A RE-READING OF HAMLET IN THE LIGHT OF BHAGAVADGITA

by Salia Rex

Supervisor: Dr. P. Geetha, Director, Centre for Women’s Studies,
Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri Rashtriya Sanskrit Vidyapeetha,
New Delhi – 110016.

ABSTRACT

The present study A re-reading of Hamlet in the light of Bhagavad Gita brings two great literary works Hamlet and The Bhagavad Gita on common ground to attempt a comparative study of their cardinal heroes. Hamlet continues to assert its prominence and its relevance in the twenty first century because more than any other Shakespearean hero, Hamlet seems to reflect the predicament of the modern man caught in the whirlpool of scepticism due to his blurred vision on the world. The Bhagavad Gita portrays a similar crisis in Arjuna which results from the inadequacy of proper moral and intellectual edifices to support and provide the hero with the right direction to action. Both Arjuna and Hamlet are utterly struck by grief and doubtful thoughts which sink them to the abyss of despair until they are rejuvenated by the philosophical elixir.

The Bhagavad Gita and Hamlet portray two valiant heroes who belong to the princely class entrusted with a responsibility to revive their family’s honour as well as their own broken self esteem. The princes are encountered by issues created
by the vicious involvement of their kinsmen which led them to take up arms against their erring relatives. It is interesting to note that both the heroes are partaking in an act which is not of their coinage. These heroes are men of principles whose deep rooted sense of morality, ethical and idealistic vision of life cause them to reflect on the righteousness of their action. They are dominated by a similar emotional crisis caused by their mixed emotions brewed of intense attachments with their relatives and awareness of the prime responsibility to safeguard truth and justice in their respective kingdom. It is interesting to attempt a comparative study of these two epic heroes who seem to suffer from very same mental and moral conflict. Both Hamlet and Arjuna experience similar moral and metaphysical doubts. The philosophical teachings of Lord Krishna served as a remedy to Arjuna’s problem and these are applicable to Hamlet’s dilemmas.

A plethora of critical texts have been written on the character of Hamlet accusing him as someone incapable of action and lacking the essence of true heroism. There are also Shakespearean critics who hail Hamlet as he most philosophical among the Shakespearean tragic heroes. The thesis under submission analyses Hamlet from a new angle – in the light of Bhagavad Gita.

The thesis is presented in five chapters. The first chapter aims to provide a comprehensive view of the Hamlet criticism.

The second chapter entitled “Arjuna and Hamlet – as men of gunas” proposes to identify the presence of negative traits or gunas in Arjuna and Hamlet as heroes. The term ‘gunas’ apparently a positive term is explicitly used in the eastern philosophy of the Gita to denote the presence and influence of negative qualities in the self which cause the hero to indulge in vices that deter man from achieving self-realization. The presence of gunas makes Arjuna consider himself as
the doer of all action and leads to his bondage. The gunas are considered as an obstructing veil of egoism which hinders one from enjoying full freedom. A detailed reading will disclose that the fundamental negative character traits in Hamlet that led to his tragic end are fear, attachment, hatred, anger and excessive egoism. Hamlet’s failure to respond to the plea of ghost sprang from his wrong attitude to duty triggered by his egoism, hatred and vengeance. The influence of the sattwa guna, rajoguna and tamoguna in Prince Hamlet can be discerned from the study of the nature of the hero who falls at times into dungeons of inaction which culminates in a harsh act of impulsiveness and later returns to a state of hibernation with an egoistic desire to be free from sin in order to win heaven.

The third chapter titled “Arjuna and Hamlet as men of inner action” presents Arjuna engulfed by sorrow on seeing his relatives, teachers and revered elders which is manifested by a series of doubtful thoughts on the propriety of his warfare against his elders. The doubts of Arjuna shake the very foundation of his identity as a soldier and as a valiant hero of the pandava clan. The moral dilemma in Hamlet is caused by his ignorance on how to perform an action and yet be free from its possible evil consequences. The hero’s reliance on religion and morality makes him preoccupied with the righteousness of his action. Arjuna re-iterates his doubtful questions until Krishna draws out the grains of impurity: egoism, anger, hatred, and desire which contaminate Arjuna’s conscience by motivating him to do an improper action for a proper cause. The moral dilemma in Hamlet is caused by his ignorance on how to perform an action and yet be free from its possible evil consequences. The hero’s reliance on religion and morality make him preoccupied with the righteousness of his action. The two heroes brood existential issues triggered by their anguish caused by antithetical entities such as body and soul,
mortality and immortality, finiteness of man and infiniteness of God, hell and heaven. They are subjectively tossed by their sense of indecisiveness in choosing the appropriate approaches: action or inaction, selfless duty or motiveless malignity, knowledge or ignorance, sin or righteousness, order or disorder, intellect or instinct in man for tackling the various abstract and ethical issues of daily life. The soliloquies in *Hamlet* express the hidden mindscape of Hamlet and they deserve special consideration because unlike the other tragic heroes of Shakespeare, Hamlet lacks an accomplice or a confidante to relieve the burden of his mind. The soliloquies act as a parameter which gauge the level of progression attained in his moral regeneration.

The presence of soliloquies in the initial four acts and their absence in the final act is a proof for Hamlet’s transformation from a hero of inner action to a hero of action. Arjuna’s intimate talks with Sri Krishna can be likened to the silent conversation that takes place between a soul and Over soul or the unconditional and unbreakable link that exists between *jivathma* and *Paramatma*.

The fourth chapter titled as “Arjuna and Krishna as men of action” brings out their identical thoughts which liberate them from inner conflict to become men of action. The moral teachings of Lord Krishna in the Gita are equally applicable to find solutions for these two heroes who are unable to tackle their problems in life with the right attitude. When viewed from the angle of the philosophy in the Bhagavad Gita, *Hamlet* portrays the final victory attained by these men in their battle against the evil factors within himself such as egoism, anger, hatred, rashness, and selfishness that defile his mind, body, and life. The heroes understand the omnipotent nature of God to man, the superiority of God’s will to man’s will, and the impact of proper and improper actions of man on their life. The heroes have a spiritual rejuvenation at a point of crisis in their life. The newly gained wisdom
about the omnipotent provides a similar enlightenment in Arjuna and Hamlet, which lead to the understanding of the superiority of soul to body, God to Man, and Action to Inaction. The study proves on the basis of the philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita that both the heroes pass through a similar period of degeneration and gain an inner strength which provides them mental maturity and moral regeneration toward the end of life.

The concluding chapter discusses the similarities and unique qualities in Arjuna and Hamlet as heroes. The two heroes get liberated from the labyrinth of doubts and despair and become performers of selfless action. The character of Hamlet can be considered as unique among the characters in Hamlet since he decides to take up a selfless action of purgation for the well being of others. A correlation is made between the Arjuna and Hamlet on the basis of their enlightenment achieved in the light of the philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita.

The literary works and the predicament of the two heroes present definite answers regarding the importance of the right kind of attitude and manners one should abide by while performing one’s duty. These heroes display the complete range of human emotions and peculiarities in their own unique manner of action. The attempt is made to bring to light the similarity in the moral dilemma felt by the characters of Hamlet and Arjuna who are caught in a similar tug of war between their political and domestic problems in life. When Hamlet is read in the light of the philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita it can be clearly understood that the hero rises to a level of a tragic hero and becomes a man of action when he decides to sever all egoistic desires which include his personal vengeance towards Claudius. The supernatural intervention and its advice can be likened to the advice offered to Arjuna by Krishna in the Gita. In a similar manner Arjuna is asked to take part in the
Kurukshetra war in an attitude of total detachment from his enemies as well as negative emotions. The initial inability of the heroes symbolize the initial inability of men to cope with the new situations and the gradual adjustment with it. The literary works reflect the frigidity and rigidity of modern man towards his own endeavors and impediments, until he is soothed by the philosophical elixir.