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HAMLET AND ARJUNA AN ANALYSIS IN THE LIGHT OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF BHAGAVAD-GITA

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Abstract: The attempt is to make a comparative study of the predicaments of Hamlet in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*. It is an interesting exercise to re-read Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in the light of the Gita to trace the homogeneous elements, similar philosophical undertones and the subtle difference in the characters that help them retain the identity and uniqueness.

Index Terms – Swadharma, Bhishmaparva, pandava, Kauravas, Draupathy, Ksatriya, gunas, prakrti, sattva, rajas, tamas, Arjuna Vishada

I. INTRODUCTION

The two heroes, Hamlet and Arjuna present the predicament of a human being caught in the labyrinth of emotional distress which make them totally unfit for action. The study attempt is to probe into the two archetypal characters of world literature, Arjuna and Hamlet, two princes of oriental and occidental realms and cultures who are entrusted with royal and ethical responsibilities of a similar kind and their stark similarities as men of *gunas*, men of inner action and men of action through the philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita.

The Tragedy of Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark holds a salient position due to the universality of the plot and the humanistic portrayal of its tragic hero. The character of Hamlet may be traced as a solid proof to Shakespeare's deep and accurate knowledge about the innate working of the human mind which sets the parameter in the creation of a humane tragic hero. Therefore, the character of Hamlet offers a live demonstration of the various nuances of a human mind when oppressed by life's problems and the magnitude of his obstacles that hinder him from achieving the ultimate realization of life.

The Bhagavad Gita is an integral part of the epic Mahabharata, forming chapters 23 to 40 of its 'Bhishmaparva' which contains Lord Krishna's teachings to relieve Arjuna from his dilemma regarding the propriety of waging war against his teachers and revered relatives. The dilemma of the pandava prince originates from the clash between the incongruous principles of the domestic and political worlds, the character Arjuna has to perform as a prince and as a family man. The immediate causes for the dilemma in Arjuna are the result of his innate sense of justice evolved from the experience of injustice done by the Kauravas. The filial devotion ensued from Arjuna's intense attachment to the erring relatives and a simultaneous hatred caused by their misdeeds committed on Pandavas are coupled with his superficial knowledge in various metaphysical themes of human life. The presence of self-pride and self-consciousness that spring from his egoistic understanding of himself as the protector of his clan's lost honour makes Arjuna fearful about the evil consequences of the battle on his life. In a nutshell Bhagavad Gita discusses the question of the problem of human action – a subject dealt by the great dramatist, Shakespeare in his play *Hamlet*.

Hamlet presents a similar protagonist who is fully aware of his duty to atone for the death of his father but lacks proper resolution for its execution. The two heroes belong to the princely class whose *Swadharma* or prime responsibility is to safeguard truth and justice in their respective kingdoms. But both the characters are dominated by a similar emotional crisis caused by their intense attachments to their relatives and negative

impulses which have to be curbed to be men of selfless action. The predicament of Hamlet is similar to that of Arjuna since both the heroes are intellects who are conscious of their actions and adhere to superior morality principles.

During the initial stages of their actions the two heroes endure a phase of disillusionment, despair and depression which even force them to neglect their responsibilities. If the untied locks of Draupathy had been a constant reminder for Arjuna to wage war against the Kauravas the ghostly intervention of king Hamlet commits Hamlet with the responsibility of avenging his father's murder as well as preserving the honour of his mother from further contamination. The first, second, third and fourth acts of *Hamlet* present Hamlet as a young prince of exceptional caliber and charisma, who is fully aware of his duty and responsibility to one's self, his family and kingdom. But the protagonist lacks proper resolution for its execution until the final act of the play.

The dilemma of Arjuna originates from the clash between the incongruous principles of the domestic, political and ethical worlds because he has to perform diverse functions as a prince, as a householder, and as a human being. The moral uncertainty in Arjuna is caused by his ignorance about the permanent nature of the soul and wrong attribution of himself as the doer of all action. Radhakrishnan comments on Arjuna as a character who typifies the struggling individual who feels the burden and mystery of the world but has not yet empowered his inner spirit to understand the unreality of his own desires and passions (Indian philosophy 520).

The term 'gunas' is an important part in the Gita ethics that bears a positive expression in spite of its negative concept. According to Chinmayananda in *Sreemad Bhagavadgeeta: Chapter XIV & XV* the three *gunas* like chords bind the spirit to matter and create in the Infinite Spirit, the painful sense of limitations and sorrows (19). 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. 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. The expression 'gunas' is an equivalent for 'human frailty' a Greek concept propounded by Aristotle to denote the presence of tragic traits in an individual which obstruct him from attaining fulfillment in life. A.C. Bradley in *Shakespearean Tragedy* views that the tragic trait, which is the greatness of a tragic hero proves fatal to Hamlet in the end. The hero fails to meet the circumstance with proper resolution, which a smaller man might have given and he errs by action or omission (14).

Radhakrishnan discusses the doctrine of the *gunas* and their negative effect on human beings in *Indian Philosophy*:

The constituents of *prakrti* 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. (502)

A reading of Hamlet will reveal the exuberance of three burning emotions - disillusionment, depression, and despair which block Hamlet from accepting his father's death and his mother's incestuous marriage. The hero is changed into a disillusioned idealist owing to the stark incongruity between appearance and reality in his domain. The initial four acts of the play *Hamlet* present Hamlet as a highly egoistic man who focuses his attention entirely on the possible consequences of his revengeful action on his life. The hero's sole concern to kill his father's murderer is triggered by his inner hatred and anger toward Claudius and the intense attachment to his dead father. The prince fails to consider the murder of Claudius as a therapeutic treatment administered to save Denmark and his people. The hero could not accept himself as an instrument ordained by the king Hamlet to avenge his death for the wellbeing of Denmark. The motivating factor which leads Hamlet to take revenge upon Claudius ensues from his hatred toward Claudius and not from his concern for the people of Denmark.

In *The Bhagavadgita* Arjuna is also hindered from undertaking a rightful action by the influence of *gunas* and other flaws. When Arjuna inspected the opposing army, he caught sight of his teachers, cousins, elders and friends. Arjuna suddenly gets struck by grief by his attachment to his relatives and forgot his purpose: "How shall I strike Bhishma and Drona who are worthy of worship, O Madhusudana (Krsna), with arrows in battle O Slayer of foes (Krsna)?" (II. 4). The valiant warrior forgot the ultimate goal of his life and became a victim of mundane and transitory relationships. The angst stricken Arjuna becomes an archetype of modern man who is typified by anxiety about the culpability of his actions and the future of his offspring.

Sri Krishna advocates the necessity of performing the right action, selfless and free from the *gunas*, selfish desire and hatred in order to attain freedom from the cycle of births and deaths. Gita reminds Arjuna about the necessity of forgetting completely his egoistic nature in order to do selfless action. Ramdas stresses the

importance of eliminating one's artificial sense of actor ship in order to dissolve the personal ego through complete surrender of all actions to God (*GitaSandesh* 15- 16).

Hamlet and Arjuna gain wisdom regarding the right method of performing one's action in their unique ways. According to Ribner, Hamlet has a proper understanding of the probable consequences of his action and its effect on his destiny. Hamlet's ruthless murder of Polonius complicated his task by causing his moral disintegration caused by the recognition of having forfeited the role of God's minister and has become a scourge destined to damnation (*Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy* 67). Sri Krishna teaches Arjuna that one's action becomes a proper one only when it is undertaken with a sense of devotion and dedication. A rightful action alone will lead man to a status of complete detachment which will enable him to be active in the execution of his duty but passive and uninterested about the result of his actions.

An important theme of *Hamlet* closely linked with the repercussions of right action done with wrong attitude is the idea of the sin and retribution. The ideal state is transgressed at first by Claudius by the murder of his brother and by his incestuous relation with Gertrude. Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern become passive accomplices in the crime by helping Claudius in protecting his undeserving kingship. The villainous nature of Claudius makes him plot against Hamlet with the help of Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Laertes.

In *Hamlet* the hero suffers the consequences of the murder of Polonius because of his erroneous act done under the spell of base emotions and wrong attitude. The principle of selfless action done with a sense of devotion propounded by the Gita provides justification for the retribution suffered by Hamlet in the end. A rightful action is evolved from an act executed in a state of complete detachment which will motivate the doer in discharging his duty with perfect composure. Therefore Hamlet feels remorseful and considers a victim of its retribution for the act triggered by hatred and anger:

HAMLET. For this same lord,
I do repent: but heaven hath pleas'd it so,
To punish me with this, and this with me,
That I must be their scourge and minister. (III. IV .172 – 175).

The tranquility attained by Hamlet in the last scene of the play is the result of his total surrender to the will of God. Shakespeare underlines the importance of a calm mind free from egoistic thoughts and negative emotions in order to foster an intimate God- man relationship. Earlier Hamlet maintained a fearful image of God who acted as a taskmaster in reckoning the sins of man. The fear originated from his dissociated relation with God.

In the final act Hamlet acknowledges the omnipotent nature of God who holds command over the entire universe. In the graveyard scene Hamlet reveals an unprecedented state of composure evolved from his attitude of perfect detachment for the results. The recognition of God's magnificence and benevolence reveals to Hamlet his limitation and the importance of man's obeisance to God. *Hamlet* presents the hero who has finally decided to suspend all conflicting thoughts from his mind in his willingness to surrender to the divine providence. The hero has attained genuine awareness of Claudius's villainy and therefore his actions are ensuing out of his true conviction. Hamlet begins to believe in the idea of predestination and in the sublime thought, that every action in the world takes place by the divine will. Hamlet does not insist for a change in the appointed schedule for the duel nor he is ready to accept Horatio's request to heed to his presentiments. The hero's lack of any selfish motive in his decision to engage in the duel with Laertes is evident from his decision to enter into an open combat with him. Laertes openly confesses the secret of the cold blooded treachery played on Gertrude and Hamlet by Claudius. Hamlet's decision to kill Claudius for his treachery can be counted as a selfless service done for the wellbeing of his kingdom and countrymen. The hero who is mortally wounded is ready to kill Claudius with a clear understanding that he would not get any personal gain from the murder. The murder of Claudius facilitates Young Fortinbras to gain the throne of Denmark without further bloodshed. Hamlet's decision to nominate young Fortinbras as the new ruler of Denmark shows his genuine interest for the well-being of his country.

Hamlet and Arjuna gain wisdom regarding the right method of performing one's action in their unique ways. According to Ribner Hamlet has a proper understanding of the probable consequences of his action and its effect on his destiny. He achieves victory over evil by encountering with it and thereby wins the true knowledge and enlightenment for his salvation (*Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy* 67).

The philosophy of Gita states that man becomes superior when he succeeds in conquering his senses by the mind and engages in action free from detachment. Radhakrishnan in *The Bhagavadgita* opines that consciousness must be raised step by step in order to attain self-realization:

KRISHNA. The senses, they say, are great, greater than the senses
Is the mind, greater than the mind is the intelligence?
but greater than the intelligence is he. (III .42)

This philosophy of the Gita helps Arjuna to resolve his moral dilemma and rejuvenates him to perform his duty in the battlefield with a new insight and identity.

The philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita teaches Arjuna to take up action against the evil doers since the duty as a Ksatriya expects him to wage war for restoring peace in his kingdom. The divine teachings on the immortality of the soul and its reincarnation in all ages until the attainment of salvation are relieving Arjuna from his pangs of inner conscience. The only factor insisted by the Gita on the doer is to gain freedom from all selfish desires and to observe total detachment from the results of the action. The valuable maxim of Sri Krishna is tearing the dark clouds of doubts and ignorance from the mind of the great pandava prince.

The reading of *Hamlet* in the light of the philosophy of Bhagavad Gita will present Hamlet as a character similar to Arjuna, who performed a selfless action for the benefit of others. *Hamlet* presents the moral trajectory of Hamlet as a son who is obliged to avenge the murder of his father to a statesman who commits regicide for the well-being of his countrymen. The character traits of Hamlet as a man of endless thoughts, inspired by continual and never-satisfied meditation on human destiny and the gloomy perplexity caused by the events of the world are visible in the character of Arjuna.

The attempt is to find stark resemblances in the protagonists who tried to give dramatic form to the problems of man's life on earth, its meaning and its direction in the face of the reality perceived in the ever-present evil and an inevitable death. The initial failure and the hard earned victory over the self, underline the relevance of absolute reliance on the omnipotent, philosophical strength, spirit of resilience and heroism manifested in their right action in accordance to the inner conscience.

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:

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).

Chinmayananda rightly puts in *The Art of Man Making*: "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). The present study established that Shakespeare's Hamlet also is a victim of *Arjuna Vishada*, and applying Gita philosophy to the study of Hamlet it is clear that Gita offers a solution to all problems of humanity.

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