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**A comparative study of the philosophy of Ship of Theseus and its relation to identity using the examples of character ‘S’ in the book *Ship of Theseus* by VM Straka with Siddhartha in Herman Hesse’s novel *Siddhartha***

The theme of quest for true identity, this paradox of whether the mind and body form the identity of an individual or the soul or both is presented as a philosophical thought to the readers from both books, *Ship of Theseus* and *Siddhartha*. This quest has long been addressed by human thought and the constant changes in human faith. It has been a question for sadhus and scientists, and, philosophers and poets. It continues to defy a single “right” answer as it is fundamentally dependent on an individual’s experience and reflection upon it.

*S: Ship of Theseus* is an ambitious project jointly envisioned by Doug Dorst and J.J. Abrams. The book that is in a reader’s hand is about a fictitious book published in 1949 by a “fictitious” Author V.M. Straka, who may have been or not been real. (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/27/jj-abrams-ship-of-theseus>) . It is a book consisting of multi-layers of storytelling and narration. This mystery along with Straka’s relationship with FXC, including the story of the main character S, is discussed in the form of annotations in the same book by Eric and Jen. The annotations contain several elements important to receiving a general understanding of the overall plot. It includes Eric and Jen’s discussion regarding the intricacies and codes presented in the book, the mystery of Straka’s identity and his relationships, and the progression of their own relationship. “S” is the main protagonist in the book by Straka, *Ship of Theseus*. This paper, will exclusively focus in the story and accounts of S relating to his exploration and his quest of his identity.

He doesn’t really know who he is. So, is he who he is if he does not know who he is? And until he knows who he is, can he know what he is existing for and what is his significance? If not, should he be searching for his identity? If his quest for identity is justified, is it possible for him to reach a definite conclusion or is he just going to be lost in the process? Most importantly, is he the same person he started out as after he goes through experiences that have changed his perception on the world he is in, its characters but not really his original self; a philosophy ideal to the paradox of the *Ship of Theseus*.

The “Ship of Theseus” is a famous philosophical paradox first proposed in print by the Greek philosopher Plutarch, which is as follows:

“*The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place, insomuch that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same*.”

At any moment of time, the ship was no different than what it was before with the minimal change of a plank each time. However, once all the planks had been replaced and all the previous planks preserved, hypothetically, a new ship could be constructed with the old planks. If the ship which had all its planks replaced is still the original Ship of Theseus, then there is a question of the identity of the new ship made from all the original planks from the Ship of Theseus. Hence, it is a paradox. This paradox is based on these assumptions:

1. An ordinary object will survive gradual change. The original ship is the Ship of Theseus as it has always been the original one just with changes. Its core essence has not changed.
2. An object goes where its parts go. The original ship is tending to be less and less original and more of a new kind each time a plank is replaced. The ship that we started out thinking the Ship of Theseus is no more the Ship of Theseus as all parts of its original identity have been replaced and its essence has been lost with its part.

The assumptions are related to the paradox of identity of an individual. With time and experience, an individual understands a lot about the world and about himself/herself than how one started with when one was born in this world. The challenge is to figure out what is more important to our identity: our qualities and our inner self (i.e. analogous to the individual parts of the ship of Theseus), our physical body and its functionality which implies our ability to conduct daily tasks (i.e. the structure of the ship and how it is important to float on the water without sinking) or our history (i.e. how our existence has gone through the development in our lives). There are many ways one could contemplate this idea of whether we die a different person than who we were when we were born, or are these two phases of the same individual. Another question presented by Straka in his book *Ship of Theseus* is whether it is the combination of multiple absolute identities at each unique moment of time that form an overall relative identity or vice-versa.

Fundamental questions relating to identity constitute the mystery and are a source for exploration directly or indirectly for the protagonists in both books, *Ship of Theseus* and *Siddhartha*. *Ship of Theseus* presents a fictitious story in a partly non-fictitious setting along with a fascinating blend between fiction and non-fiction in the quest of one’s identity. The story of S. in the novel preserves the fundamental uncertainty between fact and fiction in the world we live in. The protagonist S. finds himself in a completely new world, an alien world where all dimensions are skewed. He doesn’t remember who he is and where he is. He is in search of his absolute identity, but for the time being his own senses identify him as a man with defective memory, i.e. a relative identity. He sees a paper in his pocket with the symbol “S”. He doesn’t know what that symbol means, but is curious. S. also has a tiny pebble as another possible source to define part of his identity and “the third that runs through every cell in his body: a vague but terrifying sense-memory of falling from a great height” (Page 6). That relates to a vague sense of an experience from a past life that has stuck permanently in his memory as a terrifying feeling. Later, S. has a very short discussion with Sola, a beautiful woman he meets by apparent accident. He mentions the note with the symbol “S” and right at that moment he is grabbed by unknown people. He then finds himself the resident of an anonymous ship in the middle of a vast sea and meets Maelstrom. When Maelstrom calls him S, S starts assuming that that is his name, which is one aspect of him that changes as he continues to search for other dimensions of his identity. He discovers more about himself in the city with Vevoda’s bomb making industry. During the later invasion, he feels as though he is a murderer but he is also a lover of Sola. The narrative ends with him looking with a binocular at people’s faces which form their own feature: *The ship is one of theirs, and as for the identities of the two people at the wheel, well, both Sola and he will let their imaginations fill in their features* (Page 456). They are changing their identities according to the way he perceives them. The people at the end of S’s journey symbolize identity as being a blank canvas, where the look and meaning of the painting depends on the painter. Thus, the story of *Ship of Theseus* introduces this concept of perceptual identity, instantaneous absolute identity, and overall relative identity. For example: *This is what happens, of course: men get lost, men vanish, men are erased and reborn (*Page 5), portrays the concept of fluid and relative identity. The title of the book, refers not only to the ship which S. was in but also to the whole story of S., which is an example of the paradox of the original Ship of Theseus.

Curiosity for a deeper understanding of one’s self is a fundamental process of human psychology. This theme is not unique to S. and its variations can be seen in many religious myths and printed media. One searches for a real identity different from one’s identity popularized by various social narratives, stereotypes, and judgments. The theme is also portrayed by the protagonist Siddhartha in Herman Hesse’s famous book by the same name. Both *Ship of Theseus* and *Siddhartha* have as their main themes the quest of identity and love. Both works include characters who first did not really know about themselves and then went on solo adventures to discover more of themselves.

Siddhartha is the story of the son of a Brahmin who goes through multiple phases while seeking enlightenment and his real identity. He meets many people along the way and changes his perception of who he really is. Realizing how his world views are skewed results in him having different ideals at different phases, he ultimately discovers the idea of “Maya (worldly spider web of emotions and attachment)” and “Tyag (being able to distant oneself from worldly greed)” by coming in contact with the ferryman after being tired of the material word of riches, love, and greed. This idea is presented in many Eastern religious philosophies. *The Bhagavad Gita* frequently talks about how being affected by material world and its emotional trap hinders one’s quest to find one’s identity and hence enlightenment. In this way, the story of Siddhartha goes back to the concept of *Ship of Theseus*. Siddhartha starts out with pure and innocent soul, but ends up as the same soul. This is not because of lack of introduction to the material world but rather due to the enlightenment. The fundamental causes that make him the same pure and innocent soul are different. If he had gone through different lifestyles in the process, would he have possessed simultaneously multiple identities? Or was his entire and original identity preserved as Siddhartha, even though there were changes in his internal worldly perspectives and way of life?

Both novels revolve around individuals on a solo unknown adventure who arrive at inner peace with their identity. Both also present a version of the paradox of Ship of Theseus. S is not the same “S” he was before when looked at individual aspects of his identity, but he is looking at an overall picture. Similarly, Siddhartha turned from a pure Brahmin, to a devotee, to a lover and rich greedy businessman, to an ascetic and a ferryman.

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