

A Comparative Analysis of the Motif of Quest in Two Buddhist Novels: Portrait of the Buddha and Sathyakāma

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Introduction

This research provides a comparative analysis of the motif of quest as depicted in two Sri Lankan novels which can be categorized under the genre of Buddhist literature: *Portrait of the Buddha* by Jayasena Jayakody and *Sathyakāma* by Kathleen Jayewardene. These two books are English translations of two popular novels originally written in Sinhala, respectively, *Amāvāssa* and *Sathyakāma*, the translator of the former is K.D.de Lanarōle whilst the latter is translated by K.A.N.Perera.

The concept of a quest is central to these two narratives. The protagonists of both novels seek fulfilment beyond their aristocratic and privileged lifestyle, showcasing a commonality, even though their quests are fundamentally distinct: Siddhārtha's quest for spiritual enlightenment in *Portrait of the Buddha* inherently contrasts with *Sathyakāma*'s pursuit of romance in *Sathyakāma*.

The identified research gap via a literature review on Buddhist literature was that no research has been conducted analyzing these two novels together, specifically via comparative analysis. This research aims to fill that gap by exploring how both narratives have utilized the quest motif to examine human desire as well as spiritual fulfilment. Engaging in a comparative analysis, the study attempts to explore the nature of the quest and how both characters' quests evolve from personal desires to broader existential realizations. The objective of this research is to compare and contrast the nature of the quest motif as explored in these two novels. However, the analysis is limited to these two translated works of literature, paving the way for further exploration of similar themes in Buddhist literature as well as comparative analysis of original novels and their translations.

Methodology

These two texts will be analyzed utilizing qualitative method via

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comparative analysis, focusing on the key elements that define the quest in both novels. Both texts will be closely read whilst engaging in a deep textual analysis. Data collection will be done via extracting textual evidence in order to engage in thematic analysis, specifically with reference to other central themes of the quest, escapism, wisdom versus knowledge, and personal disillusionment.

The study attempted to compare and contrast Siddhārtha's spiritual journey in *Portrait of the Buddha* with Sathyakāma's pursuit of his beloved Kalindajā in *Sathyakāma*. A thematic coding method was utilized to categorize distinct aspects of the quest, identifying key turns in each character's journey where their personal desires shift towards a quest for greater truth and wisdom. Literary devices such as symbolism, metaphors, and imagery were also analyzed to highlight how the quest is portrayed in each work. Socio-cultural elements, such as caste, class, and gender, were examined to explicate the context for the protagonists' decisions and the nature of their quests.

Results and Discussion

The comparative analysis reveals that both novels portray the quest as a transformative journey but with distinct differences in scope and motivation. In *Portrait of the Buddha*, Siddhārtha's quest is spiritual and for the benefit of the world from the initiating point. He leaves his aristocratic life, not to seek worldly pleasure, but to find the truth of existence and enlightenment. Siddhartha's journey is marked by encounters with various spiritual teachers, but he eventually surpasses the knowledge and wisdom of his teachers. His moment of enlightenment represents the culmination of his quest, and it is actualized through inner reflection and renunciation of worldly desires.

In a stark contrast, Sathyakāma begins as a quest driven by romantic love. Sathyakāma leaves his privileged life in pursuit of Kalindajā, a maidservant he loves and longs to be reunited with. His journey, while initially motivated by personal and emotional needs, eventually evolves into a spiritual quest as he encounters ascetics and experiences the harsh realities of life. Unlike Siddhārtha, whose quest is defined by the search for truth, Sathyakāma's quest is grounded in the search for love, which ultimately transforms into a deeper understanding of life's impermanence and the futility of worldly attachments towards the end of the story.

Aspect of Quest	Portrait of the Buddha	Sathyakāma
Quest Motivation	Spiritual enlightenment	Romantic love
Key Encounters	Spiritual teachers, ascetics	Kalindajā, ascetics
Turning Point	Siddhārtha's Actualization of Middle Path	Sathyakāma finds Kalindajā as an old woman
Outcome	Attains enlightenment	Being disillusioned about love and settles for quest of truth.

In *Portrait of the Buddha*, Siddhārtha's quest reflects a universal spiritual journey, where wisdom and knowledge are seen as entirely separate realms. His pursuit of wisdom leads him to discard all beliefs and doctrines imposed by other religions and teachers, as seen in instances where he rejects the teachings of spiritual leaders. This self-reliance is central to Siddhārtha's journey, and his enlightenment comes from within, as he realizes that the truth cannot be found externally.

On the other hand, Sathyakāma presents a more personal and emotionally driven quest. Sathyakāma's love for Kalindajā serves as the initial catalyst for his journey, and his encounters with others are largely framed by his longing for her. However, as the narrative progresses, Sathyakāma's quest begins to slightly mirror Siddhārtha's, as he too becomes disillusioned with the superficial aspects of life. His encounter with Kalindajā as an old woman represents the turning point in his journey, as he realizes that the love he sought was an illusion, and his true quest lies in understanding the nature of existence itself.

Both quests, while different in motivation, ultimately lead to a form of disillusionment and enlightenment. Siddhārtha's realization of the impermanence of all things aligns with the concept of detachment from desire, while Sathyakāma's eventual understanding of love as an ephemeral pursuit reflects a more human-centered approach to truth. In both narratives, the quest transcends its initial purpose, leading the protagonists to a deeper understanding of life's meaning.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of two English translations of Sinhalese Buddhist novels; *Portrait of the Buddha* and *Sathyakāma* reveals that both novels use the quest motif to explore deeper truths about life, love, and spiritual fulfilment. While the quest in the former is rooted in the pursuit of wisdom and enlightenment, the latter revolves around a search for romantic love yet eventually transforms into a spiritual quest. Both protagonists undergo profound moments of disillusionment,

where their initial desires pave the way to a more profound understanding of life's impermanence and the nature of truth. This study contributes to the broader field of comparative literature by highlighting how the quest motif, though varied in its form and motivation, can lead to similar conclusions about human existence as well as human perception of spirituality, truth and wisdom at large.

Keywords: Quest, Enlightenment, Love, Truth, Buddhism

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