

**Literature in the Age of Globalization with Special Reference to  
Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha***

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to examine the influence of globalization on English literature with special reference to Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*. Globalization has changed the face of English literature, when we think of globalization and forms of entertainment, we immediately think of the internet, social media, movies, or television shows. But contrary to popular belief, literature also holds an important place in the flow of entertainment media that is coursing through the veins of public consumption in our globalized world. The technological advances that are connecting people worldwide through shared information are also serving as a medium to disseminate books across national and cultural boundaries.

The term "world literature" was first used by the German writer and statesman Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, referring to dissemination of literature from and to countries across the globe. World literature, in the modern sense, refers to literary works that are translated into multiple languages and circulated to an audience outside their country origin.

Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* was published in Germany in 1922; it quickly became popular throughout Europe. Its introspective and passive protagonist appealed to readers who were traumatized by the violence of aggression of World War I, which had ended few years before its publication. It became popular again after World War II, when Hesse won many prestigious awards, including the Nobel Prize in literature in 1946. A few decades later, American readers' supportive pacifism and individualistic spirituality found resonance in *Siddhartha*, which was first published in English in 1951. Hesse's *Siddhartha* has transcended the boundaries of nation, language and culture.

**Keywords:** Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*, Globalization, World Literature, Cultural Boundaries, English Literature

Globalization is an undeniable phenomenon and can be explained in multiple ways. Globalization encompasses variant aspects of modern world, bringing nations of the world closer into a single society through culture, economic transactions, politics, technology, social interactions, and literature. It is a term used for the growing integration of economics and societies around the world. Any interaction across cultures, borders, ethnic groups constitutes globalization. Globalization has become a dominant buzz word in social sciences debates in the media. It is, of course, not just a word, but it denotes very real developments in the world of today and even more so in the world of

the 21st century. Although globalization processes are especially obvious in the areas of economy and marketing, they affect all spheres of life— political and social systems, institutions, values, and also the daily activities of individual people. Companies are selling their products worldwide, and they themselves become supranational, i.e. they are less and less identified as belonging to one country only.

Mergers and acquisitions result in multinational or supranational giants with an ever-increasing scope of products. At the same time, traditional forms of business, commerce, education, etc. are changing with companies buying and selling their products (or even other companies) via e-mail or the Internet with complete spatial disregard. An emergence of global culture ensures that cooking, for example, is no longer an essential and time-consuming daily activity. Packaged pre-prepared food is ‘micro waved’ within seconds, shopping and banking can be handled online, the concept of working from home is ready to be lapped by people. The Internet, the digital marketplace for e-commerce and a lot of other activities has influenced the way people learn, how they search for information, how they communicate. Besides availing knowledge at a click of mouse, new communities are formed e.g., communities of users and/or chatters on a particular website, or on an e-mail list. That is, people are communicating, they are sharing like never before.

Globalization has changed all aspects of human’s life such as culture, society, economics, education, politics and literature. It offers varieties of choices like fashion, music, technology, entertainment etc. Cultural contact with other countries has influenced traditional culture and literature. The process of Globalization started with the masses travelling to other geographic areas for exploration with the interest for travel and enjoying personal space; then came the era of search for global employment opportunities in an attempt to win the race necessitated by the game rule of “survival of the fittest”. With every leap that technology took towards modernization, globalization started rooting its footsteps. In today’s era the various means of telecommunication, social media, and most importantly, the Internet has a big role to play in the spread of globalization.

The interchange of world views and ideas has resulted in a major transformation of the lifestyle and living standards of people globally. Indian culture, with its rich heritage, is no exception to this transformation process. With the emergence of globalization, our deep rooted traditions and customs have loosened up their hold. Globalization has not only helped in the westernization of India, but conversely, the Indian culture has also spread its impact globally.

Culture and traditions of any geographic region hold a special significance with respect to their uniqueness and that is the differentiating factor for a population within a geographic boundary. This uniqueness has been disturbed in varying degrees in lieu of globalization. Such an impact is very much pronounced when they hit a developing country like India. Globalization has both positive and negative impacts throughout the globe. Widespread effects ranging from environmental challenges, climatic influence, air, water, soil pollution to Cyber-crimes etc., are apt examples of the negative effects of being Global.

The literary aspect of globalization is also of no less important. Though seemingly separate areas of study, both globalization and literature share some meeting points in their institutional and structural edifices; undoubtedly debates about globalization are relevant to debates in literary studies and certainly existing ideas of interest in literature and literary studies fit with notions of globalization. It is a reciprocal course through which literature and globalization affect each other interactively. As Paul Jay claims,

Our awareness of the complex ways in which English and American identities have been constructed historically through migration, displacement, colonialism, exile, gender relations, and cultural hybridity has radically restructured our sense of what Paul Gilroy has dubbed the “roots/routes” of these identities. With this awareness it has become increasingly difficult to study British or American literature without situating it, and the culture(s) from which it emerged, in transnational histories linked to globalization.

Of course, there are some other reasons to justify the need for such affiliation between the two principles as Paul Jay further asserts the importance of English language and literature appearing in the wider scope:

At the same time the remarkable explosion of English literature produced outside Britain and the United States has made it clear that this literature is becoming defined less by a nation than by a language, in which authors from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds write. The globalization of English from this point of view is not a theoretical formulation or a political agenda developed by radicals in the humanities to displace the canon. It is a simple fact of contemporary history. English literature is increasingly post national, whether written by cosmopolitan writers like Derek Walcott, Arundhati Roy, and Nadine Gordimer or by a host of lesser-known writers working in their home countries or in diasporic communities around the world, from Europe and Africa to the Caribbean and North America. I want to argue that we can more effectively reorganize our approach to the study of what we have heretofore treated as national literatures (in our curricula and programs) by emphasizing literature’s relation to the historical processes of globalization.

While theorizing the concept of globalization, Paul Jay differentiates between globalization conceived of as a postmodern phenomenon and as a long historical process.

However, while approaching literature and globalization within literary studies three correlative levels of attachment or association can be highlighted. At one level, this relationship mainly engages with literary theory, discipline and criticism. Many studies have tried and succeeded to fit discussions of globalization with certain established fields of literary studies. Some links can be traced between globalization debates and literary postmodernism and post colonialism since these terms have been on the highest point of agenda during the same post-1970s period in which the term

globalization has extended itself to its current prominence. Susie O'Brien and Imre Szeman also posit that

A cursory survey of contemporary literary critical discourses suggests that some of the tools to address these issues [like seeking literatures outside national framework] are ready-to-hand: the (messy, unwieldy, heterogeneous) critical discourses of post colonialism and postmodernism each address, more or less explicitly, the relationship between literature and globalization.

At this level notions such as world literature and comparative literature and their bonds with globalization are considered of great value.

The second level could be called one of tools or mediums with certain key terms. The Media and specially its new forms is one of the key terms here. Indeed, modern technologies such as satellite communications and World Wide Web have made drastic changes in dissemination of various forms of literature and quite relevantly information explosion has played a central role in distribution of social and cultural packages all around the globe. The globalization of publishing and literary institutions has emerged as an important phenomenon. English language status in the world – and its popularity with different forms of socio-cultural exchanges or with literary productions – is the second key figure. English being the contemporary lingua franca, a great part of literary production is created or at least transmitted via 'global English'.

The third important medium is undoubtedly translation practice. It is closely related to the dominant position of instrumental global English; translation practice plays a very dynamic role in the connection between globalization and literature. Bassnett and Lefevere rightly emphasize that

... With the development of Translation Studies as a discipline in its own right, with a methodology that draws on comparatistics and cultural history. Translation has been a major shaping force in the development of world culture and no study of comparative literature can take place without regard to translation.

On the surface, translation conveys or transmits texts across boundaries and communicates across languages, but indeed, building a part of social, cultural, political and economic existence is the profound work it does. In either surface or deep perspectives the grand role of translation in the global patterns of communication is quite outstanding. Translation has become an important tool to enhance understanding between cultures; translation brings cultures closer. Hence, it is quite reasonable if it is claimed that translation provides one of the meeting points in globalized cultural relationships.

The third level in itself includes broad disciplines and methods through which literary studies has evoked realities of globalization in the way literary texts and the interpretation thereof have been recruited to support or elucidate conceptual positions taken by political and socio-cultural theorists about globalization. In this regard, Suman Gupta asserts that:

[...] acts of literary reading will both register globalization's appearances as literary theme and seek to develop or extend narratives of globalization. Debates about globalization and literature, thus, are not held apart with merely the possibility of the latter being able to present something of the former, but are meshed together so that they merge in a conjoined field that processes globalization in literature and the literariness of globalization.

The third level also bears a rather problematic issue within its sphere. The uncertainty that if, in practical terms, there are certain passwords to the world of literary globality; in other words, some questions are raised about any definite formulations for a literary text in qualifying to get the etiquette of global.

The concept "world literature" or Weltliteratur is first coined by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in 1827 to describe the growing availability of texts from other nations:

National literature does not mean much at present, it is time for the era of world literature, and everybody must endeavor to accelerate this epoch.

This happens to be the turning point in a prolonged study of a phrase that travels much beyond its realm or function; in fact, during recent decades, Weltliteratur has attracted interest in two (often overlapping) areas of inquiry, comparative literature and postcolonial studies, most notably (and especially in the United States) in connection with the theme of globalization. And just interestingly enough, contemporary literary globalization is widely read under the sign of Goethean Weltliteratur.

Even when Goethe defines this notion more simply: "European, i.e., world literature;" the venture seems bearing connotations.

For Goethe, world literature is an evolutionary process whereby the various national literatures will gradually, through countless individual encounters and "corporate actions," unite in a grand synthesis (perhaps reminiscent of Northrop Frye's structuralist notion of an "order of words"). He sees the approaching epoch of "world literature" as an opportunity for authors "to look beyond their own surroundings" and thereby avoid "pedantic arrogance," as an opportunity for mutual support and correction, and as a development that everyone must now work to accelerate.

However according to Hendrik Birus, Goethe's dictum is not to be taken at face value today: For what we meanwhile observe is not the replacement of national literatures by world literature, but the rapid blossoming of a multitude of European and non-European literatures and the simultaneous emergence of a world literature (mostly in English translations) as two aspects of one and the same process.

The understanding of such dialectic, Birus argues, ought to be one of the main targets of comparative literature today. Hendrik Birus also emphasizes that Goethe's notion can help the discipline of comparative literature to recognize both the limits and possibilities of its field of inquiry.

Later on the term "world literature" was used by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in their Communist Manifesto (1848) to describe the existence of a world literature which is produced out of the constant revolutionizing of bourgeois production, and spreads across national and cultural boundaries.

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country in place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency; we have intercourse in every direction and as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.

In fact, such advice to shun "national one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness" was, from one perspective, an emphasis on Goethe's goal of Weltliteratur: "not that the nations shall think alike, but that they shall learn how to understand each other, and, if they do not care to love one another, at least that they will learn to tolerate one another. And from a more modern standpoint, those statements on world literature could be interpreted as foreshadowing of a greater share in cultural and literary globalization. However, the manner in which notions of world literature have been reinvigorated in and since the 1990s, primarily in connection with the institutional space of comparative literature, has a necessarily close relation to the association between literature and globalization. This presents a somewhat distinctive institutional track or history when compared with English studies. In this track, one finds negotiations on how literary traditions should be described and institutionally engaged, gradually moving away from conventional organization along national or regional lines towards a more joined-up international or global view. The phrase "world literature" is such an attractive vista that a variety of theorists.

Writers, critics and reviewers have already engaged themselves in its implications or disciplines. This has been done either with exclusive concentration on this term or in its conjunction with cultural studies and comparative literature. Although anthologies of world literature have often used the term to market a largely European canon, the past three decades have given rise to a much more expansive conception of literary interest and value.

Contrary to David Damrosch's much quoted conviction that world literature does not lie in reading everything but in reading a few things carefully, Spivak reminds us that as the discipline becomes global or planetary, we need to encounter how members of those cultures speak for themselves in their own language. In her book, *Death of a Discipline* (2003) Spivak tries to "mediate



the radical political agenda of Theory in comparative literature both by maintaining the particular importance of taking „the languages of the Southern Hemisphere as active cultural media rather than as objects of study by the sanctioned ignorance of the metropolitan migrant“ against the hegemony of “global English” (Spivak 2003, 9), and by maintaining a presumptive conceptual horizon that recognizes collectivity the collectivity that is presumed to be the condition and effect of humanism is the human family itself. Suman Gupta appraises this standpoint by Spivak in the direction of a specific alignment:

The idealistic thrust of world literature, from Goethe to Aldridge, has, however, been pushed towards a more pragmatic and real-world turn, and the consequent process of reconceptualization is still underway. Inevitably this entails, as the phrase „world literature“ suggests, a cautious calling up of Universalist political thinking to offset and question the emphasis on differences and fissures in postmodernism and post colonialism. The impetus of a conditional universalism is expressed thoughtfully in Gayatri Spivak's consideration of comparative literature in *Death of a Discipline*.

Accordingly, Spivak reveals that in opposition to comparative literature’s claim of worldwide scope in 2000 most academic programs in comparative literature in the United States concentrated on “Europe and the extracurricular Orient” Simultaneously, programs in area studies found themselves in search of a renewed mission, having prospered with the Cold War and declined in its wake. In view of that, Spivak first proposes a coalition between comparative literature and area studies, with the aim of making these enterprises resemble each other. Comparative literature would gain from the linguistic and political coverage, institutional alliances, and rigor of area studies, while area studies would learn to think conceptually about things that are better understood through close reading of all kinds of texts than through empirical observation. Comparative literature committed to a national and territorial model of the world, must, in turn, attend to the new demographic frontiers of the postcolonial and globalized era.

Hermann Hesse is one of the most widely read German language authors; his books are world literature classics and he is one of the most famous 20<sup>th</sup> century writers. His great success is based on such works as *Siddhartha*, *Steppenwolf*, and *the Glass Bead Game*. His books which have been translated more than 70 languages, total around 150 million published copies. *Siddhartha* written in German by an author, who was born with (inherited) Estonian citizenship, grew up in Germany and became a Swiss citizen. And appropriately, like many of Hesse’s works, *Siddhartha* has received a particularly international reception. The heart of *Siddhartha* is in the portrayal of an intensely personal “restlessness of the soul”, and in the exploration of difficult questions of meaning, purpose, truth and enlightenment.

*Siddhartha* follows its eponymous central character (the name plays on the birth name of the Buddha) not only on an “inward” journey, but one through space and time. The young *Siddhartha*’s quest is prompted by nagging restlessness, typical of almost all Hesse’s characters, and driven by his thirst for understanding. He abandons home and family to become an itinerant monk. He learns from

the Buddha but refuses to become a “follower”. He transforms himself into a “worldly” man, guided by a courtesan and a merchant. And most famously he ends his life as a ferryman, achieving an extraordinary harmony with the universe and with time, embodied by the eternally flowing river.

The novel was written at a time of international crisis and transition in the aftermath of World War I. It was also a time of personal and artistic problems for Hesse. Like many of his modernist contemporaries in the aftermath of the war, he was seeking new directions away from the romantically-tinged realism that had characterized his early successes. Siddhartha was inspired in part by his reading of Eastern religions and philosophy, in particular that of Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism. And so it is perhaps unsurprising that the book displays few of the qualities of popular drama. There’s no development of rounded characters and no dramatic tension in its consciously sparse and focused depiction of a quest for “the essential thing” beyond the physical world. Siddhartha searches for a truth that can only be attained by an “inward journey” of self-discovery, one that can be experienced but not taught.

This rejection of formal modes of instruction and dogma was an important theme for Hesse. It undoubtedly relates to his unhappy experience of a bourgeois education in the formal rigidity of imperial Germany. Yet at the same time the compact, episodic narrative of Siddhartha, in depicting the key “stations” of a life, displays an affinity both with the German tradition of the Bildungsroman, the novel of education, as well as dramatic forms that have an even longer tradition, for example in the Christian passion play.

There are in fact few works of literature from the 20th century that have enjoyed comparable reach and resonance. The first wave of enthusiasm was during the 1920s and 1930s. Then there was a second from the 1960s, when the novel’s themes of spirituality and rebellion found a ready audience among a young generation seeking authenticity and value in an increasingly secular and material world. Siddhartha has been translated into more than 30 languages, including many Indian languages, has sold countless millions of copies and was lavishly adapted into a film, directed by Conrad Rooks in 1972.

The influence of Asian culture on Europe stretches back many centuries, and Hesse’s novel was certainly not unique in attempting to go beyond cliché in its engagement with Asian themes. Yet for today’s multicultural and globalised culture, the synthesis of Eastern and Western perspectives in this unusual novel retains a distinct relevance.

When Hermann Hesse first published this novella in Germany, it quickly became popular throughout Europe. The reason behind Hesse’s Siddhartha worldwide popularity lies in its universality of theme and plot construction. Siddhartha the protagonist of this novella is a universal character, his pain and struggle of spiritual quest makes it a popular work of art among all the nations’ people. In this materialistic world where each person is running blindly towards worldly desires, the novel comes across as a breath of fresh air. The beauty of this book manifests itself when it is read in different phases of life. The interpretation comes out in various hues depending on the



mental picture of the reader. The book is narrated by a third person and has direct and indirect quotes of various characters but the focus is always on Siddhartha. Hesse in his simple way of writing has portrayed an ordinary man's search and journey to salvation and enlightenment. There are many references to Hindu holy books - Vedas, Upanishads and the Gita. The word "Om" has a special significance for the Hindus and it recurs in the novel. In part two of the book the author has assigned a small chapter on this word. Siddhartha practices meditation with the chants of "Om" when he is at his paternal home, training to be a Brahmin.

Hilda Rosner, the translator of the novel, lyrically explains the significance of the word in the life of a Brahmin - "Om is the bow, the arrow is the soul, Brahmin is the arrow's goal"<sup>10</sup> The novel starts with a boy named Siddhartha, born in a rich Brahmin family engaged in "the art of contemplation and meditation" He has all the luxuries at his disposal and leads an easy life. However, the feeling of something missing always haunts him. One day he comes across some people called Samanas, who are ascetics, having renounced all their material and physical desires - "Wandering ascetics, they were thin worn-out men, neither old nor young, with dusty and bleeding shoulders, practically naked, scorched by the sun, solitary, strange and hostile - lean jackals in the world of men".

Siddhartha is influenced by their way of living and believing this to be the missing link in his life, leaves his home against the wishes of his father, in quest of enlightenment. After moving with the samanas he realizes that this was not what he had expected. He is still dissatisfied with life. Soon he hears the name of Gautama Buddha who was supposed to have attained Nirvana or total bliss. After meeting Gautama Buddha, he discovers that though Buddha's enlightenment was a unique personal experience, he was not able to convince him to become his follower. None of the wise men he met could teach him the ways and means to achieve salvation.

This insight leads Siddhartha to set out again into the unknown on his own. The solitary life he leads amidst the samanas for three years suddenly ends as he enters the court of Kamala - a courtesan. She teaches him the art of love.

Siddhartha now enters into business and becomes a wealthy man just as his father used to be. All good things in life surround him. One day while introspecting he feels nauseated with the way he is living. He asks himself a question: - "For what purpose I left my family and friends? Just to stay like them?" He once again walks away into the forest leaving behind all his fortune and friends. Very disillusioned, he contemplates suicide by the side of the river. He is suddenly jolted into consciousness by the word Om. He gives up the thought of taking his life and continues with his journey.

This time he comes across Vasudeva, the ferryman, who serves as his teacher and a mutual admiration develops between the two. Inquisitive individuals come and meet these two people and feel a sense of healing after spending some time with them. The novel follows the life journey of Siddhartha through various stages with different people- with Gautama the Buddha, Kamala the

courtesan and Vasudeva the ferryman who teach him specific purposes in life. He yearns for his son's love but is agitated by his indifference when he leaves him and goes away. This reminds him of his younger days when he had left his father alone to pursue his own goal. He goes through various phases in life and is satiated with both the spiritual and material world.

Finally, Siddhartha stops looking for his son and returns to Vasudeva the ferryman and living by the side of the river finds solace and spends the rest of his days ferrying people across the waters. Here living by the side of the river he finds enlightenment and learns an important lesson that knowledge can be taught but wisdom comes from experience. Siddhartha was originally written in German and published in 1922. Although the novel was inspired by Hesse's visit to India and delves on Hinduism and Buddhism, the problems faced by Siddhartha are universal. Any person who has pondered on life can appreciate the book irrespective of caste, creed or religion.

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Literature in the Age of Globalization with Special Reference to Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* 38