

Secular Life and Samsara: Symbolic Significance of the River Image in *Siddhartha—An Indian Tale*

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Abstract: Born in the 1870s, Hermann Hesse is one of the most influential writers in the history of European literature and even world literature. The characteristics of Hesse's works are different from those of other European writers. He was good at deeply integrating religious culture into his works and using religious images to express his philosophical thoughts. As the masterpiece which best expresses Hesse's religious thought, *Siddhartha—An Indian Tale*, after its publication in Germany in 1922, has set off a cultural upsurge. The whole book tells a story of Siddhartha, a nobleman of Brahman, after leaving his hometown and going through hardships, pursues selfhood and the supreme doctrine of Brahmanism. In the book, the image "river" appears many times along with the turning point of the Siddhartha's life, bearing the symbolic significance of secular life and samsara. Literature image of river is the basis of this paper. From the perspective of religious culture, by searching the relevant papers at home and abroad and combining with the relevant religious scriptures, mapping the symbolic significance of the river image in the book to the different religious texts, finally symbolic significance of the river image in the book is found. Also, this paper carries on the deep analysis to the image. This paper not only pays attention to the surface meaning of the image, but also analyzes the symbolic significance of "river" in the novel by combining the characters, the plot and religious culture together.

Keywords: *Siddhartha—An Indian Tale*; River image; Symbolic significance; Religious culture; Hermann Hesse

1. Introduction

Siddhartha—An Indian Tale, as one of novellas written by Hermann Hesse, has been appreciated and studied deeply by scholars for its complex psychological meaning, rich religious culture and deep philosophical implication. Hermann Hesse's creation of this book began in 1919. Because of living in that period of time, due to the great changes in his life and the influence of war, after his wife's mental breakdown, he once also fell into a mental disorder and received psychoanalytic treatment. Because of that, so far, the researches about the book mainly involve two aspects: one focuses on analytic psychology, but, the more extensive research falls on the religious culture and philosophical implication in the text^[1]. In his works, Christianity, Indian religions and Chinese Taoism form three sources of Hesse's religious thoughts^[2]. As an important image in literature, river image which has rich symbolic significance occupies an important position in literary works and religions. In Hinduism, the Ganges is a sacred river, bathing in which symbolizes getting the sin cleansed and giving the water burial in which symbolizes guiding the soul of the dead. In *Matthew*, Jesus was sinless, but he was still baptized in the Jordan River. Here, baptism in the river is symbolic of cleansing original sin. The river image in the book *Siddhartha—An Indian Tale* also bears rich symbolic significance. In the numerous researches about this book, scholars have been focusing on analytic psychology and pure religious culture analysis, but have paid less attention to the analysis of specific religious image in the book.

As a way of information transmission in human culture, symbolism reflects the perception in a given society, mental states, abstract concepts of humans and various social and cultural phenomena by adopting the thinking mode of analogy as well as association and also by relying on some imagined or real existing objects and other perceptible things^[3]. That is, the symbolic significance of images appearing in the novel does not float on the surface, but is deeply rooted in the plot and culture background. The interpretation of the symbolic significance needs to be combined with the analysis of

the characters, plots and other factors appearing in the novel, so as to dig out the further meaning behind the image.

2. Image as Foundation

2.1. The overseas development of research on image

As a concept in the field of the poetic theory and criticism, image is generally regarded as an imported product. The concept of image is usually regarded as the product of the western imagism movement in the 1920s. However, the concept of image has already originated in China. The concept has two origins: The Book of Changes and Zhuangzi[4]. For example, in The Book of Changes[5], image has been described as “The sage set up an image to express his mind”, which means image is the representative of the incorporeal feeling towards one certain groups of concrete objects. Like Min Ze[4] explained that “In The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons, the ‘image’ proposed by author Liu Xie here refers to the artistic imagination of the writer who wants to concrete the feelings about life.” Admittedly, the imagism movement in the West has played an important role in promoting the research of image, but it is undeniable that the movement has also been greatly influenced by traditional Chinese literature, especially classical Chinese poetry. In the 1920s, China was undergoing changes. Around the May Fourth Movement, revolutionary literature was on the rise. However, at that time, the development of that kind of literary form made a thorough criticism of traditional literature. But, at the same time, there was a movement of imagism happened in the western world. At that time, in the West, there was an upsurge of learning Chinese classical poetry. Imagist masters Ezra Pound and Arthur Waley had participated in the English translation of Chinese poetry. Ezra Pound, as a leading figure of imagism in the West, once gave his definition of image: an “image” is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time[6]. In addition, Ezra Pound once made a brief description about how he formed the concept of image. He explained that a very key factor was the influence and inspiration he received from Chinese characters[7]. In the further development of image, with the development of cognitive linguistics, Lakoff and Johnson[8] proposed the concept of image schema in *Metaphors We Live By* by developing the concept of image and schema. The concept of image schema can be defined as: an image schema is a recurring, dynamic pattern of our perceptual interactions and motor programs that gives coherence a structure to our experience[9]. In the later researches on literary texts, researchers not only use the image analysis techniques, but also combine the image schema in cognitive linguistics to conduct text research.

2.2. The development of research on image within China

Professor Jiang Yin once said, “In a very long period of development of literature research, the concept of image is still vague”[10]. Originated in China, the concept of image has been defined in many ancient Chinese classics. However, with the passing of the time and the in-depth study of image, many scholars have given different definitions of image. Here, we discuss the definition of image from Chinese and western two sides respectively. Professor Yuan Xingpei, a famous scholar of Chinese classics, once said, “The ‘image’ is the object which is mixed with the subjective feeling, or the subjective feeling which is expressed with the help of the object”[11]. Ai Qing, a famous Chinese poet, also said, “Image is a kind of concrete feeling”[12]. From the three points of view, it can be seen that only through the author’s own experience and personality processing can the real object become an image. On the western side, the definition of image mainly comes from the imagism. Leader of the imagism Ezra Pound had been attracted by Chinese and oriental classical poetry images, thus giving the definition of “image”. From all above, it can be known that although the definition of image from the both sides has a subtle difference, they both think that the formation of image should be based on real objects and should combined with personal subjective factors such as emotion and knowledge reserves.

3. The River Image Symbolizing the Secular Life

One of the interpretations of the word “secular” in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (fifth edition) is “A secular priests lives among ordinary people, rather than with other priest in a monastery.” In the view of Buddhism, the concept of “secular” is often contrasted with “Buddhist”, who can obtain enlightenment through Buddhist practices. “They travel outside the human world. I travel within it. There is no common ground for these two ways”[22]. At the beginning of his journey, Siddhartha, becoming a Samana penancing himself, held a scornful attitude toward secular life,

believing that “All of this was not worthy of one look from his eye, it all lied, it all stank, it all stank of lies, it all pretended to be meaningful and joyful and beautiful, and it all was just concealed putrefaction”[13]. His best friend Govinda was also sure that “He would not become a common Brahman, not a lazy official in charge of offerings; not a greedy merchant with magic spells; not a vain, vacuous speaker; not a mean, deceitful priest”[13]. Like Sotapanna and Arhat in the scripture Vajracchedika-Sutra, Samanas practice the doctrine “Abstain from all human desires and selfhood,” which is contrary to Siddhartha’s pursuit of selfhood and the “Brahmā”. After abandoning penancing himself and seeking for Gotama the Buddha, Siddhartha and his friend Govinda made a very different choice. Govinda chose to stay in the Sravasti and become a monk following Gotama the Buddha for the rest of his life. Siddhartha, however, after pointing out the flaws of doctrines in the conversation with the Gotama, despite the advice of his friends, resolutely planned to follow his heart to find his true selfhood and the “Atman” by living in the Large City.

3.1. The river image symbolizing the starting point of secular life

Siddhartha becoming a Samana to practice penance, seeking Gotama to listen to his doctrines, all of these were in order to pursue his selfhood, to talk to gods, to unite his spirit with divinity, and to achieve the highest goal of being a nobleman of Brahman. Even when the Gotama’s doctrines failed to detain him, he thought, “I want to learn from myself, want to be my student, want to get to know myself, the secret of Siddhartha”[13]. This was just like the famous ancient Chinese philosopher Wang Yangming once obtaining enlightenment in Longchang, although he was happy but full of loneliness because of being alone. The river Siddhartha crossed before entering the Large City was the starting point of his secular life, and the ferryman on the river was Siddhartha’s guide who guided him entering into the secular life, from which his sufferings of being a normal person began. In the original version of this book, the name of the ferryman is called “Vasudeva”, in Hindu mythology, which is believed to be the eighth incarnation of Vishnu, the father of Krishna. Krishna is one of the most beloved gods in India, and his father Vasudeva is the important media of his coming into this world. Vasudeva, as the guide as well as a father, led the incarnation of Vishnu, Krishna, into this world[14]. In the book, a ferryman named Vasudeva was also a guide as well as a wise man who built a path for Siddhartha crossing the river to go into the Large City, the earthly world, to experience secular life. After being addict to the secular life and gradually losing his true selfhood by living in the Large City, Siddhartha suddenly realized that this was not what he wanted to pursuit and then he went to the same river being awakened by the sound “Om” in his heart. In Hinduism, the scripture Vedas held by Brahma, one of the three creators of the world, is the principle of how the whole world works. And through the scripture Vedas the sound “Om” is born. In the ancient Indian tradition, the word “Atman”, the universal essence, can be perceived through “Om”, the sound from which the world is created[15]. The word “Atman”, which can be translated as “selfhood” and “I”, is one of the most fundamental concepts in Hindu philosophy. It refers to the eternal core individuality of all human beings and it is the basis of all human activities[16]. The awakening of Siddhartha not happened in the Large City or in his floundering nightmares, but beside the river, the river he once crossed in order to go into the Large City. Beside the riverbank, he stared at the water, awakened by the sound “Om”, the supreme sound in the Hinduism. When Siddhartha entered the city, he crossed the river in order to follow his heart into the earthly world to pursuit secular life, but he gradually lost his selfhood. Then he came to the riverside and obtained awakening there. Siddhartha’s stepping into the secular life began and ended up here, the river accepting him and also opening a door to the earthly world for him. This was exactly what Siddhartha thought when he fled to the river, “My path had led me at that time into a new life, which had now grown old and is dead—my present path, my present new life, shall also take its start there”[13].

3.2. The river image symbolizing the secular life in Large City

After meeting the famous prostitute Kamala, Siddhartha realized that his shabby attire was inappropriate. In order to win her heart, he must change his appearance first. So “He had the barber’s assistant shave his beard and cut his hair, comb his hair and anoint it with fine oil. Then he went to take his bath in the river”[13]. He bathed in the river for a simple purpose, which was just to wash away the dirt of his body. The bath in the river, relying on this contact, one not only washes away the dirt of his body, but also cleanses away his mental stupidity[17]. The bath in the river described by Tagore was full of longing for the divinity, while Siddhartha only wanted to wash away the filth of the flesh with his longing for being enrolled in the secular life. He learned sexual techniques from Kamala and business skills from Kamaswami, a wealthy businessman. In Sanskrit, the word “Kamala” means “thirst for love”, which is a reflection of lust, while the name “Kamaswami” is a combination of the

Sanskrit “kāma” (lust) and “svāmin” (master), which means “the lord of desire”[14]. Siddhartha wanted to obtain awakening through the pursuit of sex and wealth, but like Devdutt Pattanaik[18] once put it in *The Seven Secrets of Vishnu*, “In order to be free from suffering, one must renounce all desires.” The three dharma seals of Buddhism: changing irregularly, everything being of non-self and nirvana in silence are also very different from the secular practices of Siddhartha. When he became rich, he built his luxurious garden by the river. There, he lived an extravagant life. But, sometimes he contemplated his own life with fear there. The river peered through the garden at his secular life and listened to his confusion and pain as well. From coming into the city with poverty and bathing in the river until becoming rich and having his garden built by the river, the river image was closely bound with Siddhartha’s secular life.

4. The River Image Symbolizing the Samsara

One of the interpretations of the word “samsara” in the Collins English Dictionary is “The endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.” In the views of Hinduism, Brahmanism and Buddhism, the word “samsara” refers to the process of the death and rebirth of a creature in the six great divisions in the wheel of karma, namely, the realm of heaven, human, asura, beast, hungry ghost and hell. “There are infinite worlds that are destroyed and rebirthed in infinite time. Effect follows the cause. There are always causes entwined, and we cannot know the beginning; there are always effects, and we cannot measure the end”[19]. All things in the world are connected; cause and effect are linked, and karma drives them forever. In the *Analects of Confucius Variorum*, Chu Hsi[20] also likened the flow of rivers to the samara of human life, “The changing between heaven and earth, the death of people, and the rebirth of babies, never stops, which is the nature of Tao. This is just like a river, once it having gone and it never coming back.” The affairs in the world are like the water in the river, the alternations between the old and the new never ending. The encounters between Siddhartha and Govinda for two times beside the riverbank, the death of the famous prostitute Kamala, and the death of Gotama the Buddha, the cases and effects of all these things as well as their samsara were all reflected through the river.

4.1. The river image symbolizing the samsara of secular affairs

Siddhartha entered the Large City by crossing the river to begin his secular life, and then found his true selfhood beside the riverbank. The river bore the cause of his going to suffer the secular affairs, and carrying the effect of his sudden awakening. The ferryman’s wife died in the riverside hut, and the famous prostitute Kamala, Siddhartha’s lover, also died in the riverside hut on the same bed on which the ferryman’s wife died. Just as the ferryman said, “Kamala has died on the same bed, on which my wife had died a long time ago. Let us also build Kamala’s funeral pile on the same hill on which I had then built my wife’s funeral pile”[13]. The famous prostitute was pregnant with the child of Siddhartha without letting him know after him escaping to the riverbank starting to live with the ferryman. And it was until their accidental encounter beside the river that Siddhartha begun to know that he had been a father long time ago. After the death of the famous prostitute, rebellious spirit of his son became too much for Siddhartha to control. And eventually the son fled from the riverside hut after cursing his father, Siddhartha. When Siddhartha went to search for his son, while crossing the river, he saw his father’s face in the reflection of the river. At that time, the scenario of his son running away from his arms was just as he had left his father without being reluctant to leave years ago. When Govinda and Siddhartha met again for the last time, Gotama the Buddha was about to die and the wise ferryman Vasudeva had walked into the bamboo forest to greet his last moment of life. At that time, Siddhartha finally became a true saint. Actually, Siddhartha Gotama (Śākyamuni) is one person, the founder of Buddhism, but in this book, Hesse splits the religious figure into two separate individuals. They are just like the two sides of the same coin. For the side of Siddhartha, he was a seeker on his way to selfhood, and for the side of Gotama the Buddha, he was an awakened one who had reached the shore of Brahmā. While Siddhartha was still confused by the secular affairs, the Buddha had already reached the truth of the whole world, and when the Buddha was dying, Siddhartha was about to become a true saint. They are two sides of the same coin, and the interchange of their experiences is actually the samsara.

4.2. The river image symbolizing the samsara of lives

“I have learned from the river: everything is coming back”[13]. This was what the ferryman said to Siddhartha during his first river crossing. “He saw: this water ran and ran, incessantly it ran, and was

nevertheless always there, was always at all times the same and yet new in every moment”[13]. People came and went by crossing river. The ferryman ferried Siddhartha, after the death of ferryman, Siddhartha continuing to ferry others. Famous prostitute Kamala came to Siddhartha and then died, but she brought their child, who later fled across the river to the Large City. When Gotama the Buddha was about to die and Siddhartha finally awakened by the riverside, reaching the true essence of “Atman”. The great Greek philosopher Heraclitus once put it “No man ever steps in the same river twice.” The lives are just like the water in the river. Once it elapsed and it would never return. From this point of view, rivers are ruthless. But “The highest good is like water. Water benefits everything by giving without taking or contending. It likes the place others dislike, so it follows closely the divine law”[21]. From this perspective, the river is also benevolent, not competing with other things, reflecting all the things accurately, and what is reflected in the water can never be distorted. It seems cruel, but it is also kind. As a normal monk, Govinda couldn’t understand all of these, but finally, during the last meeting with Siddhartha, the saint Siddhartha showed what he had learned from the river by using the view of gods.

“He no longer saw the face of his friend Siddhartha, instead he saw other faces, many, a long sequence, a flowing river of faces, of hundreds, of thousands, which all came and disappeared, and yet all seemed to be there simultaneously, which all constantly changed and renewed themselves...he saw gods, saw Krishna, saw Agni—he saw all of these figures and faces in a thousand relationships with one another, each one was a will to die, a passionately painful confession of transitoriness, and yet none of them died”[13].

Siddhartha once said, “This is a stone, and will, after certain time, perhaps turn into soil, and will turn from soil into a plant or animal or human being”[13]. The river taught him the essence of lives: lives run on and on, and the outward appearance of lives does not represent the core of them. Lives of creatures will never die, and will run on forever just like the river. Just like the ten incarnations of Vishnu in Hinduism: the fifth incarnation the dwarf Vamana, the ninth incarnation the Buddha Siddhartha Gotama, and the tenth incarnation the white horse Kalki, etc. Gods can become strange animals and mortals, and mortals can also reincarnate in other forms to continue their lives. All the things in the world are the result of samsara, and the appearance of different lives actually contains the same essence. Siddhartha would pass away, and so did Govinda, but they would also be alive through other life forms. The river taught Siddhartha the cycle of reincarnation, the samsara, and Siddhartha also showed it to Govinda.

5. The Conclusion and Further Thoughts

5.1. *The conclusion*

“In the shade of the house, in the sunshine of the riverbank near the boats, in the shade of the Sal-wood forest, in the shade of the fig tree is where Siddhartha grew up”[13]. Siddhartha, who grew up by the river, left his hometown to penance himself by ignoring his father’s dissuasion. After becoming a Samana, Siddhartha sought Gotama the Buddha to listen to his doctrines. When the two met for the first time, one was an ordinary man and another was a Buddha admired by all. Then Siddhartha went to the Large City to seek selfhood by living a secular life. In the Large City, he bathed in the river to wash the dirt of his body, and then built his house by the river. At that time, in the view of Buddhism, the river acted as a dividing line between the secular world and the world in which people penanced themselves according to the doctrines of Buddhism. And, also, it is noticeable that the river cleansed the filth of his body as Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River in order to cleanse his original sin in the view of Christianity. After suffering a lot, Siddhartha fled to the river outside the city through which he used to enter the Large City and was awakened by it. This entry and exiting of the Large City through the same river form a loop. Siddhartha left his father and crossed the river into the Large City; Siddhartha’s child also crossed the river and fled to the city, which created another loop. When Siddhartha saw his friend Govinda for the last time, Gotama the Buddha had already passed away, and Siddhartha had become a saint and found his true selfhood. When the two met for the first time, one was a humble mortal, and another was a holy man worshiped by many, and then, later, one became a saint who passed away in pace, and another raised to become a new well-known saint. The mutual transformation of the two figures’ experiences also forms a loop. Many loops which concerned about life and death as well as secular affairs intertwined symbolizing samsara according to Hinduism and Buddhism. In the book, from Siddhartha leaving his hometown as an ordinary Brahmin nobleman after bathing in the river, to his deciding to stay with the river for the rest of his life, the river witnessed

loops appearing again and again, and also it witnessed Siddhartha's secular life in the Large City. The river in the book symbolizes samsara as well as secular life.

5.2. Advice on further research

In the early period of the research on this book in the 1950s, researchers like German professor Rudolf Pannwitz and South Korean scholar Lee Inn-Ung focused on the research of oriental culture and religion reflected in the book[1]. But from the beginning of this century, scholars, such as Christoph Gellner, are gradually shifting to the researches of psychoanalysis. Until recently, research on Siddhartha—An Indian Tale becomes more comprehensive, from the philosophy of religion, analytic psychology to myth origins. However, except studying the book as a whole, researchers also need to lay emphasis on the specific individual images in the text to further analyze the value of the book, such as river image and religious or myth prototype of the main characters. The research field mentioned above has received little or even no attention. Siddhartha—An Indian Tale is a huge treasury, and there are still a lot of valuable things waiting for people to discover.

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