

Derridian Logic, Categories and Strategies in Herman Hesse's Siddhartha

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Abstract

The article tries to look at the work *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse from the perspective of Derridean logic of deconstruction. Hesse identifies the binaries of spirituality and materialism and breaks them down by telling the story of Siddhartha who has to experience both in order to attain Nirvana. At the end of the novel, Siddhartha understands the inseparable nature of the material and spiritual world. One has to experience both to attain completeness. Siddhartha also understands that good is meaningless in the absence of bad and that both are defined by an opposition to each other and thus the absence of one makes the presence of the other impossible. Derrida's critique of language is also found in the novel as Siddhartha refuses to believe Buddha's claim that the path to nirvana can be communicated verbally to another person. For him, each person has to find this path on his own, without depending on anyone else.

Keywords: Siddhartha, Hesse, Deconstruction, Derrida, Binaries, Buddha

The year 1922 is an important year in the history of literature. T. S. Eliot was not the only writer to be disillusioned by the war. Though not entirely a war novel many critics consider *Siddhartha*, published in 1922, as a reaction to Hesse's disappointment with the European culture. The novel is set in India at the time of Gotama Buddha. A closer reading of the text reveals that the novel does not take sides with any particular religious belief. More importantly *Siddhartha* is a novel that has great significance in the then political context of Germany. The notion of racial supremacy had been prevalent in the German conscience from early times. But Hesse never believed in this. He says in his essay, A Bit of Theology: "in the search for truth, nothing will be so valuable and comforting as the realization that beneath the division in race, color, language and culture there lies a unity, that there are not various peoples and minds but only One Humanity, only One Spirit" (191). The brotherhood of man with no respect to any ethnical or religious differences is a leitmotif in Hesse's texts after World War I. He considered it to be a counterword to nationalism, imperialism and World War I and II. Hesse's *Siddhartha* is all the more relevant in a world which is being torn apart in the name of religious, cultural and ethnic differences.

Hesse had a deep respect for Eastern philosophy and spirituality. His problem with Western spirituality and religion was that it was rigid and did not accommodate personal differences or needs. In Christianity standardization often took place. Something is good or else it is bad. Everything is divided into polar opposites. But post-structuralism proved that this was wrong. Good cannot be defined without reference to bad and bad cannot be defined without reference to good. Therefore good can never be completely good and bad can never be entirely bad. Hesse expresses this idea in the novel. Eastern philosophy also provided some relief from the constrictions of Western thought. It celebrated multiplicity, variations and contradictions. Western world was predetermined that their culture was superior and hence they considered it as the yardstick for evaluating other cultures. Hesse criticized this Euro-centrism which permeated all aspects of Western philosophy and life. It is here that Hesse's arguments bear a close resemblance to that of Derrida's. Derrida also criticized the 'othering' of foreign cultures by the Europeans.

Derrida understood that even when the Europeans tried to study other cultures they made the same kind of mistakes. Their interest in other cultures did not arise out of their respect for those cultures rather they wanted to show the superiority of European culture over other cultures. Even those scholars who did not have this attitude made the mistake of considering the European culture as the yardstick when they studied other cultures. Thus their studies also were tilted in favour of European culture even though it was unintentional to a certain extent. Hesse however was different in this respect. His treatment of Asian philosophy showed all the merits of this philosophy. He showed how they were superior to the European philosophy. European philosophy he thought was too narrow in its scope. Indian and Buddhist streams of thought accepted differences and deviations. This is what attracted Hesse to the East.

Hesse's criticism of Euro-centrism does not mean that he supports World-centrism. In World-centrism the entire humanity and its culture is taken as the centre. In such a view, life would be the ultimate reality that should be given priority over everything else. But Hesse does not believe in this idea. Human life or life in general is not the central point of the novel *Siddhartha*. The novel discusses both worldly life and spiritual life. But the answer that the novel provides to the question of ultimate reality is not life as such but a state of flux that denies all centres.

Hesse was against all forms of institutions and structures. His opposition to organized religion is just one example. All structures and organizations depend on a fixed centre for their existence. This fixity is something that Hesse does not advocate in his philosophy. Hesse is attracted to many ideologies and beliefs but he does not consider any one of them as perfect, nor does he claim that one is supreme to the other. Hesse was deeply influenced by Buddhism, but he does not believe that the Eightfold path will lead to salvation as Buddha promised. For Hesse there is no fixed path or rule that applies to all. As a person is unique, his path to salvation is also unique. Rigid structures only help in taking people further away from truth. What is needed is an open approach to different opinions and beliefs. Free play should be permitted in every discourse so that all opinions are accommodated. There should be no distinction as mainstream and variations.

Another interesting theme in *Siddhartha* is the problem of language. It is one of the most important arguments of post-structuralism that language is not infallible. Hesse in many of his novels advocated that language was incapable of representing higher reality. In his 1917 essay, "Language", Hesse says, Language is "a shortcoming and residue that causes the poet more distress than anything else. At times he can actually hate it, indict it and curse it – or rather, himself, that he is born to work with this miserable tool" (27). In the same essay Hesse points out the exact problem that language poses to the writer, "He cannot use a single word that ... does not simultaneously summon up alien, disturbing, hostile associations" (74). The writer is not able to convey what he wants to the reader.

T. S. Eliot refers to this problem in his work *Four Quartets*:

... Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still. (19)

'Signifieds' cannot stay in their place; they exchange position with signifiers as they cannot contain meaning when the process of signification is in full swing. The containers that are signifiers break under the strain of the meaning they carry. Although Derrida says in *Of Grammatology* "there is nothing outside of the text" (158), it does not point to the superiority of language. Aniket Jaaware in his book, *Simplifications: An Introduction to Structuralism and Post-structuralism*, that:

This concentration on language has given some misleading impressions; that deconstruction says 'everything is language', that deconstruction is deeply based on linguistics and so on. These are misleading impressions, for deconstruction is, with post-structuralism in general as well, deeply suspicious of the assurances that language gives us in our daily existence, and equally suspicious of the assurance that language gives philosophy. (418)

Another theme that we can find in Hesse is that of binaries. Hesse tries to reconcile the binary of worldly life and spirituality. In *Siddhartha* the protagonist learns that they are inseparable. They are both realities as well as illusions. One is not better than the other. By reversing the hierarchy of the binary opposites, Derrida proved that they are equal and related. Another thing that we see in *Siddhartha* is the rejection of wisdom as a transferable commodity. While Hesse focuses on the non-verbal nature of wisdom, Derrida talks about the constructed nature of knowledge and epistemology on the weak foundation of language.

A closer examination of the text of *Siddhartha* is needed to understand the similarities between the philosophies of Hesse and Derrida. The protagonist, Siddhartha meets Gotama

Buddha in Jetavana. The conversation between Gotama and Siddhartha is very crucial in the text. Siddhartha tells the exalted one: “you are presenting the world as a perfect chain, a chain which is never and nowhere broken, an eternal chain, the links of which are causes and effects” (Hesse 33). The words itself remind one of the structuralist way of thought. The importance given to causes and effects and the notion of an unbroken, completely perfect and explainable world is definitely a structuralist idea. Derridian world is much more broken, unexplainable and definitely not based on cause and effect. In fact in Derridian thinking cause can become effect and effect can become cause. As cause can be called a “cause” only if there is an effect, it can’t be said for sure which precedes which. Siddhartha finds a fault with Buddha’s teachings. He puts it thus:

But according to your very own teachings, this unity and logical consistency of all things is nevertheless broken in one place. But through a small gap this world of unity is invaded by something alien, something which had not been there before, and which cannot be demonstrated and cannot be proven: these are your teachings of overcoming the world, of salvation. But with this small gap, with this small breach, the entire eternal and uniform law of the world is being smashed to pieces and is done away with. (34)

The way Hesse criticizes the teachings of Buddha reminds one of the way Derrida deconstructs Western episteme. Derrida points out the failure or inability of language and hence questions the validity of anything and everything that uses the base of language. Western episteme and metaphysics definitely takes the infallibility of language for granted. Hence by attacking the roots he brings down the grand old tree of Western episteme. Hesse also uses the same argument to confront Buddha’s teachings. As words and language cannot carry ultimate truths and realities Buddha cannot transfer the knowledge of enlightenment to his disciples through teachings for which he uses language and words.

By making his protagonist reject Buddha’s path Hesse makes it clear that he is against all forms of institutionalized religions. Logocentrism is one problem that he finds with these structures. Siddhartha tells Buddha:

“You have found salvation from death... it has not come to you by means of teachings! You will not be able to convey and share with anyone, oh venerable one, in words and through teachings what has happened to you in the hour of enlightenment!” (35). The futility of words is what echoes in Siddhartha’s words. Again towards the end of the novel Siddhartha expresses the same idea to Govinda. “Wisdom cannot be passed on. Wisdom that a wise man attempts to pass on to someone always sounds like foolishness” (132). He says that wisdom can only be found and lived, but can’t be expressed and taught with words. He also says:

... any truth can be expressed and put into words when it is one-sided. Everything that can be thought with the mind and said with words is one-sided, it’s all just the half of it, lacking completeness, roundness, or unity. When the exalted Gotama spoke his teachings about the world, he had to divide it into Samsara and Nirvana, deception and truth, suffering and salvation. It can’t be done any differently, and there is no other way for the person who wants to teach. But the world itself that exists around us and inside of us is never one-sided. (132-133)

Thus it becomes quite clear that whatever we believed as truths had other unseen aspects or sides to it. The veracity of truth is questioned. Thus the term itself undergoes deconstruction. If language is not capable of expressing truth, then what does the term refer to? “Truth” is after all just another signifier whose signified could be falsehood. If the other side of truth, inexpressible through language, is opposed to the traditional meaning of truth, then truth becomes falsehood. Hesse expresses this through Siddhartha’s words: “the opposite of every truth is just as true” (132). Thus we see that Hesse also deconstructs language although his methodology is different from that of Derrida.

We can say without any doubt that Herman Hesse’s Siddhartha exhibits the presence of Derridian logic, categories and strategies.

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