
Transcending Borders: The Bhagavad Gita's Philosophy in the Context of English literature

Dr. Radhika,

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, DAV (PG) College, Karnal
Radhika.kaushish1993@gmail.com

Article Received: 07/12/2024

Article Accepted: 06/01/2025

Published Online: 07/01/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.01.32

Abstract:

The *Bhagavad Gita*, a spiritual and philosophical cornerstone of Indian thought, offers timeless guidelines on the complexities of human existence, ethical action and spiritual transcendence. Rooted in ancient Indian philosophy, the Gita's teachings—centred around *Karma* (selfless action), *Dharma* (duty) and *Moksha* (liberation)—transcend cultural and geographical boundaries, addressing universal dilemmas that resonate with contemporary life. English literature, known for its exploration of human struggles, ethical quandaries and existential quest, provides a compelling lens to interpret and contextualize the Gita's philosophy in a global framework.

The paper examines how the Gita's teachings have influenced and can be identified in key works of English literature, highlighting their universal applicability. The paper explores moral conflicts and ethical action in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the critique of materialism and attachment in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the resilience and equanimity in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, the spiritual crisis and redemptive insights in T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* and the pursuit of self-realization in Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*.

By analysing these works, the paper illuminates how the Gita's philosophy bridges cultural divides, offering profound insights into the human condition that remain relevant in today's interconnected world. The discussion extends to contemporary challenges such as materialism, mental health, leadership ethics and environmental consciousness, showcasing the enduring relevance of the Gita's teachings.

The paper also delves into how the themes of self-action, detachment and spiritual awakening are mirrored in English literary narratives, emphasizing their potential to address contemporary anxiety. The universality of the Gita's message—its advocacy for balance, mindfulness and a higher purpose emerges as a guiding light for a global audience navigating the complexities of contemporary life.

Keywords: Gita, Selfless action, Detachment, Duty, Liberation, Materialism

Introduction:

The *Bhagavad Gita*, a timeless spiritual and philosophical text, has transcended its origin in ancient Indian culture to become a universal source of wisdom. Part of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*, the Gita unfolds as a dialogue between Lord Krishna and warrior Prince Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. As Arjuna grapples with moral and existential dilemmas, Krishna imparts teachings on *Karma* (action), *Dharma* (duty) and *Moksha* (spiritual liberation). These teachings resonate across cultures and epochs, addressing questions about the nature of existence, morality and the human condition. In contemporary times, the Gita's universal philosophy finds echoes in the global literary canon, particularly in English literature, which has long grappled with similar themes of moral conflict, existential crisis and the search for meaning.

The phrase “transcending borders” is particularly apt when considering the Gita's relevance in English literature. While rooted in Indian thought, its teachings align with the broader philosophical concerns explored in literary works worldwide. T.S. Eliot, an iconic figure of modernist English literature, acknowledges the influence of Indian philosophy, particularly the Gita, in his work. In a lecture at the University of Chicago, Eliot stated, “the *Bhagavad Gita* is the greatest philosophical poem after Dante's *Divine Comedy* (32). Eliot's use of Sanskrit phrases like “*Shantih, Shantih, Shantih*” (Eliot 54), which means “peace, peace, peace” in *The Wasteland* reflects the profound impact of eastern philosophy, including the Gita's teachings, on his worldview.

As its core, the *Bhagavad Gita* presents a framework for ethical living, spiritual growth and self-realisation. Its teachings are organized around three primary paths, that is, *Karma yoga*, *Jnana yoga* and *Bhakti yoga*. *Karma yoga*, which means the path of action, emphasizes performing one's duty selflessly without attachment to outcomes. Lord Krishna advises Arjuna, “you have a right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions” (Easwaran, chapter 2, verse 47). *Jnana yoga*, which is the path of knowledge, advocates for wisdom and self-awareness to transcend ignorance. Lord Krishna explains, “when your intellect crosses beyond the mire of delusion, you will become indifferent to all that has been heard and all that is to be heard” (chapter 2, verse 52). The third primary path is the *Bhakti yoga*, which is a path of devotion. This path involves surrendering to the divine will through love and faith. Lord Krishna assures, “be devoted to me, fix your mind on me, sacrifice to me, bow down to me. Having thus disciplined yourself and regarding me as the supreme goal, you will come to me” (chapter 9, verse 34). These principles transcend religious boundaries and resonate universally, addressing existential challenges that persist across time and space.

English literature has historically engaged with questions about morality, identity and spiritual fulfilment—themes central to the Gita. The universality of the Gita's teachings makes it a powerful lens for interpreting these literary works. Writers such as T.S. Eliot, Herman Hesse and Aldous Huxley have explicitly acknowledged their engagement with eastern philosophy, particularly the Gita. Huxley, in his seminal work *The Perennial*

Philosophy writes, “the *Bhagavad Gita* is one of the clearest and most comprehensive summaries of perennial philosophy ever to have been made. Hence its enduring relevance—not only for Indians, but for all mankind” (89). The Gita's teachings often align with the ethical and existential dilemmas explored in English literature, providing a framework to address contemporary anxieties about purpose and morality.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* exemplifies the moral conflict and ethical paralysis that Arjuna faces in the Gita. Torn between avenging his father's murder and his fear of external damnation, Hamlet's soliloquy, “to be or not to be—that is the question” (67), mirrors Arjuna's hesitation on the battlefield. Krishna's counsel to Arjuna to perform his duty without attachment to the results directly addresses Hamlet's inner turmoil. Krishna says “therefore without attachment, perform the task enjoined on you, for by performing action without attachment one attains the supreme” (Easwaran, chapter 3, verse 19). The parallel underscores the universality of the Gita's teachings on duty and action, transcending cultural and temporal boundaries. In contemporary times, such guidance is especially relevant in a world where individuals are often torn between personal and societal responsibilities.

Contrarily, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* critiques the materialism and moral decadence of the Jazz Age. Gatsby's obsessive pursuit of wealth and social status, driven by his unrelenting love for Daisy, symbolizes the dangers of attachment of material goals. Krishna warns against such attachments, stating, “he who is unattached to the fruits of his work and acts as he is obligated, attains the supreme” (Easwaran, chapter 3, verse 19).

Gatsby's tragic demise serves as a poignant reminder of the impermanence of material wealth and the emptiness it brings when pursued without spiritual grounding. In an age defined by consumerism and instant gratification, the Gita's teachings of detachment offer a counter narrative that emphasizes contentment and self-awareness.

On the other hand, Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* epitomizes resilience and the human spirit's triumph over adversity. Santiago's unwavering determination to catch the marlin, despite his repeated failures reflects the Gita's teaching on equanimity. Krishna advises “be steadfast in yoga. O Arjuna, perform your duty and abandon all attachment to success or failure. Such evenness of mind is called yoga” (Easwaran, chapter 2, verse 48).

Santiago's acceptance of his fate and his continued preservice highlight the Gita's philosophy of detached action and inner strength. In today's fast-paced world, where failure often leads to despair, the Gita's emphasis on equanimity provides a valuable perspective on resilience and mental well-being.

T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* captures the spiritual desolation of the modern world, grappling with fragmentation, despair and the loss of meaning. Eliot draws heavily on the Gita's teachings to propose redemption through discipline, self-control and surrender. The

closing lines of the poem— “Datta. Dayadham. Damyata.” (54) meaning “Give. Sympathize. Control” echo the Gita’s emphasis on selfless action, compassion and self-discipline.

Eliot’s work demonstrates how the Gita’s philosophy can address the spiritual crisis of modernity, offering a path toward renewal and harmony. As the contemporary world grapples with similar challenges of alienation and existential uncertainty, the Gita’s teachings remain profoundly relevant.

Similarly, Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha* explores the quest for self-realization, a central theme of the Gita. Siddhartha’s journey mirror Arjuna’s transformation under Krishna’s guidance, as both characters seek liberation through self-awareness and inner wisdom. Krishna declares, “when a man gives up all desires that enter the mind and rest contented in the self by the self, then he is called steady in wisdom” (Easwaran, chapter 2, verse 55). In a world where identity and purpose are often dictated by external validation, the Gita’s emphasis on self-realization offers a powerful antidote, encouraging individuals to look within for fulfillment and peace.

The *Bhagavad Gita* is not confined to a specific culture, religion or historical context; its philosophy speaks to the universal dilemmas of humanity. It offers practical wisdom for navigating life’s challenges, emphasizing balance, detachment and the alignment of individual purpose with a greater cosmic order. When contextualized with English literature, the Gita’s teachings reveal their profound relevance, bridging eastern and western thought in addressing the timeless concerns of morality, identity and spiritual fulfillment.

In a world increasingly shaped by globalization, cultural hybridity and shared human challenges, the Gita’s message holds particular significance. Its teachings on detachment, duty and spiritual awakening provide a framework for addressing the complexities of contemporary existence— whether it be the quest for mental well-being, the ethical dilemmas of leadership or the need for ecological and social harmony. By engaging with English literature, the Gita demonstrates its adaptability, presenting its philosophy not as an esoteric or cultural artifact, but as a living, breathing guide to human fulfillment.

As humanity continues to face challenges of alienation, moral ambiguity and spiritual emptiness in a fast-paced, material-driven world, the *Bhagavad Gita* offers a beacon of hope and clarity. Through its integration into global literary discourse, it not only, transcends physical and cultural boundaries, but also fosters a deeper understanding of shared human values. This dialogue between the Gita and English literature serves as a testament to the universality of its teachings, reaffirming its status as a timeless philosophical text that continues to inspire, guide and enrich the lives of readers across cultures and generations.

In the words of Swami Sivananda, “the *Bhagavad Gita* is a universal scripture applicable to people of all temperaments and for all times. It is a treasure-house of spiritual wisdom” (3). This treasure remains open for exploration, offering solutions to the deepest questions of existence and guiding individuals toward a life of purpose, resilience and peace.

References:

Easwaran, Eknath, translator. *The Bhagavad Gita*. Nilgiri Press, 2007.

Eliot, T.S. *The Wasteland*. Edited by Michael North, W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Scribner, 2004.

Hemingway, Ernest. *The Old Man and the Sea*. Scribner, 1995.

Hesse, Hermann. *Siddhartha*. Translated by Hilda Rosner, New Directions, 1951.

Huxley, Aldous. *The Perennial Philosophy*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016.

Sivananda, Swami. *Essence of the Bhagavad Gita*. The Divine Life Society, 2000.