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The Voyage to the *Self*: The Coexistence of the Opposites in Hesse's *Abraxas*

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Abstract- *Man's life has always been looked upon as a journey. Like any other journey, life has its own destination too. The destination is contingent on the direction the voyage is made. In case of the majority, the direction is outward – from the 'self.' That is why the common lot never become individuals. Rather they are reduced with time to a part of the system which is euphemistically called 'human society.' A few, however, make the movement in the opposite direction – to the 'self.' The journey of such a person is never easy. He needs to pass through various phases of life. Having done that, he gains 'wholeness' of existence, that is, his 'self.' In that self coexists the contrary inclinations – good and evil, moral and immoral, conscious and unconscious. Hermann Hesse's timeless classic '**Demian**' bears the same motif. The protagonist, Sinclair, is able to explore his self only when he has experienced the opposite forces of life. Sinclair's friend Demian who throughout the journey remains his guide, becomes a part of his consciousness like God in the end.*

Keywords- *Good; Evil; Permissible; Forbidden; Despair; Self*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial man has cherished the practice of drawing a line between 'good' and 'evil.' Though both words are relative in significance, and though the concept of goodness changes with place and time, qualities like charity, pity, love, meekness, faith in God, obeying social norms, and so on, have always been deemed 'good.' The common people believe that learning good qualities and nourishing those in the heart, and staying as much away from 'evil' as possible are essential to the construction of an ideal human nature. One never wishes to be 'bad' practically, and feels elated if his 'goodness' is praised. A child who is brought up under the sheltering roof of parents is with the greatest possibility of learning the 'good' values of the world. He has the greatest likelihood to be a model citizen in his later life. The society extols a person like him.

However, as the span of twenty four hours consists both of day and night, and as a year is comprised both of summer and winter, there can be no 'good' without the concurrent presence of 'evil.' Though everyone expresses disapproval of the 'bad,' at least publicly, deep inside a person always remains a tremendous temptation for it, whether he is conscious of the fact or not matters very little. If one is unaware of this attraction or, even after being aware, flagellates his heart severely for being attracted, it is largely due to the fact that his mind has been fashioned by the family and the society in a way as to base all his thinking and judgement on religious teachings and social morality. A person, as long as he is under the spell of morality and religion, remains unaware of the 'individual self' that demands the knowledge of the dark side larking in him equally. Because of his unawareness or his constant denial of the other side of his personality, he fails miserably to become complete as a human being. In other words, he merely goes on living, but never succeeds in existing; for existence calls for the cognizance of one's individuality. Outwardly though, he might behave as the society expects from a good citizen, the inward hollowness in him persists and haunts him like the worst nightmare. The result is despair of the soul, which can either be conscious or unconscious of itself. Despair eventually leads a person to destruction, either by begetting boredom or by making him vulnerable to evil when the shield of society is not present. He might also plunge in utter depravity as a sign of protest against the society. His revolt is against the so called 'goodness' that he no longer wishes to tolerate. He becomes careless of the consequence of his actions, at least outwardly. He feels sadistic pleasure to participate in the 'forbidden' acts. The pleasure is intensified as the so-called 'good' society starts fearing or avoiding him. The ego becomes more and more captivated by the desire for evil, something he was for long repressing in the unconscious. He becomes, in a sense, 'possessed.' 'Why', he feels, 'should I care about the society?' Unknowingly, he is drifted further and further away from his previous 'good' self, and eventually an almost irremediable rift is established between that self and the present one. He is now a lost soul, and further away from himself. If his previous despair was over himself, the present one is, in a sense, that of '*defiance*' (Kierkegaard, '***The Sickness unto Death***,' 76).

A strong influence is needed to rescue the soul from the grip of evil and '*illumine*' what '*is dark*' (Milton, '***Invocation, Paradise Lost, Bk I***,' lines 22-23) in it. To Sinclair, the protagonist and narrator of Hermann Hesse's timeless classic '***Demian***' (1919), the influence comes in

the form of his friend and schoolmate, Demian. He leads Sinclair to a discovery of the concurrence of the opposite impulses of life in the self. Finally, Sinclair triumphs in exploring his individual self.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research paper intends to show:

- That human beings in general exist as fragmented units of the system.
- How the hero of the novel becomes a 'self' with his realization of the importance of the contrary impulses of life
- That the presence of God can be felt only after one's realization of the self.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The main techniques used to analyse the novel are close reading and fragmentation. At first, the fallacy of human condition lacking in an awareness of the opposite forces of life is shown. Then, in that light the story of the novel is evaluated. The journey of life of the hero is divided into three phases. The reader sees how each of these phases leads the hero to realize ultimately the significance of the conflicting impulses of life. The symbol of 'Abraxas' is the unity where the opposite drives coexist. At the end, the journey of the hero leading to his self is manifested as the way a lone traveller occupied with the yearning of self-exploration needs to follow.

4. Discussion

4.1The dualistic character of existence

Hermann Hesse (1877-1962), one of the most influential German novelists of the 20th century, has dealt with the theme of the search for self in his works again and again. Hesse's deep insight into human psyche revealed to him the truth that in the 'self' lies a synergetic relationship of the contraries. In his celebrated work '***Siddhartha***' (1922), he articulates through Siddhartha, '*the world itself, what exists around us and inside of us, is never one-sided. A person is never entirely Sansara or entirely Nirvana, a person is never entirely holy or entirely sinful. It does really seem like this, because we are subject to deception*' (151). 'Self' signifies the attaining of wholeness through the union of contradictory impulses. Siddhartha obtains procures salvation only when he realizes the co-existence and the reciprocal relationship of the opposites. First, he lives a religious and austere life with utmost dedication; then, he participates in the mundane enterprise with equal enthusiasm. Only after that he becomes ready to attain 'moksha.' Similar is the experience of Emil Sinclair in '***Demian***.' His very name signifies the interdependence of opposing forces – '*the forces of evil* (*Sin*) *and the power of light* (*clair*)' ('***Demian Reader's Guide***'). Emil is born and brought up in in an affluent German family, reputed for being righteous and religious. The story begins when Sinclair is '*ten years old and attending the grammar school*' ('***Demian***,' 13) in their small town. He speaks about the two worlds belonging to opposite poles and exerting on him contrary influences. The first world '*was my father's house . . . was very familiar to me; it meant . . . love and severity, exemplary manners and school. This was the world of a warm glow, clarity, and cleanliness; gentle, friendly speech, washed hands, clean clothes, and proper behaviour . . .*' (13-14). This world is the world of 'goodness' that a society aiming at utopian possibilities offers a person. Sinclair's parents and sisters belong to this irradiated world. The values of this world inspire a person to be upright, forgiving, and virtuous, and in this way become an ideal citizen of a civilized nation. The other world '*was altogether different, smelled different, spoke differently, made different promises and demands. In this second world there were maids and journeymen, ghost stories and scandalous rumours; there was a motley flow of uncanny, tempting, frightening, puzzling things, things like slaughterhouse and jail, drunks and bickering women . . . houses collapsing, stories of burglaries, killings, suicides*' (15). Though possessing all the traits which Sinclair knows are '*forbidden*' (15), the second world is too enticing to be repudiated. To describe the world he uses words like '*tempting*' and '*beautiful*' (14). He gets astonished to find that at times he '*preferred to live in the forbidden world, and frequently my return home to the bright realm . . . was almost like a return to some place less beautiful, more boring and dreary*' (15). The first world may be compared to the 'world of God' in the conventional sense. It comprises all the brighter aspects of life – goodness, fraternity, and security. But this world fails to attract Sinclair to it. The other world is the 'evil world', a world of darkness, mystery, and sometimes even '*scary, wild and cruel*' (14). But at the same time it is exciting. Sinclair hears its wild call which his heart cannot deny. The world of evil is seductive, and man feels an irresistible urge to taste it.

From the psychological viewpoint, the first world is the world of consciousness. It is orderly, ethical, rational, and illuminated. The civilized society directed by the superego promotes this world to make itself a better place to live in. One who is a follower of the norms of this world, becomes in due course a 'good person,' though never a complete one. He suffers unconsciously from despair, the '*despair of finitude*' (Kierkegaard, 33), and as such, from the '*despair over oneself*' (Kierkegaard, 68). His condition is the despair of finitude because he knows only one side of existence. The values of the cultured society and those of his family constitutes his 'good' self. He becomes merely an imitator of the ethical standards he sees in his limited sphere. The ignorance of being in despair though keeps him happy. Sinclair's parents and sisters are prototypes of this condition. They are happy as in a way they are '*secured against becoming aware*' of their despair, that is, they are '*secured in the power of despair*' (Kierkegaard, 47). The attainment of the 'self' to them is never possible because they seem totally detached from the experience of the dark side of life. Sinclair, however, is not like that. In the very beginning of the novel he tells us about his

fascination for the 'other' world. His urge for the flavour of that world reveals his consciousness of the unconscious. As he becomes aware of the limit of the sphere he exists (the bright world which he is expected to follow), he feels despair over himself for his finitude. But because the mind is almost unaware of the mystery of the unconscious, the consciousness falls an easy prey to its snare. Sinclair's attempt of acquaintance with the 'other' world brings disaster in his life in the form of Franz Kromer, an older boy who takes on tyrannical control over his life by intimidating to disclose an awful secret. On the brink of utter despondency, however, Sinclair is rescued by his schoolmate, Max Demian. Sinclair gets mesmerized at Demian's mysterious detachment, his sharpness, and his insightful revolutionary ideas about the relative significance of good and evil. '*As their friendship deepens, Demian assumes an ambiguous role of both mentor and tempter, prompting Sinclair to question every value that he has heretofore accepted and gradually to reject the safe but stultifying world that Sinclair's parents have created for him*'('***Demian Reader's Guide***') . It is not that Demian comes in Sinclair's life coincidentally. External influence is always present. But not everyone is abetted by it. '*What comes to us from outside . . . can be made our own if we are capable of an inner amplitude equal to that of the incoming content*' (Jung, '***The Four Archetypes***,' 63). There was already the inner urge present in Sinclair to respond positively to Demian's influence over him. That is why Demian, who normally stays away from acquaintance with other people, comes to Sinclair on his own.

From Sinclair's account of himself we learn about his curiosity '*in the steps*' ('***Demian***,' 58) one needs to take to arrive at himself. He feels the desire to '*discover . . . a primordial urge . . . that had to crawl away and hide from the bright, permissible world*' (59). Demian later on tells him that to explore the individual self it is necessary for him '*to discover for himself what is . . . forbidden in him*' (75), besides participating in the permissible venture of religion and society.

When Sinclair takes admission in the new school at St–, he gets detached from his friend, Demian. He feels helpless. Demian is the personified '*anima*' (Jung, 67) that has all along been guiding him in his inward journey to the 'self.' Being separated from the mediator with the unconscious, Sinclair once again is victimized to the forces of darkness. His manifested indifference to his surroundings makes him an 'outsider' in the new institution. It is taken as a sign of contempt for the world. In course of one of his evening walks, he comes across Alfons Beck, a dissipated young man directing Sinclair to the abyss of depravity. Liquor and corrupt revelry gradually take hold of him as compulsive practices. Many of his schoolmates start looking upon him as a sort of leader and a dauntless fellow; others prefer to avoid him. His parents and teachers become concerned about his degenerated condition. Inwardly though he still suffers the pangs of conscience, outwardly he enjoys the dissolute acts which the cultured society abhors and dreads at the same time. He sees his actions as a protest against the hollowness of the so-called civilized world that has shown him an imperfect picture of life, that of 'goodness' and the 'permissible', since his early childhood days. Without his friend and guide, he is lost in the maze of immoral passions which laid repressed in the unconscious. One spring day, when his destruction is almost at hand, he comes across a young lady in a park. He is enchanted at her beauty that seems to him unearthly. Suddenly he feels an urge to renounce the path of corruption as '*once more I had an image before me, a lofty, revered image – and, oh! There was no need, no urge within me as strong and vehement as my wish to respect and venerate something! I gave her the name Beatrice . . . It was an English Pre- Raphaelite figure of a girl, slender, with very long limbs and a long, narrow face and spiritual hands and features*' ('***Demian***,' 93). Once again his heart throbs with joy. He becomes completely changed with the discovery of the object of his worship. He retreats to the 'bright world' once again. This 'bright world' is the world of higher innocence, a place that one can reach only after overcoming the evil world of experience. He makes a significant development in his personality – this time the desire to repudiate evil comes from inside. The girl occupies his mind completely, and he tries to capture his imaginings in pictures. Having failed more than once in his attempt, he finally succeeds in painting a face following his imagination. He gets astonished to discover that the face is not of his Beatrice. It does not even look completely like a woman, for there are features of a man in it concomitantly. He spends hours looking at the picture for the next few days until one day he abruptly discovers in it the face of his friend, Demian. His amazement heightens as with time he sees himself reflected in the same picture.

The portrait is very significant. It is a man, it is a woman, it is Demian, and it is Sinclair himself. It is ageless, perennial. It is, as though, a reflection of Sinclair's inner being. The 'anima' that lay outside in the person of Demian is now experienced as a part of his psyche. That is why he no longer feels the necessity of Beatrice to keep himself away from the evil practices that hindered the movement of his spiritual journey until recently. The picture is significant also because it is not the face of Beatrice. That Sinclair tried to paint Beatrice at first reveals that he was suffering from the despair of defiance unconsciously. By painting her face he was trying to found his self all by himself. His endeavour was not to '*begin with the beginning but in the beginning*.' He was '*not willing to attire himself in himself, nor to seek his task in the self given him; by the aid of being the infinite form he* [was willing] *to construct it himself*' (Kierkegaard, 77). If he became successful in portraying Beatrice perfectly, he would lose his self forever. But the picture he paints is a clear manifestation that he is a step ahead to self-discovery.

4.2'Abraxas': the coexistence of the opposites in the self

The portrait Sinclair paints inspires him to paint a new picture. What he paints this time is '*the bird in the coat-of-arms* (of his dream) . . . *it was working itself free, as if from a gigantic egg*' ('***Demian***,' 103). Why he dreams of the bird, or why he paints it is not clear to him at this moment. A mysterious impulse of the soul as if compels him to do that. He envelops the picture and mails it to the old address of Demian. He is not sure whether his friend would ever get it. However, some days later he suddenly finds a note sticking out of his book. Unfolding the note, he reads it and is petrified to see the lines, '*The bird is fighting its way out of the egg. The egg is the world. Whoever wishes to be born must destroy a world. The bird is flying to God. The god is named Abraxas*' (106). Sinclair fails to understand the implication of the lines. For the next few days he remains obsessed with the word '*Abraxas*.' While wandering restlessly one day, he comes across Pistorius, an excellent organist who plays organ in a small church. With time their relationship deepens, and Sinclair is able to acquire a lot of knowledge from him about religion, especially about the Gnostic deity Abraxas. He learns that in Abraxas rests both light and darkness, good and evil. Similar to his relationship with Demian, his meeting and eventual proximity with Pistorius are not the result of sheer chance. He feels it himself. He was deeply in need of someone like Pistorius, and so he comes to his life. There was already something in him to '*respond to*' the influence of Pistorius, something to go out '*to meet it*' (Jung, 63). Pistorius helps him explore his self.

Sinclair is now close to his destination. He is cognizant of both the 'good' and the 'evil' sides of life. He has gained an awareness of the darkness of the unconscious very closely. He has also lived the bright world of consciousness. The mysteries of religion, too, have been revealed to him by his friend Pistorius. It becomes clear to him that Abraxas embodies the concept of 'self.' The time is ripe to meet Demian once again. He leaves the company of Pistorius. Sinclair's act of going away from him has the same reason as that for which he renounced first, the permissible world of innocence of his childhood, and then, the world of corruption. He feels that Pistorius has brought into light only a part of him. However, all the three phases of his life are equally significant in his inward journey. Self means wholeness. Only the assimilation of the opposite impulses of life – the conscious and the unconscious, the apparent and the implied, the mundane and the spiritual, the dynamic and the static – can constitute it. Most people remain unaware of this truth, and so instead of arriving at the self, are drifted away from it bit by bit. But Sinclair has never tailed the path of the common herd. Contrary to theirs, his movement has always been inward. He is an explorer of the self.

Sinclair is a changed person when he meets Demian this time. Having gained knowledge about the various sides of life and awareness of human psyche, he is now on the verge of reincarnation. It is a symbolic reincarnation that is to lead him to his self, though at the same time he will be able to '*remember that* [*he*] *has lived through previous existences and that these existences were* [*his*] *own*' (Jung, 54). When Sinclair says, '*For each person there was an* "*office,*" *but for nobody was there one that he was permitted to choose for himself . . . I didn't exist to write poetry, to preach sermons, to paint pictures . . . All of that merely happened to a person along the way. Everyone had only one true vocation: to find himself*' ('***Demian***,'145), we become sure that he has made acquaintance with his self. One's aim to become something in life, one's social position or profession reveal merely that person's social existence. Nothing of these is who that person is. Sinclair's awareness of the truth comes from the experience of his life. He achieves totality of a being from his realization. Abraxas is now the quintessence of his being.

The individual Sinclair finds home in Frau Eva, mother of Demian. In her he discovers the primordial spirit of existence which is a synergy of the opposite forces of life. She is a seductress and a beloved but also a loving mother, she has the vigour of a man and the charm of a woman at the same time, gloom and joy reside in her eyes concomitantly, she is ancient and new, autumn and spring, and as such ageless. Sinclair's vision of a large number of people being consumed into a god-like figure resembling Eva symbolizes the impending death of the old fragmented world. From the ashes of that world would rise the Phoenix of a new world of totality. Towards the end of the novel, we see that World War I has broken out. Both Sinclair and Demian participate in it. Their involvement in the war is as though the call of destiny. As the two friends lay wounded in a hospital side by side, Demian tells Sinclair, '*I'm going to have to depart . . . you'll have to listen within yourself, and you'll notice that I'm inside you*' ('***Demian***,' 187). This is for the last time Sinclair sees his friend. When next morning he wakes up, he sees Demian is no longer there. But within him he feels his presence. Demian here becomes a God-like figure residing in the soul of Sinclair who has gained the knowledge of 'self.'

5. CONCLUSION

God is completeness, He is perfection. He is the unity in which merges all the opposite forces of existence. Quite unfortunately, human beings in general never comprehend that. They discriminate the world of darkness from that of light, good from that of evil. Their experience is never complete. They are fragmented units and need the aid of community to sense fullness. They remain in the fallacy that they are '*a united group*' and so '*bound to prevail*' ('***The Quran***,' 54:45). But despair, not eternity, is their essence. That they can have a discrete 'self,' the basis of perpetuity, is something they never come to know. To them, God remains an external object. God as the internal essence can only be felt by a person who in search of the 'self' becomes aware of the importance of the conflicting inclinations of nature, both external and internal. Through the unfolding of the story of Sinclair, Herman Hesse tells

us that 'self' is the essence of existence, and that essence is experienced only by that enlightened individual who comprehends the need of the opposing impulses of life.

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