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Western Interpretations of Eastern Spirituality: Social Cognition in the Reception of Siddhartha

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Abstract

This study examines Western interpretations of Eastern spirituality through the reception of Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha. Although the novel is widely read as a literary representation of Buddhist philosophy, scholars have suggested that its spiritual vision reflects a Western reinterpretation of Eastern traditions rather than an accurate representation of Buddhist doctrine. Drawing on Orientalism theory, social cognition theory, and cross-cultural communication perspectives, this study explores how Eastern spiritual ideas are represented in literary form and interpreted by Western readers. The research adopts a qualitative design combining interpretive textual analysis with reader reception analysis. The textual analysis focuses on key philosophical themes in Siddhartha, including enlightenment, self-discovery, individuality, and the relationship between humanity and nature. In addition, approximately 200 reader reviews from online literary platforms were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in reader interpretation. The findings indicate that the spiritual philosophy presented in Siddhartha reflects a hybrid framework shaped by both Eastern traditions and Western individualistic thought. Reader responses further show that Western audiences frequently interpret the novel as a narrative of personal self-realization rather than as an expression of Buddhist doctrine. These results suggest that Eastern spiritual ideas are actively reconstructed through literary representation and culturally shaped interpretive frameworks.

Keywords: Siddhartha; Eastern spirituality; Orientalism; social cognition; reader reception

1. Introduction

Since the nineteenth century, Western intellectual traditions have increasingly engaged with Eastern religious and philosophical systems. Buddhism, Hinduism, and other Asian philosophical traditions entered European intellectual discourse through colonial encounters, missionary activities, and the translation of classical Asian texts. As these traditions circulated within Western cultural contexts, they were frequently interpreted and reinterpreted through Western philosophical frameworks, leading to new forms of cross-cultural philosophical exchange (Lopez, 1998; McMahan, 2008).

Scholars have noted that Western encounters with Eastern religious traditions were often shaped by broader historical and cultural forces, including colonial expansion, missionary scholarship, and the emergence of comparative religion as an academic field. Within these contexts, Eastern philosophical traditions were frequently reconstructed according to Western intellectual expectations. As Said (1978) famously argued, Western representations of Eastern cultures often reflect Western cultural assumptions and ideological frameworks rather than authentic representations of Eastern societies. Consequently, the transmission of Eastern philosophical ideas into Western discourse has often involved processes of reinterpretation and transformation rather than simple cultural translation (Araujo & de Albuquerque, 2021; Said, 1978).

The modern Western reception of Buddhism illustrates these dynamics particularly clearly. Scholars have demonstrated that modern Western interpretations of Buddhism often emphasize individual spiritual experience, psychological insight, and philosophical rationality, producing what has been described as "Buddhist modernism." Similarly, research has shown that Western representations of Buddhism frequently reflect Western spiritual expectations rather than traditional doctrinal frameworks (McMahan, 2008; Tan, 2022).

Literature has played a particularly significant role in this process of cross-cultural philosophical exchange. Literary texts function not only as artistic expressions but also as cultural mediators through which philosophical ideas travel across cultural boundaries. Through narra-

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tive structures, symbolism, and aesthetic interpretation, literature often reshapes philosophical concepts in ways that make them accessible to new cultural audiences. As a result, literary works may simultaneously transmit and transform philosophical traditions (Damrosch, 2018; van Cranenburgh et al., 2021).

Among Western writers who explored Eastern spirituality, Hermann Hesse occupies a prominent position. Hesse's works reflect a sustained engagement with spiritual questions and philosophical traditions beyond the boundaries of Western religious thought. His novel *Siddhartha*, first published in 1922, tells the story of a young man's spiritual journey during the time of the Buddha. The narrative traces Siddhartha's search for enlightenment through experiences of asceticism, worldly life, and ultimately spiritual awakening (McMahan, 2008).

Because of its thematic focus on enlightenment, spiritual self-knowledge, and the search for meaning, *Siddhartha* has often been interpreted as a literary representation of Buddhist philosophy. The novel achieved considerable popularity in Western cultural contexts during the twentieth century, particularly among readers interested in spirituality, existential philosophy, and alternative religious traditions (Lopez, 1998).

However, scholars have long debated the philosophical authenticity of the spiritual worldview presented in the novel. While some readers interpret *Siddhartha* as an accessible introduction to Buddhist thought, other scholars argue that Hesse's interpretation of Eastern spirituality reflects Western philosophical traditions and his own cultural background rather than traditional Buddhist doctrine (Lopez, 1998; McMahan, 2008).

Hesse's upbringing within a Protestant missionary family and his exposure to European intellectual traditions played an important role in shaping his spiritual worldview. As a result, the philosophical narrative presented in *Siddhartha* may be understood not simply as a representation of Buddhist thought but as a hybrid cultural construction that combines Eastern philosophical ideas with Western individualistic spirituality (Tan, 2022).

This debate raises important questions about how philosophical ideas change when they move across cultural boundaries. When Eastern spiritual traditions are represented within Western literary forms, they may be reinterpreted according to Western intellectual traditions and cultural assumptions. In this sense, literary texts may function not only as sites of cultural transmission but also as spaces of cultural transformation (Araujo & de Albuquerque, 2024; Miyake, 2023).

Furthermore, the widespread popularity of *Siddhartha* among Western readers invites further investigation into how readers interpret the spiritual ideas presented in the novel. Readers often approach literary texts through culturally shaped cognitive frameworks that influence how they interpret unfamiliar philosophical ideas (Dezuanni & Schoonens, 2024; van Cranenburgh et al., 2021).

Social cognition theory provides a useful perspective for understanding this interpretive process. According to this perspective, individuals interpret new information through cognitive schemas shaped by cultural experience. These schemas influence how readers perceive, categorize, and interpret cultural narratives. Western cultures often emphasize independent self-construal, which prioritizes individual autonomy and personal development. Such cultural frameworks may influence how Western readers interpret the spiritual themes presented in *Siddhartha* (Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Heine, 2020; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Despite extensive scholarship on Hesse's literary works and philosophical influences, relatively little research has examined how readers cognitively interpret the spiritual ideas presented in *Siddhartha*. Most existing studies focus primarily on textual interpretation, philosophical sources, or biographical influences rather than on reader reception and interpretation (Eekhof et al., 2022; van Cranenburgh et al., 2021). Understanding how readers interpret cross-cultural philosophical narratives is particularly important because literary texts often function as cultural mediators through which philosophical and religious ideas circulate globally (Damrosch, 2018). This study therefore investigates how Eastern spirituality is reconstructed in Hesse's literary narrative and how Western readers interpret these ideas through culturally shaped cognitive frameworks (Chen et al., 2024).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Western Interpretations of Eastern Spirituality

Western engagement with Eastern philosophy has developed through a long history of intellectual exchange and cultural encounter. Early European interpretations of Asian religious traditions were closely connected to colonial expansion and the development of Orientalist scholarship. As Said (1978) famously argued, Western knowledge about the "Orient" was historically shaped by political and intellectual power relations. Subsequent studies of Buddhism in Western contexts have similarly shown how Asian religious traditions were interpreted through European cultural frameworks (Lopez, 1998; McMahan, 2008). More recent scholarship continues to examine how Orientalist perspectives influence contemporary cultural discourse about Asia (Araujo & de Albuquerque, 2021; Nash, 2020).

Edward Said's theory of Orientalism suggests that Western representations of Eastern cultures often reflect Western intellectual assumptions rather than authentic depictions of Eastern societies. In this framework, the "Orient" functions less as a geographical reality than as a conceptual category constructed within Western discourse. Later researchers have extended Said's insights to contemporary media and cultural production, demonstrating how Orientalist perspectives persist in modern representations of Asian cultures (Araujo & de Albuquerque, 2021; Loza, 2023). Studies of digital culture and global media likewise show that Orientalist narratives continue to shape cultural imaginaries in new technological contexts (Miyake, 2023; Sobral, 2023).

Within this broader intellectual context, Eastern religious traditions were frequently interpreted through Western philosophical frameworks. Research on Western engagements with Asian philosophy suggests that such encounters rarely involve direct cultural transmission. Instead, they often produce reinterpretations shaped by Western intellectual traditions and cultural assumptions. Studies of Buddhist modernism have highlighted how Western interpretations of Buddhism frequently emphasize philosophical rationality and personal spiritual experience (McMahan, 2008, 2020). Similar observations appear in recent research on contemporary Buddhist communities and the globalization of Buddhist ideas (Starkey, 2024; Tan, 2022).

For instance, many Western interpretations of Buddhism highlight themes of individual spiritual experience and personal enlightenment. Scholars have noted that these interpretations often resonate with Western intellectual traditions such as Romanticism and existential philosophy. At the same time, they may diverge from traditional Buddhist doctrinal frameworks and institutional practices (Lopez, 1998; McMahan, 2008). Recent psychological and sociological studies also suggest that modern interpretations of Buddhist meditation frequently emphasize individual well-being and psychological transformation (Du, 2022; Tse et al., 2022).

Recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes the dynamic and transformative nature of cross-cultural philosophical exchange. Rather than moving unchanged across cultural boundaries, philosophical ideas are often reshaped through processes of translation, interpretation, and cultural adaptation. Comparative literary research highlights how texts function as sites where philosophical traditions are reinterpreted within new cultural environments (Damrosch, 2018). Studies of global media and cultural representation further demonstrate that such reinterpretations continue to occur within contemporary communication systems (Araujo & de Albuquerque, 2024; Lin, 2023; Miyake, 2023). Research

on media discourse and global cultural politics likewise shows how representations of non-Western traditions are constantly renegotiated within modern communication contexts (Kabir, 2024; Richter, 2024).

2.2. Hermann Hesse and Eastern Philosophy

Hermann Hesse's engagement with Eastern philosophy has been widely discussed in literary scholarship. Studies of Western interpretations of Buddhism suggest that many European writers approached Asian religious traditions through philosophical reinterpretation rather than direct doctrinal transmission. As McMahan (2008) argues in his analysis of Buddhist modernism, Western engagements with Buddhism often emphasize philosophical reflection and individual spiritual experience. Similar observations appear in earlier research on Western representations of Buddhism (Lopez, 1998).

Raised in a Protestant missionary family with connections to India, Hesse was exposed to both Christian theology and Asian religious traditions from an early age. This intercultural background has often been considered an important factor shaping his intellectual development and lifelong interest in spiritual questions. Research on cross-cultural religious exchange also suggests that such encounters frequently lead to hybrid forms of philosophical interpretation rather than direct cultural transmission (McMahan, 2008; Starkey, 2024; Tan, 2022).

Scholars have long debated the nature of Hesse's engagement with Eastern philosophy. Some literary critics argue that his works demonstrate a deep engagement with Asian philosophical traditions, while others suggest that his interpretation of Eastern spirituality reflects a synthesis of multiple intellectual influences rather than a direct representation of Buddhist doctrine. Studies of Western Buddhist modernism support this view by showing how Buddhist ideas are often reinterpreted through Western philosophical and cultural frameworks (Lopez, 1998; McMahan, 2008, 2020). Contemporary scholarship on global Buddhism likewise highlights the diversity of interpretations that emerge as Buddhist ideas circulate across cultural contexts (Tan, 2022).

In *Siddhartha*, the spiritual journey of the protagonist emphasizes personal experience and individual discovery rather than adherence to established religious teachings. Siddhartha ultimately rejects formal religious instruction—including the teachings of the Buddha—in favor of discovering truth through direct personal experience. This narrative structure reflects a broader pattern in modern Western interpretations of Buddhism, which frequently prioritize experiential insight and individual self-realization (McMahan, 2008; Tse et al., 2022).

Such emphasis on personal spiritual experience resonates strongly with Western philosophical traditions that prioritize individual autonomy and subjective understanding. Scholars in cultural psychology have argued that Western cultural contexts often emphasize independent self-construal and personal agency in shaping identity and meaning-making (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These cultural orientations may influence how Western authors reinterpret spiritual traditions and how readers understand philosophical narratives drawn from other cultural contexts (Heine, 2020).

Consequently, *Siddhartha* can be interpreted as a hybrid philosophical narrative that blends elements of Eastern spirituality with Western individualistic thought. As comparative literary scholars note, philosophical ideas frequently undergo transformation when they move across cultural boundaries and are reinterpreted within new intellectual traditions (Damrosch, 2018). In this sense, Hesse's novel illustrates how literary texts function as sites of cross-cultural philosophical reinterpretation.

2.3. Social Cognition and Cultural Interpretation

Social cognition theory provides a useful framework for understanding how readers interpret philosophical ideas within literary texts. Fiske & Taylor (2013) argue that individuals rely on cognitive schemas—mental structures shaped by cultural experience to process new information. Cultural psychology research likewise suggests that these cognitive frameworks influence how individuals interpret narratives and social information across different cultural contexts (Heine, 2020).

When readers encounter unfamiliar philosophical concepts, they often interpret these ideas through existing cultural frameworks. As Markus & Kitayama (1991) demonstrate in their analysis of cultural models of the self, Western cultural contexts tend to emphasize independent self-construal, which prioritizes individual autonomy and personal interpretation. Studies in narrative cognition further show that readers actively use their prior knowledge and cognitive frameworks to understand stories and characters (Eekhof et al., 2022; Houghton et al., 2023).

Within the field of literary studies, reception theory similarly emphasizes the role of readers in constructing textual meaning. Rather than possessing fixed meanings, literary texts acquire significance through the interpretive engagement of readers. Empirical research on reader responses supports this view by demonstrating that readers actively participate in meaning-making during the reading process (van Cranenburgh et al., 2021). Recent studies of narrative engagement and reader cognition likewise highlight the interactive relationship between texts and readers (Eekhof et al., 2023; Wimmer et al., 2021).

By combining insights from social cognition theory and reception theory, this study examines how readers interpret the spiritual philosophy presented in *Siddhartha* through culturally shaped cognitive frameworks. Research in narrative psychology and communication studies indicates that readers' interpretations of narratives are influenced by cognitive schemas, emotional engagement, and cultural background (Chen et al., 2024; Tikka et al., 2023; Vaccaro et al., 2021).

Although existing scholarship has examined the philosophical influences on Hesse's work and the symbolic structure of *Siddhartha*, several important gaps remain in the literature. Previous research has focused primarily on textual interpretation and philosophical sources, particularly in studies of Western engagements with Buddhism and Asian philosophy (Lopez, 1998; McMahan, 2008). Relatively little research, however, has explored how readers interpret the spiritual ideas presented in literary narratives, despite growing interest in reader reception and narrative engagement in contemporary literary and communication studies (Eekhof et al., 2022; van Cranenburgh et al., 2021).

Second, although Orientalism theory highlights the reinterpretation of Eastern traditions within Western discourse, this theoretical perspective has rarely been systematically applied to the reception of Hesse's work. As Said (1978) famously argued, Western discourse has historically constructed representations of the "Orient" that reflect Western cultural assumptions. Subsequent studies of Orientalist discourse have extended this insight to modern media and cultural representations (Araujo & de Albuquerque, 2021; Loza, 2023; Miyake, 2023).

Third, there has been limited integration of social cognition theory with literary reception studies. While social cognition research demonstrates that individuals interpret information through culturally shaped cognitive frameworks (Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Heine, 2020), literary studies have traditionally emphasized interpretive engagement without fully examining the cognitive mechanisms involved in this process. Recent work on narrative cognition and reader interpretation suggests that readers rely on prior knowledge, cultural schemas, and emotional engagement when interpreting narratives (Chen et al., 2024; Eekhof et al., 2023; Houghton et al., 2023).

Addressing these gaps can provide a deeper understanding of how literary works mediate cross-cultural philosophical exchange. Comparative literary scholarship has emphasized that philosophical ideas often undergo transformation as they move across cultural contexts and narrative forms (Damrosch, 2018). This study therefore integrates three theoretical perspectives: Orientalism theory, social cognition

theory, and cross-cultural communication.

Orientalism theory provides a critical perspective on how Western discourse constructs representations of Eastern cultures. As Said (1978) demonstrates, Western interpretations of Eastern traditions frequently reflect Western intellectual concerns rather than authentic cultural representations. Contemporary research further shows how Orientalist frameworks continue to shape modern representations of Asian cultures in global media and cultural discourse (Araujo & de Albuquerque, 2024; Kabir, 2024).

Social cognition theory explains how individuals interpret unfamiliar information through culturally shaped cognitive schemas. According to Fiske & Taylor (2013), cognitive schemas help individuals organize and interpret new information, while cultural psychology research highlights how cultural background shapes these interpretive processes (Heine, 2020). When readers encounter spiritual ideas from different cultural traditions, they therefore interpret these ideas through existing cognitive frameworks.

Cross-cultural communication theory emphasizes that meaning is not simply transmitted across cultures but is actively constructed within specific cultural contexts. Research on global cultural exchange and media representation shows that ideas and narratives often undergo reinterpretation when they circulate across cultural boundaries (Damrosch, 2018; Lin, 2023).

Together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that Eastern spiritual ideas undergo multiple transformations as they move across cultural boundaries (see Figure 1).

First, philosophical ideas are reconstructed within literary narratives shaped by the author's cultural background, a process frequently observed in Western reinterpretations of Buddhist thought (McMahan, 2008; Tan, 2022). Second, readers interpret these narratives through culturally shaped cognitive frameworks that influence narrative understanding and meaning construction (Eekhof et al., 2022; Tikka et al., 2023). As a result, the meaning of Eastern spirituality within Western cultural contexts is not fixed but dynamically constructed through processes of literary representation and reader interpretation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design that integrates textual analysis with reader reception analysis. The research aims to explore how Eastern spiritual ideas are represented in Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* and how readers interpret these ideas through culturally shaped cognitive frameworks.

The research design consists of two complementary stages (see Figure 2). The first stage involves interpretive textual analysis of *Siddhartha*, focusing on key philosophical themes such as spiritual enlightenment, self-discovery, individuality, and the relationship between humanity and nature. This stage examines how Eastern philosophical ideas are represented within the narrative and how they intersect with Western intellectual traditions.

The second stage investigates reader interpretations of the novel through the analysis of reader reviews published on online literary platforms. Digital platforms have become important spaces for reader reception and literary discussion, providing valuable data for studying contemporary reading practices and interpretive communities (Hu et al., 2022; van Cranenburgh et al., 2021). Recent scholarship also emphasizes that online reading communities allow researchers to observe how readers collaboratively interpret literary texts and construct meaning through discussion (de Amo & García-Roca, 2021).

3.2. Data Collection

Two types of data were collected for this study: the literary text itself and reader-generated responses. The primary textual data consist of Hermann Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*. The text was analyzed through close reading to identify key philosophical themes and narrative representations of spirituality.

The second dataset consists of reader reviews collected from online literary platforms, including Goodreads and Amazon. These platforms host large reader communities and provide extensive user-generated discussions about literary works. Studies of digital reading culture suggest that online reader reviews offer valuable insights into contemporary literary reception and reader engagement (Noorda, 2024; Roig-Vila et al., 2021).

To ensure analytical relevance, only reviews containing substantive discussion of the novel's philosophical or spiritual themes were included. Reviews consisting solely of brief ratings or general comments about the plot were excluded from the dataset.

3.3. Sampling Strategy

This study employs purposive sampling to select reader reviews for analysis. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research to identify data that are particularly relevant to the research questions. Approximately 200 reader reviews were selected for analysis. The selection followed three criteria (see Table 1):

1. The review must contain explicit discussion of the philosophical or spiritual themes of *Siddhartha*.
2. The review must provide interpretive commentary rather than brief evaluative remarks.
3. The review must be written in English to ensure consistency in analysis.

This sampling strategy allows the study to focus on reader responses that meaningfully engage with the philosophical content of the novel. Previous research on online literary communities has similarly emphasized the value of purposively selecting interpretive reviews when analyzing reader reception (van Cranenburgh et al., 2021).

3.4. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify recurring patterns and themes within textual data. The analysis follows the six-step procedure, including familiarization with the data, initial coding of meaningful segments, identification of recurring themes, review and refinement of thematic categories, and interpretation of thematic patterns.

This analytical approach allows the study to identify how readers interpret the spiritual themes of *Siddhartha* and how these interpretations reflect culturally shaped cognitive schemas. Research in narrative cognition suggests that readers actively interpret narratives through cognitive and cultural frameworks that influence how meaning is constructed during reading (Eekhof et al., 2022; Houghton et al., 2023). Studies of narrative processing further demonstrate that readers engage emotionally and cognitively with literary narratives, which shapes their interpretation of characters and philosophical ideas (Chen et al., 2024; Jin et al., 2024).

3.5. Reliability and Validity

Several strategies were employed to enhance the reliability and validity of the research. First, transparency was ensured through clear documentation of the data collection and sampling procedures. Second, the coding process was conducted systematically to ensure consistency

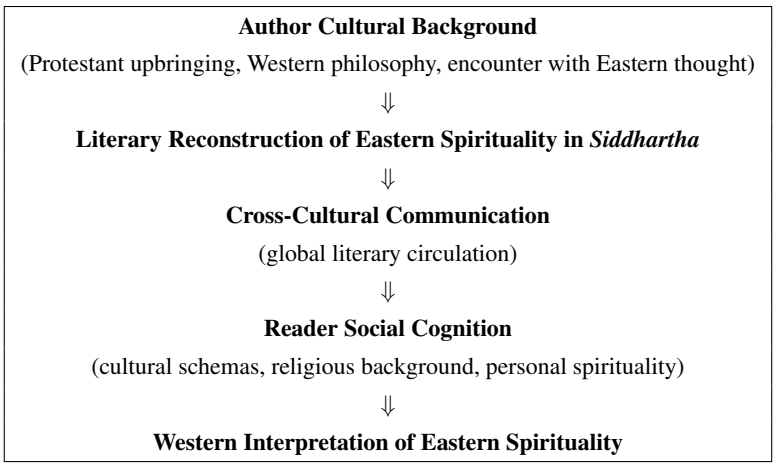


Figure 1. Theoretical framework of cross-cultural interpretation of Eastern spirituality

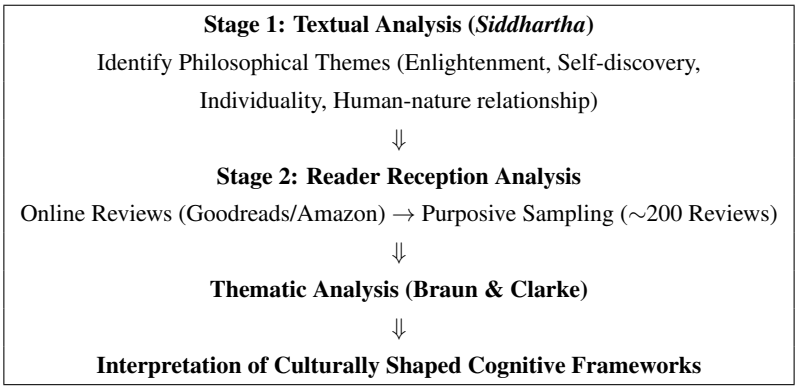


Figure 2. Research Design and Analytical Procedure

Table 1. Overview of the Reader Review Dataset

Data Source	Platform	Sample Size	Selection Criteria
Reader reviews	Goodreads	∼120	Discussion of philosophical or spiritual themes
Reader reviews	Amazon	∼80	Interpretive commentary on the novel
Total		**∼200**	**Purposive sampling**

in identifying thematic patterns across the dataset. Third, the findings from reader reception analysis were interpreted in conjunction with insights from the textual analysis of *Siddhartha*, allowing for triangulation between the literary text and reader responses.

This approach strengthens the interpretive validity of the research by integrating textual analysis with empirical reader data. Research in cognitive and cultural psychology suggests that readers' interpretations are influenced by broader cultural cognitive frameworks, highlighting the importance of analyzing both textual representation and reader reception (Gutchess et al., 2022; Heine, 2020).

4. Findings

The analysis of reader reviews reveals several recurring patterns in how Western readers interpret the philosophical and spiritual ideas presented in *Siddhartha*. These findings illustrate how Eastern spiritual concepts are interpreted and reconstructed through culturally shaped cognitive frameworks. Research on narrative cognition suggests that readers actively interpret literary narratives through culturally embedded interpretive processes rather than passively receiving textual meanings (Eekhof et al., 2022; Houghton et al., 2023).

4.1. Individualized Interpretation of Enlightenment

The first major finding concerns the individualized interpretation of enlightenment. Many readers interpret Siddhartha's spiritual journey primarily as a narrative of personal self-realization rather than as an illustration of Buddhist philosophical doctrine. Reader responses frequently emphasize themes such as personal growth, inner transformation, and the search for authentic selfhood.

This pattern suggests that readers tend to interpret enlightenment in psychological and individualistic terms. Instead of understanding the narrative within its original Buddhist philosophical context, readers often reinterpret enlightenment as a form of personal self-development. Such interpretations reflect cultural frameworks that prioritize individual autonomy and subjective experience. Cultural psychology research has shown that Western cultural contexts often emphasize independent self-construal and personal agency in meaning-making processes (Heine, 2020; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

4.2. Philosophical Universalization of Spiritual Ideas

A second recurring theme involves the philosophical universalization of the novel's spiritual themes. Many readers describe *Siddhartha* not as a representation of Buddhist teachings but as a general philosophical reflection on life. Reader reviews frequently characterize the novel as offering insights into mindfulness, emotional balance, and the search for meaning.

Through this interpretive process, specific religious concepts are transformed into broader philosophical ideas applicable to modern life. Studies of Buddhist modernism have similarly noted that Western interpretations of Buddhist ideas often emphasize personal spirituality and psychological insight rather than traditional doctrinal frameworks (McMahan, 2008, 2020). Contemporary research on mindfulness and Buddhist-derived practices also suggests that Buddhist concepts are frequently reframed within modern psychological discourse (Du, 2022; Tse et al., 2022).

4.3. Reconstruction of Eastern Spirituality

A third key finding concerns the reconstruction of Eastern Spirituality in reader interpretation. Although the narrative draws heavily on Buddhist cultural contexts, readers often detach the spiritual themes from their original religious framework. Instead, the novel is interpreted as presenting a universal spirituality that transcends particular cultural or religious traditions.

This reinterpretation illustrates how Eastern spiritual ideas may be transformed when they are received within Western cultural contexts. Said's theory of Orientalism suggests that Western representations of Eastern traditions often involve processes of reinterpretation shaped by Western cultural assumptions (Said, 1978). More recent studies have also shown that Orientalist frameworks continue to influence contemporary cultural representations and interpretations of Asian traditions (Araujo & de Albuquerque, 2021; Loza, 2023; Miyake, 2023).

4.4. Cultural Cognitive Frameworks in Reader Interpretation

Taken together, these findings indicate that readers interpret the spiritual themes of *Siddhartha* through culturally shaped cognitive frameworks. Reader interpretations tend to emphasize individual self-realization, universal philosophical insight, and personal spirituality.

These patterns suggest that cross-cultural philosophical narratives do not simply transmit ideas from one cultural context to another. Instead, readers actively reconstruct the meaning of these ideas through culturally embedded interpretive processes. Research on narrative processing and reader cognition has demonstrated that readers engage with narratives through complex cognitive and emotional mechanisms that shape interpretation (Chen et al., 2024; Tikka et al., 2023). In this sense, the reception of *Siddhartha* illustrates how Eastern spiritual concepts may be reinterpreted within Western cognitive and cultural frameworks.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into how Eastern spiritual ideas are represented and interpreted within Western cultural contexts. The analysis suggests that the spiritual philosophy presented in *Siddhartha* reflects a hybrid intellectual framework shaped by both Eastern philosophical traditions and Western cultural perspectives. This pattern is consistent with scholarship on Buddhist modernism, which argues that Buddhist ideas are frequently reinterpreted in Western contexts as emphasizing personal spirituality and individual experience (McMahan, 2008, 2020).

First, the textual analysis indicates that Hesse's interpretation of Eastern spirituality emphasizes personal experience, individual discovery, and inner transformation. These themes resonate strongly with Western intellectual traditions that prioritize subjective experience and personal authenticity. Consequently, the spiritual journey depicted in *Siddhartha* can be understood not merely as a representation of Buddhist philosophy but as a cross-cultural reinterpretation that integrates Eastern spiritual concepts with Western individualistic thought. Similar patterns have been identified in studies examining the modern reinterpretation of Buddhist ideas in contemporary cultural contexts (Tan, 2022; Tse et al., 2022).

Second, the analysis of reader reviews demonstrates that Western readers tend to interpret the novel through cultural frameworks emphasizing personal growth, self-development, and psychological insight. Many readers describe the narrative as offering guidance for individual self-realization rather than presenting a systematic explanation of Buddhist doctrine. Cultural psychology research suggests that individuals interpret complex ideas through culturally shaped cognitive schemas (Heine, 2020; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Likewise, studies of narrative cognition indicate that readers actively construct textual meaning through their own cognitive and experiential frameworks during the reading process (Chen et al., 2024; Eekhof et al., 2022).

These findings highlight the dynamic nature of cross-cultural philosophical exchange. Rather than functioning as a simple transmission of Eastern religious ideas into Western contexts, the novel operates

as a site of cultural mediation in which spiritual concepts are continuously reinterpreted through literary representation and reader reception. Comparative literary scholarship has similarly emphasized that ideas often undergo transformation when they move across cultural and linguistic boundaries (Damrosch, 2018).

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support the relevance of both Orientalism theory and social cognition theory for understanding the cross-cultural reception of philosophical narratives. As Said (1978) argues, Western representations of Eastern traditions are often shaped by Western intellectual assumptions. More recent studies also demonstrate that Orientalist interpretive frameworks continue to influence contemporary cultural representations and interpretations of Asian traditions (Araujo & de Albuquerque, 2021; Loza, 2023; Miyake, 2023).

Taken together, the results suggest that the meaning of Eastern spirituality within Western literary contexts is not fixed or universally transmitted. Instead, it emerges through an ongoing process of interpretation in which philosophical ideas are reshaped by both authors and readers operating within specific cultural contexts. In this sense, the reception of *Siddhartha* illustrates the complex dynamics through which cross-cultural philosophical ideas are interpreted, reconstructed, and integrated within new cultural environments.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how Eastern spiritual ideas are represented in Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* and how readers interpret these ideas within contemporary cultural contexts. Through a combination of textual analysis and reader reception analysis, the study explored how literary narratives mediate cross-cultural philosophical exchange.

The findings suggest that the novel presents a hybrid spiritual framework that combines elements of Eastern philosophical traditions with Western perspectives on individuality and self-realization. Reader responses further indicate that many readers interpret the narrative as a reflection on personal meaning and spiritual development rather than as a representation of Buddhist doctrine. Studies of digital reading communities similarly suggest that contemporary readers actively construct meanings through online interpretive spaces (de Amo & García-Roca, 2021; van Cranenburgh et al., 2021).

6.1. Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to research on cross-cultural literary interpretation in several ways. First, it expands Orientalism-related scholarship by demonstrating how Eastern spiritual ideas are reconstructed not only through media representations but also through literary narratives and reader reception. Recent studies have similarly emphasized how cultural representations of Asia continue to evolve within contemporary global discourse (Lin, 2023; Sobral, 2023).

Second, the study integrates social cognition with literary reception research by highlighting the role of culturally shaped cognitive frameworks in reader interpretation. Research in narrative cognition has shown that readers interpret stories through complex cognitive processes shaped by prior experiences and cultural knowledge (Eekhof et al., 2023; Wimmer et al., 2021).

6.2. Practical Implications

The findings have implications for both literary studies and intercultural communication. In cross-cultural literary contexts, philosophical ideas are rarely transmitted unchanged; instead, they are interpreted and transformed through readers' cultural perspectives. Understanding how readers interpret philosophical narratives can help scholars and educators better address the complexities of cross-cultural meaning-making. Recent studies of contemporary reading cultures, particularly those emerging through digital platforms, highlight how readers participate in collective interpretation and discussion of literary works (Dezuanni & Schoonens, 2024; Noorda, 2024).

6.3. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the reader reception analysis is based on online reviews, which may not represent the full diversity of readers' interpretations. Research on digital reading communities suggests that online reviews reflect particular forms of reader engagement shaped by platform cultures (Hu et al., 2022). Second, the analysis focuses primarily on English-language reader responses, which may emphasize Western interpretive frameworks. As studies of global reading cultures suggest, literary interpretation may vary significantly across cultural contexts (Birke, 2025).

6.4. Future Research

Future research could expand this study in several directions. Comparative studies could examine how readers from different cultural backgrounds interpret *Siddhartha* and other cross-cultural philosophical narratives. In addition, future studies could incorporate alternative forms of reader data, such as reading groups or classroom discussions, to gain deeper insights into reader interpretation. Research on contemporary reading communities suggests that digital platforms, social media discussions, and online book communities provide valuable data for understanding evolving reading practices (BookTok, 2024; da Silva, 2025).

Moreover, as digital transformation reshapes various societal and organizational domains (Hu et al., 2026), and as technological advancements increasingly challenge the boundaries of social cognition and acceptance (Hu, 2026), future studies must account for how these modern digital and technological contexts mediate the reception of traditional spiritual philosophies. Further interdisciplinary research combining literary studies, cultural psychology, and communication research may deepen our understanding of how philosophical ideas circulate and transform within global cultural environments (Gutchess et al., 2022).

Author Contributions

The author independently conceptualized the study, developed the theoretical framework integrating Orientalism, social cognition, and cross-cultural communication perspectives, conducted the textual and reader reception analyses, and completed the writing of the manuscript.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

This study is based on publicly available textual materials, including a literary work and online reader reviews. No human subjects were directly involved, and no identifiable personal data were collected. Therefore, ethical approval was not required.

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Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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