

**THE DOUBTING-SELF AS A SITE OF AGENCY?
A DECONSTRUCTIVE READING OF THE *GITA* AND *HAMLET***

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When Rene Descartes, the 17th century French philosopher-cum-mathematician, has pronounced, “I think, therefore I am”,¹ he seems to have given a new meaning to the centuries-old debate about man’s role as well as his relative autonomy in his contextual world. By this pronouncement, Descartes is said to have promoted the notion of a very effective doubting subject who uses reason to ascertain and justify his own existence and thereby symbolizes the complete severance of the modern Western philosophy from its medieval lineage.² Certainly the medieval notion of subjectivity situated an individual in a position where he could not think his existence as separate from God. God used to supply and define the meaning of his existence. His access to power, knowledge and truth were often guarded and dictated by God’s unquestioning and unquestionable ideological apparatus, that is, Faith. Such a situation never allowed an individual any freedom or autonomy neither in thinking nor in practice. Descartes’ utterance has proved to bombard the foundational pillars of this philosophy. No doubt, the process of God’s withdrawal from the world of man has just begun and not yet culminated and the space left by God in the ontological world of an individual is seen to be gradually filled in as well as controlled by reason, the Cartesian pronouncement has however been instrumental to the emergence of a new kind of subjectivity. This subjectivity enables an individual to have not only a separate, distinct and individual existence. Rather by offering this confidence, it injects a philosophical conviction in an individual that he is free to think and choose a position for himself and thereby has the possibility of exercising an agency in deciding the meaning of his existence.

The case of Descartes is one of the many instances where the issue of doubting self as a possible site of interrogation is treated. Of course, not all the cases have arrived at the theoretical postulation that Descartes seems to have reached. But the notion of man contesting his scripted role in his world is a haunting topic in social and philosophical enquiry and representation. The contention of the present paper is to trace and locate a doubting subject in two seminal texts—the *Gita* and *Hamlet*. In terms of textual form, they are obviously different. The *Gita* is meant to be a religious discourse, while the text of *Hamlet* is a full-fledged tragedy. Yet both these texts betray a scintillating symmetry in respect of the fact that both of them deal with a doubting subject. In both the texts, the protagonists dwell in a strongly regimented religious order, much like the individual in the medieval Western episteme. But the texts generate almost a Cartesian moment when the protagonists replace the medium of faith with that of doubt in order to understand the meaning of the world and their relationship with it. The *Gita*, a religious text, becomes then metaphysical and *Hamlet*, primarily a metaphysical exploration, becomes deeply religious by this revelation of subjectivity.

I

The *Gita*³ has eighteen chapters in which Lord Krishna, the incarnation of God, discourses on the fundamental principles of living a purposeful life to Arjuna, one of the five great *Pandava* brothers. Krishna who was Arjuna's friend as well as his charioteer in the great battle of Kurukshetra where the two clans--the *Pandavas* and the *Kauravas* are engaged in an epic battle is seen to have dominated almost the entirety of the text of the *Gita* except the first two chapters. No doubt, the *Gita* is a poem almost entirely about the advices and exhortations of Krishna and Krishna's voice has attained an ideologically privileged position within the text not only because of the spatial extent of the text he dwells on and dominates but also because of his role in the text as the sole proprietor, guardian and controller of the meaning of the text's discourse. Whether we appreciate and accept or disagree with the knowledge he generates, his discourse defines him almost what in the Derridean term may be called as the logo-centre or the 'metaphysics of being'⁴. It is in this discourse both power and knowledge seem to be locked together to define and produce different normative roles for human subjects as well as the meaning of subjectivity itself.

Krishna's deliberation to Arjuna has many important aspects. But what seems to be important for the present essay is how Krishna, in the course of delivering his religious doctrine suffused with metaphysical and theological assumptions, has constructed a social order and germinated subjectivities suitable for that social order. "The fourfold caste was created by Me, by the differentiation of Guna and Karma" (Sl.12, Ch.IV)—Krishna affirms. By fourfold caste, he obviously refers to the very old Vedic social order comprising the *brahmins*, the *kshatriyas*, the *baishyas* and the *sudras* whose genesis may be traced back in the ancient Vedic verse. But the utterance of Krishna as the creator, and by default, the sole proprietor of that social order casts him as the logos of that order--a kind of structuralist structure where Krishna, the centre, generates the meaning of that order while remaining outside it. Now the subjectivities that are recruited to keep alive that structure and, thereby, the very control of Krishna over that order, are distinctly different from one another on the basis of 'guna' and 'karma'. 'Guna', etymologically and symbolically equivalent to a rope that binds, is the name of the substance as well as quality, matter and force of the subject. It is the inherent nature of the subject. But 'karma' is the name of social responsibility that the subject has to bear and discharge. It is primarily a social qualification. Thus a *kshatriya*'s 'karma' is to fight battle. For this reason, his 'guna' asks him to be courageous and ready to fight battle. No doubt Krishna is not suggesting anything new here, as the natures of these subjectivities are already socially recognized. Krishna's reiteration of these facts to Arjuna is necessary not because such issues are not known, but because there is a visible threat to this social order whose sustenance depends exclusively upon the maintenance of these issues. And Krishna tries to revive and impose these issues on Arjuna in order to curb any possible resistance from him.

Such a subversion of the social order has really taken place in the text. Arjuna, the great warrior prince on the side of the *Pandavas* and, without doubt, their most accomplished hero, therefore having a huge responsibility as a warrior in the battlefield and having the credit of single handedly winning battles for the *Pandavas* in the past, is undoubtedly the epitome of those virtues of a *kshatriya* that Krishna has defined. So with a settled identity as well the expected responsibility borne out of that identity, Arjuna entered the battlefield on chariot being driven by Lord Krishna. His being certain about his social role and responsibility as a *kshatriya* warrior is indicated by his own impatience before the battle starts. In his own words, this is apparent,

For I desire to observe those who are assembled here for fight, wishing to please the evil-minded Duryodhana by taking his side on this battlefield. (Ch.I, sloka.23)

Indeed, he is not only betraying his social role here. By a reference to Duryodhana as 'evil-minded' he seems to demonstrate that this social role he wears is vindicated and nourished actually by a clear-cut affiliation to the dichotomy of the good and the evil of the social order that Lord Krishna constructs. But just after this when Lord Krishna has driven the chariot to the convenient place in the battlefield from which Arjuna can have a comprehensive view of the battlefield, a transformation has suddenly arrived on him. After surveying the enemy-side which happens to comprise the great warriors on the side of the *Kauravas* like Vishma and Drona, Arjuna is suddenly captivated by a perplexing emotion of grief, pity and despair. Finding that he has to battle with and kill all the persons whom he knows as his kith and kin and loves and respects very much, the embittered Arjuna describes his mental condition in this way,

Seeing, O Krishna, these my kinsmen gathered here eager for fight, my limbs fail me, and my mouth is parched up. I shiver all over, and my hair stands on end. The bow Gandiva slips from my hand, and my skin burns. (Ch.I, slokas. 28-29)

Psychologically realistic, this physical show denotes a deep mental crisis, Arjuna experiences a loss of what Swami Swarupananda suggests as 'self-control' and 'the first step into the abyss of ignorance'⁵. He further states,

Neither, O Keshava, can I stand upright. My mind is in a whirl. And I see adverse omens. (Ch. I, sloka.30)

Then he goes to declare his intention of not fighting at all in this battle because as he explains it,

Neither, O Krsna, do I see any good in killing these my own people in battle. I desire neither victory nor empire, nor yet pleasure. (Ch. I, sloka.31)

Then finally Arjuna goes to that logic, which seems to suggest a personal ethics of sin and fall,

Alas, we are involved in a great sin, in that we are prepared to slay our kinsmen, out of greed for the pleasures for a kingdom. (Ch. I, sloka.45)

No doubt, this emotional crisis is temporary and fleeting. It was not there in the mind of Arjuna before the battle, nor will it be there after the exhortation of Krishna ends. But, fleeting and temporary though it may be, it has a profound meaning that shocks and rocks the entire text. In one plane, this decline to kill may please those thinkers who do not favour the act of killing itself and thereby criticize Krishna as the war-monger politician who incites man by means of a smoky ideology of war to go to battle field ⁶. In fact, to extend this argument a bit further, what may be surmised by this traumatized reaction of Arjuna is that he is not just interrogating the very ideology of *kshatriya*. He is at the same time problematizing the very ethics of good and bad on which the very logic of war stands. He was championing this ethics earlier during his arrival at the battlefield. Now he declines to follow it. However if we explore the issue further and limit our introspection only to the issue of Arjuna's decline without extending or specifying it to the act of killing, the meaning of this decline assumes a profounder sense. Thus it may fairly be said that Arjuna's decline is the symptomatic of the germination of a doubt about his own role as a *kshatriya*. This doubt leads him to reject his role for a fleeting period though. This rejection of his role indicates the emblematic subversion of the discourse of Krishna that asks him to act according to the guidelines set for a *kshatriya*. Thus Krishna seems to be wonder-struck to see Arjuna's perturbation,

In such a crisis, whence comes upon thee, O Arjuna, this dejection, un-Arya-like, disgraceful, and contrary to the attainment of heaven? Yield not to unmanliness, O son of Prtha! Ill doth it become thee. Cast off this mean faint-heartedness and arise, O scorcher of thine enemies! (Ch. II, sloka.2-3)

Krishna therefore warns Arjuna,

Looking at thine own dharma, also, thou oughtest not to waver, for there is nothing higher for a Kshatriya than a righteous war. (Ch. II, sloka.31)

In a more general sense, this doubt and rejection threatens Krishna's order. It transgresses the limit set upon Arjuna. It creates a fissure in the mind of Arjuna between his socially assigned role and his own individual self. In that fleeting moment, with the lightening of doubt striking Arjuna's mind, he comes out of the garb of his *kshatriya*-subject position and asserts his individual existence. It is a moment therefore when not only a solid citadel is found to have crumbled. It is a moment when an individual registers his voice. The doubting self of Arjuna germinates an agency by which not only Krishna's legacy is transgressed but also an individual inscribes his autonomy through his choice. Thus even though the text is successful later on in treating this enlightenment as an instance of ignorance and thereby attempting to regain control of Arjuna's mind as well as restoring the temporarily perturbed social order by a spirited deliberation on the justification of the hierarchy, it nevertheless fails to conceal its own inherent fault line that the doubt of Arjuna seems to have brought to light. Arjuna's doubt therefore leads itself as a Cartesian self does, only with this difference, that Descartes asks this subject to cast his own territory of freedom and agency with the instrument of reason whereas Arjuna uses emotions of pity and commiseration to represent his rebellion and agency.

Hamlet

The situation of Hamlet, the protagonist of the eponymous Shakespearean tragedy is almost similar to that of Arjuna in the *Gita*, but much more subtle and complex. Like Arjuna, Hamlet is set before a responsibility and, like him, he suffers from a doubt. However, the doubt that engulfs Arjuna's mind is momentary and apparently more strategic, at least from the point of view of the text. But in *Hamlet*, the doubt occupies the mind of the protagonist extensively for a larger duration. Moreover, the play never means anywhere to suggest that Hamlet, like Arjuna, has intended to refuse the responsibility. On the contrary, there is no denying the fact that he is eager to accomplish the role. But the problem is that he fails to carry out the responsibility that his role sets him in till the end of the tragedy. Much has been written on why after all he proves unable to undertake the responsibility. Interesting and intriguing though these postulations may be, they however need not detain us here simply because the focus of this essay is to explore the theoretical and philosophical implication of his failure to the meaning of his subjectivity.

After his father's death, Hamlet comes from Wittenberg to his native country, Denmark. Wittenberg being the seat of the great Protestant spokesman Martin Luther is naturally held as a symbolical space of subversion in the early modern period. It was at this Wittenberg where Marlowe's Dr. Faustus scripted his pact with the Devil and transgressed God. Naturally, therefore, by affiliating Hamlet with such a subversive space like Wittenberg, the text tries to affiliate Hamlet with a subversive identity. Father's death has made Hamlet pensive. But what aggravates his mind more is the subsequent marriage of his mother to his uncle. The marriage of the mother appears to be an unpardonable crime to him for two reasons. The marriage takes place just after two months of his father's death and more seriously, the mother marries a man in comparison with whom Hamlet's father, in the opinion of Hamlet, stands just like 'Hyperion to a satyr' (I, ii, 140)⁷. The marriage appears to him as a token of ingratitude and mere physical lust. It makes him so pensive that he is even contemplating suicide.

But the situation of Hamlet has taken a more serious turn when, through the voice of his dead father's ghost, he learns that his father did not have a natural death. In fact he was murdered by Hamlet's uncle. Even though Hamlet takes time to get it confirmed, already the whole mystery about his father's

death is getting clearer to him. The ghost's story and the subsequent circumstantial evidences make it clear to him that his uncle Claudius murders his father, usurps the throne and marries his mother. The ghost asks Hamlet to avenge this murder. Naturally therefore Hamlet's responsibility is fixed. He has to avenge his father's death by killing Claudius. He has to restore moral order to a state that stands 'disjoint and out of frame' (I, ii, 20). It is, by the *Gita*'s term, his 'karma'.

But what kind of 'guna' does this karma expect from Hamlet? In the beginning of the text, we learn that Denmark, a warlike state, is preparing itself for war. But taken this war symbolically, what may ultimately mean is that Hamlet is facing a war, a war that may restore the moral order violated by the murder of his father, usurpation of the Danish throne by Claudius and the remarriage of the mother. He needs to clad the visage of a soldier, much like Arjuna. The text has assorted many factors to justify this role. Hamlet's father was a great warrior. The text offers precedence and antecedence to confirm the fact that Hamlet's role is expected to be like that of a *khastriya*. The incident of Fortinbras, the prince of Norway, waging war to regain land which his father lost to Hamlet's father over a battle, the subsequent incident of preparation for war for recovery of a piece of land hardly worth for a serious battle and, later, the oath of Laertes to avenge his father's murder—all these segments scattered in the text clearly project the role of a son in the context of his father's ignominy and murder. The text, by these symbolic incidents, has made quite unambiguous the role, action and subject-position expected of Hamlet. But even before he knew the fact about his father's murder, or in fact from the very beginning of his appearance on the stage, Hamlet displays a mind that prefers contemplation to action. In a long exhortation, Claudius almost ironically attempts to persuade Hamlet about the role that he needs to embrace,

'Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet,
To give these mourning duties to your father,
But you must know your father lost a father,
That father lost, lost his---and the survivor bound
In filial obligation for some term
To do obsequious sorrow. But to persevere
In obstinate condolement is a course
Of impious stubbornness, 'tis unmanly grief,
It shows a will most incorrect to heaven,
A heart unfortified, a mind impatient,
An understanding simple and unschool'd;
For what we know must be, and is as common
As any the most vulgar thing to sense---
Why should we in our peevish opposition
Take it to heart? Fie, 'tis a fault to heaven,
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
To reason most absurd, whose common theme
Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried
From the first corse till he that died today,
'This must be so'. We pray you throw to earth
This unprevailing woe,... (I, ii, 87-107)

The address of Claudius has points almost similar to those that Krishna made in the *Gita* when the latter exhorted Arjuna to battle. The argument that death is an inevitable phenomenon of life was also used there in the *Gita* to provoke Arjuna. Sinking in sadness at the death of near ones as an unmanly and

impious attitude is a theme that is also a part of Krishna's discourse. The discourse of Claudius, ironically though, asks Hamlet to lift himself from a condition of passive contemplation to a state of decisive action.

Arjuna refuses to battle in this context. Hamlet does not refuse. He understands and agrees to the ethical implication of his obligation. But he fails to murder his uncle and therefore remains unable to accomplish the duty imposed on him. What precisely has he done is that he first contemplates suicide which he avoids because he gives the excuse of the divine sanction against it (it may be noted here that even if there were no divine sanction against suicide, still it is uncertain whether he could at all do it). Later on when he gets confirmed that his father was murdered and therefore not at all received a natural death and that it was his uncle who did it, he thinks of avenging the murder. But he lets the opportune moment pass away with a strange and mysterious dillydallying. In his celebrated soliloquy "To be or not to be...", he displays a psychological state that is doubting and divided. One part of this mind wants to complete the deed, another one creating excuse against the deed and this eventually leads him to miss a golden opportunity to kill his uncle when the latter is in a temple to offer his confessional prayer alone and unarmed.

But this very Hamlet gets changed in the latter half of the play when he appears to be much more determined to accomplish his scheduled task. Even though he ends his life at the end of the play tragically, he has accomplished his scheduled duty of the killing of Claudius before his death. His action provokes a question that seems to address the issue of this essay. If Hamlet is successful in accomplishing the deed in the latter half of the play, why could not he do this in the first half? Putting this question in a different way, why the Hamlet of the second part of the play could do it what the Hamlet of the first part could not? Was Hamlet changed? How could Hamlet shake off his dillydallying nature in the second half? Was there two Hamlets? Hamlet himself in fact rouses this suspicion about the presence of two Hamlets in him when he meets Laertes in the fatal moment of his life,

Give me your pardon, sir. I have done you wrong;
But pardon't as you are a gentleman.
This presence knows, and you must needs have heard,
How I am punish'd with a sore distraction.
What I have done
That might your nature, honour, and exception
Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet.
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
Who does it then? His madness. If't be so,
Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd;
His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy. (V, ii, 222-235)

Hamlet's madness, feigned or real, may symbolically be interpreted as a highly disrupted mental stage that he seems to bear in the first stage of the play. It is this madness that stands between him and his responsibility enjoined on him by his context—between him and the power of ideology that defines his responsibility and his karma. Claudius's exhortation, the instruction of the father's ghost, the contextual expectations and many other factors together contribute to the formation of a role for Hamlet that asks for a specific work to be done and he, through his hesitation and introspection, has been deferring and delaying the execution of this scripted responsibility. It is where he simply creates a distance from his

scripted role and this act of distancing is an emblem or symbol of a gesture that seems to be a threat to power. It is a moment of confusion both for the subject and power. The subject by his confusing mental make-up never adheres to any committed position, remains non-committal and thereby makes it impossible for power to read him and manage his body and mind. To power, the subject's madness appears to register the presence of a mind that can think and exist independently off the scripted role as well as the ideology that has scripted this role. Bewildered and endangered, power seems to suspect in the subject's mind the germination of a site of agency where the soul, amid its perils and threats of extinction, may enjoy the bliss of autonomy. The attempts of Claudius to impose on Hamlet a machinery of surveillance comprising Polonius, Rosencrunch and Guildenstern in order to diagnose this mind attests to the fact that power is desperate to read it and the failures of the attempts of power as manifested in Hamlet's reactionary attitudes and actions in the text do also suggest that Hamlet is successful in eluding this strategy of his uncle and thereby implants in power the suspicion about the presence of mind that appears to be autonomous. This discourse of the self's autonomy encounters a phenomenal change in the second half of the play which however makes the manifestation of this autonomy more conspicuous by its negation.

However, the frank admission made by Hamlet in the above-mentioned quotation about the presence of a division in his mind now holds it by implication that that division no longer exists now. The Hamlet that appears out of this admission is much more solid and unified, completely oriented to the ideology whose scripted role he treated earlier with a kind of suspicion and hesitation. To him, now it is clear that 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends'(V, ii, 10). In fact in an overtly generalized introspection, he makes his understanding about his own position vis-à-vis his contextual ideology clear,

There is a special provision 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, of aught he leaves, knows aught, what is't to leave betimes? Let be. (V, ii, 215-220)

Hamlet's introspection here follows closely the Biblical lore⁸. The mind which in the first phase of the play displays a Renaissance autonomy by questioning its relationship with the power of its context has now turned into a much more orthodox subject relinquishing his agency and embracing the dictate of the moral order. The recognition of the control of Providence in the affair of man has hurled Hamlet to the orbit of that orthodox ideology which Hamlet has earlier thwarted. In a sense, therefore the drama plays with a game of subversion and containment. The fate of Arjuna too is similar at the end of the *Gita* where Arjuna, shaking off his initial dilemma has agreed to go by the path that the moral order of that universe constructed on Krishna's discourse has scripted for him.

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