



## The Buddha through modern literary eyes

By Prof. Suwanda Sugunasiri writing from Toronto

British author, Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* was regarded as blasphemous and raised ire in the Islamic world. A fatwa condemning the author to death was issued by the Iranian spiritual leader in 1989. The furore brings to mind the treatment of the Buddha in two works of fiction, one originally written by a Swiss writer and translated into English, and the other in Sinhala in Sri Lanka.

There are both parallels and differences between Herman Hesse's ever-so-popular novel, *Siddhartha*, and Rushdie's work.

Both were written in a Western language and published in the West, although Hesse was not born into the faith the book deals with.

### Renunciation

If Prophet Mohammed is thinly veiled under the name of Mahamed, Siddhartha is the lay name of the Buddha before his renunciation. The Buddha himself becomes a fictional character at the hands of Hesse. Indeed, the cover of the first English translation of *Siddhartha* in 1951 shows a seated Buddha.

Hesse's character, however, does not match the life of historical Siddhartha in all its detail. Our protagonist, for example, ends up as a ferryman and not a Buddha. But there is little doubt that Hesse had the Buddha's life in mind when he developed his character.

Born to a Kshatriya family (the Buddha was born a prince), Siddhartha leaves home "to join the ascetics," and goes from teacher to teacher. Dissatisfied, he goes on a solitary

search.

All this is the life of the Buddha. Even the ferryman is symbolic of the Buddha, the one who found the way to help sentient beings across the ocean of life.

### **Twist of history**

In a clever twist of history, Hesse takes Siddhartha, and his companion Govinda, to the Buddha as his last teacher. Leaving the Buddha, Siddhartha goes on the solitary search, just like the historical Siddhartha did, vowing “I’ll conquer myself.”

This search, however, takes him on a different course from the historical Siddhartha: to a courtesan who he asks to be his “friend and teacher.” But this again is clearly not created out of the blue by the author, but drawn upon the character of courtesan Ambapali who goes on to become an Arahant under the Buddha.

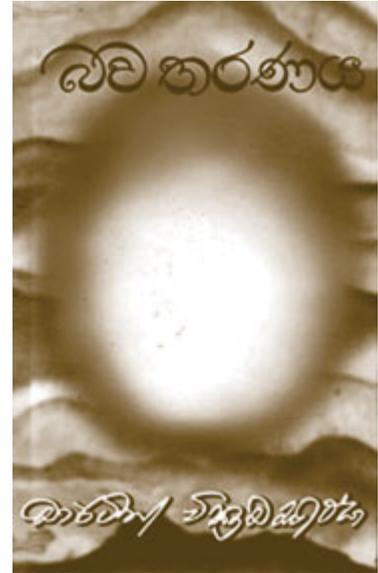
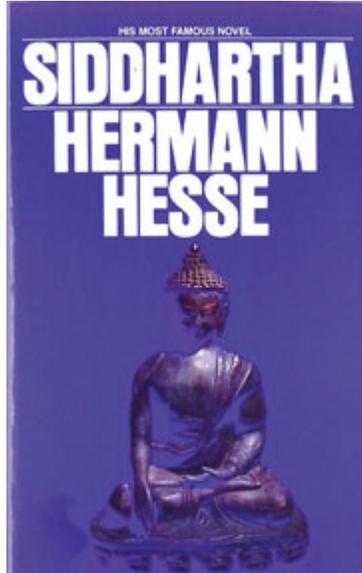
In the course of the psychological transformation from spiritual seeker to prisoner of the senses, Hesse uses the same dream technique as the one that has stirred up the Rushdie controversy:

During the night ... Siddhartha had a dream. He dreamt that Govinda stood before him, in the yellow robe of an ascetic ... He embraced Govinda ... and kissed him. He was no longer Govinda, but a woman, and out of the woman’s gown emerged a full breast, and Siddhartha lay there and drank; sweet and strong tasted the milk from her breast. It tasted of woman and man ... (*Siddhartha*, 1951, p. 50).

According to the Abhidhamma analysis of a human being, there is both a woman and a man (yes, listed in that order) in each of us. While elements like the senses – eye, ear, nose, tongue and body, are the universals, ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ are particulars. While each of us come to be of a dominance of one or the other of the latter at conception, the one not opted for remains dormant within us nevertheless. Indeed it may be reflective of this that in the Sinhala Buddhist culture, the Buddha comes to be called both ‘mother’ (of nectar) (*amaa maeniyā*) and ‘father’ (*budu piyaanan*). Formally speaking, if the former refers to the affective, i.e., the feeling domain of the right brain hemisphere, the latter refers to the cognitive, i.e., the rational domain of the left hemisphere.

This scene, as well as the lengthy encounter with the courtesan (covering a full quarter of the novel), who finds herself with child, can be seen as drawing upon Prince Siddhartha’s own lay life of twenty-nine years. He lived in a royal household, entertained by wine and dancing women. He had a wife and a son.

Hesse's portrayal of Siddhartha, no doubt, is an extension of historical Siddhartha's life up to renunciation, but incorporating significant elements of life after renunciation.



And he is clearly exploring the human side of the pre-Buddha, through thinly veiled fictional detours.

Just as clearly, all this is offensive to the sensibility of the Buddhist who likes to think of only the Buddha, as the one beyond a shadow of lust, and in complete control of the senses, with the pre-Buddha, the very anti-thesis, and preferred to be kept far off from memory.

Despite the liberties taken of the type that would raise the ire of the devout, Hesse departs from Rushdie in one significant way. He does not treat the Buddha irreverently. Indeed, the protagonist addresses the Buddha as, "O Perfect One."

Yet, Siddhartha challenges him:

*You show the world as a complete, unbroken chain ... linked together by cause and effect. ... But ... this unity and logical consequence of all things is broken in one place. Through a small gap there streams into the world of unity something strange, something ... that cannot be demonstrated and proved; that is your doctrine of rising above the world, of salvation (p. 35).*

Siddhartha is challenging here one of the Buddha's most fundamental teachings: Nibbana. The entirety of his teachings thus comes tumbling down. The Buddha is no longer the Perfect One!

Or the All-knowing One, as known to millions of followers. The Buddha responds to the challenge with the words, "You have found a flaw."

Now the Buddha admits to his fallibility!

The Buddha even wishes the departing young Siddhartha well in his search.

## Sensibility

Wouldn't all this step on the Buddhist sensibility? A redeeming factor for Hesse is that such a freedom is allowed by the Buddha himself. In his Discourse to the Kalamas, the Buddha says: "... it is proper that you have a doubt." The Buddha cautions further not to accept anything, even in the faith that "this is our teacher," but only upon personal experience.

Today, after over six decades, Siddhartha still adorns the shelves of libraries and university course outlines in both the Western and the Buddhist world. But what about when it first hit the bookstores?

As I recollect it, the publication hardly moved a feather in the Buddhist world. Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand were just beginning to enjoy political freedom. The literary elite had had their own education and training in the West, and were perhaps too benumbed to the local culture. For the more sensitive, Siddhartha would have been simply a twitch of the decadent West, and something to be ignored!

Where Siddhartha found ready acceptance, of course, was among the North Americans whose search for an alternative lifestyle ended in the hippie culture.

A closer parallel to the Rushdie furore, however, is the Sinhala novel written in the early seventies by Sri Lanka's foremost writer of the time, Martin Wickramasinghe. *Bava taranaya* (*Crossing the Ocean of Life*) is the very story of the life of the Buddha.

While Wickramasinghe, born and raised a Buddhist, handles the Buddha story fictionally with the same respect that Hesse does, his imagination runs riot in one scene, which cuts to the very core of the Sinhala Buddhist sensibility.

As in history, the Buddha in Wickramasingha's novel (1973) returns to his hometown. Here, he is venerated by his father, nursing mother and the royal retinue with deep respect, but keeping their distance.

Now without waiting for Yasodhara, his former wife, to come to him, the Buddha goes in search of her, and meets her in the bed chamber. And here the reader is treated to the following moving scene:

## Restraint

*It was with the greatest restraint that Yasodhara held in check any verbal expression of the surge of happiness that arose in her heart upon seeing the Buddha. But the surge held in check was so overwhelming that it knocked her right down. Soon up on her knees, she embraced the Buddha's feet, kissing them, as tears rolled down. As if in a stupor, she then reached up the legs to just*

*Yasodhara gave vent to her love, sorrow and happiness, turning them into a stream of tears. Seeing the bed chamber and the contents therein that ushered in flashes of his lay life from winning Yasodhara's love through a skilful display of the martial arts to the time of the birth of Rahula, the Buddha entered into a Samadhi. Across his face spread an aura of Metta and Karuna. An immediately sensing Yasodhara stopped kissing his legs and gazed at the Buddha's face. Even as her heart came to be overwhelmed with a happiness at seeing the face in its lustre of spiritual happiness, she was given to a fear (Bava taranaya, 13th printing 2008, p. 175,).*

### Clergy

If my memory serves me right, critics, journalists and the intelligentsia, and most understandably the Buddhist clergy, were outraged. And there were calls to ban the book, and pull it off the racks of bookstores and university libraries. But luckily no effigy burnings or death threats!

Luckily again Sri Lanka was no theocratic state. The multifaith secular government let the matter lie where it should: in the hands of the literary world.

Perhaps my literal translation does not capture all the nuances intended by the author, but what does the literary world see in this classic and powerful portrayal of conflict, denouement and resolution in one single paragraph? I'd say a deft literary hand at work, inviting the reader to at least six of the nine literary 'tastes' as in Bharata Muni's *Natyasastra*, depending on what the reader brings to it. First, for the uninitiated and the immature reader, it is the *srangaara rasa* (love), while for the conservative and traditional reader, it is *raudra* (anger). There is also the *karuna* (compassion) for the helpless Yasodhara, but also the compassion and the empathy of the Buddha himself who, just prior to this scene, goes to where Yasodhara is, without waiting for her to come to meet her. There is also the 'apprehensive' taste (*bhaya*) as Yasodhara ends given to a fear. But in the end, it is the *saanta rasa* (peace), a Buddhism-inspired sensibility, that wins the day, along with again *karuna* (compassion).

In the scene, the Buddha is portrayed as the Arahant with the *kilesa* defilements jettisoned, and Yasodhara as the woman in *samsara*, in the unsurprising vise grip of sentiment and feeling, and *dukkha* suffering. Putting the book aside, the student of Buddhism is treated to a sixth taste: *heroic and energetic* (*utsaaha*), reminiscing the story of the Buddha leaving the household life, subjecting himself to self-torture to the point of death and then experiencing the Awakening. And happily, it is the same sentiment of energetic effort that comes to be associated with Yasodhara who eventually becomes Arahant *Bhaddhā Kaccānā*, and identified by the Buddha as being 'foremost among those who quickly attain direct knowledge'.

In the end, critical dialogue prevailed. Today, as then, I presume, *bava taranaya* adorns the bookshelves and course lists of universities and high schools.

Author Wickramasinghe, too, died the same way he lived – respected as a provocative but mature novelist, a scholar of Buddhism and Sinhala Buddhist culture, and, most importantly, a humanist. On a personal note, as a budding literary buff, I was happy to have had the pleasure of benefiting from all this, taking many a walk with him in the neighbourhood of his Nawala, Rajagiriya home. And I still treasure on my bookshelf the many books given to me, with his signature signature!

But why go to Switzerland or Sri Lanka to see how the Buddha has taken kickings and beatings with a smile? A Zen master titles his work, Dropping Ashes on the Buddha.

Closer to home, in a restaurant lobby in Toronto, a pot-belly laughing Buddha invites you to a soup named after him!

The last time I tasted it, I thought Perfection had found a home in the hands of the Chef!

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