of his protagonists. *Siddhartha* is no exception to this rule. The eponymous hero, Siddhartha, undergoes a major transformation in his moral values from one extreme to the other and in the end witnesses a reconciliation of these polarities. It is revealed in the beginning of the story that Siddhartha has an uncommon temperament as he is not interested in youthful pleasures and is inclined towards meditation and other-worldly pursuits. Under the influence of scriptures and Brahmanism, there exists a definite boundary in his mind between moral and immoral, and he has been conditioned to see any moral transgression as sinful.

Siddhartha at this stage appears to be not at variance with the youth of his age. His morality and worldview is not peculiar since every lad of a Brahmin household was supposed to be educated and brought up on such lines. This maturity of thought in terms of morality at such a young age can be understood from a vantage point of caste. Had Siddhartha belonged

to some other caste, he would not have exposure to scriptural knowledge and would therefore be engrossed in daily chores without questioning values. Even if he were a Kshatriya, his training for a warrior and altruist moral principles would have made him a conformist. Gautama Buddha and Vardhamana Mahavira are exceptions due to peculiar circumstances of their life. In fact, it is knowledge of sanyasa that Siddhartha brings into practice. It is his quest for enlightenment, especially his will to give up everything for his goal that makes him different from the majority of youth of his times. Morally, he is supposed to become a householder and look after his parents but he becomes what Sartre calls authentic 'being-for-itself' by foregoing social obligations and finding his own path. Moreover, it is not uncommon for a Brahmin of his times to abandon worldly duties for spiritual quest.

In the company of the *samanas*¹, codes of morality for Siddhartha become stricter. Whatever has been considered moral by a common man is held as less moral by the samanas. Here Siddhartha, along with his companion Govinda leads an austere life filled with rigid norms and discipline. They have to control hunger, thirst, breath, and practice all sorts of hardships in order to bring mental discipline. But, Siddhartha discovers that his achievements as self-control and miraculous powers are temporary and all his exercises and hardships have failed to advance him spiritually. He refers to all these practices of the samanas as self-denial or fleeing from the self. Here the author's opposition to moral discipline is manifested and he indirectly unlike his other novels upholds the Dionysian spirit that embraces life in all colours without any denial. The hero, thus, exercises his choice in abandoning samanic faith in spite of being deeply entrenched in its rigorous discipline.

The next phase that brings a significant transition in moral temperament of Siddhartha is his interaction with the fold of Buddha. The teachings of the master have a great influence on him and Govinda. He reveres Buddha as the wisest and truly perfected one. The moral code of Buddha is by no means an austere one in comparison to that of the samanas. Govinda enters the sangha² and becomes a monk. Siddhartha finds that in spite of his admiration for Buddha, he remains unaffected by teachings of the master. He apprehends that there comes a stage in life when a person does not require any teacher, but has to become teacher unto oneself. This marks a major shift in the personality of Siddhartha. He realizes that moral precepts of preachers or society cannot lead to spiritual evolution; one must set one's route according to one's intuition. In true sense, he must be prepared to embark his pathway alone. It can be compared with Nietzsche's Zarathustra's dictum that every person is unique and must draw his own morals and undergo a distinctive pathway to realize the goal of overman. The brief encounter with Buddha overtly has spiritual implications on Siddhartha and moral question here seems quite inappropriate. But this episode is pertinent as here onwards he shuns conformity to norms of the larger social order and assumes total responsibility for his onward actions. Heidegger would call this state as authentic³ *dasein*⁴ as Siddhartha's choice of 'what to be' is free from what he thinks to be extraneous factors.

The novel explores the themes typical of Hesse's work: the alienation of man from man, the alienation of man from environment, and the desire for self-knowledge. The story takes place in ancient India. Siddhartha, along with his friend Govinda, leaves behind his

home in the quest of spiritual enlightenment. In his pursuit, he undergoes severe austerities as a *samana* and finds them worthless. He meets Gautam Buddha and finds his teaching supremely wise, but considers all borrowed wisdom inadequate. He believes that every individual is unique, so one must find one's own wisdom. This assertion through his discovery and penetration into life forms a cusp in his life that leads him to engage with life in a free spirit without any moral baggage. However, as life cannot be studied in categorical manner, Siddhartha's tryst with moral values is also a complex one. One finds him moving back and forth on a moral scale, but this morality gradually belongs to him not the social Other.

Siddhartha's morality or authenticity as a *dasein* would not be tested if he had lived in the wilderness. He would have lived unaffected by complexity of the worldly life, if he had continued his spiritual exercises and solitary quest in the forest. His authenticity is put to test when he enters the city life. He, for the first time in life comes face to face with the worldly life replete with its pleasures and pains. This life is usually referred to by the ascetics and even Buddha as *maya* or *mara*, the illusion. Conventionally, sages and seers advise the *sadhaka* or spiritual seeker to beware of worldly pursuits as they hinder or even mislead one from the spiritual path. Before entering the city, Siddhartha meets a woman and easily gets seduced by her. He approaches her sexually but some inner voice makes him conscious and he becomes alarmed of the sin that he was about to commit. It shows the influence of social mores on the writer as he cannot afford moral laxity especially when he writes a book on the spiritual journey of a noble man. Siddhartha is unlike Nikos Kazantzakis's Zorba the Greek, who easily violates moral laws to give expression to his desires. He is also not like Hesse's Harry Haller or Goldmund who are uncontrolled in temperament and whose spiritual journey is not deliberate like Siddhartha. So, it becomes difficult for the writer to switch his protagonist to an act of casual sex with such an ease.

However, in the city, he gets involved in a relationship with a famous courtesan named Kamala, amasses wealth, and becomes a merchant. He leads a prodigal and lustful life. His sexual ventures can be seen as scandalous for a sanyasi but it is more of a love affair that a writer can afford to an upright character like Siddhartha. At the same time, he seeks spiritual wisdom in the material world. So, it can be inferred that he is not totally lost in material life but is aware of his goal. Siddhartha does not seem to understand his city life as a mistaken misadventure under some false consciousness. His case cannot be discerned as being trapped in illusion or *maya* since he is conscious of his every action and goal throughout. His failure to realize his goal, with the passage of time, makes him feel guilty and he consequently abandons everything in despair. He realizes that he had a purpose in his life but he chose a path of despondency for himself and thus contemplates to end his life. This dejection is not because he thinks himself to be engrossed in immoral life. It is because he thinks he is far driven from his goal than before he entered worldly life. Nevertheless, one can perceive moral baselessness as the reason for Siddhartha's decline at this stage of his life. Johannes Maltheiner is of the opinion that Siddhartha finds that even the evil things which he had done lately had been necessary as an experience in order to bring him to an understanding of what life really was (107). But he also becomes discouraged because all his

endeavours so far had not given him the desired insight and peace of soul. Here one can trace the religious notion of connecting immorality with failure or fall of man.

A similar situation is elaborately dealt upon in another novel called *Steppenwolf* by Hesse. He presents the protagonist as entangled in an irresolvable struggle between his spiritual (high) nature and animalistic (low) nature. It shows the central character Harry Haller involved in free sex and drug usage, at the same time seeking spiritual goals. Earlier Haller is guilt-ridden of such habits considering them as immoral and lowly, hindering his spiritual progress. But towards the end of the novel, he realizes that his experiences were functional in his spiritual journey. While *Siddhartha* does not struggle between moral and immoral, he in the early phase abides by stringent codes of morality but later he abandons both these categories as unnatural and unnecessary. In both the cases, the road towards goal is not linear. However, the theme of amorality pervades through major portion of *Siddhartha* while it comes into fore only as a conclusion in *Steppenwolf*.

One instance of moral law that lays emphasis on moral life is when *Siddhartha's* son from Kamala abandons him. He loves him and has a deep attachment with him but the child does not respond to his affection and care. The more the father loves, the farther the son drifts away from him. The child hates him to the core and has a disdain for life in the wilderness. He does not consider *Siddhartha* as his father but sees him merely as his mother's fornicator. The child longs for a wealthy city life and eventually runs away. *Siddhartha* is in distress at the loss of the child and realizes that his father would have undergone a similar or more severe pain when he left him to be a samana. He realized: "Had his father not also suffered the same pain for him, which he now suffered for his son? Had his father not long since died, alone, without having seen his son again? Did he not have to expect the same fate for himself? Was it not a comedy, a strange and stupid matter, this repetition, this running around in a fateful circle?" (75). The Hindu and Buddhist law of karma or samsara which lays stress upon the adage: 'As you sow, so shall you reap' is evident here. It states that one has to bear fruits of one's actions, which is inescapable, so one should lead a moral life in order to avoid a bad fate. Hence, there again appears a struggle between good and evil, moral and immoral in his mind.

In the last phase of his spiritual journey, he is guided by Vasudeva, the ferryman to seek wisdom from the river. Vasudeva is a superman, who in Nietzschean sense "dances" with the existence. He asks *Siddhartha* to abandon all moralities and open himself to the pure music of existence. It is from the river he learns the message of unity and continuity of every entity in the universe (80). He learns that as the two extremes of the river lose their meaning in the central flow, similarly all notions of morality and immorality merge in the end. In other words, he realizes that all moral and immoral actions account towards a total experience, which makes him liberated from the world as well as one with the existence. He states that the experiences which are held as immoral by people, have been instrumental in leading him towards his goal. He explains to Govinda how every experience of his life weaves into a unified whole:

Therefore, I see whatever exists as good, death is to me like life, sin like holiness, wisdom like foolishness, everything has to be as it is, everything

only requires my consent, only my willingness, my loving agreement, to be good for me, to do nothing but work for my benefit, to be unable to ever harm me. I have experienced on my body and on my soul that I needed sin very much, I needed lust, the desire for possessions, vanity, and needed the most shameful despair, in order to learn how to give up all resistance, in order to learn how to love the world, in order to stop comparing it to some world I wished, I imagined, some kind of perfection I had made up, but to leave it as it is and to love it and to enjoy being a part of it.--These, oh Govinda, are some of the thoughts which have come into my mind (82).

It is implicit that Hesse's "Superman" is an amoral being, where the extremes of socially recognized moral and immoral norms merge into meaninglessness. Hermann Hesse's conceptualization of morality emanates from the philosophy of the Upanishads and partly from Buddhism. There seems to be a significant impression of Nietzsche's Zarathustra on Siddhartha, especially his subscription to self-chosen morals rather than adhering to the preaching of the wise men. Like Aurobindo's superman, the difference between moral and immoral is nullified in Siddhartha towards the end of the tale.

Also in his novel *Narcissus and Goldmund*, Hermann Hesse pitches up the question of Apollonian against Dionysian in the story. Initially the eponymous protagonists are monks in a monastery, Narcissus is a young master and Goldmund is a student. In the course of the story, Narcissus follows the Apollonian⁵ principle and becomes a wise abbot in the end. On the other hand, Goldmund leads a Dionysian⁶ life full of passion, lust, revelry and becomes an artist (sculptor). The author presents a contrast between these polarities, one leads a life of high morals while the other readily transgresses morals to experience life. Goldmund in the end embodies an extensive range of experiences of life and is spiritually more advanced than Narcissus. This is also evident in Siddhartha, Govinda is more like Narcissus and Siddhartha is more like Goldmund. Siddhartha also represents a Dionysian mode of life and through experiencing life in totality reaches the ultimate goal. Therefore, one can infer that Hesse's superman is amoral who repudiates the categorization of life into moral/immoral binary.

End Notes:

1. *Sramana* or *samana* was a non-Vedic Indian religious movement that started when new philosophical groups broke with tradition and rejected the authority of the Vedas and the Brahmin priests around 800-600 BCE. The dominant Vedic ritualism contrasted with the Shramanas, who renounced married and domestic life and adopted ascetic path to achieve liberation.
2. *Sangha* is a word in Pali and Sanskrit meaning 'association', 'assembly' or 'community' and most commonly refers in Buddhism to the monastic community of ordained Buddhist monks or nuns.
3. Heidegger considers existence of Being authentic if his will or being is not shaped by any external agency or the Other.

4. *Dasein* is one of the core terms in *Being and Time*. It can be simply defined as entity that is conscious of the meaning of its own existence. In practical terms, this means the human being is *Dasein*, since, arguably, no other life-forms on the planet are conscious of their own existence.

5. In Greek mythology, relating to the god Apollo. Commonly, it refers to the rational, ordered, and self-disciplined aspects of human nature.

6. In Greek mythology, relating to the god Dionysus. Commonly, it refers to the sensual, spontaneous, and emotional aspects of human nature.

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