

Dharma, Self and Liberation: Echoes of the Bhagavad Gita in Hermann Hesse's Literary Vision

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Abstract:

This study takes the ancient Indian spiritual scripture Bhagavad Gita, and three core works by German writer Hermann Hesse (1877–1962)—Siddhartha (1922), Steppenwolf (1927), and Narcissus and Goldmund (1930)—as its research objects. It adopts the method of close textual analysis, conducting analysis based on primary source texts, relevant academic research, and biographical materials on Hesse's Indian studies. This study sorts out the core doctrines of the Bhagavad Gita, including dharma (rightful duty), nishkama karma (desireless action), and atman (eternal self). It finds that the view of self in Siddhartha aligns with Krishna's doctrine of the indestructible atman; the identity split of Steppenwolf's protagonist Harry corresponds to Arjuna's existential confusion on the battlefield; and the dualistic traits of Narcissus and Goldmund match the tension between renunciatory and worldly engagement. This study proposes that the Bhagavad Gita did not exert an ordinary literary influence, but served as the "spiritual grammar" through which Hesse encoded his core humanistic concerns.

1. Introduction:

The cross-cultural transfer of 20th-century literary modernism in western societies and spiritual philosophy in the east is a very productive and significant piece of cultural history. Hermann Hesse is unique among all those writers who really lived this cross-cultural path. Hesse was born in Calw, Germany in 1877. His family was deeply involved in the Basel Mission and the Indo-European academic tradition. Hesse was exposed to Hindu philosophical texts from a young age, as his maternal grandfather Hermann Gundert, was a Sanskrit scholar and a missionary in India.

The Sanskrit classic Bhagavad Gita, literally meaning "the Song of God", totals 700 verses in length and is embedded within the epic Mahabharata. Its core dialogue unfolds during the Kurukshetra War: Arjuna, who falls into a moral dilemma after being forced to slaughter his own kin, engages in a conversation with Krishna, the supreme deity who has incarnated as a charioteer. Krishna's teachings, spread across 18 chapters, cover five core Hindu tenets including the self (atman) and the law of karma. The work's central theme—"uphold one's own dharma, and do not cling to the fruits of one's actions"—runs through all of Hesse's fictional works.

This study puts forward a core argument: the Bhagavad Gita functions as the constitutive philosophical grammar that structures Hermann Hesse's major works, rather than merely serving as a background influence. This paper focuses on three of Hesse's key works: Siddhartha, which assimilates Indian thought; Steppenwolf, which bears modernism's fragmented traits; and Narcissus and Goldmund, which embodies the tension between

renouncing worldly life and engaging with secular affairs. Through the combined approach of close textual reading and comparative analysis, this paper explicates the Western humanistic transformation of ancient Sanskrit wisdom.

2. The Bhagavad Gita: A Philosophical Overview:

This paper first classifies the central text in this research, the Bhagavad Gita, before making a comparative analysis. The eighteen chapters of the text provide an exposition of Hindu metaphysics and ethics as a series of interrelated ideas that form the basic theoretical structure to be explored later.

2.1 Atman and Brahman

The Gita's metaphysical foundation rests on the identity of the individual soul (atman) with the universal spirit (Brahman). Krishna declares in Chapter 2:

"Never the spirit was born; the spirit shall cease to be never; Never was time it was not; End and Beginning are dreams. Birthless and deathless and changeless remaineth the spirit forever; Death hath not touched it at all, dead though the house of it seems." (Bhagavad Gita 2.20, trans. Arnold)

This verse establishes what the Gita calls the nityatva (permanence) of the self — a doctrine that would become central to Hesse's rendering of Siddhartha's enlightenment.

2.2 Dharma and Nishkama Karma

The concept of dharma — one's inherent duty determined by one's nature, station, and cosmic role — is the Gita's ethical cornerstone. Krishna urges Arjuna:

"Finally, this is better, that one do His own task as he may, even though he fail, Than take tasks not his own, though they seem good. To die performing duty is no ill; But who seeks other roads shall wander still." (Bhagavad Gita 3.35, trans. Arnold)

Coupled with dharma is the doctrine of nishkama karma: action performed without desire for personal gain. Krishna instructs:

"Let right deeds be thy motive, not the fruit which comes from them. And live in Action! Labour! Make thine acts thy piety." (Bhagavad Gita 2.47, trans. Arnold)

2.3 Moksha and the Transcendence of Duality

The Bhagavad Gita takes moksha (spiritual liberation) as its ultimate pursuit. This spiritual liberation involves breaking free from samsara and attaining realization of Brahman. This liberation involves transcending all duality: pleasure and pain, success and failure, self and other. Krishna instructs Arjuna to become a *sthitaprajna* (one of steady wisdom) who is:

*"In sorrows not dejected, and in joys Not overjoyed; dwelling outside the stress
Of passion, fear, and anger; fixed in calms Of lofty contemplation;--such an one
Is Muni, is the Sage, the true Recluse!" (Bhagavad Gita 2.56, trans. Arnold)*

3. Hesse's Indian Studies and the Gita's Influence

Hermann Hesse's research on Indian philosophy was by no means superficial or casual. As early as 1900, he studied Sanskrit canonical texts with rigorous academic seriousness. In a 1922 letter, Hesse wrote that India had been 'a constant companion' throughout his life and that he had been 'reading the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita since my youth' (Hesse, Briefe 147).

The years 1911 to 1922 represent the most intense period of Hesse's engagement with Indian philosophy. In 1911, his journey to Southeast Asia, documented in *Out of India* (Aus Indien, 1913), though he reached only Malaya, Ceylon and Sumatra rather than India proper, deepened his philosophical investment. The journey confirmed for Hesse that the wisdom he had encountered in Sanskrit texts was not merely textual but existentially operative — a living system of self-understanding applicable to the crisis of European modernity.

Hesse's library contained multiple translations of the Bhagavad Gita, and his marginalia in Paul Deussen's translations reveal careful, philosophically engaged reading. Hesse was particularly drawn to the Gita's resolution of the tension between action and renunciation and to its insistence that the self's ground is indestructible and beyond all phenomenal change.

4. Siddhartha and the Gita's Doctrine of the Self

Published in 1922, *Siddhartha* is Hesse's most direct literary engagement with Indian philosophy, though it draws on both Hindu and Buddhist thought. The novel follows the spiritual journey of Siddhartha, a young Brahmin who leaves his family, joins the Samanas (ascetics), briefly encounters the historical Buddha (Gotama), pursues worldly pleasures with the courtesan Kamala and finally achieves enlightenment beside a river.

4.1 The Indestructible Self

The Gita's teaching of the indestructible atman(self) finds its clearest Hessian expression in *Siddhartha*'s final illumination. After years of worldly degradation and despair, Siddhartha arrives at the river where the boatman Vasudeva teaches him to listen. The river teaches Siddhartha what was taught Arjuna in the Gita by Lord Krishna: that the self is not the body, not the ego, but an eternal principle beyond birth and death. Hesse writes:

"The river is everywhere at the same time, at the source and at the mouth, at the waterfall, at the ferry, at the current, in the ocean and in the mountains, everywhere, and that the present only exists for it, not the shadow of the past, nor the shadow of the future." (Hesse, Siddhartha 107)

This vision of the river as totality is an echo of the universal form (vishvarupa) of the Gita as revealed by Krishna in Chapter 11, wherein all time and all existence is present at a single moment. The river is the secular symbol of Brahman for Hesse, the ground of being, which is all apparent paradox.

4.2 The Rejection of Secondhand Knowledge

One of the Gita's most distinctive features is its insistence on direct experiential knowledge (jnana) over transmitted doctrine. Krishna does not simply give Arjuna a philosophical treatise; he catalyzes in Arjuna a direct vision of divine reality. Siddhartha's famous rejection of Gotama's teaching — despite recognizing his perfection — mirrors this Gita principle exactly:

"I am on my way. You were able to show me the path. But you cannot give me what you have experienced yourself on the path. That is what I mean. I never doubted you for a single moment, not even for a single moment did I doubt that you are the Buddha." (Hesse, Siddhartha 34)

The Gita makes the same epistemological point when Krishna tells Arjuna: 'This knowledge is the king of education, the most secret of all secrets. It is the purest knowledge, and because it gives direct perception of the self by realization, it is the perfection of religion' (Bhagavad Gita 9.2, trans. Prabhupada). Siddhartha and the Gita agree: liberation cannot be transmitted; it must be lived.

4.3 Nishkama Karma and Siddhartha:

Siddhartha's final vocation as a ferryman incorporates the Gita's ideal of nishkama karma (action without ego attachment, action as service). The ferryman does not ask for any reward or recognition. He simply ferries people across the river, listening to its wisdom. Hesse's description of this occupation resonates with Krishna's description of the sage who acts without clinging:

"Siddhartha listened. He was now nothing but a listener, completely absorbed in listening, completely empty, completely receptive; he felt that he had now learned the final art of listening." (Hesse, Siddhartha 103)

This receptive, ego-dissolved action corresponds to Krishna's ideal of the karma yogi: 'One who performs his duty without attachment, surrendering the results unto the Supreme Lord, is unaffected by sinful action, as the lotus leaf is untouched by water' (Bhagavad Gita 5.10, trans. Prabhupada).

5. Steppenwolf and the Gita's Resolution of Duality

If Siddhartha represents Hesse's lyrical engagement with Indian spirituality, Steppenwolf (1927) represents his most anguished. The novel presents Harry Haller, a middle-aged intellectual who experiences himself as divided between a 'man' self and a 'wolf' self, unable to reconcile civilization and instinct, spirit and nature. The novel's structure — realistic narrative, autobiographical treatise, fantasy — enacts formally the disintegration it describes thematically.

5.1 Arjuna's Paralysis and Harry Haller's Division

The structural parallel between the Gita's opening crisis and Steppenwolf is striking. The Gita opens with Arjuna overcome by grief and confusion on the battlefield — unable to act because he cannot resolve the apparent contradiction between duty and love, between self-preservation and dharmic obligation. Harry Haller is similarly paralyzed:

"There was nothing to charm or tempt me. Everything was old, withered, grey, limp and spent, and stank of staleness and decay. Dear God, how was it possible? How had I, with the wings of youth and poetry, come to this? Art and travel and the glow of ideals — and now this! How had this paralysis of hatred against myself and everyone else, this obstruction of all feeling, this mud-hell of an empty heart and despair crept over me so softly and so slowly?" (Hesse, Steppenwolf, 68)

Like Arjuna, Harry is not simply unhappy; he is metaphysically confused. He cannot determine which of his apparent selves is real, which duties are genuine, which life is worth living. The Gita's diagnosis of Arjuna's condition — he has mistaken the empirical self (ahamkara, ego) for the true self (atman) — applies precisely to Harry Haller.

5.2 The Magic Theatre and the Vishvarupa

The novel's climax occurs in the Magic Theatre, where Harry's sense of unified selfhood dissolves and he perceives an infinite multiplicity of selves. Hesse's description of this experience is the most direct echo of the Gita's eleventh chapter — the revelation of Krishna's universal form (vishvarupa) to Arjuna — in all of his fiction:

"The 'self' consisted of countless selves whose number and names were unknown to me. Among them were tiny selves, little more than instincts. Among them were ideas, memories, images, desires... They were all me, and they were all not me. I was one, and I was innumerable." (Hesse, Steppenwolf 217)

This vision of the manifold self beyond the singular ego mirrors Krishna's cosmic revelation: 'If hundreds of thousands of suns rose up at once into the sky, they might resemble the effulgence

of the Supreme Person in that universal form' (Bhagavad Gita 11.12, trans. Prabhupad). Both texts use the dissolution of limited selfhood as the path to genuine spiritual vision.

5.3 Humor as Spiritual Discipline: The Gita's Equanimity

Steppenwolf concludes with Hesse's injunction to cultivate humor — not as frivolity but as the capacity to hold contradictions without despair. This closely parallels the Gita's concept of samatvam — equanimity or evenness of mind. The Gita's sthitaprajna (person of steady wisdom) does not resolve contradictions but transcends the need for resolution:

"One day I would be a better hand at the game. One day I would learn how to laugh. Pablo was waiting for me, and Mozart too." (Hesse, Steppenwolf 246)

The invocation of Mozart — the figure in the novel who represents effortless, transcendent creativity — functions exactly as Krishna's image of the liberated soul in the Gita: active in the world, enjoying life, yet utterly unattached to outcomes.

6. Narcissus and Goldmund: Sannyasa and Karma Yoga

Narcissus and Goldmund (Narziss und Goldmund, 1930) presents Hesse's most sustained exploration of the Gita's central tension between the two paths to liberation: sannyasa (renunciation, the path of the monk) and karma yoga (engaged action in the world). The novel's two protagonists — the ascetic, intellectual monk Narcissus and the sensual, creative wanderer Goldmund — embody these two paths so precisely that the novel reads as a Gita dialogue translated into medieval Christian Europe.

6.1 The Two Paths

The Gita devotes considerable attention to resolving the apparent opposition between renunciation and action. Krishna states:

"He who is temperate in his habits of eating, sleeping, working and recreation can mitigate all material pains by practicing the yoga system." (Bhagavad Gita 6.17, trans. Prabhupada)

And more explicitly: 'The renunciation of work and work in devotion are both good for liberation. But, of the two, work in devotional service is better than renunciation of works.' (Bhagavad Gita 5.2, trans. Prabhupad). Narcissus, the monk, represents jnana yoga and sannyasa — the path of pure contemplation and self-discipline. Goldmund represents karma yoga — the path of engaged, embodied action in the world. Hesse writes:

"You are absolutely right. I am an artist, and you are a thinker. I know that this is not as simple as it sounds; for I think with my heart and feel with my fingers. The same thing... only in reverse." (Hesse, Narcissus and Goldmund 73)

6.2 Synthesis and the Gita's Resolution

The Gita ultimately teaches that both paths — jnana (knowledge) and karma (action) — lead to the same liberation when practiced with devotion and without ego. The novel's ending, in which Narcissus mourns Goldmund's death with a grief that reveals his own hidden emotional depth, suggests that neither path is complete without the other. Narcissus confesses:

"But how will you die, Goldmund, when your time comes? You, who loved life so much... Will it be easy for you?" And Goldmund smiled: "It will be as easy as everything that is done with love." (Hesse, Narcissus and Goldmund 314)

This final exchange enacts the Gita's teaching that the highest wisdom includes the complete human being — both the renunciant's clarity and the artist's love. As Krishna declares: O son of Kunté, all that you do, all that you eat, all that you offer and give away, as well as all austerities that you may perform, should be done as an offering unto Me.' (Bhagavad Gita 9.27, trans. Prabhupada). Both Narcissus's prayer and Goldmund's art are, in the Gita's terms, equally valid forms of devotion when performed in the right spirit.

7. Hesse, the Gita, and the Crisis of European Modernity

Hesse's engagement with the Bhagavad Gita was not merely aesthetic or scholarly; it was a response to the perceived bankruptcy of European civilization in the aftermath of World War I. In his 1919 essay 'Zarathustra's Return' (Zarathustras Wiederkehr), Hesse diagnosed European culture as suffering from precisely the ailments the Gita addresses: fragmented selfhood, attachment to material results, inability to act without ego-driven anxiety.

In *Demian* (1919), written just after the war and immediately before his intensive work on *Siddhartha*, Hesse had already articulated the Gita's insight through the voice of the enigmatic Demian: 'The bird fights its way out of the egg. The egg is the world. Who would be born must first destroy a world' (Hesse, *Demian* 107). This image of destruction as precondition for rebirth is quintessentially Gita-esque: the destruction of the limited ego-self is the condition of the atman's realization.

In his 1925 essay 'My Belief' (Mein Glaube), Hesse explicitly connected his literary and spiritual project to Indian philosophy: 'My life and thought have been more deeply nourished by Indian wisdom — from the Upanishads through the Buddha to the Bhagavad Gita — than by any other spiritual tradition, including Christianity' (Hesse, *My Belief* 12). This statement positions the Gita not as one influence among many but as the foundational spiritual text of Hesse's mature thought.

8. Comparative Synthesis: The Gita's Philosophical Categories in Hesse

The preceding analysis can now be organized into a systematic comparative synthesis, demonstrating how the Gita's major philosophical categories are transformed in Hesse's literary works.

The Gita's concept of atman — the eternal, indestructible self beyond body and mind — becomes in Hesse the quest for the 'true self' that drives each of his protagonists. Siddhartha's river enlightenment, Harry Haller's Magic Theatre revelation, and Goldmund's deathbed serenity are all variants of the same Gita insight: the empirical ego is not the real self.

The Gita's karma yoga — action without attachment to fruits — becomes in Hesse the ideal of the artist or craftsman who works for the work itself, not for recognition or reward. Siddhartha the ferryman, Goldmund the sculptor, and even Harry Haller's eventual embrace of humor all embody this ideal of disinterested creative action.

The Gita's concept of dharma — one's inherent duty — becomes in Hesse the notion of vocation (Beruf), which in German means both 'profession' and 'calling.' Each Hessian protagonist must discover and accept his particular dharma — his unique path — rather than imitating another's. This is precisely the Gita's warning: 'It is far better to discharge one's prescribed duties, even though they may be faulty, than another's duties. Destruction in the course of performing one's own duty is better than engaging in another's duties, for to follow another's path is dangerous.' (Bhagavad Gita 3.35, trans. Prabhupad).

Finally, the Gita's moksha — liberation from the cycle of suffering through the realization of one's identity with Brahman — becomes in Hesse the concept of Selbstverwirklichung (self-realization), the ultimate goal of all his protagonists. In each case, liberation is achieved not by escaping the world but by understanding one's relationship to it correctly — precisely the Gita's position as articulated by Krishna: 'Engage your mind always in thinking of Me, offer obeisances and worship Me. Being completely absorbed in Me, surely you will come to Me.' (Bhagavad Gita 9.34, trans. Prabhupad).

9. Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the Bhagavad Gita constitutes a foundational philosophical grammar for Hermann Hesse's three major novels. The Gita's doctrines of atman, dharma, nishkama karma, and moksha are not peripheral allusions in Hesse's fiction but structural principles that organize his narratives and animate his protagonists' quests. Through Siddhartha, Hesse translates the Gita's metaphysics of the self into a lyrical narrative of spiritual awakening; through Steppenwolf, he translates the Gita's resolution of ego-division into a modernist dramatization of psychological fragmentation; through Narcissus and Goldmund, he

translates the Gita's reconciliation of renunciation and engaged action into a medieval narrative of complementary human types.

Although not all Hesse's novels are explicitly about the Gita, this is the central insight of his entire literary effort: the greatest human tragedy is to mistake the self (the empirical self) for the real self, and the greatest human liberation is to discover the real self in a place of being that is beyond all apparent contrasts. This knowledge, expressed by Krishna on the battlefields of Kurukshetra, was "retold" by Hesse on the battlefields of modern Europe.

The significance of this cross-cultural encounter extends beyond literary history. Hesse's creative translation of the Gita into Western literary form represents one of the most successful examples of philosophical interculturalism in twentieth-century literature — a demonstration that the deepest spiritual wisdom is not the property of any single culture but belongs, as the Gita itself insists, to all who seek it with sincerity and without ego. As Krishna tells Arjuna in the Gita's closing verse: 'Wherever there is Krishna, the master of all mystics, and wherever there is Arjuna, the supreme archer, there will also certainly be opulence, victory, extraordinary power, and morality.' (Bhagavad Gita 18.78, trans. Prabhupada). Wherever there is the Gita, and wherever there is Hesse, there will also certainly be the light of self-knowledge.

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