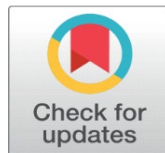


COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE NOVELS ZORBA THE GREEK AND SIDDHARTHA BASED ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

Anjana R. Nair ¹, Dr. Sreena K. ²

¹ MA English Language & Literature, Amrita School of Arts, Humanities & Commerce, Amrita Viswa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, Kerala, India

² Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Amrita School of Arts, Science & Commerce, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, Kerala, India



Received 29 March 2025

Accepted 21 April 2025

Published 25 April 2025

DOI [10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i4.ISMER.2025.6082](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i4.ISMER.2025.6082)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2025 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

Literature acts as a reflection of society or human existence giving philosophical understanding and meaning of life. Zorba the Greek by Nikos Kazantzakis and Herman Hesse's Siddhartha are two novels that dig into contrasting yet complementary philosophies of life. An existentialist perspective is presented by Zorba the Greek mainly focusing on Hedonism, the rejection of intellectual disengagement and spontaneity. Siddhartha by Herman Hesse is influenced by Buddhist philosophy—follow the path of self-discovery, spiritual transcendence and inner peace. Through the textual analysis and philosophical discourse, this paper showcases that the two novels emphasize two fundamental approaches to human conditions, engagement, and dismissal from the physical world. The comparative study inspects a philosophical framework of the novels.

Keywords: Comparative Literature, Siddhartha, Existentialism, Zorba the Greek, Self-Discovery

1. INTRODUCTION

Life is a conundrum, continuously developing puzzle that welcomes us to interrogate, seek and delineate our own purpose. The philosophy of life at its core, is a precarious balance between two ostensibly opposite yet interdependent perspectives—existentialism and spiritual philosophy. Between the hush chains of existentialism and the bright claims of philosophy, we are at the junction of popular and the indefinable, probing our purpose in a world which has unclear answers. The question is, are we just an accident of chance or is there any meaning to our existence or as unsaid truth that is always waiting to be disclosed?

Precursors like Jean Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche and Albert Camus, whose voices shaped the existentialism which removed the mirage of inherent meaning. It approaches us with the absurdity of life forcing us to take the responsibility of our life and create our own significance in the world. Existentialism speaks about freedom which acts as a burden and the meaning cannot be given but should be created by ourselves. Yet, in the extreme independence, we face a longing, a pain for a deep connection which is just physical.

Another lens through which we could see the reality is the spiritual philosophy. Spirituality suggests that life is not just a random event but a deep revelation of the consciousness, inspired by the teachings of the Zen, from Sufi mysticism and Taoist harmony. In spirituality, there is a cosmos, where the meaning gets discovered but not created, and the self-indulges into something eternal and timeless.

2. OBJECTIVES

This paper seeks to examine the existential and spiritual philosophies embedded in Zorba the Greek and Siddhartha with a special attention on the complex interplay happening between these two dimensions within each text. Through the lens of existentialism and spiritual philosophy this paper seeks to compare the role of experiences, suffering and knowledge in shaping the protagonist's understanding of life. The paper explores how both novels critique intellectualism and highlights the role of direct experience as a way to attain wisdom. Drawing from the theories of Nietzsche and also the Buddhist theory, this paper intends to explore the philosophical resolutions presented by Hesse and Kazantzakis about the purpose of life. Moreover, this research hopes to shed light on the philosophical impact of these texts.

3. HYPOTHESIS

This paper hypothesizes that the works Zorba the Greek by Kazantzakis and Siddhartha by Hermann Hesse advocate that regardless of coming from distinct philosophical backgrounds both the works converge in the examination of the search for meaning of life and realization. Both the characters have their own ways to get wisdom and an authentic living. Zorba lives life fully having the pleasures of life with action and fondness, Siddhartha through detachment from distractions. Through this paper the argument is put forward that they both follow the paths which are different yet complementary to each other. Their pursuit of life is contrasting to each other. Both the characters confront dogmas declaring that life cannot be taught it must be lived through experience. The paper illustrates that even though both the works are rooted in their respective philosophical ideologies they underscore the existential truth that meaning doesn't arise from institutions or theories but from one's own lived experience.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This work employs a qualitative comparative analysis approach, giving prominence to literary and philosophical frameworks. Combined close reading of both the texts are done to pinpoint the thematic and philosophical structures. Similarities and differences are identified in the depiction of human experiences in both the texts. Through the lens of philosophical theories like existentialism and Spiritual Eastern philosophy both the works were analysed. Many scholarly articles,

critical essays and philosophical texts were consulted to shed more light upon the topic.

5. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several works have been already studied on Zorba the Greek and Siddhartha individually within their philosophical traditions. Existentialism as a philosophy was studied by scholars like Jean Paul Sartre (1943) in *Being and Nothingness* and Albert Camus (1942) in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Thus Spoke Zarathustra by Friedrich Nietzsche introduces the concept of the Übermensch, self-affirmation and the rejection of morality in the favour of created values. Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1992) and scholars like Eliade and Zaehner have highlighted the Siddhartha's journey towards enlightenment and also the importance of detachment. Richard King, according to him, existentialism focuses on the creation of meaning in and bizarre world, Eastern philosophies focus on dismissal of ego and harmony with universal awakensness. Zorba was considered as an embodiment of existentialism and this was interpreted by Leonidas Papadimitriou (2010). Siddhartha was viewed as modern articulation of spiritual ideas by the scholars like Mircea Eliade *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, 1958 and R.C. Zaehner *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane*, 1966. In *Orientalism and Religion*, considers the spiritual journey which transcends institutionalized religion and welcome self- transformation. In *Modernist Literatures: A Comparative Introduction* (2006), scholar Rajeev S. Patke hints that both the protagonists serve as philosophical archetypes not only as literary figures. Comparative literary analysis that merges existential and spiritual philosophy remain limited but the individual scholarship on each novel exists.

A very few numbers of research works had been done on the comparative analysis taking both the novels together as texts dealing with existential crisis and also examining both the novels through spiritual philosophy. Other works emphasized on the experiential nature of Eastern philosophy in Siddhartha and also Dionysian spirit in Zorba the Greek. The integrative analysis comparing the existential affirmation in Zorba the Greek with the spiritual transcendence in Siddhartha remained under-explored and this is portrayed through this work.

6. ANALYSIS

Zorba the Greek by Kazantzakis and Siddhartha by Herman Hesse are excellent works that encapsulates differing perspectives on the philosophy of life. Zorba and Siddhartha, the characters are the examples of philosophical seekers of life's meaning. Both the characters embody the trailing of authentic living. Siddhartha and Zorba follow different paths – spiritual contemplation followed by Siddhartha and earthly pleasures followed by Zorba. They are the two sides of the same coin, where Siddhartha gets the meaning through detachment and meditation and Zorba through indulgence and action. Their common lesson is that wisdom or discernment cannot be taught-it must be lived.

Let us dive deep into how both the characters are interconnected to each other despite coming from different philosophical backgrounds. They have the opposite but their approaches to life are complementary-self-discovery and wisdom. Both acted as philosophical seekers of life's meaning. Siddhartha, is a spiritual seeker who is on the journey to attain enlightenment exploring sensual pleasures and asceticism and finally inner peace through his own experience. Zorba is an impulsive man with passion who celebrates life through his physical experiences, dance, work, happiness without not much thought or analysing. Both the characters emphasized

lived experiences over dogmas. Siddhartha totally rejects religious paths of buddha or his teachings and focused on learning the life directly. Zorba, who is not a philosopher also stands against the strong ideologies. He enjoys living life rather than just thinking about it. Siddhartha does not believe in attachment and become aware that true intelligence comes from within. Zorba allows others to enjoy themselves and he enjoys himself, he is imaginative and not attached to material things or strong beliefs. Both the characters serve as guides, Siddhartha as a guide to Govinda instructing him about perception beyond words. Zorba as a guide to the narrator teaching him to have a life with passion.

The nominal character of Zorba the Greek, Alexis Zorba, who is spontaneous, remarkable and has existentialist joy. He is engaged with physical world, rejecting conceptualization in favour of practical knowledge. Zorba lives in the moment always embracing pleasure, work, love and suffering with equal zeal. Zorba has instinctual understanding that scholarship alone is not at all sufficient to enjoy the existence and this is the root of his philosophy. He always encourages the narrator to renounce overthinking and engage with the world: "boss, everything's simple in the world. How many times must I tell you? All you have to do is do it!" (Kazantzakis, 1952). Zorba has satiation in sexual pleasures. For him, love is an experience and it is not merely pleasure but it is vital for life. On the other hand, while the narrator hesitates and intellectualizes emotions, Zorba fully submerges himself in passion. His relationship with Madame Hortense shows his concept of love that it is meaningful in the moment. Zorba's view on suffering and death is quite explicable. He considers suffering as inevitable and part of the fullness of life and encourages to face it with laughter, acceptance and dancing. He views death as something fearless. "No, no boss! Say it aloud, 'All is an illusion.' But don't let your heart believe it" (Kazantzakis, 1952). It shows the non-acceptance of metaphysical explanations—he doesn't fear or deny death. Instead, he chooses to live it till the end.

Siddhartha, the main character of Herman Hesse's novel, has a spiritual seeking to attain enlightenment. He is not like Zorba who always loves the external world. Siddhartha embraces inner transformation and denies worldly pleasures for self-discovery. His journey has mainly three phases: the first stage of his journey is as the Intellectual Seeker who begins as a devoted son of a Brahmin, always thirsting for knowledge. He finds no satisfaction in the foolish wisdom but masters religious rituals and philosophy. The second phase is that of the worldly man—eventually Siddhartha, like Zorba, engages in sensory pleasures. He enjoys love through his relationship with Kamala. He becomes a successful merchant and accumulates wealth. But Siddhartha, unlike Zorba, was unfulfilled with materialism and views it as a distraction to his life. The third phase of his life was as an Enlightened ferryman. Ultimately Siddhartha arrives at a stage of peace through detachment and inner stillness. He realises that enlightenment comes from accepting the life's flow but not from indulgence or asceticism. Siddhartha had a different view on love and women compared to Zorba. He views it as temporary and illusionary, not like Zorba, who sees it as necessary part of living. Siddhartha's love relationship was not satisfactory but was passionate. He seeks something beyond human relationship and abdicates desire. His view on love life is reflected in his act of leaving Kamala and their child behind and believes that love is secondary to self-discovery. He sees suffering as a result of attachment. His journey in life makes him understand that ego, illusion, and desire are the root of suffering. Like Zorba, who stands against suffering through actions, Siddhartha solves it through acceptance and spiritual insight. The river in the novel plays a significant role, it is what makes Siddhartha to realise the unity of existence. Siddhartha finds meaning in the stillness rather than in the movement.

Existentialism as a branch of philosophy raises questions about the existence of human life like why there is a need of life what is the purpose and how should one live a life. The revolution in the society made an arrangement of philosophy from theoretical conjecture which focused on universal truths to existence of human life and freedom. As spiritual and existential philosophies are connected to each other, both these philosophies can be seen in the two novels. Kazantzakis's Zorba the Greek impart Nietzsche commemoration of life. It also rejects intellectual passivity. Zorba in the novel personify the ideal of existential philosophy of living only in the present movement, with no fear of death or any kinds of judgement. Siddhartha which is based on Eastern philosophy has an intersection with the concept of existentialism with its concentration on personal experience over dogma. Siddhartha is against institutionalized religion and he found self-realization through personal experience which resounds the existentialism that life must be lived but cannot be taught. Zorba is the archetype of existential freedom who is into dancing love and always acts without getting crippled by theoretical thinking and the fear we have for death. Zorba resists nihilism through his engagement with the real world. Siddhartha also exemplifies existentialism from ignorance to enlightenment, focusing on self-experience over teachings. He also rejects nihilism through spiritual realization. Both of them operates on existential problem where it raises the question of how to live in a world where there is a collapse in the conventional structures of meaning.

The existentialism is visible in the works of Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche and also in the works of Jean Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger and Albert Camus. According to Sartre, human beings are "condemned to be free". Originality for Sartre is having the fearlessness to live without having bad faith and with one's own freedom. Nietzsche also developed notions like Übermensch and the idea of Amor Fati for accepting the life as it is. There are many Existentialist themes in Zorba where he chooses freedom over thought. He also embraced absurdity of life. Zorba acts as an existential hero who refuses to search for universal truths but embodies a philosophy of action, sensual pleasures and liveliness. He confronted the lack of meaning of life with a smile. He laughed at the time of suffering and also laughed at the concept of death echoes Nietzsche's concept of Übermensch who is an individual who surpass dogma to create meaning in life through experience.

Zorba found meaning in the present movement through human connection, love, labour, food and music. The dance at the end of the novel acts as a symbolic act of assertion. A bodily expression of his freedom. Through the joyful engagement with the world and through welcoming impermanence of life and uncertainty, he exceeds nihilism. Zorba is the literary embodiment of the existentialist assertion, encouraging the narrator to confront life with laughter. The existentialist spirit corresponds with Albert Camus's 'The Absurd Man' in The Myth of Sisyphus, one who chooses to live fully and with passion even after recognizing the absurdity of life. Zorba follows hedonistic existentialism where desire, pleasure, and physical experiences are the instruments of originality. Zorba does not remain in anxiety or scepticism like Sartre or Camus. He enjoys little joys like sensual love, music, food, dance, and it is not just distractions from existential fear but they are affirmations of being alive. His liveliness reflects an existential insight that life is fleeting and does not have any guarantee. The only response is to merge oneself into the present. Zorba's life philosophy intersects with Nietzsche's thought that is Gay Science and Thus Spoke Zarathustra emphasises on the word 'yes' to life—though affirmation and thoughts rejection of suffering not through rejection of suffering. Zorba does not find salvation in other worldly ideals but in life's pleasure, transforming the experiences into freedom and self-realization. He rejects Traditional Morality and Religion. He doesn't stick to the institutional structures or religion and conventional

morality but he acknowledges God in hard times. In the Gay Science, Nietzsche talked about the death of God. Nietzsche's declaration destructs the traditional sources of meaning. In the Nietzsche's sense, Zorba creates his own values which is rooted in instruct, responsibility, which is personal and also passion. Zorba's ethical compass comes from within from his direct engagement with his life. This morality is not codified, it is spontaneous. The respect towards his own life and not towards religious dogma resonated existentialist idea of authentic living—an authentic life which is not mediated by authorities instead led by creativity, freedom and responsibility.

Spiritual philosophy is the branch of philosophy which inquires in the purpose of human existence and mystery of human life beyond the material world. It focuses on deeper search for inner peace, self-realization and truth. It goes beyond religious boundaries. Spiritual philosophy helps in the inner journey of humans from desire to liberation, from fragmentation to unity from ignorance to enlightenment. Wisdom comes from inner reflection, meditation and strong direct experience of the self. Human attains meaning not through material aspects but through enlightenment and symphony with existence. The Vedanta, Taoism, Buddhism, Christian Mysticism, and Sufism follows this belief. Spiritual philosophy also raises the question of existence of human life and proposes that the answers are within oneself. The ideals of compassion, unity, and detachment are taught through this philosophy. Spiritual philosophy is the way of life not a system of thoughts. It guides people towards inner freedoms and the apprehension that there is a truth beyond the momentary world. Siddhartha's journey us a representation of human being's exploration of spirituality. He passes through different stages of life like materialism, sensual pleasures, asceticism to realize that wisdom must be experienced and not taught. "Wisdom is not communicable. The wisdom which a wise man tries to communicate always sounds foolish" (Hesse ,1951). This line resonates the Eastern spiritual philosophy that self-realization is not intellectual it is experimental. There is a great influence of Eastern religion and Mysticism. Hesse used the concept of Atman and Brahman. The river also becomes a symbol and it represents life, unity, time, and flow of existence. Siddhartha resonates with spiritual philosophies like Buddhist and Advanta philosophy where Moksha or Nirvana comes from transcending dualities. It also reflects the detachment idea where the protagonist in the novel tries to detach himself from material wealth, desires and from suffering. The idea of spiritual detachment is clearly visible in the novel. Siddhartha believes that there is an interconnectedness of all life. This reflects the spiritual teachings of getting surrender and that striving doesn't give truth, but only through acceptance and stillness. Zorba is also related to spiritual philosophy that's the spirituality of living fully. Zorba lives in the present moment and enjoys dancing, loving, and eating. This is very similar to Taoist and Zen thoughts. This is deeply spiritual in the existential sense. Zorba rejects theoretical knowledge and he marks at intellectualism and move beyond books. It is similar to the spiritual idea that wisdom comes not from reading but from living. Like of Anicca the Buddhist idea of accepting impermanence, Zorba accepts suffering as a part of existence and teaches that fear of death shouldn't make life limited.

Siddhartha follows key characteristics of the Eastern spiritual philosophy like the path of self-discovery and inner awakening. Unlike the protagonist in Zorba the Greek, who indulges in sensual pleasures Siddhartha apprehends that wisdom cannot be achieved through teachings or religious doctrines. He completely rejects the institutionalized religious teachings which reflects the Buddhist idea that one can gain enlightenment through experience but not through knowledge which is taken from other sources. Initially, Siddhartha engages in sensual pleasures of life

through his relationship with Kamala and also gets attracted to wealth, but unlike Zorba he does not get devoted to these experiences. One of the distinctions between Zorba and Siddhartha is their approach towards attachment and also desire. Siddhartha realizes that clinging to material things leads to suffering depicts the Buddhist teaching of dukkha. Siddhartha gradually recognizes that all the external experiences are short-lived. The concept of Anicca is visible in the narrative which means that impermanence exists throughout life. The Buddhist principle of Nirvana or liberation is achieved through surrender and not through accumulation and the dissolution of the line between the self and the universe is exposed through Siddhartha.

7. CONCLUSION

Zorba the Greek by Nikos Kazantzakis and Siddhartha by Hermann Hesse represents two diverse yet interconnected visions of life aligning in existentialist engagement and spiritual transcendence. Zorba in the novel exemplifies the “authentic individual” who declare meaning through his own experience and freedom in an ordinary world. Existentialist thoughts are drawn from the works of Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean Paul Sartre.

Zorba celebrates life in its rawest form. His unfiltered happiness, love, suffering are fundamental to his philosophy of life. He supports Nietzsche’s critique of passive Nihilism through his refusal of dogmatic morality. On the other hand, Hesse’s Siddhartha echoes the spiritual philosophy which has its roots in Buddhism, Vedanta and Upanishads. The concepts of Atman, Moksha and Advaita is portrayed in the novel for the realization that the human self is not separable from the universal consciousness.

Despite their differences both the texts share the idea that experiential knowledge outdoes intellectual speculation. In both the novels the authors stresses on the same notion that wisdom is not taught but should be gained through lived experience.

Ultimately, the study illustrates that Kazantzakis and Hesse working under distinct philosophical frameworks, express a universal human exploration that is the hunt for the meaning through experience which is personal, where in life acts as both question and answer.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Camus, A. (1991). *The Myth of Sisyphus* (J. O'Brien, Trans.). Vintage International. (Original work published 1942)
- Eliade, M. (1958). *Yoga : Immortality and Freedom*. Princeton University Press.
- Hesse, H. (1951). *Siddhartha* (H. Rosner, Trans.). New Directions.
- Hesse, H. (2006). *Siddhartha* (H. Rosner, Trans., p. 142). New Directions.
- Kazantzakis, N. (1952). *Zorba the Greek* (C. Wildman, Trans.). Simon & Schuster.

- Kazantzakis, N. (2003). *Zorba the Greek* (C. Wildman, Trans., pp. 253, 317). Simon & Schuster.
- King, R. (1999). *Orientalism and Religion : Postcolonial Theory, India and "The Mystic East"*. Routledge.
- Lindley, R. (1979). *Hermann Hesse : Pilgrim of Crisis*. Elek.
- Nietzsche, F. (1978). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1883–1885)
- Papadimitriou, L. (2010). *Kazantzakis and the Search for Meaning: An Existentialist Approach*. University of Crete Press.
- Patke, R. S. (2006). *Modernist literatures: A comparative introduction*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Sartre, J.-P. (2003). *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology* (H. E. Barnes, Trans.). Routledge. (Original work published 1943)
- Zaehner, R. C. (1966). *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane*. Oxford University Press.