

## ***Siddhartha*: An Encounter of Buddhism and Postmodernism**

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### **Abstract**

*Siddhartha* is a 1922 novelette by Hermann Hesse, a German-Swiss poet and novelist awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1946. It explores the spiritual quest of an Indian young man named Siddhartha during the time of the Gautama Buddha. Lyrical and philosophical, this novelette highlights Oriental wisdom as a remedy for human sufferings.

The purpose of this study is to explore the harmonious coexistence of Buddhism and postmodernism in *Siddhartha*. The ancient Eastern religion resonates with modern Western critique on language and subjectivity. Both view language as an incomplete and subjective means of communication incapable of conveying Truth, if not distorting it to a certain degree. Human subjectivity has no inherent essence or autonomy. Postmodern discourses view subjectivity as an unfixed entity, while in Buddhism, it is not only unfixed but also empty. To explore the unstable subjectivity, Buddhist philosophy of emptiness, karma and cosmic consciousness is elaborated.

The contents of this paper are divided into two parts. The first part illustrates postmodern and Buddhist views on language. The second part analyzes human subjectivity. The discourse encounter of the East and West in *Siddhartha* highlights the construction of language and subjectivity. Sharing with postmodernism the deconstructive feature, Buddhism clears the illusion of individuality and further promotes compassion toward other beings. This study infuses *Siddhartha* with postmodern vigor and Buddhist wisdom, showing the path to living a meaningful life.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Postmodernism, Language, Subjectivity

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## **1. Introduction**

*Siddhartha* is a 1922 novelette by Hermann Hesse, a German-Swiss poet and novelist awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1946. It explores the spiritual quest of an Indian young man named Siddhartha during the time of the Gautama Buddha. Written in a symbolic and lyrical style, it centers on the meaning of life. Siddhartha, the son of Brahman, is dissatisfied with the religious upbringing of his father. He leaves home to join the ascetics, renouncing the pleasures of the world by fasting and meditation. The restless heart drives him to seek the Buddha, but still, he feels unable to accept his doctrine. He then embraces the pleasures of the material world and abandons himself to a long life of decadence. Eventually, overwhelmed by shame and nausea, he flees in despair from the worldly life. Through the help of a wise, old ferryman, he achieves enlightenment by a river, understanding the true nature of the world and himself.

*Siddhartha* conveys Buddhist wisdom despite the fact that Hesse himself preferred a life of individualism and isolation to traditional religion and morality. The hero's name, Siddhartha, is the name of Gautama Buddha in his secular life, meaning the one who has reached the goal or the one who has found the Way ("Siddhartha," 1998). Siddhartha's life resembles the Buddha's, only that they develop in reverse directions (Hsia, 2009). While both undergo the similar stages of leaving, searching and finding, their path is different. Buddha leaves the former world of sensual pleasures to practice asceticism and attain enlightenment; on the contrary, Siddhartha leaves the former practice of asceticism to seek worldly pleasures and later becomes enlightened. The steps are reversed but the result is the same. The parallel life between the two highlights the universal pattern of a mythological hero. Both experience the typical hero's cycle of leaving and returning, with their old consciousness transformed to the new one through harsh trials (Campbell, 1988). Like the Buddha, Siddhartha is the type of hero engaged in spiritual struggles instead of violent battles. He leaves the old world in quest of an illuminating idea to transcend his old self. The new vision corresponds to Buddhist wisdom, which functions as the hero's final boon to benefit his society. This wisdom survives into modern times, echoing the crucial issues in postmodern discourses.

The contents of this paper are divided into two parts. The first part illustrates postmodern and Buddhist wisdom on language as a subjective expression. The second part analyzes human subjectivity as an unstable and unfixed entity. The encounter of the East and West as shown in *Siddhartha* heightens the awareness that both language and subjectivity are social constructs leading to the binary distinctions of truth and fiction, self and other. Only when the distinction is erased can Siddhartha obtain wisdom and enlightenment. Buddhism and postmodernism can't be defined in simple phrases. It's not the aim of this study to analyze their diverse schools and arguments, but their similar views on language and subjectivity as embodied in *Siddhartha*. The comparison will highlight Buddhism as a universal discourse to have its spiritual allies in different critiques. Through its compatibility with postmodern discourse, it can even be viewed as a sort of organism with a capacity to evolve through time. Siddhartha is both a Buddhist sage and postmodernist with deconstructive sensitivity, which liberates him from the prison of individuality. He points out the potentiality to transcend ego boundary and achieve true Nirvana.

Critics generally agree that *Siddhartha* reflects the psychoanalytic movement and the new orientalism in vogue in the first decades of the twentieth century. This book was unpopular in the US at the time of its publication in 1951. The reason for Hesse's neglect, in Eugene F. Timpe's (1977) opinion, lies in the fact that his narration was often sacrificed to didacticism and that the melancholy quality of his heroes didn't appeal to the generation after the war. However, his works became influential in the 1960s, marking an important step in the presentation of Eastern philosophy to the Western world (Malthaner, 1952). The American youth, with their tendency to revolt against the weight of tradition, found his works fascinating because of his recurrent theme of social disenchantment and Eastern religion (Liebmann, 1977). With the fading of the hippie generation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one may wonder whether Hesse is still relevant today. In response to this doubt, Ingo Cornils (2009) gave a complete affirmation of Hesse's influence because his view of a human being as an "evolving," "struggling" and "ever-changing" individual chimes with the modern experience. (Cornils, 2009: 13) *Siddhartha* is a text that validates Cornils' assertion as it depicts such an individual undergoing struggles and changes.

Despite the positive acceptance of Hesse's influence, there was growing

disapproval of his work in academia. The objections included the infiltration by Oriental thought of Western understanding of reality (Paslick, 1973). A more disparaging criticism was made by Cathy Benton (1997) that *Siddhartha* was a false portrayal of Buddhism infused with Western individualism. Indeed, Hesse incorporated Western individualism into *Siddhartha*. It is by no means a traditional Buddhist text with the exact steps to reach Buddhahood. Siddhartha's way of achieving enlightenment deviates from the rigorous practice of six perfections<sup>1</sup> as taught in Buddhist doctrines. He is more a Zen artist with an intuitive grasp of wisdom than a traditional Buddhist disciple. His method of attaining enlightenment is individualistic to the extent of breaking the fundamental Buddhist law. This research confirms the existence of Western individualism in this novelette, and further explores its coexistence with Buddhism. Despite a work in the early twentieth century, *Siddhartha* incorporates central postmodern issues of Truth and subjectivity. It shares with postmodernists' doubt of the transparency of language and autonomy of subjectivity. But it goes beyond the postmodern interrogation and shows the way to happiness for those who desperately seek the cessation of suffering, Hesse being one of them. In a certain sense, *Siddhartha* is a reflection of Hesse's seeking for perfection in the world of individualism. The yearning for deliverance from the bondage of individuality led Hesse onto the pursuit of Eastern religion. In 1911, he visited India to seek the source of life which "signifies the Oneness of all phenomena" (Shaw, 1977: 66). In *Journey to the East*, Hesse remarked that India was not only a country or geographical location, but "the home of the youth of the soul, the everywhere, and nowhere, the oneness of all times" (as cited in Seidlin, 1977: 23). *Siddhartha* is a testimony to his ideal of "Oneness" in Oriental philosophy, which provides salvation for the restless souls of the West.

Traditions distant from each other in space and time may blend and emerge in new alliances (Jencks, 1992). The encounter of Buddhism and postmodernism in *Siddhartha* is such a case. Both discourses share similar concepts on the negation of autonomous

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<sup>1</sup> Six perfections are the summation of all the key points of bodhisattva practice, the foundation for achieving Buddhahood (Tsong-kha-pa, 2004). They refer to the perfect qualities of generosity, ethical discipline, patience, joyful perseverance, meditative stabilization and wisdom. Each perfection is the precondition for subsequent ones. The bliss of liberation is attained through the power of wisdom, which is obtained in turn by meditative stabilization (Tsong-kha-pa, 2004).

subjectivity and the futility of language in expressing Truth. As a radical deconstruction of individual existence, Buddhism chimes with postmodern “incredulity towards grand narratives”<sup>2</sup> (Batchelor, 1998: 123). In *Siddhartha*, the “grand narratives” are the traditional doctrines of Buddhism practiced by its numerous disciples. Siddhartha is comparable to a Zen master who shows his “incredulity” by insisting on finding Truth in his own way instead of following the scriptural authority. He acquires a new insight into the essence of things without the intervention of religious conventions. Reason and logic are the main agents of “grand narratives” to hinder his mind from coming into direct communication with his true being. John Pickering (2006) also claimed the alliance of Buddhism with postmodern deconstructionism. With the central teaching of “*annatta*” (there is no essential self) and “*anicca*” (all things arise and vanish), Buddhism is basically a deconstructive program like postmodernism. Zen especially exhibits this spirit in its focus on mental upheaval which destroys the doctrinal concepts to establish a new angle of observation (Suzuki, 1964). *Siddhartha* is the site where the two deconstructive thoughts meet to convey the illusion of selfhood and Truth. Language is an incomplete and subjective means of conveying Truth. Human subjectivity, likewise, is a social construct subject to ceaseless changes. It’s an unfixed and unstable entity in postmodern discourses, while in Buddhism, it is not only unfixed but nonexistent.

## **2. Language as Subjective Expression**

### **(1) Buddhist Perspective**

In Buddhist philosophy, wisdom is incommunicable as shown in a Zen story. The Buddha once delivered a sermon by lifting a flower in his hand silently and smilingly. And one disciple understood his message by giving a sign through his eyes silently. The smile and the flower represent the intuition to see through the nature of things without

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<sup>2</sup> The term “postmodernism” entered the philosophical lexicon in 1979 with the publication of Jean-François Lyotard’s *La Condition Postmodern*, (in English, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* in 1984) in which he defined postmodernism as “incredulity toward meta-narrative.” Implied in this assertion is the breaking of the subject into heterogeneous moments that do not cohere into a unified identity (Aylesworth, 2015)

the medium of language. Buddha's silence is not the silence of ignorance but the silence where no speech can intrude and no precise description can be given (Pruthi, 2004). The intuitive leap of the heart is the aim of Zen, which is indefinable, incommunicable and free from names and descriptions. This is the moment when we awaken our innermost wisdom which is pure, divine, and experienced by each individual alone. Chinese Taoist sage, Lao Tzu also declares the incommunicability of Truth, Tao or the Way in the first sentence in *Tao Te Ching*: "The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao / The name that can be named is not the eternal name." This famous passage reveals the similarity between Taoist philosophy and Zen Buddhism. In its centuries of development in China, Buddhism had absorbed nutrients from indigenous Chinese Taoism. The yearnings of early Buddhist ascetics for the "forest sense of things" are in accord with Taoist philosophy (Coomaraswamy, 1964: 175). Siddhartha displays such an aspiration to hear the sermon of the woods, which teaches him the value of silence and patience. The attentiveness in listening to the Nature develops into full bloom in his later life as a Zen artist. In *The Power of Myth*, Campbell (1988) similarly pointed out the unnamable feature of wisdom. The ultimate Truth is beyond human conception because we think in terms of opposites while the transcendent is beyond all pairs of opposites. Everything in the field of time and space is dual; to transcend is to go past duality constructed through reason and language.

For Campbell (1968), the Buddha is a hero that transcends the duality fabricated by human conception. As a mythic hero, the Buddha is perceived to have the "speech-defying" wisdom after his return to the human world. The enlightenment the Buddha gets after his adventure is unspeakable; therefore, how to spread this wisdom among his people is the hero's greatest challenge: "how render back into light-world language the speech-defying pronouncement of the dark!---revelations that shatter into meaninglessness every attempt to define the pairs of opposites? How communicate to people who insist on the exclusive evidence of their senses the message of the all generating void?" (Campbell, 1968: 218) After his returning to the human world, Siddhartha has the very same demanding task to perform---to deliver the "speech-defying" pronouncement of the "all generating void." Here, the "void" refers to

the central Buddhist philosophy of emptiness.<sup>3</sup> Siddhartha's advice to his friend, Govinda, reveals the "speech-defying" essence of truth: "[k]nowledge can be communicated, but not wisdom. One can find it, live it, be fortified by it, do wonders through it, but one cannot communicate and teach it" (Hesse, 1996: 142). Siddhartha is here echoing the teaching of Zen masters that any attempt to explain or analyze the experience of enlightenment would be in vain. The perfect sound of "OM" is the wisdom he grasps in silence. He chooses to fulfill rather than preach the wisdom, as enlightenment is beyond description. Once put into words, the true essence of wisdom is distorted.

## **(2) Postmodern Perspective**

In postmodernism, what is commonly regarded as objective and transcendental Truth is nothing more than a metaphor or an illusion of our individual perception embodied through specific languages. Once Truth finds expression through language, it becomes distorted. Even an eye-witness account can only offer one limited interpretation of what has happened. Another account by a different witness can be different because of the background knowledge and angle of vision of that witness (Hutchen, 2002). By claiming the incapability of language in conveying Truth, Siddhartha can be labeled a postmodern thinker invalidating the objectivity of language. As a form of representation, language offers us no direct access to Truth. On this point, the postmodern theory of New Historicism gives a full illustration.

New Historicists view history as construction bound up with ideological values. As a kind of narrative, history is inescapably endowed with a certain meaning. In Michel Foucault's (1986) opinion, discourse or knowledge is associated with power and desire: "Power and knowledge directly imply one another . . . there is no power relation

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<sup>3</sup> The Buddhist concept of Śūnyatā (Sanskrit) is translated into English as emptiness, voidness, openness or vacuity. Buddhist scriptures also have different expressions for emptiness: non-duality, non-discrimination, true nature of dharma, or the inexpressible (Conze and Horner, 1954). In this paper, "emptiness" is adopted to convey the Buddha's realization of worldly existence. By perceiving the emptiness and the dependent-arising law of all phenomena, the Buddha liberates himself from attachment and clinging. It is the Buddha's central teaching to guide people towards enlightenment.

without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (Foucault, 1986: 27). Hayden White echoes Foucault’s critique by asserting that historians suppress, highlight and organize facts to interpret the past events. Like a fictional narrative, history comes out of an “origin” that is foreign to it and exists in a dialogue with the “foreign” other that can never be controlled (Davis, 1986: 107). If the origin can only be accessed through language, it can never be transparent truth. Historiography is an attempt to comprehend and master the “origin” by composing a narrative order on it. Therefore, the multiple perspectives in historiography make final closure of meaning impossible. Reality should be apprehended as multiple, complex, and antagonistic (White, 1986).

### **(3) Encounter of Buddhism and Postmodernism**

Like New Historicists, Siddhartha interrogates the function of language in conveying Truth. Echoing postmodernists, he asserts that language is a subjective expression instead of an objective access to Truth: “Words do not express thoughts very well. They always become a little different immediately they are expressed, a little distorted, a little foolish” (Hesse, 1996: 145). Siddhartha’s remark corresponds to Nietzsche’s view of Truth as metaphors and Wittgenstein’s theory of language as a social construct. As a precursor of postmodernists, Nietzsche regards Truth as a subjective creation by humans; it’s nothing more than an elusive collection of metaphors or anthropomorphisms (Kaufmann, 1976). For Nietzsche, language and human thought are inherently anthropomorphic. Truth, once expressed through language, can only be a metaphor imbued with subjective speculations. Wittgenstein also perceives that the meaning of a word involves the psychological feelings of the users, each of whom can mean something different by it. Therefore, communication would be difficult if not impossible (Richter, 2004). Once put into words, the meaning of any thought is deprived of its totality and completeness. Siddhartha proclaims this fact as follows: “In every truth, the opposite is equally true. A truth can only be expressed and enveloped in words if it is one-sided, only half the truth; it all lacks totality, completeness, unity (Hesse, 1996: 143). Here, Siddhartha has become a Zen master who intends to free his disciple’s mind from the bondage of intellect. Language

together with the scriptural doctrines is like the finger pointing to the moon. They serve as a guide and under no circumstances can they be changed into the moon itself. Siddhartha grasps Buddhist wisdom that there should be no abiding place<sup>4</sup> for anything, including Truth itself. As *The Diamond Sutra* (Ch. 6) indicates, in teaching spiritual truths, the Buddha uses concepts in the way that a raft is used to cross a river. Once the river has been crossed over, the raft has no more use and should be discarded. Language is the raft to help people cross the ocean of ignorance to the land of enlightenment, and it should ultimately be discarded after one attains enlightenment.

Various Buddhist scriptures convey the postmodern idea that Truth cannot be defined in words or attained to in thought. All living creatures, owing to their disillusionments, make false distinctions at every thought and consequently cannot get into concord with the ultimate Truth (Conze and Horner, 1954). An Indian fable entitled “The Blind men and the Elephant” explicates this point well. People who stick to their own perspectives are just like the blind men who may grasp one aspect of truth but not the whole picture. Our consciousness is always bound to a narrow circle and full of restrictions. As an imperfect medium, language can’t be relied on to communicate Truth. Siddhartha is a Zen artist obtaining enlightenment by intuition and action instead of by reason and logic. Sharing with postmodernists’ doubt on intellect, he goes further in promulgating Zen wisdom that those who seek Truth through words will not find it, as innermost wisdom is not meant to be taught and communicated through language, but to be found and practiced in one’s own way.

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<sup>4</sup> “abiding place” is a recurrent expression in the Prajnaparamita Sutras, which has “No abiding” as its central teaching. The perfect state of Buddhahood is the realization of the state of emptiness, where in one should not cling to any conceptual or analytical grasping: “here in this emptiness, there is no form, no perception, no name, no concepts, no knowledge. . . . There is no knowledge of Nirvana, no obtaining of it, no not-obtaining of it” (as cited in Suzuki, 1964:21). Those who achieve such a state of emptiness, or “no abiding,” are free from fear and capable of enjoying final Nirvana.

### 3. Subjectivity as Unfixed Entity

#### (1) Buddhist Perception

##### (a) Emptiness

The river is an instrument for Siddhartha's enlightenment. The sound "OM" heard from the river conveys the wisdom of unfixed subjectivity, a central doctrine known as emptiness in Buddhist philosophy. *The Diamond Sutra* illustrates this point: "there is no such thing as a self, a person, a living being, or a universal self---all things are devoid of selfhood, devoid of any separate individuality" (Ch.17). Subjectivity is a living, complex and evolving organism responding to external conditions. We act and are acted upon by external conditions, lacking autonomy and intrinsic nature. Emptiness refers not only to subjectivity but to all phenomena, which feature impermanence and dependent-arising.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Buddhist emptiness is not nihilism as the surface meaning of the word suggests, but is deep and profound, filled with Tao or Zen or Light (Humphreys, 1990). Emptiness highlights the Buddhist wisdom that everything in this phenomenal world is subject to continual change and that its existence is dependent on factors outside of itself. In other words, all things are empty of their self-established, permanent essence because they are composed and defined in what lies outside them and therefore subject to alteration and revision (Wright, 2010). Buddhist Master Tsong-kha-pa (2002) instructed this concept as follows: "All compounded phenomena are dependent-arising. Anything that is a dependent-arising is not autonomous because it is produced in dependence upon causes and conditions. These things all lack autonomy. Therefore, there is no thing which has self, that is, intrinsic nature" (Master Tsong-kha-pa, 2002: 760). Here, the Master addresses the core issue in *The Heart Sutra*, a major Buddhist scripture with the best known lines on emptiness: "form is emptiness

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<sup>5</sup> The Buddhist conception of "dependent-arising" is inseparable from "emptiness." It is the principle of the Middle Way by which the Buddha explains the functioning of phenomena without resorting to the two extreme views of existence and non-existence (Kalupahana, 1986). Nagarjuna's philosophy of the twelve causal factors of human personality gives this idea a vivid illustration: ignorance, volitions, consciousness, namarupa, six sense organs, contact, feeling, desire, appropriation, being, birth, suffering (Siderits and Katsura, 2013). Conditioned by these internal and external factors, we are caught in the chain of births and deaths. There can be no deliverance from suffering until the initiating agent of ignorance ceases.

and the very emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form, form does not differ from emptiness, whatever is emptiness, that is form, the same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness.” *The Heart Sutra* explicates that emptiness is synonymous with worldly form and all human feelings and perceptions. Through the perspective of emptiness, the universe is seen as a ceaseless becoming and never-ending change without an intrinsic existence. Likewise, human subjectivity is empty without a fixed or static entity. There is no permanent and autonomous self but different selves subject to revision and always in motion based on the external and internal conditions.

Siddhartha’s reflection on his life points to the Buddhist emptiness: “I reviewed my life and it was also a river, and Siddhartha the boy, Siddhartha the mature man and Siddhartha the old man, were only separated by shadows, not through reality. Siddhartha’s previous lives were also not in the past, and his death and his return to Brahman are not in the future” (Hesse, 1996: 107). The river of life contains Siddhartha’s different selves at different stages, just as it incorporates different voices of all living creatures. The diverse voices of the river suggest not only Siddhartha’s multiple subjectivity but the eternal recurrence of life. To see death in birth and birth in death is to grasp the profound meaning of emptiness. When we regard life and death as the alternate and inseparable currents of the life-river, we embrace Buddhist non-duality and non-discrimination. Life is a ceaseless flux, and the concept of time is dissolved: “The water changed to vapor and rose, became rain and came down again, became spring, brook and river, changed anew, flowed anew” (Hesse, 1996: 135). For Siddhartha, the dividing line that lies between present and eternity is debunked through the Buddhist wisdom of emptiness. Life is always in the present, so are all phenomena: “Time is not real. The dividing line that seems to lie between this world and eternity, between suffering and bliss, between good and evil, is also an illusion” (Hesse, 1996: 143). The dissolution of time removes the obstacle of binary discrimination. The potential Buddha dwells in every sinner, as the Buddha once committed sins before He obtained enlightenment. The forms of life may change, but life itself is in the present and eternal, just like the river: “The river is everywhere at the same time, at the source and at the mountain, 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” (Hesse, 1996: 107). Life is not evolving towards

some state; time is an illusion. Life is here and now, covering and becoming every form in each moment. Again, Siddhartha's view conveys Buddhist emptiness, which emphasizes the lack of intrinsic nature in subjectivity. This notion accounts for the emergence of different selves in a nonstop cycle of incarnation. All the joy and sorrow, good and evil, suffering and bliss are an illusion when examined from the Buddhist perspective of eternal life: "The world is not imperfect or slowly evolving along a long path to perfection. No, it is perfect at every moment; every sin already carries grace within it, all small children are potential old men, all sucklings have death within them, all dying people---eternal life" (Hesse, 1996: 144). It is the sound "OM" that teaches Siddhartha to see emptiness in all phenomena. For him, to discriminate between joy and sorrow is an illusion, as everything is not autonomous but dependent-arising. Seen from the perspective of emptiness, the negative can become the positive, and vice versa. He is immune to the onslaught of sorrow or evil, for he knows that the negative is prerequisite to the positive feeling of joy and good.

(b) Karma

In Buddhism, the recurrence of life depends on the effects of karma. The cause-effect law is the shaping force of subjectivity. It determines external social forces and internal psyche, and both work together to construct the self. Karma explains why it's such social conditions that one is situated in and their effects on each individual mind. In its literal meaning, karma refers to cause and effect relationship of all things. In religious perspective, karma is the Buddhist wisdom that "whatever is subject to origination is subject also to cessation" (Coomaraswamy, 1964: 45). This law of universal causation is linked with emptiness as discussed above. The lack of essence and dependent-arising are two aspects of the same thing. While emptiness reveals the non-fixity of all phenomena, the law of karma explains the reason for the emergence of everything in the universe. Buddhism considers humans uncontrollably manipulated by the "habit-energy" acquired in previous lives (Conze and Horner, 1954). Driven blindly by this energy, we produce false views and all the consequent defilements. In Humphrey's (1990) perception, karma is significant in that it corresponds to Newton's third law of motion: the equal and opposite operation of Action and Reaction. A true understanding of the law of karma prevents us from complaining about our present circumstances and helps us look positively for the future. Each event is at once the

result of all that has preceded it and a contributing cause of all to come (Humphreys, 1990). Coomaraswamy (1964) illustrated the interrelationship of karma and free will as follows: “Buddhism is fatalistic in the sense that the present is always determined by the past; but the future remains free. Every operation we make depends on what we have come to be at the time, but what we are coming to be depends on the direction of the will” (Coomaraswamy, 1964: 233). Having no rights to be pessimistic, every man is free within the limitations of his self-created karma.

The river carries the message of karma for sagacious minds to catch. Siddhartha’s predecessor, the wise old ferryman, is one of them. He reveals the wisdom to Siddhartha after helping him cross the river without receiving any payment from him: “I did not expect any payment or gift from you. You will give it to me some other time. . . . I have learned that from the river too; everything comes back. You, too, Samana, will come back” (Hesse, 1996: 49). Implied in this remark is that everything is interconnected in a causal relationship. Siddhartha learns the law of karma after his son leaves him. From his son, he realizes that humans are inescapably trapped in the fateful and recurrent circle of events. The anguish he brought to his father in the past would not vanish; it comes back to him in exactly the same way from his son. His father had suffered from the same pain that he is now suffering. Karma finds full expression in his remark that “everything that was not suffered to the end and finally concluded, recurred, and the same sorrows were undergone” (Hesse, 1996: 132). For Siddhartha, all deeds remain ineradicable to construct the reincarnated subjectivity in future life. All experiences are stored up for a time in a kind of unconscious and influence human actions at a later date. Therefore, sufferings must result from evil-bringing acts done either in this life or previous lives. With the firm belief in this logic of cause and effect, he bears his suffering with fortitude and sympathizes with other people.

More than natural justice, karma also calls for his strenuous efforts to fight for a better future. He is practicing the virtue of non-attachment when he sets his son free to pursue his own goal, however trivial and insignificant it may be. This virtue is the cause that breaks his ego boundary, as strong attachment to a certain person or thing reinforces the sense of selfhood. Non-attachment liberates him from the trap of egotism and further contributes to his sainthood. His peaceful countenance and undisturbed mind are the benefits that he reaps after cultivating the virtue of non-attachment toward

his beloved. When his mind releases itself from any favorable object, he achieves the perfect state of “no abiding” or “no clinging,” with the consequent transcendence of binary thinking like self and other, good and evil.

(c) Cosmic Consciousness

Through the river, Siddhartha perceives that there is no fixed and permanent self to be pampered; instead, all humans are brothers eventually merged into perfect unity. The final stage of Siddhartha’s spiritual quest turns out to be the synthesis of his former selves. He learns to accept the young and ambitious Siddhartha leaving his father to practice asceticism, as well as Siddhartha the lover, merchant, gambler and ferryman. All these identities are linked with other ordinary people; the enlightened sage is no different from the poor and wretched. At the end of the novel when Siddhartha reunites with his friend Govinda, he reveals to him the various forms of being and the smile of unity over these flowing forms:

He [Govinda] no longer saw the face of his friend Siddhartha. Instead he saw other faces, many faces, a long series, a continuous stream of faces---hundreds, thousands, which all came and disappeared and yet all seemed to be there at the same time. . . . He saw the face of a fish, of a carp, with tremendous painfully opened mouth, a dying fish with dimmed eyes. He saw the face of a newly born child . . . a murderer, . . . men and women in passionate love. (Hesse, 1996: 150)

Siddhartha’s different faces convey crucial Buddhist doctrine of cosmic consciousness, through which the ego boundary is dissolved and the perfection of great compassion is achieved.

As there is no permanent and essential core of self, all human beings are collectively interdependent. Great compassion then arises, breaking the ego boundary and the consequent distinction of self and other. Altruistic and self-benefiting, great compassion is preconditioned by debunking discriminatory thoughts. All forms of life, being manifestations of one life, are interrelated in a complex web:

He could no longer distinguish the different voices---the merry voice from the

weeping voice, the childish voice from the manly voice. They all belonged to each other: the lament of those who yearn, the laughter of the wise, the cry of indignation and the groan of the dying. They were all interwoven and interlocked, entwined in a thousand ways. And all these voices, all the goals, all the yearnings, all the sorrows, all the pleasures, all the good and evil, all of them together was the world. (Hesse, 1996: 135)

The moment Siddhartha gains this cosmic consciousness is the moment of his enlightenment. The ordinary people become his brothers, and their joy and sorrow are his: "He now felt as if these ordinary people were his brothers. Their vanities, desires and trivialities no longer seemed absurd to him; they had become understandable, lovable and even worthy of respect" (Hesse, 1996: 130). The way of liberation, as Siddhartha experiences, lies in the eradication of discrimination. In all the illusion-separated things, love is the cohesive element to make the parts become one (Humphreys, 1990). Associated with cosmic consciousness, love is another crucial message the river delivers to Siddhartha: "Love is the most important thing in 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, to be able to regard the world and ourselves and all beings with love, admiration and respect" (Hesse, 1996: 147). Love preconditions the virtue of great compassion, which is not only the root of the Mahayana path but also the essential quality of the Buddha. The supreme achievement of Siddhartha lies in his practice of great compassion, which is equal to the deed of a Bodhisattva. As a ferryman, he takes on the symbolic image of a Bodhisattva determined to ferry people across the stream of samsara (Conze and Horner, 1954). Although he has attained the perfect state of sainthood, great compassion drives him to be tied to the world and help suffering people relieve their pains. With the strong resolution of a Bodhisattva, Siddhartha stays in the world of samsara, taking upon himself the burdens of worldly anxiety and despair.

The significance of cosmic consciousness lies in the eradication of self/other distinction. Campbell (1988) defines it as the Buddha consciousness, which is synonymous with empty selfhood or a non-dual relationship. The gaining of such consciousness marks the final achievement of Siddhartha's sainthood, wherein the self

undergoes exchange with the other. Buddhist Master Tsong-kha-pa (2002) embraced this state of consciousness: “By becoming accustomed to the equality of self and other / The spirit of enlightenment becomes firm / Self and other are interdependent / Like this and the other side of a river, they are false” (Tsong-kha-pa, 2002: 54). The Master further argued that self and other are merely posited in relation to a particular reference point and do not essentially exist. The “other” bank is not in itself “other” but in relation to someone else which is “this” bank. Therefore, “self” does not exist in its own right but in relation to someone else that is the “other.” Master Tsong-kha-pa’s perception finds embodiment in Siddhartha’s compassionate deed. By merging his self with others, he is no more a separate entity in this universe. All the sense of isolation and despair is eradicated once this cosmic consciousness is achieved.

## **(2) Postmodern Perception**

Postmodern questioning of autonomous subjectivity can be traced back to Nietzsche’s anti-Enlightenment critique. Nietzsche denounces the truth-oriented way of thinking initiated by Socrates and Plato, whose method of argument tries to eliminate conflict through a single and stable point of view (Lovibond, 1990). As soon as humanity is caught up in Platonic ideals of truth, reason and morality, the hierarchical binary opposition emerges, leading to the domination of the center. Nietzsche’s assertion of the fictionality of truth and reason inspires a lot of thinkers such as Althusser, Foucault and Derrida. If we can only know the world through a network of socially established meaning systems, we, as a subject, are likewise a social construct. As it is impossible to have an unmediated access to reality, so it is unlikely to have an identity free from the discourses of a specific culture. Postmodern thinkers don’t view everything as empty but question the complicity of power and knowledge in shaping the individual identity.

In postmodern theory, subjectivity is regarded as a social construct subject to the change of time and space. There is no more a coherent, free and autonomous subject. The Enlightenment belief in a conscious self that generates meanings is replaced with the postmodern subject which is historically conditioned and determined. Subjectivity is a product of ideological interpretation, elusive, changing and contradictory. The skepticism of a rational and autonomous subject is manifest in Louis Althusser’s (1986)

essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” In his view, subjectivity is shaped by such ideological state apparatuses as schools, church, family and media. Each individual is “interpellated” as a subject through language: “Ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way that it “recruits” subjects among the individuals . . . by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing ‘Hey, you there!’” (Althusser, 1986: 245) In Althusser’s formulation, the relationship between the individual and the subject position taken up in a specific ideology is imaginary. Each individual misrecognizes the self as the autonomous and rational author of their ideology. In fact, it is ideology that constructs their subjectivity.

Like Althusser, Foucault (1986) exposes the alliance of power and discourse in shaping subjectivity. Discourse, according to him, is associated with power and desire. Holding its sway over people, it subjugates and carries them along with it, thus weaving itself into the fabric of their minds. Subjectivity, in Foucault’s formulation, as in Althusser’s, is denied its creative role under the surveillance and control of society. This point finds a vivid illustration in *Madness and Civilization* where Foucault (1965) revealed human reason as a dominant power to define madness as an “other,” thereby subjugating unreason and establishing the unequal hierarchy: “what is originaire is the caesura that establishes the distance between reason and non-reason; reason’s subjugation of non-reason, wresting from it its truth as madness, crime, or disease, derives explicitly from this point” (Foucault: 1965, 10). Another important postmodernist to shed light on the construction of subjectivity is Derrida. Replacing the fixed signifieds of Saussure’s chains of signs, Derrida (1982) develops a theory of *différance*, in which meaning is produced through the dual strategies of “difference” and “deferral.” For Derrida, the sign is a “deferred presence,” and the effect of representation in which meaning is apparently fixed, is but a temporary fixing and subject to change. The speaking subject, inscribed in language which only consists of differences, would come to “defer” and “differ.” Derrida’s concept of subjectivity as a function of language echoes Althusser’s critique of the hailed subjectivity and Foucault’s power/knowledge critique. They all endorse a non-fixed and constructed subjectivity. To see “difference” as a productive mechanism rather than a negation of subjectivity is the hallmark of postmodern philosophy (Aylesworth, 2015).

The formation of subjectivity in *Siddhartha* is shown to be dependent-arising, echoing the postmodern critique on the construction of subjectivity through social institutions. Siddhartha's subjectivity is determined not only by internal but by external conditions. Greed, wrath and delusion, the three common aspects of moral deviation, are the internal drives waiting for the release switch of external conditions represented by religion, family and the material world. The concurrence of the two conditions dominates his thought and behavior, shaping his different roles as a pious Brahman, stern ascetic, shrewd businessman, decadent lover and gambler, caring father, and finally, an enlightened Zen master. The orientation to seek spiritual transcendence is rooted in his upbringing as the son of a Brahman. The assertion of his selfhood triggers his yearning for a spiritual life superior to the trivial life of ordinary people. As a disciple of ascetics, he strengthens his mind to overcome sensory temptations. He learns to think, fast and wait, the very qualities preparing him for future sainthood. The Buddha shows perfection for him to follow while the old ferryman helps him reach it. To complete the spiritual self, the material counterpart is indispensable. Without living a dissolute life, he can't develop real compassion toward others. All the incidents in the material world are the external forces to shape his final identity as a Buddhist saint.

### **(3) Encounter of Buddhism and Postmodernism**

Buddhist and postmodern negation of an autonomous subjectivity is not degeneration into nothingness or void, but a sober awareness of the construction of reality and identity. The "I" as a social construction is the core concept in postmodernism, while in Buddhism, the "I" is regarded as emptiness and dependent-arising. Both view subjectivity as an unfixed and unstable entity lacking autonomy. In Buddhism, subjectivity is dependent-arising without intrinsic essence. The Buddhist terminology finds a similar expression in postmodernism. Althusser's "hailed" subjectivity, Foucault's "surveillance," and Derrida's "difference" all point to the lack of autonomy and intrinsic essence in subjectivity. Following Nietzschean critique, postmodernists consider subjectivity to arise and multiply as effects of dominant discourses. Buddhist scriptures have no lack of such perception: "This body is not yours. It should be regarded as the product of former karma, affected through what has been willed and felt" (as cited in Conze and Horner, 1954: 66). The law of karma explains

the lack of autonomy in subjectivity. Buddhist wisdom, together with postmodern critique, is still valid in today's technological world. We are "hailed" or bombarded by large flows of information. Technology reshapes human relations into a virtual alliance and reliance. This digital generation turns to social websites for the affirmation of their identity, just as capitalism recoded human relations into "flows of money" in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Deleuze, 1983: 224-227). The press plays no less a role in shaping modern subjectivity, as it "levelled individuals into an abstract phantom known as the public" (Kierkegaard, 1962: 59). The press or media functions as a powerful machine of information to hold together the mass of undiscerning individuals, branding into their minds a collective perception. This trend echoes Nietzsche's assertion of the "eternal return," as everything leads back to a single discourse and corresponds to the thought of everyone and no one (Conway, 1998). We are a trace of discourses, constituted by others' thoughts that we mistakenly think are ours.

While postmodernism emphasizes social institutions as the constituting force of subjectivity, Buddhism goes further to prescribe the remedy of liberation, namely, emptiness, karma and cosmic consciousness. Buddhism gives a positive twist to what postmodernism interrogates. The postmodern resistance against the manipulation of dominant discourses is endowed with a new altruistic power by Buddhism. Siddhartha transcends the postmodern discontent through the perception of emptiness. Deep meditation helps him regain a pure heart to see his empty selfhood. Without the cognizance of unfixed subjectivity, cosmic consciousness and the consequent virtue of compassion won't arise. It's the practice of no self and no abiding of anything that leads to the acquisition of the Buddha consciousness, the happy and peaceful state of Nirvana.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Siddhartha is a hero of all time, showing suffering as the truth of life and the possible way of liberation through Buddhist wisdom. His story points to the spiritual potentialities of a human life full of bondage and limitations. Although the coinage of "postmodernism" has yet to come in the time when Hesse wrote *Siddhartha*, it finds a harmonious coexistence with Buddhism in the issues of language and subjectivity. With the similar deconstructive spirit, both view language and subjectivity as social

constructions without an inherent and autonomous essence. In Buddhism, language is a flawed medium incapable of expressing wisdom. Similarly in postmodernism, history cannot be narrated objectively through language. Language is to Buddhist wisdom as historiography is to postmodern history. The New Historicist assertion that narration is an act full of gaps and subjective values coincides with Buddhist philosophy of emptiness. Buddhism as well as postmodernism describes human subjectivity to be transitory, unstable and unfixd. In Buddhist formulation, subjectivity emerges and fades as transitorily as dew drops, bubbles, and lightning flashes just like all things in the phenomenal world. It lacks autonomy and depends on external conditions to arise and disappear. Buddhist emptiness considers human subjectivity a dependent-arising void, and karma explicates the internal and external conditions that trigger the emergence of subjectivity. In postmodern conception, subjectivity is a social construct without an inherent entity. The encounter of Buddhism and postmodernism in *Siddhartha* highlights the compatibility of Eastern philosophy with Western critique. Despite the distance of space and time, the two discourses share the similar perception of the inaccessibility of Truth and contingency of selfhood. Yet, Buddhism transcends postmodernism in the doctrine of cosmic consciousness, which perceives the universe as unity and harmony itself. While postmodernism invalidates the binary opposition regulated by dominant discourses, Buddhism goes further to erase all distinctions and incorporate all beings into brotherhood. The path to liberation lies in the cultivation of wisdom and compassion as embodied by Siddhartha.

The way to enlightenment varies from person to person, depending on one's internal and external conditions. Siddhartha may well be labelled a Zen master that attains enlightenment through his intuition. This Oriental sage is also a postmodern philosopher with sagacious views on language and subjectivity. He promulgates the futility of language in communicating wisdom and the illusion of selfhood. With an unfixd subjectivity, he is an ascetic devoted to eliminating sensory delights, a successful merchant, a decadent gambler, a Zen artist with a cosmic consciousness, a Bodhisattva helping people weather through difficulties, and a postmodernist problematizing the objectivity of language. He embodies the postmodern negation of a fixed identity. Moreover, he transcends the deconstructive views of postmodernism and further cultivates the cosmic consciousness, which in turn leads to empathetic

relationship with others and eternal peace with himself. Through the Buddhist wisdom of emptiness, Siddhartha banishes all his former discriminative thoughts and cravings, releasing himself from the prison of egotism and the duality of spirit and flesh. The river flows forever with multiple forms and harmonious sounds. The Buddha in ancient India was gone, but he is everlasting through his innumerable incarnations, Siddhartha being one of them. His story implies that Buddhism is compatible with postmodern philosophy and that Buddhahood is open to all.

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## 「流浪者之歌」：佛法和後現代主義的一場相遇

許惠芬\*

### 摘 要

「流浪者之歌」是赫曼赫塞於 1922 年的作品，這位兼具德國及瑞士籍的詩人小說家，是 1946 年的諾貝爾文學獎得主。本小說是悉達多的生命探索故事，背景在佛陀時期的印度。以抒情及哲思為風格，它凸顯了東方的智慧，能為西方社會的苦悶提供新的解藥。

本研究的目的在探討佛法和後現代主義如何在此小說中和諧共存，尤其在語言和主體觀這兩方面有互通之處。兩者皆視語言為主觀的溝通媒介，不能完全傳達真理，即使不至於全然的扭曲。人的主體無時不在變動中，無內在的實性。後現代主義視主體為非固定、不穩定的實體存在，而佛法更加延伸主體的不確定性，視主體為非真實的存在，即所謂空性。此處將加以申述佛法的智慧，分成空性、業果及物我合一來探討。

本研究分兩部分。第一部分探討佛法和後現代主義對語言的論述，第二部分探討主體觀。東西方的論述在「流浪者之歌」相遇，揭示主體和語言的建構性。佛法和後現代主義都具有解構的特質，而佛法更深遠處在於解構後倡導慈悲心的生起。藉由「流浪者之歌」闡釋佛法和後現代主義的相同性，不僅賦予此書後現代的深刻意涵，也彰顯了佛法助人離苦得樂的永恆性。

**關鍵詞：**佛法、後現代主義、語言、主體

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