



A study on the underlying philosophies of *Hamlet* and *The Bhagavad-Gita*

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Abstract

'A Study on the Underlying Philosophies of *Hamlet* and *The Bhagavad-Gita*', attempts to trace the philosophical undertones and their subtle differences which are manifested in the two protagonists and reveal their similarities and uniqueness and their guiding principles behind their action. The text tries to decode the thoughts, words and action of Hamlet and Arjuna and present their moral dilemma and resolution as a brave and selfless tragic heroes. A correlation between the intricate features of characters of prince Hamlet and prince Arjuna is traced out to justify that both the princes undergoes a similar level of degeneration as men of inner action in their respective lives until they got rejuvenated as men of action

Hamlet the hero is presented as a Christian hero, highly concerned about morality which makes him contemplate deeply on the teachings of the two texts of the *Holy Bible*: the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament*. The hero appears to have failed in imbibing the true spirit of the *New Testament* which upholds virtues such as peace, love and forgiveness as the corner stone of Christianity. When the play is read from the point of view of the Christian philosophy the conflict in the mind of the hero; whether to suffer patiently or to take up arms against the wrong doers, ensues from his confusion in the inner conscience whether to follow the principle of revenge of the *Old Testament* or the principle of peace and forgiveness of the *New Testament*.

Hamlet does not express an iota of preference for the saturated principle of the *New Testament* which upholds forgiveness and forgetfulness of others sins with absolute forbearance as observed in the mellowed character of Prospero in *The Tempest*. Therefore, Hamlet's action can be justified or better explained by the principal of Karma yoga taught by the *Bhagavad Gita*.

When analyzed by the philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Hamlet fails initially to fulfill his action in the detached way professed by the *Bhagavad Gita*. The impulsive act of murdering Polonius out of spite for him causes him to bear the sin of *Karma*. The sacred mission undertaken by Hamlet gets derailed by his rash murder of Polonius, a motiveless murder caused by his anger and lack of self-control which taints his conscience, leads to the death of Polonius and Ophelia, and makes him a victim of Laertes's revenge (398 words).

Keywords: bhishma parva, *Mahabharata* arjuna vishadayoga, brahmo Padesha, *gunas*, *rajoguna*, *prakrti*, *sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*, *karma yoga*

1. Introduction

The idea of the universality of artistic vision sounds true in the similarities seen in the underlying philosophies of *Hamlet* and *The Bhagavad Gita*. The texts: *Hamlet* and *Bhagavad Gita* are two literary works of great relevance, to the oriental and occidental cultures whose protagonists experience and undergo similar moral and intellectual dilemma which got resolved by varied streaks of philosophical truths. The study attempts to trace the philosophical undertones and their subtle differences which are manifested in the characters and reveal the similarities and uniqueness of the heroes and their guiding principles behind their action.

The stark similarities one finds in the two protagonists: Hamlet and Arjuna are the resemblances found in their social status and the kind of responsibility entrusted with these heroes. The heroes face equivalent state of dilemma demanding their outright responses as the responsible heirs of their kingdoms. A marked degree of similitude is found in the behavioral patterns and thought processes of these heroes during their passive and active phases of their lives culminating in a similar kind of retaliation.

2. Stating of the problem

Hamlet presents a hero who had been venerated by all as the

Paragon of manly virtues, a young man who had nurtured great hopes which are sadly shattered by the unusual and unpredicted circumstances. The play shows the initial inability of Hamlet to cope with the new situations and the gradual involvement in it. Here Hamlet reflects the frigidity and rigidity of modern man towards his own endeavors, impediments and the inevitable role of providence in his life, until he is soothed by the philosophical elixir to manage his life with the right attitude. The study traces the regenerative thoughts in the disoriented and dilemma stricken mindscape of Hamlet and Arjuna which ultimately make them attain complete command over their opponents, domain and most importantly themselves.

3. Discussion

The focal point of the *Bhagavad Gita* is the philosophical advice offered by the divine teacher Sri Krishna to make the irresolute Arjuna agree to the proposal of participating in a righteous war against his family members. The eighteen chapters of the *Bhagavad Gita* are included in the *Bhishma parva*, the sixth of the eighteen books that constitute India's great epic poem, the *Mahabharata*. Lord Krishna teaches Arjuna the way to get from the phenomenal world to the transcendental realm in the verses

encapsulated from the twenty fifth to the forty second chapters of the Bhishma – Canto of the *Mahabharata*. The first chapter of the *Gita* entitled *Arjuna Vishada Yoga* pictures the degenerative status of prince Arjuna who was once hailed as a valiant and efficient warrior among men. Even though Arjuna is aware of his responsibilities ordained on him as a prince, warrior, son, and husband he is doubtful regarding the propriety of his action against his relatives until Lord Krishna imparts him the *brahmopadesha* or divine sermon which enlightens Arjuna and sets him free for the right action. There is similarity in the moral dilemma faced by Hamlet and Arjuna who are caught in a similar tug of war between their princely duties and personal problems in life.

Among the characters in *Hamlet*, the character of Hamlet can be considered as unique since he alone decides to make a sincere attempt to modify his action with the right attitude and in the end dies with complete acceptance of the theory of the cause and effect. Therefore Hamlet achieves a realization similar to the enlightenment achieved by Arjuna through the philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The similarity found in the exposition of the problem, the initial dilemma of the heroes and their final resolution is striking. These heroes display the complete range of human emotions and peculiarities in their own unique manner of action. The play and the predicament of Hamlet present definite answers regarding the right kind of attitude and manners one should abide by while performing one's duty.

4. Argument (a)

In *Hamlet*, the first act exposes the conflict in the play and the subsequent second, third and fourth acts express the conflict in the mind of Hamlet, which is a product of his imperfect self, mutilated by the theory of *gunas* according to the philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The meeting between Hamlet and the young Fortinbras in the Act IV Scene iv provides him an opportunity to see actual performance of the right action expected from him. The selfless and dauntless fight of Young Fortinbras to fulfill the mission of his life teaches him the right attitude to do one's action. The ultimate reality of being a human being is understood in the graveyard scene which subtly exposes the omnipotence and omnipresence of God. The effect of these realizations propels the hero to execute his duty in the Act V Scene ii of the play.

Argument (b)

A similar progression of action is found in the first chapter in the *Bhagavad-Gita* termed '*Arjuna Vishadayoga*' or 'Arjuna's Despair' which opens with the vivid description of the panic-stricken Arjuna who got desperately caught within the web of confusion and ignorance. The subsequent chapters of the *Gita* present the sacred counsel Arjuna receives from the Godhead which liberates him from his ignorance and sin until he proclaims the attainment of his ultimate realization in chapter XI. Arjuna expresses the newly dawned self-realization in him: "The supreme mystery, the discourse concerning the Self which thou hast given out of grace for me – by this my bewilderment is gone from me." (XI.1).

Argument (c)

According to Radhakrishnan in *Indian Philosophy* the action performed in the spirit indicated by the *Gita* finds its completion in wisdom, by eliminating egoism and kindling a sense of divine in oneself (572).

Sri Krishna provides the philosophical as well as ethical advices to Arjuna regarding the proper way to perform one's duty in order to satisfy one's body and soul, to attain worldly success and ethereal salvation. The inspiring discourse leads to the enlightenment in Arjuna which mentally nourishes him for the crucial combat of his life. The regained spirit of ultimate reality is revealed in the lines uttered by Arjuna: "Destroyed is my delusion and recognition has been gained by me through / Thy grace, O Acyuta (Krsna). I stand firm with my doubts dispelled / I shall act according to thy word". (XVIII.73)

Argument (d)

Gita introduces the term '*gunas*' to denote the presence and influence of certain negative qualities in the self which prompt the hero to indulge in vices that finally lead to his disintegration. Radhakrishnan discusses the doctrine of the *gunas* and their negative effect on human beings in *Indian Philosophy*:

The constituents of *prakriti* are the three qualities of *sattva* (goodness), *rajas* (passion), and *tamas* (darkness). They are present throughout all things, though in different degrees. Beings are classified into gods, men and beasts according as the one or the other quality predominates. These three are the fetters of the soul (Radhakrishnan, 1999, 502).

Argument (e)

Chinmayananda considers lust – desire, otherwise expressed as anger as the greatest enemy of man in this life. *Rajoguna* is manifested through a person's insatiable desire to possess, enjoy the objects of the world and when once he allows his bosom to be conquered by anger. Krishna enumerates on the destructive effect of the *gunas* on human beings: "As a flame is covered by smoke, a mirror by dust and the foetus by the womb, so is 'knowledge' covered by the desire – lust". (Chinmayananda, 3.38)

Argument (f)

Being a Christian, Shakespeare's plays have an irrefutable influence of the myriad principles of Christian philosophy. The thought patterns of Shakespearean tragic heroes in a way mirror the playwright's moral trajectory since the revenge theme of *Hamlet* is firmly based on the feudalistic principle professed in the Old Testament which favours 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. *Hamlet* the hero is presented as a Christian hero, highly concerned about morality which makes him contemplate deeply on the teachings of the two texts of the *Holy Bible*: the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament*. The hero appears to have failed in imbibing the true spirit of the New Testament which upholds virtues such as peace, love and forgiveness as the corner stone of Christianity.

When the play is read from the point of view of the Christian philosophy the conflict in the mind of the hero; whether to suffer patiently or to take up arms against the wrong doers, ensues from his confusion in the inner conscience whether to follow the principle of revenge of the *Old Testament* or the principle of peace and forgiveness of the *New Testament*. Hamlet selects the path of revenge advocated by the Old Testament which is manifested in the following lines from the *Bible*:

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say, do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes? You on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; [...]
(Matthew 5.38-39)

Argument (g)

Hamlet does not express an iota of preference for the saturated principle of the New Testament which upholds forgiveness and forgetfulness of others sins with absolute forbearance as observed in the mellowed character of Prospero in *The Tempest*. Therefore, Hamlet's action can be justified or better explained by the principal of Karma yoga taught by the Bhagavad Gita.

Argument (h)

According to Swami Chinmayananda the function of 'action' is to be valued not merely by the externally manifested qualities but also by the un-manifested and inner motives behind the actions. Therefore no action in itself can be considered either as good or bad since the motive behind one's action determines the quality of the action (*The Bhagavadgeeta* 404). Therefore Hamlet becomes a man of action when he got purged of his spiritual dryness caused by egoism. The necessity to free one's mind from endless desires and to work with one resolute determination with a single – pointed mind is advocated by Krishna. *Karma Yoga* guarantees the devotee the highest achievement of self – realization when he works without vacillation. In the opinion of Swami Chinmayananda *Karma Yoga* or the urge of action signifies the art of working with perfect mental equilibrium in all the contrasting circumstances in one's life (*The Bhagavadgeeta* 231).

Argument (i)

Arjuna, unlike Hamlet, is greatly blessed in having a divine counselor as his charioteer who saves him from his overwhelming dilemma. Sri Krishna in his symbolic role as a charioteer is assuming a twofold role of a physical as well as spiritual guide in the battle field. When the sorrow stricken Arjuna reclined on his chariot Krishna becomes sympathetic towards his disciple. The teaching of Krishna is aimed at revitalizing Arjuna so that he would perform his duty by taking refuge in the omnipotent for the attainment of salvation.

Argument (j)

Hamlet's moral and metaphysical doubts are caused by his profound religious sense, contemplative nature which can be considered as a reflection of Shakespeare's age. The elements of Christian philosophy are a dominant factor that guides Hamlet.

Argument (k)

Roland Mushat Frye in *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* comments on Hamlet as being characterized in the final act as relying upon an unmistakably Christian providence. Frye observes that the character of Hamlet is depicted as attaining complete maturity through his suffering and steady assurance of God's providence. According to Frye [...] "it is Hamlet who seems most aware of the full range of the Christian doctrine" which had earlier made him preoccupied with the consequences of his action (Frye, 1963, 234).

Argument (l)

When analyzed by the philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Hamlet fails initially to fulfill his action in the detached way professed by the Bhagavad Gita. The impulsive act of murdering Polonius out of spite for him causes him to bear the sin of *Karma*. The sacred mission undertaken by Hamlet gets derailed by his rash murder

of Polonius, a motiveless murder caused by his anger and lack of self-control which taints his conscience, leads to the death of Polonius and Ophelia, and makes him a victim of Laertes's revenge. But the greatness of the Shakespearean hero is in his readiness to lay down his life for a noble cause with a thorough understanding of his entire actions and their consequences.

5. Conclusion (a)

An evaluation of Arjuna and Hamlet aims to bring out the converging elements in their characters. The seventeen chapters of the Gita and the final act of *Hamlet* present the transformation of mind caused by the philosophical knowledge attained by these heroes through their interactions with men of wisdom. Even though the heroes had spiritual awareness, they are transformed by a spiritual enlightenment at a point of crisis in their lives. *The Gita* provides grains of wisdom to foster God realization in Arjuna to revitalize him to be a transformed man of action. Both the *Gita* and *Hamlet* contain similar revelations of the supreme reality in varying degrees and forms capable of awakening the protagonists to divine consciousness. Sri Krishna introduces to Arjuna the various ways to salvation and inculcates the ideal yoga, *karma yoga* that suits the *Kshatriya* hero. Krishna approaches Arjuna like a teacher, like a friend and as an equal who simultaneously admonishes and inspires his disciple. The teachings of Krishna sheds myriad rays of wisdom on the fundamental and metaphysical truths concerning man : the knowledge on the omnipotent nature of God which makes God superior to man, the knowledge on the supremacy of God's providence over man's will, positive methods to sustain God – man relationship and knowledge on the divine law of sin and retribution. A re-reading of *Hamlet* in the light of the *Bhagavad Gita* reveals resemblances in the nature of problems suffered by the protagonists and in the underlining philosophical tone in the solutions leading to their moral transformation.

Conclusion (b)

The uniqueness of the heroes is retained by the contrasting destiny assigned to the heroes. The impact of actions performed by the two heroes are leading to contrasting results in their lives: The advices received in the battlefield motivates Arjuna to take up selfless action free from ulterior desires against the *Kauravas* and be victorious in the war, whereas Hamlet's selfless act ultimately proves fatal for him because of his failure to abide by the parting advice of the ghost of his dead father: "Taint not thymind, nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother[...]" (I.v.85). Arjuna and his kinfolk gain victory over the miscreants who had unlawfully possessed their kingship and kingdom. The warfare proves beneficial for Arjuna since he attains victory in the *terra firma* and *terra in cognito* through his active and rightful participation in the battlefield. Hamlet on the other hand is not fortunate to claim such a twin advantage because Hamlet suffers from the temporal point of view, since his status is dwindled from an heir apparent to that of a procurator who suffers an untimely death.

Conclusion (c)

An analysis of the two characters in the light of the *Bhagavad Gita* undoubtedly marks the prominence of Hamlet as a humane tragic hero with an indelible image of a martyr who has attained the wisdom on ultimate reality through self-introspection and

experiences. The *Bhagavad Gita* is the sacred scripture of India, the one book that all masters depend upon as a supreme source to spiritual authority. The *Bhagavad Gita* means “ song of the spirit ”, it is the divine communion of truth – realization between man and his Creator and highly regarded as the essence of the ponderous four Vedas, one hundred and eight *Upanishads* and the six systems of the oriental philosophy. Swami Chinmayananda comments that Gita summarizes the high tenets of *Vedanta* and “ [...] as a scripture, provides us with an intellectual approach to all our problems – be it our personal, social, national or international life ”(*The Art of Man making* 19). Talking about Arjuna’s dilemma Chinmayananda rightly puts it: “The ‘Arjuna disease’ is universal – it is common at all times, in all places, to people of all races, classes and creeds and cultures. It is a human disease, natural to any man of action” (39).

6. References

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