

The Theory of Karma in *The Old Man and the Sea*: An Eternal Message to Mankind

Dr. Nivedita Mukerjee

Professor of English, Department of English, Prime Minister College of
Excellence, Govt. Hamidia College, Bhopal, M.P.

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Abstract:

This paper presents a transcultural and interdisciplinary analysis of Ernest Hemingway's 1952 masterpiece, *The Old Man and the Sea*, by situating its protagonist, Santiago, within the ethical and metaphysical framework of the *Bhagavad Gita*. While Hemingway is traditionally categorized as the voice of the "Lost Generation" and a proponent of secular stoicism, this study argues that his portrayal of "grace under pressure" finds a profound spiritual parallel in the Vedantic doctrine of *Karma Yoga* (the Path of Action). By comparing Santiago's solitary struggle in the Gulf Stream to Arjuna's moral crisis on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, the research explores the principle of *Nishkama Karma*—action performed without attachment to results.

The analysis focuses on the transition of the "gigantic prize" from a material catch to a moral victory, asserting that Santiago embodies the *Sthitaprajna* (one of steady wisdom) through his unwavering commitment to duty, his detached reverence for his "brother" the marlin, and his resilience against the "sharks" of existential decay. The study concludes that the novella transcends its American literary roots to offer an "Eternal Message to Mankind": that human dignity is not found in the possession of the prize, but in the integrity of the struggle. By synthesizing Western narrative techniques with Eastern philosophical insights, the paper highlights Hemingway's role in presenting a model of life-living that remains undefeated by physical destruction.

Keywords: Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Karma Yoga*, *Nishkama Karma* (Selfless Action), Santiago, Grace Under Pressure, Dharma (Duty), Stoicism, Existential Resilience

Introduction:

The literary landscape of the twentieth century is dominated by the monolithic presence of Ernest Hemingway, a writer whose life was as storied and

adventurous as his prose. As an indisputable Titan of American Literature, Hemingway was a multifaceted individual—a sportsman, soldier, boxer, hunter, lover, journalist, and eventually, the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954. His existence was a constant pursuit of "grace under pressure," a term he coined to describe a specific brand of stoic courage in the face of inevitable destruction. This philosophy finds its most profound and spiritual expression in his late masterpiece, *The Old Man and the Sea*. While the novella is ostensibly a simple tale of an aged Cuban fisherman's struggle with a giant marlin, it serves as a universalized metaphor for the human condition. When viewed through the ancient lens of the *Bhagavad Gita*, specifically the doctrine of *Karma Yoga* or the principle of selfless action, the story of Santiago transforms from a tragic maritime report into an eternal message to mankind, mirroring the discourse between Lord Krishna and Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, the setting is Kurukshetra, the "field of dharma," where the warrior-prince Arjuna is paralyzed by a crisis of conscience. He looks upon the opposing army and sees his teachers, kinsmen, and friends, leading him to question the very purpose of his struggle. In Hemingway's narrative, the setting is the Gulf Stream, a vast and indifferent expanse of the Atlantic that serves as Santiago's personal Kurukshetra. He is at a crossroads where his age, his poverty, and his streak of failure threaten to dissolve his identity. Both Arjuna and Santiago find themselves in a "middle space"—one between two warring factions, the other far out in the dark water of the deep sea—where the noise of the world is silenced, and the only thing that remains is the necessity of decisive action. The sea, for Hemingway, is not just a body of water; it is the arena of destiny where a man's true character is forged through isolation and endurance.

The central pillar of Lord Krishna's teaching to Arjuna is the concept of *Nishkama Karma*, the performance of duty without attachment to the results. Krishna famously instructs that "your right is to the work alone, never to its fruits." Santiago, perhaps without Hemingway's conscious intent, becomes the literary embodiment of this Vedic ideal. He does not set out to sea with the primary goal of wealth or social validation; rather, he goes because he is a fisherman, and that is his *Dharma*. His commitment to his craft is absolute and ritualistic. He keeps his lines straighter than any other fisherman, ensuring that even if the fish do not come, he has performed his duty with perfect "skill in action," which is the very definition of Yoga. By focusing entirely on the "how" of his work rather than the "what" of the reward, Santiago achieves a state of meditative labor that aligns him with the self-realized mortals described in Indian philosophy.

Despite being "thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck," he maintains a sense of professional dignity that borders on the sacred. When the great

marlin finally takes the bait, Santiago enters into a three-day marathon of suffering that serves as a form of *Tapas*, or spiritual penance. He endures the cutting of the line against his back, the cramping of his left hand, and the blurring of his vision, yet he never considers abandoning his post. He tells the fish, "I will stay with you until I am dead," a statement that reflects a total surrender to his duty. In the *Gita*, Krishna urges Arjuna to fight not for the sake of victory or the fear of defeat, but because it is the righteous path laid before him. Similarly, Santiago's battle is not against the fish as an enemy, but with the fish as a partner in a cosmic dance of effort and endurance. To understand Santiago as a "Life Liver," one must analyze his psychological resilience through the Vedantic concept of *Samatvam* or equanimity. Throughout the ordeal, Santiago experiences extreme fluctuations of hope and despair, yet he remains centered. When he loses his harpoon, he does not lament; he simply shifts his strategy. When the sharks arrive, he does not curse the heavens; he prepares to fight with whatever tools remain. This stoicism is the hallmark of the "Titan" Hemingway described—a man who understands that the external world is a series of "puzzles of existence" that cannot always be solved, but can always be faced. Like Arjuna, who must eventually cast aside his bow *Gandiva* to listen to the divine song, Santiago casts aside his ego to listen to the rhythm of the ocean and the movements of his "brother," the marlin.

Hemingway's most iconic line from the novella—"A man can be destroyed but not defeated"—acts as a modern, secular echo of the *Gita*'s teachings on the immortality of the *Atman*, or the soul. Lord Krishna explains to a grieving Arjuna that "weapons do not cleave the soul, fire does not burn it, and water does not wet it." In the character of Santiago, we see a distinction between the physical man and the spiritual essence. The "destruction" Santiago faces is total: his marlin is devoured by sharks, his skiff is battered, and his body is broken by exhaustion. However, the "defeat" never occurs because his spirit remains unbowed. This "grace under pressure" is the realization that while the material world (the fish, the money, the physical strength) is subject to decay and loss, the integrity of the individual who performs their duty remains an indestructible force. Santiago's victory is a moral one, proving that the human spirit can transcend the limitations of the flesh and the cruelty of circumstance.

The bond between Santiago and the marlin subtly echoes the intricate moral philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Just as Arjuna balks at fighting those he deeply respects and loves, Krishna clarifies that the soul transcends physical mortality, making the selfless execution of one's sacred duty (*dharma*) the ultimate spiritual act. Santiago faces the exact same conflict. Though he harbors deep affection for the marlin—reverently addressing it as "brother"—he remains steadfast in his mission: "I will kill you dead before this day ends." Far from being an act of malice, his resolve reflects an awareness of a cosmic order. Santiago slays the fish devoid of hatred,

driven purely by the demands of survival. He understands that both predator and prey are inextricably linked within a divine ecosystem where life sustains life, and honor lies in fulfilling one's designated role with unwavering fortitude.

Furthermore, Hemingway uses Santiago to critique the modern obsession with "results." In the view of Charles Scribner, the publication of this story about the loss of a prize became the author's greatest prize. This irony is the essence of the *Gita's* message to mankind. In a world that measures success by the weight of the catch or the size of the bank account, Santiago stands as a reminder that the true "prize" is the development of a "pure reason" and an "implicit obedience to the Supreme"—or in Hemingway's terms, the mastery of one's own nature. Santiago's struggle is a "universalized metaphor" because every human being eventually faces the sharks that devour their hard-won achievements. Whether it is the loss of a career, the death of a loved one, or the failing of health, the "sharks" are inevitable. The eternal message is that the dignity lies in the defense of the marlin, not the possession of it.

As the story reaches its climax, the arrival of the sharks represents the "sharks" of human existence—envy, time, decay, and the inevitable loss of our hard-won prizes. Santiago fights them not because he believes he can save the meat of the marlin, but because it is his duty to defend his work until the very end. When he eventually returns to the shore with nothing but a giant skeleton, he is a figure of profound pathos but also of immense power. The skeletal remains of the catch reflect the true scale of the 'gigantic prize' Charles Scribner described. It signifies that while the "fruits" of action may be snatched away by the vultures of the world, the "action" itself remains a permanent mark on the history of the soul. Santiago's return to his shack, where he drinks his coffee and falls into a deep sleep dreaming of the lions on the beaches of Africa, signifies the peace of a man who has fulfilled his *Karma*.

For the "Life Livers" of the present generation, the story of Santiago is an instructional manual on how to navigate a world that often feels indifferent or hostile. It suggests that success is not a destination or a bank balance, but a state of being. By aligning ourselves with our specific duty and performing it with the same meticulous care that Santiago gave to his fishing lines, we find a sense of purpose that external failure cannot touch. The "Eternal Message to Mankind" embedded in this novella is that we are defined not by what we catch, but by how we fish. Whether we are educators managing an institution, students preparing for a grueling exam, or administrators navigating complex organizational shifts, the principles of *Karma Yoga*—steadfastness, detachment, and grace—remain the only reliable anchors in the turbulent seas of life.

The concept of "Jan Bhagidari" or citizen partnership in Indian governance models finds a strange but beautiful parallel in Santiago's relationship with the boy, Manolin. Although Manolin is forbidden by his parents to fish with the "unlucky" old man, he remains Santiago's spiritual disciple. In the *Gita*, Sanjaya narrates the events to the blind King Dhritarashtra, but it is the bond between Krishna (the guide) and Arjuna (the doer) that drives the narrative. Manolin provides the "high-touch" empathy that Santiago needs to survive his "high-tech" battle with the marlin's brute strength. This relationship emphasizes that even the most solitary *Karma* is supported by a community of spirit. Manolin's devotion to Santiago at the end of the book ensures that the old man's wisdom will be passed to the next generation, much as the *Gita* has been passed down through millennia.

Hemingway, through the simple figure of an old Cuban man, reminds us that even in the face of total material loss, the dignified life is a possibility for every human being who chooses to strive towards perfection despite being "ill, old, and devastated mentally." The novella challenges the "machine" of modern devastation by asserting the primacy of the human will. Santiago says, "Man is not made for death," suggesting that while the body is mortal, the "Titan" within is not. This aligns with the Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) which emphasize the realization of the self as the ultimate goal of all action. Santiago does not need to read the *Arthashastra* to understand leadership; he leads himself through the dark nights of the soul using the internal compass of his own integrity.

Ultimately, Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and the *Bhagavad Gita* converge on a single, luminous truth: that the struggle itself is the prize. Santiago is an archetypal character representing the "mortal millions" who are constantly at war with the hostile forces of life. He does not withdraw; he accepts the battle and fights. By doing so, he transforms his suffering into a form of enlightenment. In the silence of the sea, Santiago finds the same clarity that Arjuna found on the chariot. He realizes that he is not alone, that he is part of a grander design, and that as long as he remains true to his nature, he can never truly be defeated. This unique synthesis of Western narrative and Eastern philosophy ensures that Hemingway's work remains timeless, offering a beacon of hope and a philosophy of action to all who find themselves sailing far out into the unknown.

In conclusion, the selective study of Santiago through the principle of Karma displays Hemingway's enduring inspiration to the modern world. His "genius for presenting Americans as they wished to be seen" extends far beyond national borders to encompass the universal human desire for nobility in the face of failure. As we analyze the doubts, conflicts, and limitations of Santiago alongside those of Arjuna, we find a "brilliant allegory to the life of Everyman." The slender classic that is *The Old Man and the Sea* remains gripping in its drama and disturbing in its implications because it asks us to look at our own lives and ask: Are we keeping our lines straight?

Are we fighting our sharks with dignity? Hemingway's message, harmonized with the song of Lord Krishna, provides the solution to the "endless puzzles of existence," proving that a man of pure reason and high duty can indeed be destroyed, but never, ever defeated. Infact, the novel is a universalized metaphor for life in general, and viewed in this light, it becomes an all-time parable, transcending temporal and spatial dimense.

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