

Echoes of the Gita in Shakespeare

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Abstract:

Shakespeare has never claimed to have read the *Bhagavad Gita*. But one who is well-versed in the *Gita* and Shakespeare, is amazed to find striking similarities in both. The reintegration of the oriental knowledge of the *Gita* in the light of the occidental wisdom of Shakespeare suits our present-day needs, leading to the resuscitation of its fundamental values in their pristine vigour. The *Gita* is a part of the *Mahabharata*, the longest epic in the world, composed by Rishi Ved Vyasa. So without understanding the *Mahabharata*, the greatest tale ever of ambition, greed, jealousy, malice, treachery, revenge and blood-shed, one cannot fully comprehend either the *Gita*, which is set against the grand Kurukshetra war, or the Shakespearean philosophy of life and soul embodied in his whole *oeuvre*. This common pool of literature enables the reader, eastern or western, to understand and appreciate currents of world thought, as also the movements of the mind in India, which, though they flow through different linguistic channels, have a common urge and aspiration, i.e. peace, love and liberation.

Key-Words: Dilemma, Despondency, Karma, Righteousness, Conflict, Desert, Chaos, Guilt, Destruction, Gunas, Truth, Mind-control, Senses, Detachment, Renunciation, Self-realisation.

Introduction:

It's noteworthy that Vyasa has placed the text of the *Gita* at the beginning of the battle which is central to the *Mahabharata*. So the *Gita* is to be understood as an account of the evolutionary development of humanity. Radhakrishnan wrote: "The *Gita* taught a universal 'religion of the spirit' that provided what the modern world needed." Lord Krishna's exhortation to action, rejecting renunciation of action as a solution to the human predicament, is fundamental to the cycle of life. This philosophical message that the *Gita* seeks to send out finds its echo in the works of Shakespeare, the Bard of Avon gifted with an intuitive insight into the truth of life. "He was not of an age, but for all time", exclaimed Ben Johnson about his friend Shakespeare.

The first thing that comes to my mind, as I embark on a comparative analysis of Shakespeare and the *Gita* is the court-scene in the *Mahabharata* where Lord Krishna is speaking as a peace messenger (*Shanti-doot*) and the court-scene in *The Merchant of Venice* where Portia is

pleading for mercy. Krishna appears in the court of Dhritarashtra, king of Hastinapur, on behalf of the Pandavas and appeals to the King to do justice, as the king is an embodiment of justice and must always work towards keeping peace. “Let not the race be destroyed. Dhritarashtra, do not bring ruin to your people. Make peace with the Pandavas by giving them half the Kingdom”, thus states Lord Krishna. Shakespeare’s Portia stands, disguised as a lawyer before Shylock in the trial scene, pleading brilliantly for justice and begging Shylock to show mercy:

*The quality of mercy is not strain'd
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives
And him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch
Better than his crown...
It is an attribute to God himself.
And earthly power doth
Then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice...*

--**The Merchant of Venice**, Act 4, Scene 1--

And Shylock keeps whetting his knife in anticipation of the verdict in his favour (reminding of Duryodhana making fetters to bind Krishna) responds:

*What if my house be troubled with a rat,
And I be pleased to give ten thousand ducats
To have it banned? What, are you answered yet?
Some men there are love not a gaping pig,
Some that are mad if they behold a cat...for
Affection,
Mistress of passion, sways it to the mood
Of what it likes or loathes...
So can I give no reason, nor I will not,
More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing
I bear Antonio...*

The same hatred and ‘a certain loathing’, springing out of jealousy as in case of Shylock, is the reason of Duryodhana’s rejection of Lord Krishna’s proposal: “I refuse to give the Pandavas an inch of land, not even a needlepoint of territory.” Shylock says: “My deeds upon my head...The pound of flesh which I demand of him/Is dearly bought. ‘Tis mine, and I will have it.” He rails and spews poison against Antonio:

*I hate him for he is a Christian,
But more for in low simplicity
He lends out money gratis and brings down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.
If I catch him once upon the hip.
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him
... Cursed be my tribe if I forgive him!*

(1.111.37-47)

Duryodhana too hates the Pandavas. “One unforgivable offence of the Pandavas in the eyes of Duryodhana was that the people of the city used to praise them openly and declare in season and out of season that Yudhisthira alone was fit to be a king...The jealousy of Duryodhana began to grow at the sight of the physical strength of Bhima and the dexterity of Arjuna”. (C. Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, P.52) That’s why Duryodhana had earlier attempted to wipe them off as described in the wax palace episode and Vastra-haran episode. Now a full-fledged war is brewing in his mind, which he foolishly envisages to win. So he tries to seize and captivate Lord Krishna who manifests his Vishvaroop. Though Krishna is an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, but he is in his mortal form, encountering the human foibles at every step. In the *Gita* He reveals the ways to deal with Evil in order to rise above human limitations. That accounts for the universality of this epic. One would be tempted to study some characters of Shakespeare as counterparts of the *Mahabharata* characters: Karna (a good person consumed by a tragic flaw) and Othello; Shakuni, Lady Macbeth, Iago; Dhritarashtra and King Lear; Duryodhana and Macbeth. But the most interesting study would be, of course, Arjuna and Hamlet.

Echoes of the Gita in Shakespeare: (*Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear, Othello*)

In order to attain a meaningful perspective of life and its questions, coupled with a profound insight into the *Gita* and Shakespeare, one can study the works of Shakespeare in the light of five major philosophical aspects of the *Bhagavad Gita*:

1. **Dilemma, Conflict and War**
2. **Karma (Action)**
3. **Gunas (Modes, or Nature Born Properties)**
4. **Truth and Dharma**
5. **Self-Realisation**

1. Dilemma, Conflict and War—

The *Bhagavad Gita*, forming chapters 23 to 40 of ‘Bhishmaparva’ in the *Mahabharata*, is a “Samgharsa Shastra”, a scripture of conflict, a stirring call to arms, not for personal aggrandisement or national glory, but for the deeper task of becoming an instrument of Divine will. Arjuna’s heart and mind are in conflict: whether to kill those he loves deeply? Arjuna refuses to fight because he has been painfully reminded that it is the battle between two sides of his clan, the Bharatas. As Arjuna surveys the battlefield, he finds his Guru, grandfather, cousins and relatives, facing him. By the end of the first chapter of the *Gita*, he has dropped his weapon and decided not to fight. He says to Krishna:

“O Krishna, seeing my own kinsmen arrayed for battle here and intent on killing each other, my limbs are giving way and my mouth is drying up”.
My whole body shudders; my hair is standing on end. My bow, the Gāṇḍīva, is slipping from my hand, and my skin is burning all over. My mind is in quandary and whirling in confusion; I am unable to hold myself steady any longer. O Krishna, killer of the Keshi demon, I only see omens of misfortune. I do not foresee how any good can come from killing my own kinsmen in this battle. (Ch1: Verse 28-31)

Dilemma is the element of Shakespearean heroes. Their sensibilities are identical to those of Arjuna. Their highest endowments, moral sensibility and genius become their enemies. They have an imagination which, for evil as well as good, feels and sees all things in one. **Hamlet** too begins by revealing his distress in Act 1, Scene 2: “*O, that this too solid flesh would melt, Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!*”

“*What should I do, Madhusudan? What is my Kartavyam Karma?*” asks the anguished **Arjuna**. Moral propriety of waging war is the question.

Hamlet too is struggling with the same age-old dilemma of mankind. “*To be or not to be, that is the question*”, reverberate the words of the agonised Hamlet, synonymous with the *Vishad Yoga* (despondency) of Arjuna, standing in Kurukshetra and displaying fickleness of mind in crisis.

Mind Control--

“There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so”, says Hamlet. “It is mind that makes a Heaven of Hell and a Hell of Heaven”. John Milton echoes him in *Paradise Lost*. Shakespeare’s tragedies are tragedies of a divided mind: “My mind is like a fountain stirred and I myself see not the bottom of it”—these words of Achilles are applicable not just to most of the protagonists of Shakespeare—Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, King Lear and others but also to Arjuna. Their mind keeps randomly flirting around with varied thoughts, something like a monkey randomly and unmindfully jumping from one branch of a tree to the other. Human mind is incredibly powerful yet in constant flux. Maynard Mack observes in “The World of Hamlet”:

“...in Hamlet, we have a character who is not only mad in himself but a cause that madness is in the rest of us...Hamlet’s world is pre-eminently in the interrogative mood. It reverberates with questions, anguished, meditative, alarmed. There are questions that...mark the nuances of the action, helping to establish its peculiarly baffled tone....Hamlet’s world is a world of riddles ^[1].”

Hamlet's utterances in madness, even if wild and whirling, are simultaneously poignant, as Polonius discovers: “Do you know me, my lord?” Even his language is often riddling: “A little more than kin, and less than kind.” “Excellently well. You are a fish monger”. Even the madness is riddling. How much is real? How much is feigned? What does it mean? Sane or mad, Hamlet’s mind plays restlessly about his world, turning up one riddle after another.

Therefore, Lord Krishna teaches Arjuna the art of controlling mind. The Blessed Lord says:

Without doubt, O Mighty-armed (Arjuna), the mind is restless, and difficult to curb, but it can be controlled, O Son of Kunti (Arjuna), by constant practice and non-attachment. (Ch 6:35). When the disciplined mind is established in the Self alone, liberated from all desires, then he is said to be harmonised. (Ch 6: 18)

It becomes incumbent upon a being to first control one’s monkey-mind, for the in-dwelling virtues to play out unhindered. When there is a dilemma, one ought to focus on the Lord, on the present moment and do what the moment requires. Arjuna is expected to behave like a Kshatriya prince. That is his duty.

Further, having regard for thine own duty, thou shouldst not falter, there exists no greater good for a Kshatriya than a battle enjoined for duty. (11. 31).

Arjuna's *swadharma* or law of action, requires him to engage in battle. Protection of right by the acceptance of battle, if necessary, is the social duty of the Kshatriya, and not renunciation.
Krishna exhorts again:

Happy are the Kshatriyas, O Partha (Arjuna), for whom such a war comes of its own accord as an open door to heaven. (11.32):

And again, now more forcefully:

But if thou doest not this lawful battle, then thou wilt fail thy duty and glory and will incur sin. (11.33)

What he implies is that: “When the struggle between right and wrong is on, he who abstains from it out of false sentimentality, weakness or cowardice would be committing a sin ^[2]”.

Krishna continues:

Besides, men will ever recount thy ill-fame and for one who has been honoured, ill-fame is worse than death. (11. 34)

Shakespeare offers similar philosophical reflections on the inner conflict between right and wrong in *Hamlet*: “*This above all; to thine own self be true*”; “*Thus conscience does make cowards of us all; And thus the native hue of resolution is slied o’er with the pale cast of thought*”; “*The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, that I was ever born to set it right*”; “*Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer/The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune/Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them: to die, to sleep no more; and by a sleep, to say we end/The heart-ache...*” And then war within in *Macbeth*: “*This supernatural soliciting cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill/Why hath it given me earnest of success, commencing in a truth? I am thane of Cawdor/If good, why do I yield to that suggestion/Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair/And make my seated heart knock at my ribs, Against the use of nature?*” (Act 1.Scene 3); “*...this Duncan Hath borne his faculties so meek, that his virtues will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against the deep damnation of his taking off*”; “*And pity...shall blow the horrid deed in every eye*”, “*I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent*”. (Act 1, Scene 7); in *Othello*: “*Good name in man and woman, dear my lord/Is the immediate jewel of their souls*”; in *King Lear*: “*Allow not nature more than nature needs/Man’s life is cheap as beast’s*”; “*How, nothing will come of nothing*”. Each of these lines by Shakespeare will bear an in-depth analysis in the light of the *Gita*.

A C Bradley remarks in *Shakespearean Tragedy*:

Tragedy with Shakespeare is concerned always with persons of ‘high degree’; often with kings and princes...” ^[3].

The consciousness of his high position never leaves a Shakespearean hero. Both Arjuna and Hamlet belong to the princely class whose *Swadharma* or prime responsibility is to safeguard truth and justice in their respective kingdoms. But both are dominated by a similar emotional crisis caused by their awareness of their high position, their intense attachments to their relatives and negative impulses which have to be curbed to be men of selfless action; both are intellects who are conscious of their actions and adhere to superior morality principles; both are haunted by the past but immobilised by the future; both are caught in the labyrinth of emotional distress in the initial stages which make them totally unfit for action and force them to neglect their responsibilities.

Jan Kott remarks:

“Feudal history is like a great staircase on which there treads a constant procession of kings. Every step upwards is marked by murder, perfidy, treachery. Every step brings the throne nearer. Another step and the crown will fall. One will soon be able to snatch it ^[4]”.

...that is a step/on which I must fall down, or else o'erleap (Macbeth, Act 1, Scene 4)

Macbeth begins and ends in slaughter. Everyone in *Macbeth* is steeped in blood; victims as well as murderers. The whole world is stained with blood, says Duncan's son, Donalbain, “There's dagger in men's smiles: the near in blood, the nearer bloody.”(11.3) Everyone in *Macbeth* is steeped in blood; victims as well as murderers. It reminds one of the wicked world of the *Mahabharata*, where Shakuni and Duryodhana are constantly conspiring to kill the Pandavas. C. Rajagopalachari writes in *Mahabharata*: “Karna and Shakuni became evil counsellors in planning wily stratagems.”

Like Dhritarashtra and his son Duryodhana, Macbeth's moral dilemma stems from his ego, his ambition to become a king that gets the best of him. That ambition gets stirred by the prophecy of the witches, but his soul is gnawed by the compunctious visitations of conscience as he is goaded by Lady Macbeth to kill Duncan, if he wants to become a king. His heinous crime of Duncan's murder, springing out of high ambition and leading to pangs of guilt and escapism, evokes horror. After Duncan's murder, he expresses remorse in Act 2, Scene 2:

I'll go no more: I am afraid to think what I have done; Look on't again I dare not...

To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself. (11.2)

Arjuna also cries, revealing his guilt:

Why should we not have the wisdom to turn away from this sin, O Janardana (Krsna), we who see the wrong in the destruction of the family? (1.39)

Macbeth starts to feel a strong sense of **guilt** even before he goes through with the murder of Duncan: “Stars, hide your fires!/Let not light see my black and deep desires.”(1.4.52-53) and then:

“I see thee still/And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood”. (2.1.45-47)

He expresses **remorse** in Act 2, Scene 2:

I'll go no more: I am afraid to think what I have done; Look on't again I dare not.

Arjuna continues lamenting soulfully:

Alas, what a great sin have we resolved to commit in striving to slay our own people through our greed for the pleasure of the kingdom! (1.45)

Macbeth laments:

“Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood/Clean my hand? No, this my hand will rather/The multitudinous seas incarnadine.”

Arjuna reveals his tormented consciousness :

“I do not see what will drive away this sorrow which dries up my senses even if I should attain rich and unrivalled kingdom on earth or even the sovereignty of the gods.” (2.8)

Macbeth writhes in torment, knowing the damage cannot be undone, that he can never be a man he once was:

“ I'm in blood/ steep'd in so far, that should I wade no more, Returning were as tedious as go o'er.”

Through the imagery of blood, visions, hallucinations, sleep and weather, Shakespeare portrays a profound guilt that is ineffable and has the power to corrupt. After killing Duncan, Macbeth begins a journey of horror, killing and crime Macbeth's guilty conscience haunts him terribly, gnaws at his being constantly and he gradually loses his sense of reality. He becomes paranoid. He is not sure whether he is having a vision or not. Banquo's ghost suggests his disturbed state of his mind: “Which of you have done this?... Never shake thy gory locks at me”. (Act 3, scene 4) And Lady Macbeth, who is still in her senses, says: “What, quite unmanned in folly?” Macbeth continues speaking to the ghost, visible to him only: “Avaunt, and quit my sight! Let the earth hide thee. Thy bones are marrowless; thy

*blood is cold; thou hast no speculation in those eyes which thou dost glare with.” This is the depiction of a **tormented consciousness**. Later, Lady Macbeth too loses her grip on sanity: “Out, damned spot! Out, I say!” (5.1.31); “Here is the smell of blood still. All perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand”.*

Arjuna tries to escapes from horror, seeking respite in death:

Far better would it be for me if sons of Dhritarashtra with weapons in hand, should slay me in the battle, while I remain unresisting and unarmed. (1.46)

Macbeth escapes from horror of reality into a world of glory and honour, where:

*Rebellion’s head, rise never...and our high-placed
Macbeth*

*Shall live the lease of nature, pay his breath
To time and mortal custom. (4. 1)*

Hamlet too thinks of death as a respite:

O, that... the Everlasting had not fix’d his canon ‘gainst self-slaughter! O God! O God! How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable, Seems to me all the uses of the world!

*Fie on’t! O fie! ‘tis an un-weeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely...*

(Hamlet, ACT 1, Scene 2)

Hamlet’s words indicate his profound dread of ‘unweeded waste’. Arjuna too asks Krishna whether victory is worth much after we make the place a desert by killing his own people:

“How shall I strike Bhishma and Drona who are worthy of worship...it is better to live in this world even by begging...by slaying them, only, I would enjoy in this world delights which are smeared with blood.” (2.4-5)

The major theme of the *Gita*, thus, is the war within, the struggle for self-mastery that every human being must wage, to live a life that is meaningful and fulfilling. When one loses this internal war with oneself, then starts the degradation of human mind as depicted by Shakespeare in *King Lear*.

In *King Lear*, conflict springs from, “greatness [that] is linked to puerility. Lear’s instincts are themselves grand, heroic-noble even. His judgement is nothing.... Lear is mentally a child; in passion a titan”^[5]. Lear is a counterpart of Dhritarashtra whose filial love for an undeserving and wicked child becomes his doom. Both Lear and Dhritarashtra undergo a torment of dualism. Lear scarcely believes his senses when his daughters resist him. His mind keeps returning to the unreality, the impossibility of what has happened:

*Your kind old father, whose frank heart gave all-
O, that way madness lies; let me shun that;
No more of that.*

(King Lear, 111. iv. 20)

He is self-centred; he cannot understand that he has been anything but a perfect father. He takes false praise and flattery as love and falls a prey to the selfish motives of wicked Goneril and Regan, banishing his favourite and youngest daughter Cordelia. In the *Gita*, to a man with *Atmadrishti*, or spiritual consciousness, all Jivas are alike. Lord Krishna says:

He who holds equal blame and praise, who is silent (restrained in speech), content with anything (that comes), who has no fixed abode and is firm in mind, that man who is devoted is dear to Me. (Ch 12. 19)

One who is firm of understanding is un-bewildered; his mind is not fraught with fancies. He is “*Brahman Sthitah*”. Knowledge frees him from the delusion of dualities. Lear is delusional. So he cannot understand his daughters’ behaviour. It is-

*As this mouth should tear this hand
For lifting food to ’t? (King Lear, 3, iv.15)*

It is incongruous. There is no longer “rule in unity itself.” (*Troilus and Cressida*, 4: ii.138). Lear’s mind begins to fail. Due to ego-centred consciousness and lack of awareness, his responses are negative. So are the outcomes.

Othello projects the most intense conflict of emotions: intense love and extreme hate. It is horrific to see moral changes turning into a dilemma of fury and passion. Othello is the General of the Republic. At the beginning we see him in the Council-Chamber of the Senate. Othello thinks of the “pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war” (111.iii.354). He won Desdemona with the simple telling of his adventure and brave deeds as a soldier. His honour is supreme for him. So, he comes before us, dark and grand, with a light upon him from the sun where he was born; but no longer young, and now grave, self-controlled, steeled by the experience of countless perils and vicissitudes, stately in bearing and speech. He strikes as a great man naturally modest but fully conscious of his worth, proud of his services to the state, unawed by dignitaries and un-elated by honours (something of a stoic or *Sthitapragya* described in the *Gita*), secure, it would seem, against all dangers from without and all rebellion from within. And he comes to have his life crowned with the final glory of love, filling his heart with tenderness and his imagination with ecstasy. For there is no love, not that of Romeo in his youth, more steeped in poetic imagination than Othello’s.

The conflict begins because his mind, for all its poetry is very simple. He is not observant. His nature tends outward. He is quite free from introspection, and is not given to reflection. A C Bradley observes: “On this side, he is the very opposite of Hamlet.” Lord Krishna talks of balance and harmony in nature in the *Gita* (Human nature as well as Mother Nature). To his doom, ironically, he shares with Hamlet a great openness and trustfulness of nature. Emotion excites his imagination, but it confuses and dulls his intellect. But, for all his dignity and massive calm, he is by nature full of the most vehement passion. Shakespeare emphasises his self-control, extolled in the *Gita*, not only by the wonderful pictures of the First Act, but by references to the past. And then we get to see the conflict in his emotions. His sexual jealousy rises to the pitch of passion. Ludovico, amazed at his violence, exclaims:

*Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate
Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature
Whom passion could not shake? Whose solid virtue
The shot of accident nor dart of chance
Could neither gaze nor pierce? (4.i.lines 297-301)*

Iago, who has here no motive for lying, asks:

*Can he be angry? I have seen the cannon
When it hath blown his ranks into the air, And, like the devil, from his very arm Puffed his
own brother-and can he be angry?*

Othello’s incredible self-control, in the beginning, is exhibited by Shakespeare in a single line, one of his miracles, when Othello silences the night-brawl: “*Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.*”

We admire Othello's ominous words, thinking how necessary was this self-control:

Now, by heaven

My blood begins my safer guides to rule And passion, having my best judgement collided, Assays to lead the way.

And we remember these words later, when the sun of reason is 'collided', blackened and blotted out in total eclipse and in a furious frenzy he kills Desdemona.

A C Bradley comments:

"What spectacle can be more painful than that of this feeling turned into a tortured mixture of longing and loathing, the 'golden purity' of passion split by poison into fragments, the animal in man forcing itself into his consciousness in naked grossness, and he writhing before it but powerless to deny it entrance, gasping inarticulate images of pollution, and finding relief only in bestial thirst for blood. This is what we have to witness in one who was indeed 'great of heart' and no less pure and tender than he was great ^[6]".

At the end, when he is determined to live no longer, he is as anxious as Hamlet not to be misjudged by the great world, and his last speech begins:

Soft you; a word or two before you go.

I have done the state some service, and they know it.

(Act 5, Scene 2, Line 397)

It becomes a question of honour and morality for Arjuna, Othello, Macbeth, King Lear and other protagonists. They hang like *Trishanku*, each imprisoned in his private Hell. The only difference is --Arjuna seeks refuge in Krishna and attains liberation.

2.Karma (Action)--

The *Gita* propounds the doctrine of Karma and its consequences. What is *Karma*? Action on the basis of our continuing existence. The blessed Lord Krishna says in the *Gita*:

Karma is the name given to the creative force that brings beings into existence. (8:3)

The word *karma* is derived from the Sanskrit root *kri* which means to act, do, or make. Karma is any kind of action, including thought and feeling. Karma is both the cause and effect of our evolution and of our duty (*swadharma*). Karma has three different manifestations.

a) Karmic Nemesis--

Saint Paul expressed *Karma* perfectly when he wrote: "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Galatians 6:7). The *Gita* presents catastrophe as the doctrine of *Karmic Nemesis*. The Kurukshetra war is a presentation of such a "Karmic nemesis". The greed and self-centredness of Dhritarashtra is the primary cause of the tragedy. The old king gloats over the scene when Draupadi, clad only in a single garment, is dragged by her hair to the Kaurava Assembly by Dushasana. Later, the fear of revenge by the Pandavas torments and haunts him. In his troubled dreams Dhritarashtra sees: "the entire Kaurava army being dragged and molested as if it were a weak, helpless woman."

Hence, the *Gita* not just preaches the doctrine of Karma but also its consequences. *Karmic Nemesis* appears as 'poetic justice' (reward and punishment) in Shakespeare and Greek dramas. Every action, good or bad, bears consequences and accordingly creates human destiny. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare deftly makes use of this device. The two feuding families, the Capulets, and Montagues face poetic justice when their children die. Their endless arguing and fighting have resulted in the loss of two young lives, caught up in the abysmal feud. Initially, Lear seems to have gone mad because of what Generil and Regan did

to him, and this is partially true. But more so than that, he goes mad because of what he did to Cordelia. Kent, who has treated Lear, says: "From your first of difference and decay, have followed your sad steps" and tells him that it is his guilt causing madness. Macbeth fears that if he kills Duncan, all of 'heaven's cherubim' will be horrified and when he goes to murder the king he says the act will lead Duncan to 'heaven or to hell'. (Act 2, Scene 1).

The deaths of Polonius, Claudius, and Laertes in *Hamlet*, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, death of Edmund, Goneril poisoning Regan and stabbing herself to death in *King Lear*, Othello's tragic end, Cassio rewarded because of his innocence, Antonio's redemption and Shylock's imprisonment with all his property confiscated: these are brilliant examples of *Poetic justice* or *Karmic Nemesis*.

Lord Krishna explains to Arjuna that the drive or desire to act must be displaced by the knowledge of right action. What is 'Right Action'? Krishna preaches:

Therefore, at all times remember me and fight. When thy mind and understanding are set on me, to me alone shall thou come without doubt. (8:7)

Just as a dancing girl fixes her attention on the water pot she bears on her head even when she is dancing to various tunes, so also a truly pious man does not give up (his attention) to the blissful feet of the Supreme Lord when he attends to his many concerns. So, a doer must keep his eye on the Supreme, while doing action. Then he can do nothing wrong. Righteous path of right action will attract him. Away from the Divine Lord, in the form of inner consciousness, conscience or inner voice, *jiva* falls into evil deeds, leading him to destruction. Lady Macbeth kills her conscience and calls on 'murdering ministers' from hell to help her with her plans. (1:5). She is showing the consequences of not having faith in the Christian God. Calling to God's greatest enemy, the Devil, Lady Macbeth asks him to "unsex [her]". Shakespeare shows the consequences of wrong deeds. The *Gita* teaches what is right action and how to escape the clutches of fatal flaws.

b) Fatal Flaw or Hamartia--

Lord Krishna enlightens Arjuna on the fatal flaws that lead man to his destruction:

There are three gateways leading to hell-lust, anger and greed. One must give these up, for they lead to the degradation of the soul. (16.21)

In Shakespearean tragedies, most of the actions are governed by these three base emotions. Hamlet's sole concern to kill his father's murderer is triggered by his inner hatred and anger toward Claudius (tragic flaws) and the intense attachment to his dead father. Thought is the element of Hamlet's life. Passion and gullibility in *Othello* lead to extreme jealousy and fury. He becomes fixated on Desdemona's possible infidelity: "O, beware, my lord, of jealousy; it is the green-ey'd monster, which doth the meat it feeds on...But, O, what damned minutes tells he o'er/Who dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet strongly loves!"(Act 3, Scene 3): "Men in rage strike those that wish them best" (Act 2, Scene 3); "I understand a fury in your words, but not the words". Ambition and greed in Macbeth, Lady Macbeth; brooding and anger in Hamlet; Ego in King Lear-these flaws cause them to commit wrong Karmas and suffer Hell. Lord Krishna enlightens Arjuna:

Given over to self-conceit, force and pride and also to lust and anger, these malicious people despise Me dwelling in the bodies of themselves and others.(16.18). "By implication, God dwells as witness to their evil life." Says S. Radhakrishnan.

*Krodha bhavati sammohah
Sammohat smriti-vibhramah
Smriti-bhranshad buddhi-nasho
Buddhi-nashat pranashyati
(Ch. 2. Verse.63)*

When a man dwells in his mind on the objects of sense, attachment to them is produced. From attachment springs desire and from desire comes anger. From anger arises bewilderment, from bewilderment loss of memory and from loss of memory, the destruction of intelligence and from the destruction of intelligence, he perishes. (ch.2. 62-63)

When attachment becomes a part of the consciousness, renunciation of action is the first temptation.

Hamlet is harbouring anger, extreme anger. Our attention is early drawn to this image of Hamlet. Alone in the gay glitter of the court, silhouetted against brilliance, robustness, health and happiness, is the pale black-robed Hamlet, mourning. When we meet him, his words point the essential inwardness of his fury, dilemma and suffering.

*But I have that within which passeth show;
These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (1.ii.85)*

During Hamlet's soliloquy, we see another reason: disgust at his mother's marriage:
... *within a month:*

*Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
She married. O, most wicked speed, to post with such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
(1.ii. 153)*

"...such callousness is infidelity, and so impurity, and, since Claudius is the brother of the King, incest...Hamlet's state of mind... is at least definitely related to them." remarks G. Wilson Knight^[7].

Then Hamlet hears of his father's ghost, sees it and speaks to it. Hamlet's pain is intensified by knowledge of the unrestful spirit, by the terrible secrets of death hinted by the Ghost's words:

*I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood...
(1.5. 15.)*

He next learns that his father's murderer now wears the crown, is married to his faithless mother. His pain is horribly intensified. The irony of the Ghost's last injunction is terrible:

Adieu, adieu! Hamlet, remember me. (1.5.91)

And Hamlet repeats the words of his father's ghost:

*Now to my word,
It is 'Adieu, Adieu! Remember me.' I have sworn' it. (1.5.110)*

C.S. Lewis rightly comments in his essay 'Death in Hamlet': "... Hamlet for me is no more separable from his ghost than Macbeth from his witches^[8]". The Hamlet formula, so to speak, is not a "man who has to avenge his father" but a man who has been given a task by a ghost. Evil in mind is what it signifies. Doubt, uncertainty, bewilderment to almost any degree, is what the ghost creates not only in Hamlet's mind but in the minds of the other characters. In Shakespeare's play the appearance of the spectre means a breaking down of the walls of the world and the germination of thoughts that cannot really be thought. Lewis comments: "Chaos is come again"^[9].

Though he cries out against the cruel fate that had laid on him, whose own soul is in chaos, the command of righting the evil in the state:

O cursed spite

That ever I was born to set it right! (1.5.188)

Hamlet's brooding manifests as procrastination. No act but suicide is rational. G. Wilson Knight comments in *The Wheel of Fire*: "It will be clear that Hamlet's outstanding peculiarity in the action... may be regarded as a symptom of this sickness of his soul. He does not avenge his father's death, not because he dares not, not because he hates the thought of bloodshed, but because his 'wit's diseased' (111.ii.341); his will [to act] is snapped and useless, like a broken leg. Nothing is worthwhile ^[10]. The protagonist lacks proper resolution for the execution of action until the final act of the play. "The centre of the tragedy, therefore, may be said with equal truth to lie in action issuing from character, or in character issuing from action", Concludes Bradley ^[11].

According to Ribner, Hamlet's ruthless murder of Polonius complicated his task by causing his moral disintegration that springs out of his recognition of having forfeited the role of God's minister, thus becoming a scourge destined to damnation. (*Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy*, 67)

If the untied locks of Draupadi had been a constant reminder for Arjuna to wage war against the Kauravas, the ghostly intervention of the king, his father, commits Hamlet with the responsibility of avenging his father's murder as well as preserving the honour of his mother from further contamination.

Thus, it becomes a question of honour and morality for all the protagonists: Macbeth, Othello, King Lear, Arjuna. The only difference is Arjuna seeks refuge in Krishna who explains:

The man who is released from these, the three gates to darkness, O son of Kunti, does what is good for his soul and then reaches the highest state. (16.22)

C) Detachment and Renunciation in Action, not of Action—

Sri Krishna teaches Arjuna the doctrine of *Nishkaam* Karma, desire-less action or renunciation of selfish desire in action. An action becomes proper only when it is undertaken with a sense of detachment, devotion and dedication. Renunciation not of action but in action (of desire for fruit) is propounded.

Karmanye vadhikaraste Ma Phaleshu Kadachana, Ma Karmaphalaheturbhurma Te Sangostvakarmani

You have the right to work only but never to its fruits. Let not the fruits of action be your motive, nor let your attachment be to inaction. (2.47)

Nothing matters except the good will, the willing fulfilment of the purpose of God. A rightful action alone will enable man to be active in the execution of his duty but passive and uninterested about the result of his action. Such an action is undertaken with *Yogastha* (steadfast in inner composure) *buddhi* (mind) that has attained *samatvam*. "Inner poise...is self-mastery. It is the conquest of anger, sensitiveness, pride and ambition" says Radhakrishnan.

The *Gita* is a profound study in human psychology. Body consciousness and attachment make us possessive. S. Radhakrishnan observes in his *The Gita*: "It is not so much slaughter but slaughter of one's own people that causes distress and anxiety to Arjuna. We are generally inclined to take a mechanical view of wars and get lost in statistics. But with a little imagination, we can realise how our enemies are human beings. "Fathers and grandfathers" with their own individual lives, with their longings and aspirations ^[12]".

Such attachment evokes compassion, guilt, anxiety, procrastination that assail Arjuna and Hamlet. Hamlet suffers from Oedipus complex, according to Freud in his essay, "Psychopathic Characters on the Stage". He wrote: "The conflict in 'Hamlet' is so effectively concealed that it was left to me to unearth it". Hamlet is excessively attached to his mother, he said. His reaction to Gertrude's marriage reveals his Oedipus complex: "*O, most wicked*

speed, to post/With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!” He hesitates to kill Claudius and procrastinates as he sees him as his own repressed Oedipus self. He kills Claudius only after Gertrude’s death. Othello’s attachment to Desdemona, Macbeth’s to Lady Macbeth, King Lear’s to his daughters are studies in case to substantiate the point.

Action stops. No Karma then. Thus, cries out Arjuna (1.29):“Na Yotse Iti Govindam” (“I will not fight”).

“I do not long for victory, O Krsna, nor kingdom nor pleasures. Of what use is the kingdom to us, O Krsna, or enjoyment or even life...Teachers, fathers, sons and also grandfathers; uncles and fathers-in-law, grandsons and brothers-in-law and other kinsmen. These I would not consent to kill, though they kill me, O Madhusudan, even for the kingdom of the three worlds...” ^[13]

“Arjuna’s words make us think of the loneliness of man oppressed by doubt, dread of waste and emptiness, from whose being the riches of heaven and earth and the comfort of human affection are slipping away” remarks S Radhakrishnan ^[14].

Then what is our “Kartavyam Karma”? A difficult question. **And Lord Krishna Himself says: “gahana karmano gatih”: (thick and tangled is the way of works).**

Correct Action:

The theory of ‘correct action’ in the *Gita* revolves around a single concept: that action should not be purely for selfish purposes, although the self is obviously involved; it should not be simply as a necessary evil because we have to act. Action must be positive and joyous; such an affirmative action must be considered an offering to the Divine. What is important is the psychological and spiritual input into that action. Your action should lead to spiritual development. Shri Krishna reminds Arjuna that he should take pleasure and pain, gain or loss, victory or defeat alike and get ready for battle. This is a state of stoicism, *Sthitapragya*. “This would save him from the sin he would be committing if he did not act when action became necessary for the fulfilment of his duty. Whatever the result of action he should calmly do his duty without seeking a reward ^[15]”.

All Shakespearean protagonists suffer because either they don’t act or they commit unrighteous acts for the sake of reward. Lady Macbeth, in *Macbeth*, murmurs that she knows Macbeth is ambitious but that he is too full of “the milk of human kindness” to take the steps necessary to make himself a king. (1.5.15) She resolves to convince her husband to do whatever is required to seize the crown. Waiting for her husband’s arrival with Duncan, she delivers her famous speech: “You spirits/That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here/And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full/of direst cruelty” (1.5.38-41). When Macbeth arrives, she makes her intention clear:

Macbeth: *My dearest love, Duncan comes here tonight.*

Lady M. *And when goes hence?*

Macbeth. *To-morrow, -as he purposes.*

Lady M. *O, never*

Shall sun that morrow see! Your face... is as a book where men

May read strange matters:-to beguile the time,

Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye, your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under’t. (Act 1, Scene 5)

Duncan arrives and praises the castle’s pleasant environment, and he thanks Lady Macbeth, who has emerged to greet him, for her hospitality. She replies that it is her duty to be hospitable since she and her husband owe so much to the king. This scene is a powerful reminder of the Lakshagriha episode in the *Mahabharata*, where treacherous uncle Shakuni and Duryodhana hatch a plot to kill the Pandavas, apparently goading them and giving them good advice to enjoy in Varnavata; later again they send an invitation to Yudhisthira to come for a game of dice and then entrap Yuddhisthira malevolently leading him to stake and lose

all: his kingdom, wealth, brothers and wife. And then follows the Draupadi Vastraharan episode, the root-cause of the grand war.

Later, Macbeth paces by himself, pondering his upcoming action of assassinating Duncan:

He's here in double trust:

First, as I am his kinsman and his subject

Strong both against the deed; then, as his host

Who should against his murdered shut the door Not bear the knife myself. (Macbeth, Act 1: Scene7)

Macbeth, musing on the moral propriety, says like Arjuna: “We will proceed no further in this business”. (Na yotse Iti Govindam!) And his agitated mind plays tricks with him, when reprimanded and forced by Lady Macbeth to perform the sinful action: Macbeth ponders over the matter-

Present fears

Are less than horrible imaginings.

(Act 1. Sc.3)

Is this a dagger which I see before me.

The handle towards my hand?

Come, let me clutch thee;

I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.

Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible to feeling as to sight? or art thou but

A dagger of the mind, a false creation, proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain? I see thee yet, in form as palpable as this which now I draw.

(**MACBETH**-Act 2. Sc1)

Lear starts his own tragedy by foolish action – misjudgment. For he understands neither himself nor his daughters:

Regan: *'Tis the infirmity of his age: yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself.*

Goneril: *The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash.... (1.i.296)*

Lear's fault is a fault of the mind, a mind unwarrantably, because selfishly, foolish. And he knows it:

O Lear, Lear, Lear!

Beat at this gate that let thy folly in,

And thy dear judgement out. (1.i.294)

“In almost all we observe a...total incapacity, in certain circumstances, of resisting the force which draws in this direction; a fatal tendency to identify the whole being with one interest, object, passion, or habit of mind. This, it would seem, is, for Shakespeare, the fundamental tragic trait ^[16]”. (Bradley)

Othello is a man of action and clouded judgement. He is seen changing from a noble and just groom who declares, “But that I love the gentle Desdemona,” (1.11. 27) to a foul-minded, irrational husband who vows, “I'll tear her to pieces.” (111, iii, 483) His ego and possessive attachment transforms him from treating Desdemona gently to striking her in public, calling her a ‘whore’ and murdering her in an unfounded jealous rage.

The *Gita* supports the use of personal wisdom and judgement against the acceptance of external authorities. Robert N. Minor comments, quoting Radhakrishnan, that he supports Arjuna's stance as a refusal to merely accept outward demands:

When Arjuna in the opening chapter of the *Bhagavadgita* declines to conform to the demands

of society which impose on him as a Kshatriya the obligation to fight, when Socrates says “Men of Athens, I will obey God rather than you”, they are taking their stand on inward integrity than on outward conformity. By implication, Arjuna is a man of inward action, evolving magnificently, by Krishna’s exhortation, into a doer, a warrior of resolution, as the circumstances demand his outward action.

3) Gunas (Modes, or Nature Born Properties)—

The *Gita* introduces the term “gunas”. The ephemeral nature constitutes of three gunas: **Sattva**(goodness), **Rajas** (passion) and **Tamas** (ignorance). A combination of these three gunas forms the basis of one’s character. 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 accordingly as the one or the other quality predominates. These three are the fetters of the soul.

Sattva attaches to happiness, *Rajas* to action, while *tamas* veils knowledge and binds one to helplessness. Krishna tells Arjuna:

And whatever states of being there may be, be they harmonious (sattvika), passionate (rajas), slothful (tamas)-know thou that they are all from Me alone (5.12). Deluded by these threefold modes of nature (gunas) this whole world does not recognise Me who am above them and imperishable. (5.13)

S. Radhakrishnana adds that: “the Supreme expresses His regret that the world does not know him...by knowing whom the seed of the evil of samsara is burnt up”.

By implication, “we see the shifting forms as Plato’s dwellers in the cave see the shadows on the wall-not the reality-the Eternal Being, of which the forms are the manifestations, in his parable of illusion and reality”.

King Lear opens with an assertion of ‘will’ (Earl of Kent and Earl of Gloucester are talking about King Lear’s plans for ‘the division of the kingdom). “It is a will that ‘dotes’, so that its possessor is betrayed into rejecting true good and is delivered to the false appearance and illusion”. Comments L C Knights ^[17]. Evidently, Lear is led into *Rajas* (action) by his *tamas* (*illusion*). 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 in his life. Revenge is *tamas*. The *Gita* teaches transformation through *Sattva*, not revenge. **Intention of a Karma is significant**. 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.

In The *Bhagavad Gita* Arjuna is also hindered from undertaking a rightful action by the influence of *gunas* and other flaws. Arjuna gets struck by grief on account of his attachment to his relatives and forgets his purpose: “How shall I strike Bhishma and Drona who are worthy of worship, O Madhusudana (Krsna), with arrows in battle?” (II. 4). The valiant warrior forgets the ultimate goal of his life and becomes 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. So 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.

The Evil doers who are foolish, low in the human scale, whose minds are carried away by

illusion and who partake of the nature of the demon, do not seek refuge in Me. (7.15)

The evil doers cannot attain to the Supreme, for their mind and will are not instruments of the Spirit but ego. Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, King Lear do not seek to master their crude impulses but are prey to the *Rajas* and *Tamas* in them. *Tamas* is predominant in Othello. He is unforgiving. W.H. Clemen comments: “Othello characteristically never discusses general human values...the tempestuousness and absolute nature finds clear expression, a nature, which, when once seized by a real suspicion, rushes violently along this new path, incapable of a return, or of any compromise ^[18]”.

Macbeth’s *Guna rajas* (impulse for action) emerges as unrestrained greed of power (crown), though he exhibits occasional compunctious visitations of his conscience as mentioned earlier. Balance of *gunas* is preached in the *Gita*:

Those who die with predominance of sattva reach the pure abodes (which are free from rajas and tamas) of the learned. Those who die with prevalence of the mode of passion are born among people driven by work, while those dying in the mode of ignorance take birth in the animal kingdom. (ch14: 14-15)

Sattva presents itself as purity, knowledge and harmony. It is the characteristic of goodness, joy, satisfaction, nobility and contentment. It is free of fear, violence, wrath, malice.

Sattva is pure and forgiving. Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Cordelia in *King Lear* symbolise *Sattva*, since they are the personifications of wisdom, knowledge, kindness and will- power. In fact, the three *Gunas* (the natural traits) exist, in small or large measure, in all human beings. Each *Guna* asserts itself by prevailing over the other *Gunas*. By harmonising the three *Gunas*, a man attains knowledge of truth, dharma. Such a one becomes self-realised.

4. Truth and Dharma—

“Only the single-visioned see the Real,” comments Radhakrishnan.¹⁹ Truth and Dharma go hand in hand. “...for does anyone who does good, dear friend, tread the path of woe?” asks Lord Krishna. (6:40)

*Yada-yada hi dharmasya glanir bhavati bharata
abhyuthanam adharmasya tada ‘tmanam srjamy aham (4:7)*

In this 7th shloka of chapter 4 of the *Gita*, Krishna is telling Arjuna:

Whenever there is a decline of righteousness and rise of unrighteousness, O Bharata (Arjuna), then I send forth (create, incarnate) Myself.

Lord Krishna continues in the next shloka:

For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of righteousness, I come into being from age to age.

In the struggle between the chaos and order, night and light, whenever a deadlock is created, there is Divine interference to release the deadlock. So, what kind of Karma should one do? An action or Karma founded on truth and dharma! Truth is the ultimate dharma, propounds not just the *Gita* but also the *Ramayana* and other scriptures. “Dharma is the most important thing in the world, truth is established because of it. Truth controls this world and dharma is rooted in truth.” Lord Rama says to Maharshi Jabaali in the *Ramayana* when the sage tries to persuade him to give up his exile. Krishna reiterates this philosophy in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Dharma is the first word in the *Gita*. The very first shloka of the *Mahabharata* says:

Where dharma is, Krishna is; where Krishna is victory is.

Krishna tells him that for warriors, there is no more ennobling duty than to establish order and peace by fighting. Dharma will conquer adharma, truth will conquer falsehood; the power behind death, disease and sin will be overthrown by the reality which is Being, Intelligence and Bliss. ‘Dharma’ literally means mode of being.

Delivered from passion, fear and anger, absorbed in me, many purified by the austerity of

wisdom, have attained to my state of being. (4:10)

By self-surrender to the Lord who presides over cosmic existence, and activity, we must engage in all work. Lord Krishna teaches Arjuna to be the instrument of His will for universal goodness, for establishing *dharma*.

Shakespeare's universality lies in the fact that his evolved consciousness naturally comprehended this profound philosophy of truth and *dharma*, voiced constantly through his characters. Jesus Christ said, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:32). Another famous injunction on truth in the Bible is: "Dear children, let not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth." Cordelia in *King Lear* loves not with words or speech. When Lear commands his daughters to say which of them loves him the most, Lear's scheming daughters, Goneril and Regan, respond to his test with flattery, telling in wildly overblown terms that they love him more than anything else. But his youngest daughter, Cordelia, refuses to speak. She replies, "*Nothing, my lord.*" (1.1.86)

Cordelia continues:

*Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty
According to my bond; no more no less." (1.1. 90-2)*

G. Wilson Knight comments:

"Cordelia cannot subdue her instinct to any judgement advising tact rather than truth ^[20]".

Lear is so outraged that he disinherits her. The absurdity of the old King's anger, his Guna of *tamas*, his tragic flaw, is clearly indicated by Kent:

*Kill thy physician, and thy fee bestow
Upon the foul disease. Revoke thy gift;
Or, whilst I can vent clamour from my throat,
I'll tell thee thou dost evil. (1.i. 166-169)*

Cordelia is punished by this act, though she sincerely loves her father. She says: "I'm sure, my love's More ponderous than my tongue". (1.i. 76-77). King Lear's senses prove his idealised love-figments false. His intellect snaps. "As he becomes torturously aware of the truth, incongruity masters his mind, and fantastic madness ensues," says G. Wilson Knight ^[21]. He is later diagnosed with 'syphilis,' bipolar disorder. He speaks of his fears to the Fool that he is sliding into madness:

*O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!/Keep me in temper, I would not be mad".(1.5.46-47); ' O
Fool, I shall go mad!";
And then-
Does any here know me? This is not Lear Does Lear walk thus, speak thus?
Where are his eyes?...*

Who is it that can tell me who I am? (King Lear, Act 1, scene 4, line 214)

Coming to *Macbeth and Julius Caesar*, the unrighteous actions of Macbeth and Brutus are a sort of desecration of truth, hospitality, conviviality; an evil opposed to life-force. Brutus's 'mental unrest which will not let him eat' reveals his mental trauma springing out of Evil. Macbeth's anguish, likewise, is beautifully reflected in these lines: "Stars, hide your fires; let not light see my black and wicked desires"; "I dare do all that may become a man; who dares do more, is none;" "Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak knits up the o're-wrought heart and bids it break;" "What's done cannot be undone" : "O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife". Caesar is "sick", for Cassius vividly describes Caesar's 'fever' that made him 'shake', observing its effect on his 'lips', 'eye', 'tongue' and 'voice'; Lady Macbeth is sleep-walking; Calpurnia is barren and cries out in her sleep, "O I grow faint"

cries Portia; Othello falls as his words come in an anxious jumble around “ handkerchief “ and “confess” until he falls down unconscious, while Iago takes the opportunity to tell Cassio that Othello has epileptic seizures and bouts of madness. Primarily it is the soul of each character that is ill because of an unrighteous act, opposite of truth and dharma. One is reminded of Shakuni in the *Mahabharata*, with his black soul steeped in evil, limping his wicked way to total destruction.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare weaves motifs of **disease** and **decay** into every scene to illustrate Denmark’s underlying **sin and corruption**. Images of decay and corruption, plus their spreading effects, are present symbols of the infectious quality of sin and unrighteousness. Hamlet 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 based on truth and dharma 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 himself a victim of its retribution for the act triggered by hatred and anger:

*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.*
(*Hamlet*, III. IV.172 – 175)

The tranquillity attained by Hamlet in the last scene of the play is the result of his total surrender to the will of God.

5) Self-Realisation—

The philosophy of the *Gita* states that man becomes self-realised and superior when he succeeds in conquering his senses by the power of mind (will power) and engages in action free from attachment. The *Gita* speaks of *Sakshi Bhava* or ‘witness-like attitude’ as a measure of spiritual growth. “He who sees Me everywhere and sees all in Me; I am not lost to him nor is he lost to Me”. (6:30)

This verse reveals the experience of personal mysticism, the profound unity of all things in one who is the personal God. This is self-realisation. The Universal Self. When we become one with the Divine in us, we become one with the whole stream of life. The true life of a true yogi, a self-realised being, is his inner life. Whatever be his outer life, in his inward being he dwells in God. As he sees God in the world, he fears nothing but embraces all in the equality of the vision of the Self. He becomes stoic, *stithapragya*:

Clay, a rock, and gold are the same to them. Alike in honour and dishonour, alike to friend and foe, they have given up every selfish pursuit. (14:24-25)

And then-

As a lamp in a windless place flickereth not, to such is likened the yogi of subdued thought who practises union with the Self (discipline of himself). (6: 19)

Self-realisation in Shakespeare :

Hamlet is an archetype of spiritual metamorphosis. In the *Ramayana*, though Ravana is fearful inwardly of Rama’s divinity, but he stubbornly refuses to acknowledge it and clings to Maya. Only after he receives the final fatal shot of arrow from Rama’s bow in his belly, where nectar is stored as a symbol of his immortality, does he utter Lord Rama’s name in reverence: Shri Raaaam. In the beginning, he is fearful of his own eternal damnation in hellfire, as his father’s Ghost is:

“Doomed for a certain term to walk the night/And for the day confin’d to fast in fires/Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature/Are burnt and purg’d away” (1.5.10-13).

So, he hesitates to act. Hamlet’s world is a world where he has lost his way, and we can tell the precise moment at which he finds it again:

“There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ‘tis not to come: if it be not to come, it will be now: if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all: since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is ’t to leave? (5:ii. 208-213)

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. Hamlet 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’s decision to nominate young Fortinbras as the new ruler of Denmark shows his genuine interest for the well-being of his country.

Macbeth continues reflecting on his actions and is filled with fear that he has lost connection with God after he had committed murder. He tells Lady Macbeth that he could not “pronounce amen” when he had most need of blessings.

Of all of Shakespeare's heroes, Macbeth pushes the limits furthest, trying to know the future in the present and to make immediate what is distant. So does Lady Macbeth. Both circumvent time, which is unnatural, and enter a world that is something other than natural. Both lose the ability to sleep, to reason; they have hallucinations. “Tis unnatural”, notes an Old Man earlier in the play, commenting on darkness at mid-day, owls eating hawks and horses running wild, “Tis unnatural, even lime the deed that is done. Both lose the ability to sleep, to reason. In the end, Macbeth laments:

*I have lived long enough: my way of life
Is fall’n into the sear, the yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but, in their stead,
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny.*

His self-realisation brings acceptance of the consequences of his deeds. He acquiesces. By the nature of his sin, he is reaping what he has sown. When he is informed that Lady Macbeth is dead, then comes his most famous speech. Shocked, Macbeth speaks numbly about the passage of time, revealing his enlightening realisation of the futility of his actions :

*Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage.
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

(Macbeth , 5. 5. 25-27)

Othello pleads for compassion, after murdering Desdemona, before a symbolic jury of her relatives in the end, making us think: Does fault lie with Othello for exposing himself, for trusting too blindly? Should he ever have let himself, a foreigner, comfortable in Venice? This is in itself indicative of Othello’s essential morality: in a way he takes responsibility for his wicked choices. He confesses to everyone. He begins his last speech before he stabs

himself: “Soft you, a word or two before you go. I have done the state some service...I pray you, in your letters,/ When you shall these unlucky deeds relate, speak of me as I am / ...Of one that loved not wisely but too well;...” And his last words, famously, are: “I kiss’d thee ere I kill’d thee.”

Lear’s purgatory is to be a purgatory of the mind, of madness. Death is his deliverance. Lear has trained himself to think he cannot be wrong: he finds he is wrong. He has fed his heart on sentimental knowledge of his children’s love: he finds their love is not sentimental. It has been observed that Lear has, so to speak, staged an interlude, with himself as chief actor, in which he grasps expressions of love to his heart and resigns his sceptre to a chorus of acclamations. It is childish, foolish, but very human. **King Lear** ends with forgiveness in some characters, springing out of self-realisation, as they witness the protagonist moving madly towards death:

Edmund: If thou’rt noble, I do forgive thee.

Edgar: Let’s exchange charity. I’m no less in blood than thou art, Edmund; If more, the more thou hast wrong’d me.

My name is Edgar, and thy father’s son. The Gods are just, and of our pleasant vices make instrument to plague us;...

Shakespeare’s pagan characters are shown groping their way towards a recognition of Divine power, Providence and cosmic control of events in life which they witness with a *sakshi bhava*. Some critics think that Shakespeare, as well as Gloucester in *King Lear*, believed that:

“As flies are to wanton boys, are we to gods: They kill us for their sport”.

Others have supposed that he would have subscribed to Kent’s exclamation that ‘the stars governed our condition’; or, more plausibly, that he would have agreed with Edgar’s stern summing up-” The gods are just...” However, Gloucester’s words do reflect the true nature of the *Lear* universe:

These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us: Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effect: Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: In cities, mutinies, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked ‘twixt son and father. This villain of mine comes under the prediction; there’s son against father: the King falls from bias of nature; there’s father against child. We have seen the best of our time: Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders, follow us disquietly to our graves. (1.ii.115)

Is this not an apt description of the world of the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Julius Caesar* and many other works of Shakespeare as well? And wouldn’t the profound philosophy of the *Gita* be a sure-shot panacea to all the characters of Shakespeare?

Conclusion

The German philosopher Schopenhauer, terms the *Gita* as ‘the most beneficial study in the whole wide world’. Radhakrishnan’s observation reiterates what was experienced by Schopenhauer, who is said to have danced in frenzy when he read the *Gita*:

“These facts of religious experience are universal. The illuminations of the Hindu and the Buddhist seers, of Socrates and Plato, of Philo and Plotinus, of Christian and Muslim mystics, belong to the same family, though the theological attempts to account for them reflect the temperaments of the race and the epoch [22]”.

When we see Arjuna’s mind clouded, convictions unsettled, his whole consciousness confused as we see in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, we are witnessing the distress of a struggling soul seeking to reach perfection, the dramatisation of a perpetually recurring

predicament. Arjuna's *Vishaad Yoga*, before the commencement of the war, necessitates and justifies Lord Krishna's role as a *Jagadguru*, teaching the art of being and becoming:

Delivered from passion, fear and anger, absorbed in me, taking refuge in me, many purified by austerity of wisdom have attained to my state of being.

Life is a battle, a warfare against the spirit of evil. Man, on the threshold of higher life, feels disappointed with the world and yet illusions cling to him and he cherishes them. He is, after all, fighting with the forces of darkness, falsehood, limitation, and morality, which bar the way to the higher world. Utterly bewildered, he tends to lose himself. That's when he needs to illumine the Divinity within. This ongoing war between good and evil is even more fierce today. And the battlefield even more bloody. Consciousness. Yours, Mine, Ours! Human soul is liberated, we witness in the *Gita* and Shakespeare, moving from dilemma to self-realisation, evolving gradually by performing right action based on dharma and truth after balancing the three Gunas. What greater philosophy can we ask for, to find ultimate peace and happiness that is the true form of our pristine soul!

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