

Mind, Bondage, and Liberation in Siddhartha

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मन एव मनुष्याणां कारणं बन्धमोक्षयोः

mana eva manuṣyaṇāṃ karaṇaṃ bandha-mokṣayoh
(Amṛtabindu Upaniṣad)

Abstract- Contemporary Indian English fiction often retells philosophical and spiritual stories by focusing on human emotions and psychology rather than religion or idealised beliefs. Siddhartha: The Boy Who Became the Buddha by Advait Kottary reflects this change by presenting Siddhartha Gautama not as an already enlightened figure, but as a growing child who experiences restlessness, emotional sensitivity and moral confusion. His journey is shaped by inner questions rather than spiritual certainty. By focusing on Siddhartha's childhood thoughts and feelings, the novel avoids portraying him as a perfect or sacred figure and instead highlights his psychological struggles. In doing so, the narrative places human experience and inner conflict at the centre of the story. This paper offers a psychological reading of the text grounded in the Upaniṣadic assertion that the mind alone is the cause of both bondage and liberation, treating this idea not as religious doctrine but as a conceptual framework aligned with modern psychological thought.

Using ideas from developmental and moral psychology, this study explains how Siddhartha's feelings of dissatisfaction, empathy, silence, and reflection shape his mental growth. These experiences create both suffering and moral awareness. In the novel, psychological bondage comes from heightened awareness that Siddhartha does not yet fully understand, while liberation slowly develops through thoughtful reflection, emotional balance, and moral understanding. The novel does not present liberation as giving up the world or achieving spiritual perfection. Instead, it shows liberation as an inner change in the way the mind understands and responds to experience. Liberation is therefore shown as a continuous psychological process rather than a final state. By examining bondage and liberation as mental conditions, this paper places Kottary's novel within modern literary studies that focus on inner life, psychological growth, and moral responsibility.

Keywords: Indian English fiction; psychology; mind; bondage; liberation; moral development

I. INTRODUCTION

Recent developments in English literary studies reveal a growing preoccupation with interiority, cognition, and emotional complexity. Contemporary fiction increasingly privileges the workings of the mind over external action, exploring how individuals negotiate dissatisfaction, meaning, and ethical responsibility in an era marked by uncertainty and cognitive overload. Within this broader shift, Indian English fiction has shown particular interest in reinterpreting mythic, historical, and philosophical narratives through human-centred and psychologically grounded perspectives.

Siddhartha: The Boy Who Became the Buddha participates decisively in this literary movement. By situating its narrative prior to the moment of enlightenment traditionally associated with Siddhartha Gautama, the novel resists hagiographic representation and instead foregrounds a mind in formation. Siddhartha is portrayed as emotionally perceptive, intellectually restless and morally unsettled. His journey is not propelled by prophecy or doctrine but by a persistent psychological unease that demands understanding.

This paper argues that the novel can be productively read as a psychological narrative in which bondage and liberation are mental states generated by the mind's relationship to experience. The conceptual framework guiding this analysis is articulated in the Upaniṣadic assertion “मन एव मनुष्याणां कारणं बन्धमोक्षयोः”, which identifies the mind as the source of both human suffering and freedom. Far from being an exclusively spiritual claim, this insight resonates strongly with modern psychological thought, which locates distress and well-being in cognition, emotional regulation and awareness rather than in external conditions alone.

By adopting a psychological approach, this study shifts attention away from metaphysical resolution

and towards mental process. Bondage in the novel manifests as restlessness, dissatisfaction, and ethical confusion, while liberation emerges gradually through awareness, empathy, and reflective silence. In this way, the paper situates Kottary's work within contemporary interdisciplinary literary discourse that brings literature into dialogue with psychology and ethics.

II. RESEARCH PROBLEM

Although *Siddhartha: The Boy Who Became the Buddha* has received growing attention, it is mostly read as a spiritual, philosophical, or moral story. Many studies focus on its retelling of *Siddhartha's* life or its ethical message, but they do not fully explore the psychological aspects of the novel. There is very little discussion of how the novel presents bondage and liberation as mental experiences shaped by restlessness, empathy, reflection, and awareness. This paper aims to fill that gap by offering a psychological reading of the novel and by focusing on the mind as the main source of both suffering and freedom.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis as its primary research method. The analysis is interdisciplinary in nature, drawing upon concepts from developmental psychology and moral psychology, while being informed by an Indian philosophical understanding of the mind. Rather than treating the narrative as a religious or biographical account, the paper employs close reading and conceptual interpretation to examine patterns of psychological experience across the text. The methodology is non-empirical and interpretive, focusing on interiority, emotional response and ethical awareness to analyse how psychological bondage and liberation are represented in the novel.

IV. CRITICAL CONTEXT AND RESEARCH GAP

Although *Siddhartha: The Boy Who Became the Buddha* has received significant recognition, including the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar, critical engagement with the novel remains limited and largely descriptive. Existing commentary frequently emphasises the accessibility of the narrative, its re-telling of a familiar life story or its

appeal to younger readers. While such readings acknowledge literary merit, they rarely engage with the novel's sustained exploration of mental processes.

At the same time, contemporary literary criticism has increasingly embraced interdisciplinary approaches, particularly those that integrate psychology and philosophy of mind. Scholars have noted that modern fiction often replaces external conflict with inward struggle, presenting the mind as the primary site of narrative tension. Despite this shift, reimagined spiritual or philosophical narratives are still often approached through symbolic or ethical frameworks that overlook psychological development.

This paper addresses that gap by foregrounding the novel's representation of restlessness, empathy, reflection and awareness as evolving psychological states. Rather than treating

Siddhartha's journey as a predetermined spiritual trajectory, the analysis examines it as a process shaped by the mind's response to suffering and uncertainty. In doing so, the study aligns the novel with broader critical conversations about interiority and moral becoming in contemporary fiction.

V. LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGICAL POSITIONING

Within Indian English literature, psychological criticism has most often focused on trauma, displacement and identity, particularly in postcolonial and diasporic contexts. While valuable, this focus has left comparatively underexplored those texts that engage with philosophical or spiritual traditions without adopting a devotional or allegorical mode. Reimagined narratives of historical or mythic figures are frequently read symbolically, leaving their psychological dimensions under-analysed.

Moral psychology offers a particularly relevant framework for addressing this gap. It identifies empathy, emotional awareness, and reflective judgement as central to ethical development. Developmental psychology further emphasises that moral consciousness emerges gradually through experience and cognitive dissonance rather than through instruction alone. These perspectives enable a reading of *Siddhartha* that foregrounds mental

growth without reducing the narrative to didactic teaching.

Methodologically, this paper adopts close textual analysis combined with conceptual interpretation. Rather than isolating discrete scenes for symbolic decoding, the analysis traces patterns of mental experience across the narrative. Siddhartha's restlessness, compassion, silence and attentiveness are examined as interrelated psychological states that structure the movement from bondage to liberation. This approach remains focused on the text while also engaging with broader theoretical concerns in contemporary literary research.

The study also adopts a non-teleological reading strategy. Instead of interpreting Siddhartha's journey as a linear progression towards enlightenment, the paper emphasises process over destination. Psychological growth is treated as provisional and ongoing, reflecting contemporary models of mental well-being that prioritise integration over resolution. This

methodological stance aligns with current interdisciplinary literary scholarship that values complexity, nuance, and interpretive restraint.

VI. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: MIND, BONDAGE, AND LIBERATION

The Upaniṣadic assertion that the mind alone causes bondage and liberation provides a conceptual bridge between ancient philosophical insight and modern psychology. In this view, bondage arises not merely from social or material constraints but from patterns of perception, attachment and confusion. Liberation, correspondingly, is achieved through clarity, awareness, and ethical attentiveness.

Modern psychology echoes this position by locating emotional distress and well-being in cognitive and affective processes. Psychological theories of self-regulation and moral development emphasise that awareness of one's thoughts and emotions plays a decisive role in shaping ethical behaviour. When applied to literary analysis, these theories allow characters to be read as sites of mental negotiation rather than symbolic abstractions.

In Siddhartha, heightened awareness initially produces discomfort rather than peace. The protagonist's sensitivity to suffering generates unrest, indicating that awareness without interpretive clarity can function as bondage. Over

time, however, the same awareness becomes the foundation for empathy and reflection. The novel thus dramatises the paradox implicit in the Upaniṣadic claim: the mind that binds is also the mind that liberates.

VII. PSYCHOLOGICAL BONDAGE: RESTLESSNESS AND COGNITIVE DISQUIET

A defining feature of the novel is its sustained attention to Siddhartha's inner unease. Despite being surrounded by comfort and protection, he experiences persistent dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction does not arise from deprivation but from heightened perception. From a psychological perspective, such restlessness reflects cognitive disquiet—a condition in which awareness outpaces emotional integration.

Siddhartha's mind resists complacency, repeatedly questioning the meaning of pleasure, security, and social order. This resistance constitutes psychological bondage not because it restricts him externally but because it generates unresolved tension. Contemporary psychology recognises this state as cognitive dissonance, where internal conflict emerges from the clash between experience and existing assumptions.

Kottary avoids portraying this restlessness as immaturity or rebellion. Instead, it is framed as ethical sensitivity that refuses to normalise suffering. Siddhartha's mental state is marked by attentiveness rather than defiance, suggesting that bondage originates in awareness without clarity. The mind, confronted with suffering but lacking interpretive grounding, becomes a site of unrest.

VIII. EMPATHY AND THE FORMATION OF MORAL CONSCIOUSNESS

As Siddhartha's psychological unrest deepens, the novel foregrounds empathy as the primary mechanism through which moral consciousness emerges. His encounters with suffering are not presented as instructive moments with clear lessons but as affective experiences that unsettle his internal equilibrium, marking a transition from cognitive disquiet to ethical awareness. Moral psychology identifies empathy as a foundational process through which individuals recognise the emotional reality of others and Siddhartha's development is consistently situated within this framework. Empathy in the

narrative does not offer immediate relief; rather, Siddhartha's heightened sensitivity intensifies his inner conflict, compelling him to remain present with discomfort instead of seeking premature resolution. The novel resists sentimental portrayals of compassion, depicting empathy as psychologically demanding and ethically burdensome. As Siddhartha becomes increasingly aware that understanding suffering entails responsibility, psychological bondage shifts from restlessness to moral weight. Moral consciousness thus emerges not as an escape from difficulty but as an expansion of awareness shaped by sustained emotional engagement.

IX. SILENCE, ATTENTION AND REFLECTIVE AWARENESS

A recurring narrative strategy in the novel is the use of silence as a mode of psychological reorientation. Siddhartha's learning increasingly occurs in moments of quiet observation rather than through instruction or dialogue. This emphasis on silence reflects a psychological understanding of awareness as an active process of attention rather than a passive state of withdrawal. Silence allows the mind to encounter experience without immediate categorisation or judgement.

From a psychological perspective, reflective awareness involves the capacity to observe thoughts and emotions without being overwhelmed by them. Siddhartha's growing comfort with silence suggests the development of such capacity. His mind gradually shifts from reactive engagement to attentive presence. This transformation marks a critical stage in the movement from bondage to liberation. Awareness, initially experienced as destabilising, becomes a source of coherence.

The narrative avoids framing silence as mystical transcendence. Instead, silence functions as a practical mode of mental organisation. Siddhartha learns to hold conflicting emotions without fragmentation. This ability aligns with contemporary psychological models that emphasise mindfulness and non-reactive awareness as foundations for emotional regulation and ethical clarity. Liberation, in this sense, is not defined by absence of suffering but by the capacity to engage with suffering without internal collapse.

Silence also facilitates ethical discernment. By suspending immediate judgement, Siddhartha creates space for reflection. His responses to others become less impulsive and more attuned to context. The novel thus links reflective awareness with moral responsibility, suggesting that ethical action emerges from sustained attention rather than from predetermined rules.

X. LIBERATION AS PSYCHOLOGICAL INTEGRATION

Liberation in the novel is deliberately understated and incomplete. There is no climactic resolution that definitively marks Siddhartha's freedom. Instead, liberation is portrayed as an ongoing psychological process characterised by integration rather than finality. Siddhartha does not eliminate restlessness or sorrow; he learns to accommodate them within a broader awareness. This portrayal aligns closely with psychological conceptions of maturity, which emphasise coherence over perfection.

Psychological integration involves the ability to hold multiple, sometimes contradictory, aspects of experience without denial or fragmentation. Siddhartha's mind gradually acquires this capacity. His earlier discomfort stemmed from an inability to reconcile pleasure with suffering, safety with impermanence. Over time, reflection enables him to perceive these conditions as interrelated rather than opposed. Liberation, therefore, emerges as cognitive flexibility rather than emotional insulation.

This understanding reinforces the Upaniṣadic assertion that the mind is responsible for both bondage and liberation. The same awareness that once produced unrest becomes the basis for clarity when reorganised through reflection and empathy. Liberation does not require new experiences but a new mode of engagement with existing ones. The novel thus presents freedom as a psychological reorientation rather than an external achievement.

Importantly, the narrative resists portraying liberation as a withdrawal from ethical responsibility. Siddhartha's growing clarity increases, rather than diminishes, his sensitivity to others. This depiction challenges interpretations of liberation as detachment and instead frames it as ethical attentiveness grounded in psychological stability.

XI. DISCUSSION: CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOLOGICAL AND LITERARY RELEVANCE

The psychological reading advanced in this paper situates the novel within contemporary discussions of mental health, ethical responsibility, and meaning-making. By portraying liberation as psychological integration rather than transcendence, the narrative aligns with modern therapeutic models that emphasise awareness, empathy, and self-regulation. Siddhartha's experiences reflect the tension between heightened awareness and emotional exhaustion familiar to modern life, suggesting that distress becomes problematic when the mind cannot interpret or contain experience. From a literary perspective, the novel foregrounds interior transformation over external action and resists closure, emphasising psychological growth as provisional and ongoing. The integration of Upaniṣadic thought within a psychological framework further enhances the novel's contemporary relevance.

XII. EXTENDED ANALYSIS: PSYCHOLOGICAL BONDAGE, ETHICAL BURDEN AND THE LIMITS OF AWARENESS

A distinctive feature of Siddhartha: The Boy Who Became the Buddha is its refusal to present psychological growth as a linear or uniformly progressive process. Instead, the novel repeatedly emphasises the instability and burden that accompany heightened awareness. While early sections of the narrative portray Siddhartha's dissatisfaction as cognitive disquiet,

later stages reveal that awareness itself can become a form of psychological weight. This complication deepens the novel's engagement with the idea that the mind is simultaneously the source of bondage and liberation.

Kottary's narrative foregrounds this tension by refusing to grant Siddhartha emotional closure. The protagonist does not arrive at comforting conclusions that neutralise suffering. Instead, he learns to remain present with unresolved realities. This portrayal challenges popular representations of spiritual or psychological growth that equate insight

with peace. In contrast, the novel suggests that growth often involves increased discomfort, as the mind becomes more attuned to complexity.

This dimension of the novel reinforces the Upaniṣadic assertion that bondage and liberation originate in the mind. Siddhartha's psychological bondage is no longer rooted in confusion alone but in the weight of understanding. Awareness, while necessary for liberation, also exposes the mind to moral responsibility. The novel thus complicates any simplistic equation of awareness with freedom, presenting liberation as a fragile and demanding psychological state.

XIII. PSYCHOLOGICAL TIME, WAITING AND THE EXPERIENCE OF BECOMING

Another significant but understated aspect of the novel is its treatment of psychological time. Siddhartha's development is marked not by dramatic events but by prolonged periods of waiting, observation and internal negotiation. The narrative pace mirrors this psychological temporality, resisting acceleration toward resolution. From a psychological perspective, this emphasis on waiting reflects the lived experience of mental growth, which often unfolds slowly and without clear milestones.

Psychological studies of development emphasise that insight cannot be forced through will or instruction. Instead, it emerges through sustained exposure to experience and reflective processing. Siddhartha's journey exemplifies this process. His understanding does not advance through sudden revelations but through gradual shifts in perception. The novel's narrative structure reinforces this dynamic by privileging duration over climax.

Waiting in the novel is not passive. Siddhartha's periods of stillness are marked by attentive observation and internal dialogue. These moments allow the mind to reorganise experience without external intervention. The psychological significance of such waiting lies in its

capacity to foster integration. Rather than seeking immediate answers, Siddhartha learns to tolerate uncertainty, a capacity widely recognised in psychology as essential for emotional resilience.

By foregrounding psychological time, the novel resists teleological interpretations that frame

Siddhartha's life as a predetermined path toward enlightenment. Instead, becoming is presented as an open-ended process shaped by contingency and response. This portrayal aligns with contemporary psychological models that emphasise adaptability and process rather than fixed outcomes.

XIV. LANGUAGE, INTERIOR NARRATION AND THE REPRESENTATION OF MIND

The novel's stylistic choices further reinforce its psychological orientation. Kottary employs a restrained narrative voice that prioritises interior states over descriptive excess. Siddhartha's thoughts and emotional responses are conveyed with simplicity, allowing mental processes to remain visible without being over-explained. This stylistic economy reflects an understanding that psychological experience often resists articulation.

Interior narration in the novel functions as a window into the protagonist's evolving relationship with awareness. Early interior reflections are marked by confusion and questioning, while later reflections demonstrate increased coherence and attentiveness. The gradual modulation of Siddhartha's inner voice mirrors his psychological development, suggesting that liberation involves not silence alone but a transformation in how the mind speaks to itself.

Psychological research on self-talk emphasises that internal language plays a crucial role in emotional regulation and ethical decision-making. Siddhartha's changing inner discourse reflects this principle. As his awareness deepens, his internal narration becomes less reactive and more observant. This shift indicates a movement toward psychological integration rather than emotional suppression.

The novel's language thus contributes to its central argument: that the mind's patterns of engagement shape both bondage and liberation. By rendering mental processes visible through narrative form, the text invites readers to recognise similar patterns within their own psychological experience.

XV. ETHICAL NON-RESOLUTION AND THE REFUSAL OF CLOSURE

One of the most significant contributions of the novel lies in its refusal to provide ethical or psychological closure. Siddhartha's journey does not culminate in definitive answers that resolve

suffering or moral ambiguity. Instead, the narrative concludes with openness, reinforcing the idea that liberation is provisional and ongoing.

From a psychological perspective, this refusal of closure is crucial. Contemporary models of mental health increasingly reject the notion of permanent resolution, emphasising instead the importance of ongoing self-regulation and awareness. Siddhartha's experience reflects this understanding. His liberation does not consist in escaping difficulty but in developing the capacity to engage with it without fragmentation.

The novel's ethical stance similarly avoids prescriptive conclusions. Siddhartha is not presented as a moral authority who possesses answers for others. His awareness remains personal and situational, shaped by continued exposure to suffering and impermanence. This restraint aligns with ethical theories that emphasise humility and attentiveness over moral certainty.

By resisting closure, the novel affirms the complexity of psychological and ethical life. Liberation is not depicted as an endpoint but as a mode of being that requires continual effort. This portrayal enhances the novel's relevance to contemporary readers, for whom certainty is often elusive and ethical decisions are context-dependent.

XVI. REFRAMING LIBERATION FOR CONTEMPORARY READERS

The psychological framework articulated in the novel reframes liberation in terms that resonate with modern experience. Rather than defining freedom as transcendence or withdrawal, the narrative presents it as psychological integration and ethical attentiveness. Siddhartha's journey shows that awareness, though demanding, enables meaningful engagement with life's complexities. The novel avoids offering prescriptions or techniques, instead modelling a mode of awareness that balances sensitivity with stability. Liberation emerges not from controlling the external world but from transforming the mind's relationship to experience. In this way, the text situates itself within a global literary discourse that explores forms of freedom compatible with uncertainty, vulnerability and ethical responsibility.

XVII. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined Siddhartha: The Boy Who Became the Buddha as a psychological narrative that conceptualises bondage and liberation as states generated by the mind. Drawing on the Upaniṣadic insight that the mind is the source of both suffering and freedom, the study shows how restlessness, empathy, silence, and reflection function as interrelated processes of mental development. Early psychological bondage arises from heightened awareness without interpretive clarity, while empathy and reflective attention gradually foster moral consciousness and integration. Liberation in the novel is portrayed not as a final state but as an ongoing process of awareness and ethical engagement, underscoring the text's contemporary relevance.

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