

# Buddhism and Literature in South Asia

## Week 8:

Buddhist-inspired  
fiction in the 20<sup>th</sup>  
century

Herman Hesse's  
*Siddhartha*



# Overview of Syllabus

~~Week 1: Introduction to Buddhist Literature, Jāataka Tales~~

~~Week 2: Indian Buddhist Sūtra Literature~~

~~Week 3: Life story of the Buddha in Indian poetry~~

~~Week 4: Indian Buddhist Poetry and Drama~~

~~Week 5: Tibetan Buddhist Inspirational poetry~~

~~Week 6: Buddhist Biography and Hagiography in Tibet~~

**Week 7: Modern Buddhist Biographies: the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama's Autobiography**

**Week 8: Buddhist-inspired fiction in the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

# Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*

- This is a novel which, in various translations, has spanned generations of those interested in Buddhist and other 'Asian' thought
- Part of what we will explore in this class is why this is the case
- Let's start with us: when did you first encounter this book? What were you reading at the time? What led you to this book? What were your impressions?

*As we will see, Siddhartha—more than merely on the surface level—explores many Buddhist themes, but in a curious way*

# **Buddhist themes in *Siddhartha*:**

## **“The Brahmin’s Son”**

### **Buddhist lines of questioning**

- questioned Hindu practices of ablutions and the Hindu assertion that there is a self/soul, called Atman;
- “...But where was this Self, this innermost? It was not flesh and bone, it was not thought or consciousness. That was what the wise men taught.”

### **The trope of the 4<sup>th</sup> sign: the ascetic**

- Siddhartha spotted wandering ascetics and decided to leave with them the next morning (with Govinda)

# **Buddhist themes in *Siddhartha*:**

## **“Gotama”**

### **Meeting the Buddha (Gotama/Gautama)**

- location: town of Savathi: Jetavana in the garden of Anathapindika (one of the famous sites in which the Buddha in the suttas
- Siddhartha came to his teachings, yet did not think the Buddha would teach him anything new (reversal of all stories in the suttas/sutras!)
- Taught the Eightfold Path, four noble truths

### **Questioning the Buddha**

- Siddhartha identified a “flaw” in the teachings
- The Buddha warned him against being so thirsty for knowledge; knowledge is not the goal of [Buddhist] teachings, it is salvation, freedom from suffering

# **Buddhist themes in *Siddhartha*:**

## **“Kamala”**

### **En route to meeting Kamala**

- Siddhartha contemplates all Gotama's teachings; torn between the 'experience' of a Self/Atman and not being able to locate it (the Hindu/Buddhist divide!)

### **Meeting Kamala**

- Skills he learned as a Brahmin and as an ascetic : reading, writing, reciting scriptures, “he waits, he thinks, he fasts”
- Skill in means? Entering samsara to better know what he may reject?

# **Buddhist themes in *Siddhartha*:**

## **“Samsara”**

### **Siddhartha’s experience living in the world**

- “His senses, which he had deadened during his ardent Samana years, were again awakened.”
- Felt caught in the world of riches and pleasure, gambling
- Finally, under a mango tree, realized had been happier as an ascetic



# **Buddhist themes in *Siddhartha*:**

## **“The Ferryman”**

### **Meeting the Ferryman a second time**

- Sells his clothes for fare
- The ferryman, Vasudeva, accepts him as an apprentice

### **The Buddha nears death**

- Buddhist Monks and pilgrims cross the river
- Kamala came, along with her son by Siddhartha

# Buddhist themes in *Siddhartha*: “Govinda”

## Siddhartha's re-appropriation of the Buddha's teachings

- “Knowledge can be communicated, but not wisdom”
- “When the Illustrious Buddha taught about the world, he had to divide it into Samsara and Nirvana, into illusion and truth, into suffering and salvation. One cannot do otherwise, there is no other method for those who teach. But the world itself, being in and around us, is never one-sided. Neither is a man or a deed wholly Samsara or wholly Nirvana; never is a man wholly a saint or a sinner.”
- “The sinner is not on the way to a Buddha-like state; he is not evolving, though our thinking cannot conceive things otherwise. No, the potential Buddha already exists in the sinner; his future is already there. The potential hidden Buddha must be recognized in him, in you, in everybody.”

# Scholarly Analyses of Siddhartha..

- Geza von Molnar, “The Ideological Framework of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*”
- Bhabagrahi Misra, “An Analysis of Indic Tradition in Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha*”

# Hesse's use of the Indic

- In order to understand Herman Hesse's use of the Indic in his novel *Siddhartha*, one has to look into the background of German literature in its Romantic era and Hesse's biography in particular.
- It was Originally published in German under the title *Siddhartha: Eine Indische Dichtung* (An Indie Poem) in 1922, and translated into English in 1951 by Hilda Rosner, the eminent translator of Hesse's novels.
- Hesse's conception about the East is the sole basis of most of his literary art.
- In his autobiographical novel *The Journey to the East* Hesse states, "For our goal was not only the East, or rather the East was not only a country and something geographical, but it was the home and youth of the soul, it was everywhere and nowhere, it was the union of all times."

# German lit and mysticism

- The literary tradition to which this work belongs is *Bildungsroman*, an epic narrative within German literature that traces the protagonist's path toward self-realization.
- However, the *type* of self-realization Hesse speaks refers to a trend in the intellectual heritage of the West that has striking parallels in the religious philosophies of the East.
- The mystic's basic premise entails the notion that each individual harbors an absolute criterion that enables him to relate the manifold aspects of all his experiences to each other and to himself.
- In Siddhartha's case, the hero's progress is marked by a distinct sequence of stages that culminates in the ultimate state of mystical insight.
- This state differs from all other levels of consciousness insofar as it marks the conscious attainment of absolute unity from which the multiplicity of all experiential reality derives its coherence and significance

# Siddhartha's path of dialectic opposition

- Siddhartha's path is straight: it is a dialectical one where each segment has to be affirmed before it can be negated and left behind for the next one. With respect to the final goal, all preceding steps must be negated; but negation must take place in a definite order if it is to lead to that goal.
- But the order for the progressive chain of negation is not preordained; it becomes evident in the process of gaining access to any particular phase of existence only after the potential of the previous one has been fully exhausted.
- To emphasize the simultaneity of negation and affirmation in the dialectical moment of transition, Hesse employs imagery that refers to the traditional concept of death and rebirth at every important juncture in his hero's life.
- After his conversation with Gotama, for instance, he experiences the terror of dying as he becomes aware of the complete isolation that precedes the heightened degree of self-reliance necessary for his entry into a new world, and, again, upon leaving this world, the despair of death is accompanied by the bliss of reawakening to a new life.



# Western appropriations of the Indic

- Hesse inherited a lot from the Romantic tradition!
- The Romanticists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had already paved the ground in creating an interest in the Orient. The mythical image of India was an ideal picture sought by the Romanticists in order to foresee the unification of the cultures of the West and the East.
- For the burning metaphysical quest of the time, the Romanticists plunged deep into Indic philosophy, religion, myth and mysticism. To interpret human experience they used Indic themes for literary creations.
- 'A restatement of Western values embossed with the stamp of the mythical image, in the symbolism of a new mythology, meant a deeper understanding of man's place in the cosmos.'
- Thus the ideal in the imaginative world of the Romanticists centered round Indic materials. The beginning of the nineteenth century was the brilliant period of the use of Indic material.

# German Romantic longing for India

- 'The preferred German Romantic literary vehicle—though not the most perfect—was the novel, a form ignored by the representative English Romanticists: Byron, Shelley, Keats, Blake and Coleridge.'
- This romantic longing for India was to find out a synthesis between art, philosophy and religion which has been sundered in the civilisation of the West and to pave the way for a bright future.
- During this period also Hegelian philosophy contradicting the Hindu concept of morality based on suppression of desires through a ritualistic pattern of life received much attention. Hegel envisaged the Hindu way as not a goal of moral freedom but destruction of the individual.



# Hesse's early life

- 1907 to 1919 was the most crucial period in Hesse's life.. During this period due to his son's illness, father's death and wife's derangement, Hesse sought relief in psychoanalysis. To relieve his mental tension and seek relief, he fled to India in 1911.
- Hesse recorded his impressions about India in the journal *Aus Indien* (1913). 'Hesse's attitude towards the East is at this time not one of enthusiastic affirmation, but rather of critical assessment.'
- This attitude can be seen in Hesse's account :

“We come to the South and East full of longing driven by a dark and grateful premonition at home, and we find here a paradise, the abundance and rich voluptuousness of all natural gifts. We find the pure, simple, childlike people of paradise. But we ourselves are different; we are alien here and without' any rights of citizenship; we lost our paradise long ago, and the new one that we wish to build is not to be found along the equator and on the warm seas of the East. It lies within us and in our own northern future.”

# A Germanic ‘revolution of the soul’

*In 1920 Hesse writes:*

“My preoccupation with India, which has been going on for almost twenty years and has passed through many stages, now seems to me to have reached a new point of development. Previously my reading, searching and sympathies were restricted exclusively to the philosophical aspect of India—the purely intellectual, Vedantic and Buddhistic aspect. The Upanishads, the sayings of Buddha and the Bhagavad Gita were the focal point of this world. Only recently have I been approaching the actual religious India of the Gods, of Vishnu and Indra, Brahma and Krishna. And now Buddhism appears to me more and more as a kind of very pure, highly bred reformation—a purification and spiritualisation that has no flaw but its great zealousness, with which it destroys image-worlds for which it can offer no replacement.”

# Siddhartha and the Buddha

- Thus Siddhartha is a product of a special religious awareness in its ritualistic and philosophic pattern, revaluing humanity and the primitive elements in human nature.
- Some critics have tried to evaluate Siddhartha in the light of the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold path of Buddha. But this approach seems to be fallacious, since, in essence, Siddhartha is a revolt against the Buddhist way. Siddhartha is a constant oscillation between life's opposite poles, reaching a conclusion, unlike Buddha:

“If they are illusions, then I am also illusion, and so they are always of the same nature as myself. It is that which makes them so lovable and venerable. That is why I can love them. And here is a doctrine at which you will laugh. It seems to me, Govinda, that love is the most important thing in the world. It may be important to great thinkers to examine the world, to explain and despise it. But I think it is only important to love the world, not to despise it, not for us to hate each other, but to be able to regard the world and ourselves and all things with love, admiration and respect.”

# Use of the Tale of the Buddha

- For achieving this idea of a 'timeless reality', Hesse utilised the legendary tale of Buddha as the frame-work of his novel, and has 'transplanted various motifs from the life of Buddha to the life of Siddhartha ...in order to sustain the legendary quality of the narrative.' Siddhartha is therefore, a story with its origin in a historic time, but transcending to 'timeless reality', expounding all levels of human experiences.
- The creation of Siddhartha as a separate character from the historic Buddha seems to be based on the etymological meaning of the word 'Siddhartha', which means 'one who has attained his goal'.
- Hesse attempts to establish that Siddhartha could find all solace in life and peace, even being opposed to the Buddhist way; thus proving the etymological meaning of his name to be true.
- The story starts with the traditional conflict between the Brahmanical and Buddhist way. Buddha was the most eloquent expression of protest against the traditional theology, Brahmanical priesthood and sacerdotal ritualism, establishing a more rationalistic, liberal and subjective thinking.
- Siddhartha, therefore, is introduced in the first chapter of the novel as a Brahmin's son, rigorously observing all the hieratic, externalistic and ritualistic pattern in daily life, but still lingering at heart to comprehend the 'Brahman', Learning the art of practising contemplation, offering sacrifices, listening to religious discourses, and reciting hymns from Veda and Upanishads could not satisfy him. He decides to try the path of the Samanas (ascetics). This attitude in itself shows, how Hesse tries to expound the conflict in the religious tradition of India.



# Part I: Siddhartha's beginnings

- But at the time of leaving his father's house, Siddhartha waits for the permission of his father in the traditional Indian way, and succeeds in getting his permission for the devotion to his aim in life.
- In the first chapter itself, Siddhartha rejects the Brahmanical way of ritualistic life. In the second chapter he joins the Samanas. But he realizes that the asceticism does not lead him on the proper path. Through self-denial, and following the ascetic rules he 'killed his senses, he killed his memory, he slipped out of his Self in a thousand different forms. He was animal, carcass, stone, wood, water, and each time he reawakened', thus reaching at a conclusion : Govinda, I believe that among all the Samanas, probably not even one will attain Nirvana....”
- In the next two chapters Hesse introduces Gautama Buddha and his followers in a legendary setting in the 'Jetavana grove, which the rich merchant Anathapindika' had presented to Buddha and his followers. Siddhartha and Govinda listened to the teachings of Buddha. Govinda joins the teacher, but Siddhartha departs from him in search of the 'unity of time', 'overwhelmed by a feeling of icy despair'. He now finds that the world from which he has so far tried to flee is attractive.
- As Hesse puts it: That was the last shudder of his awakening, the last pains of birth. Immediately he moved on again and began to walk quickly and impatiently, no longer homewards, no longer to his father, no longer looking backwards.

## Part II: Kamala

- In the next four chapters known as Kamala episode, Siddhartha is exposed to the pleasures and pain of the worldly man. On his way to the city he encounters for the first time the longing for sex. Here Hesse is presenting a picture from the classical Indic 'Art of Love'.
- He proceeds to the city, meets Kamala, a courtesan, learns the art of love from her, discards his beggar's cloth and becomes a successful merchant. In course of his conversations with Kamala in their first meeting, Siddhartha explains that resolution is the key to success in each sphere.
- Siddhartha explains to her: “That is what Siddhartha learned from the Samanas. It is what fools call magic and what they think is caused by demons. Nothing is caused by demons; there are no demons. Everyone can perform magic, everyone can reach his goal, if he can think, wait and fast.”

## Part II: Kamala

- In writing this section, however, Hesse encountered difficulties. He states:
  - “My Indic poem got along splendidly as long as I was writing what I had experienced: the feelings of Siddhartha, the young Brahman, who seeks the truth, who scourges and torments himself, who has learned reverence, and must now acknowledge this as an impediment to the Highest Goal. When I had finished with Siddhartha the sufferer and ascetic, with the struggling and suffering Siddhartha and now wished to portray Siddhartha the victor, the affirmer, the subjugator—I could not go on.”
- During this time Hesse devotes himself in studying thoroughly Indian philosophy and religion. After a break of about one and half years he picks up new strength and vigour to lead Siddhartha to a conclusion that not by teaching or any specific action one can find peace.
- The whole emphasis of the plot is swayed by a feeling to explain the supernatural element which motivates and guides all human actions. It seems that Hesse, from the study of 'the actual religious India of the Gods', perceived that only through faith and not by following any particular teaching can man find peace in life.

# The Ferryman

- In the following chapters Siddhartha's self-analysis is the main theme of Hesse's description. Siddhartha meets Vasudeva, a ferryman, and spends the rest of his life with him.
- Here Siddhartha learns the 'timeless unity' from the river. At the bank of this river he meets Kamala, Govinda and his son. This is how Hesse reunites the plot. Thus Siddhartha in his own way achieves eternal bliss.



# Parallels between the Buddha and Siddhartha

- The Buddha left his wife and child to become an ascetic. Similarly, Siddhartha leaves his wife Kamala and his still unborn child to seek truth. Both of them have spent some time of their lives with the Samanas and have practised yoga. Revelation came to Buddha under the sacred Bodhi tree, whereas Siddhartha takes an important decision under the mango tree. River is the final place in both of their lives where they realise the ultimate truth. These parallel incidents prove to a certain degree that Hesse imitated the legendary life of Buddha in constructing the moral allegory of Siddhartha.
- But the incidents in the life of Siddhartha have been rearranged in an opposite direction than that of Buddha to meet his purpose, in creating Siddhartha as a protest against Buddhist way.
- Another important character in the novel is Vasudeva, who plays a dominant role in the life of Siddhartha. Though Vasudeva is portrayed as a simple, unconcerned, lone ferryman, many of his statements lead the reader to believe that Hesse created Vasudeva on the model of Krishna's role in the Bhagavad-Gita. After Siddhartha's revelation, Vasudeva leaves him for ever. Before leaving he says:

“I have waited for this hour, my friend. Now it has arrived, let me go. I have been Vasudeva, the ferryman, for a long time. Now it is over. Farewell hut, farewell river, farewell Siddhartha.”

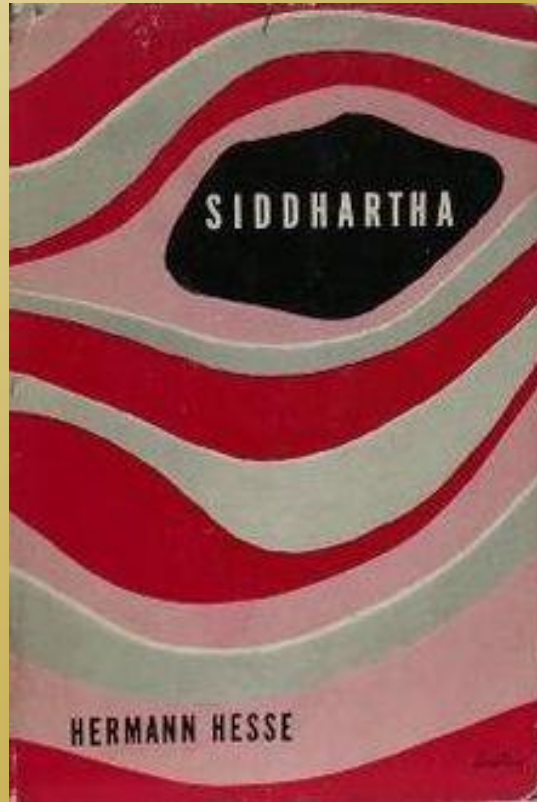
# Function of the Indic in *Siddhartha*

- The function of the Indic tradition in Hesse's novel, therefore, aims at comprehending 'chaos and cosmos', which 'exist within man, not in the world outside; and the selection (or creation) of an adequate deity is based upon man's reaction to those inner impulses'
- In his essay 'My Faith', Hesse says “that my Siddhartha puts no cognition, but love at first place: that it disdains dogma and makes the experience of unity the central point.”
- The struggle of the principle of existence is inevitably bound up with the rise and fall, births and deaths. **In other words, life is maintained through a sort of birth and death at each and every step.**
- Hesse tries to point out this, in the life of Siddhartha. At each step, Siddhartha reawakens to face the world outside. In the first chapter he rejects the Brahmanical way, next the Buddhist way and the worldly way. Finally, he reaches such a point in life when realisation comes of itself.

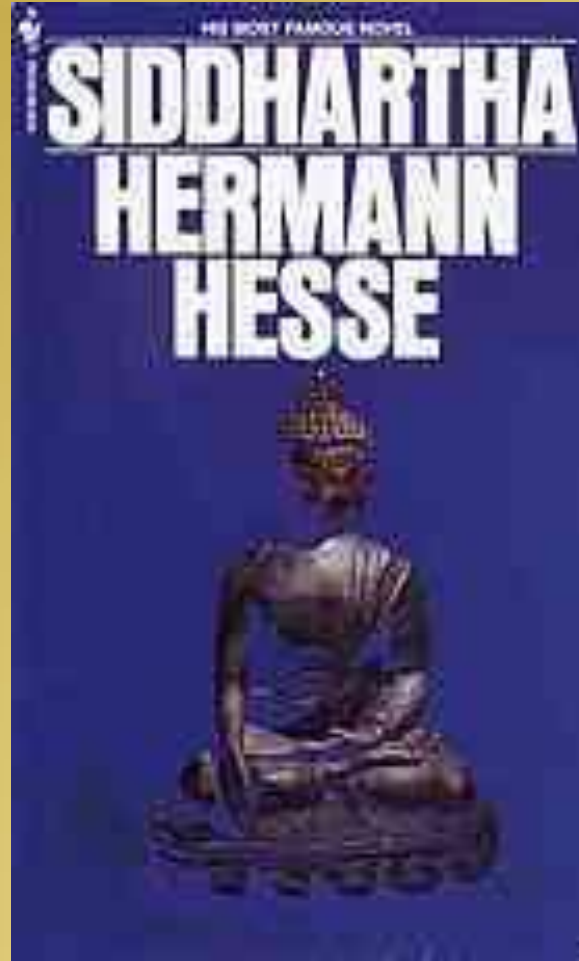
# Function of the Indic in *Siddhartha*

- In seeking to assess and convey the reactions of his time, Hesse draws examples, incidents and characters from the legendary history of India. Through a well-knit story he presents a biographical account of Gautama Buddha, descriptions of gods, symbols, religious faiths and even the natural setting of India, from scattered sources to represent an organic cultural whole of India.
- Through the analysis of *Siddhartha* he tries to present his view about the eternal value of culture and religion. To him, 'as far as the eternal in man is concerned, the teachings of Jesus, LaoTse, Veda, Goethe are the same. There is only one teaching and there is only one religion'.
- To establish this one religion, Hesse has tried to use a variety of psychological functions, incantations, rites, sacred formulae, mythology, theology, magic, charms, emotional reaction in *Siddhartha*'s life. The supernatural power and its relationship to human beings is an essential point on which Hesse seems to be working. The conflict about this relationship does not lie in the external world, but in one's own self.

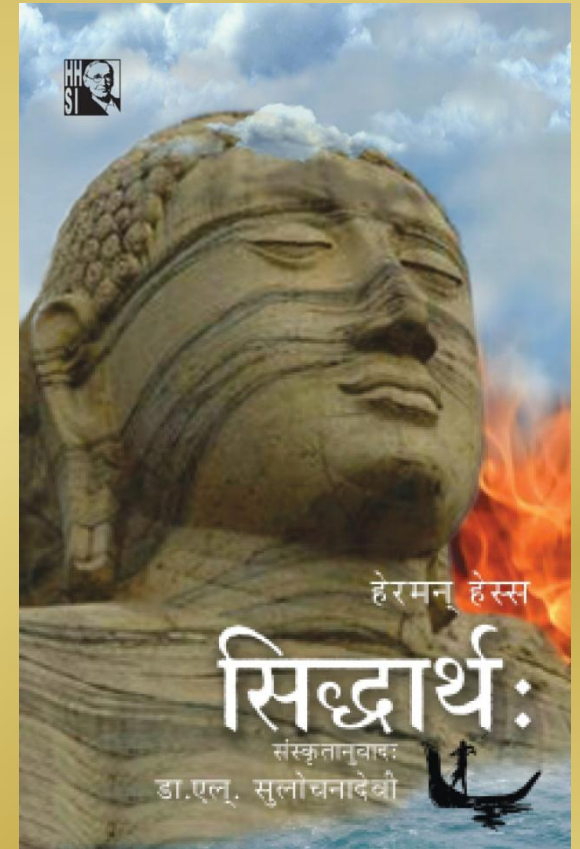
# Do we judge a book by it's cover?



First English translation, by Hilda Rosner 1922, 1951 (US)



English translation, New York : Bantam Books, 1971.



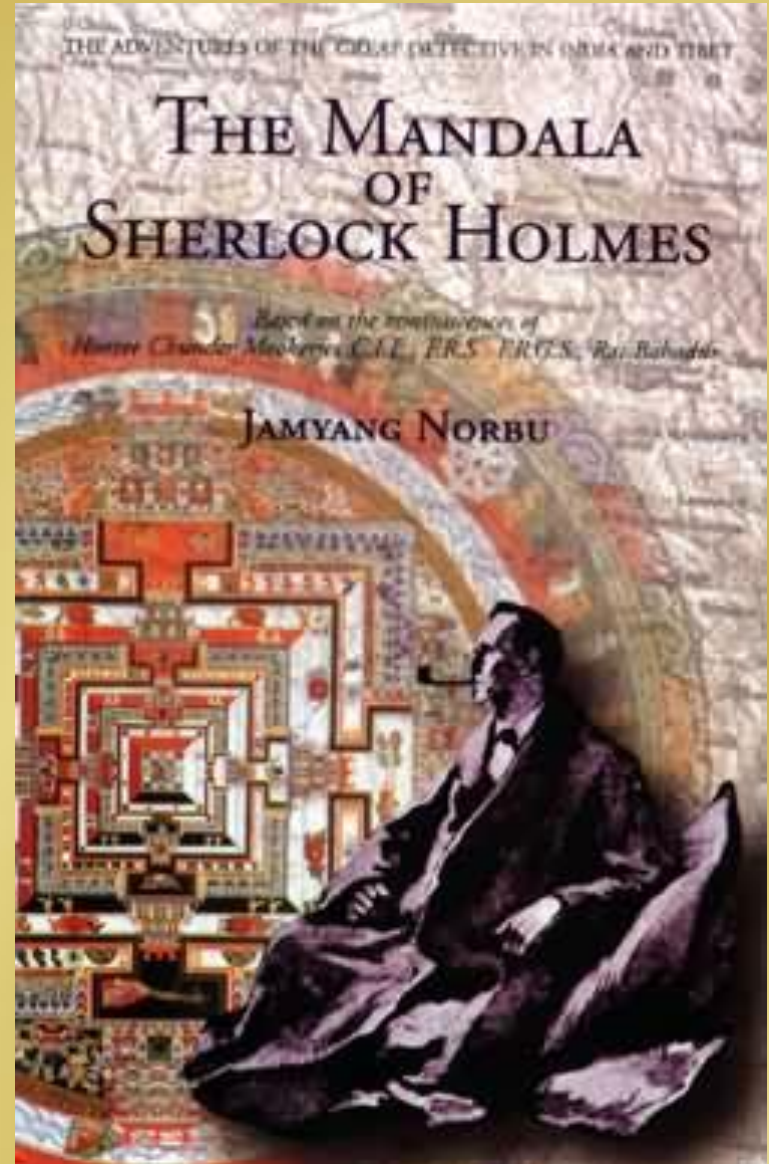
Sanskrit translation of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, 2012

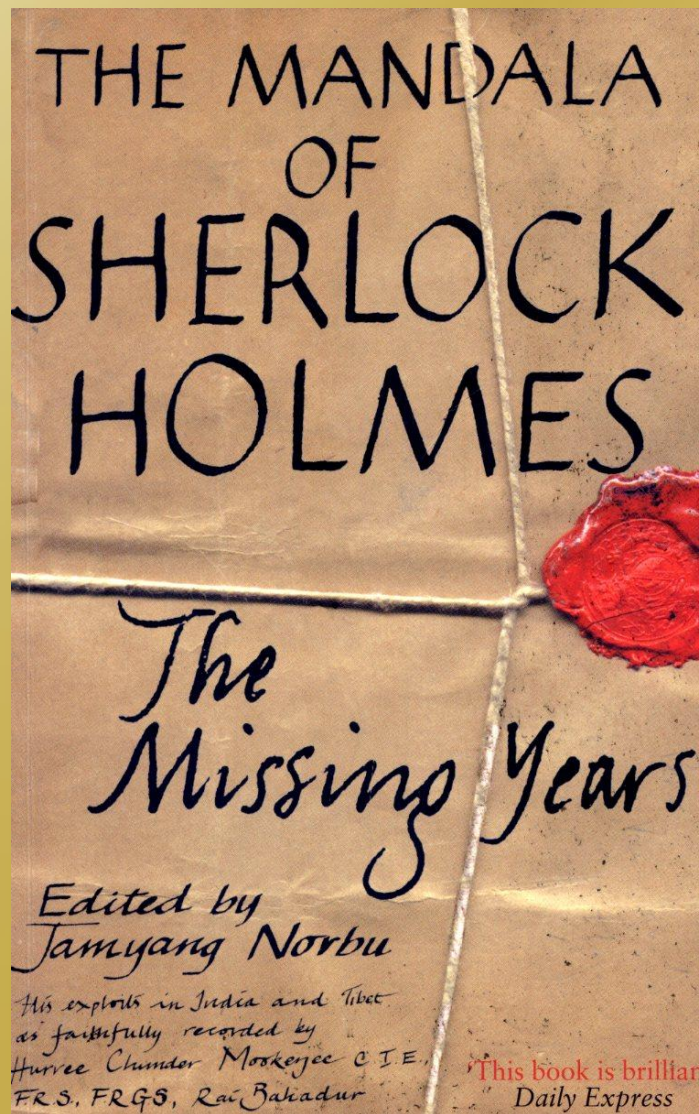
*What were your overall thoughts and reactions to **Siddhartha**?*



Another example of 20<sup>th</sup>  
century Buddhist-  
inspired fiction:

Jamyang Norbu's  
*The Mandala of  
Sherlock Holmes*





“Of all the Sherlock Holmes stories the one that fascinated me most was the adventure of *The Empty House*. In this remarkable tale Sherlock Holmes reveals to Dr Watson that for two years, while the world thought that the great detective had perished in the Reichenbach Falls, he had actually been travelling in my country, Tibet! Holmes is vexingly terse, and two sentences are all we have had till now of his historic journey:

I travelled for two years in Tibet, therefore, and amused myself by visiting Lhasa, and spending some days with the head Lama. You may have read of the remarkable exploration of a Norwegian named Sigerson, but I am sure that it never occurred to you that you were receiving news of your friend.”

-preface, *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes*



“Just a week before, Darjeeling had experienced a fairly severe earthquake — geologically speaking, the Himalayas being a rather new range, and still growing. By itself the quake was not strong enough to do any serious damage, but an unusually long monsoon had softened the mountain sides and undermined a number of houses. Lhasa Villa had not been severely damaged, only a part of the back wall had collapsed. When checking the damage Sid had discovered a rusty tin dispatch box embedded in a section of the broken wall.

Extricating it from the debris, he found that it contained a flat package carefully wrapped in wax paper and neatly tied with stout twine. He had opened the package to find a manuscript of about two hundred-odd pages in his great-grandfather's unmistakably ornate running script, and had excitedly commenced to read it, not pausing till he had finished the story, sometime in the early hours of the morning. And it was all there. Hurree had met Sherlock Holmes. He had travelled with him to Tibet —besides getting himself into some unbelievably strange and dangerous situations.

So the Babu had not been able to resist the urge to commit a true Account of his experiences to paper, but had taken the precaution of sealing it within the back wall of his house; maybe with the hope that it would come to light in a distant future when 'The Great Game' would be over, and when people would read of his adventure in company of the world's greatest detective, with only wonder and admiration.”

-Preface, *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes*



“Sid took out the manuscript from a chest of drawers and put it in my trembling hands.

Knowing that I was a writer of sorts, Sid insisted that I handle the editing and the publication of the manuscript. But aside from providing some explanatory footnotes, I have had to do very little. The Babu was an experienced and competent writer, with a vigorous and original style that would have suffered under too heavy an editorial hand.

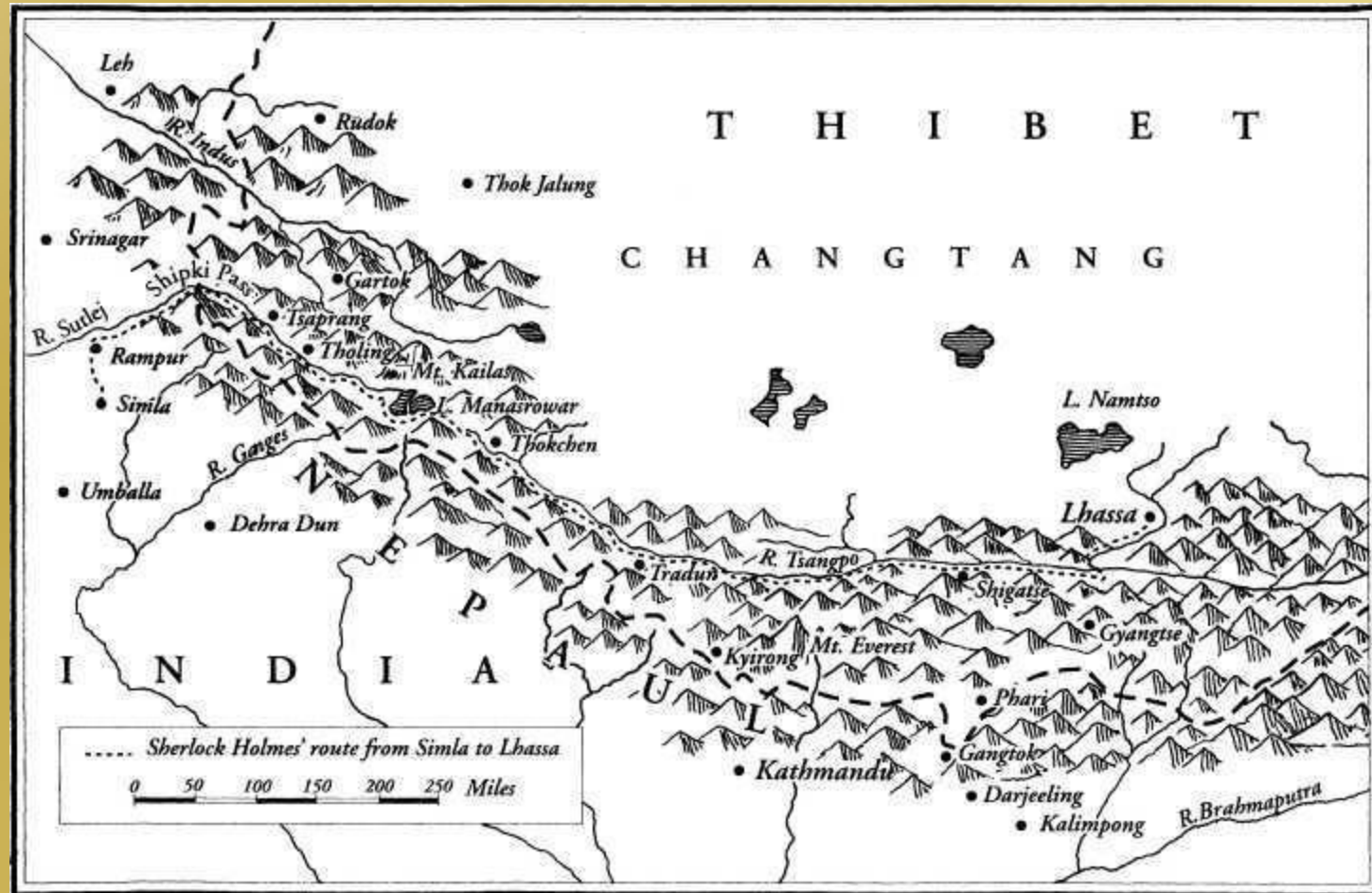
...

Tibet may lie crushed beneath the dead weight of Chinese tyranny, but the truth about Tibet cannot be so easily buried; and even such a strange fragment of history as this, may contribute to nailing at least a few lies of the tyrants.”

October 1988 Jamyang Norbu  
Nalanda Cottage Dharamshala

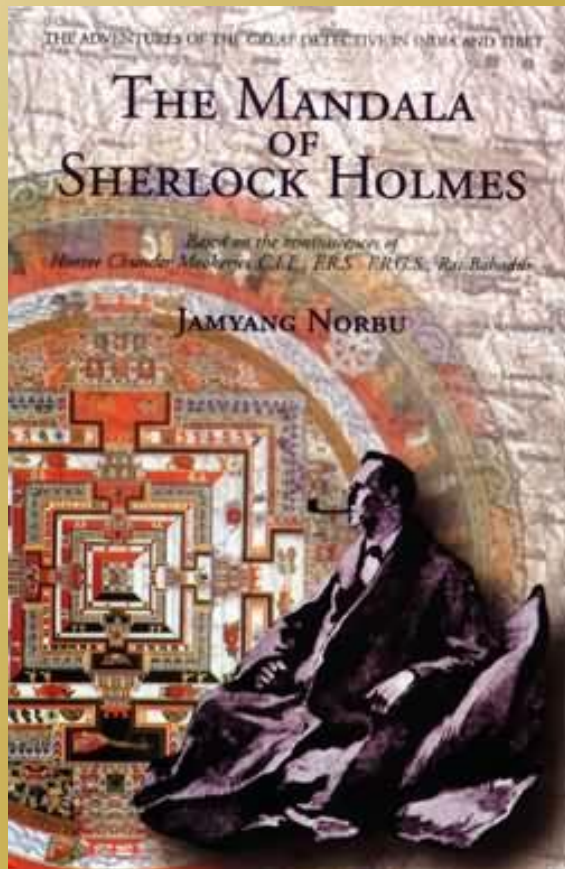


# map of Sherlock Holmes' route included in Jamyang Norbu's book

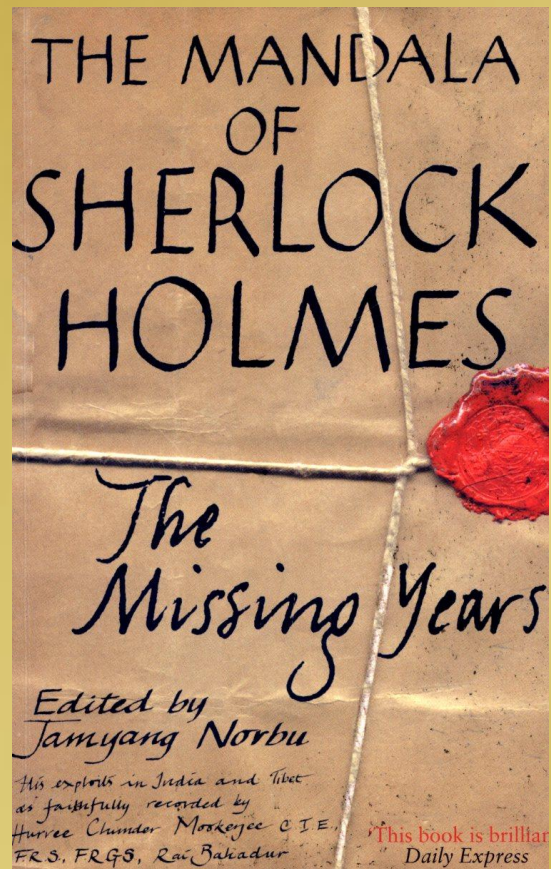




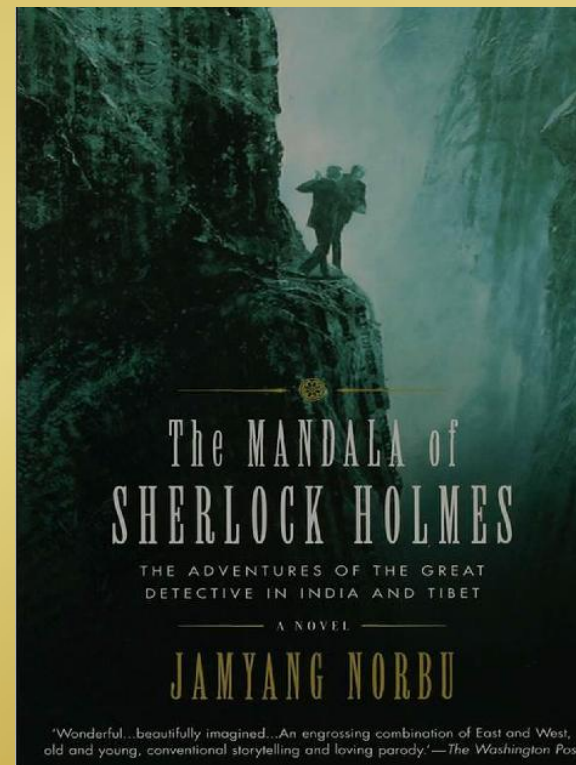
# Do we judge a book by it's cover?



1<sup>st</sup> edition cover Delhi  
Harper-Collins 1999



Wrap-around cover for  
hardback 2001-2



2003 Bloomsbury USA  
edition cover  
2003 Kindle edition  
cover

*Any questions or final thoughts on the pieces or genres we've read over the quarter?*

**Week 1:** Introduction to Buddhist Literature, Jātaka Tales

**Week 2:** Indian Buddhist Sūtra Literature

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**Week 5:** Tibetan Buddhist Inspirational poetry

**Week 6:** Buddhist Biography and Hagiography in Tibet

**Week 7:** Modern Buddhist Biographies: the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama's Autobiography

**Week 8:** Buddhist-inspired fiction in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*)