

# Asian Resonance

## Heroes of Ernest Hemingway's Novels: A Critical Study.



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### Abstract

Hemingway's heroes have been mainly separated into two different categories namely the code hero and the Hemingway hero. But a minute perusal of his entire published novels and short stories will lead us to the revelation that all of them are linked with one soul because of which they share qualities of adventurous spirit, male machismo and above all inherent spiritual strength which leads them further in life. They differ in proportion of maturity and wisdom. The earlier heroes are young boys who are jolted by the stark realities of life and live a vagabond life in search of meaning of life and how to live in it. They can be very well compared to the shaking, nervous and ignorant Arjuna when 'Gita' begins and before Krishna preaches him. As this discussion will develop, I will be focusing over three basic points which are the subject matter of my research work. First that these heroes are not two distinct personalities but present a gradual development of the same personality or soul. Secondly, that they have an inherent spiritual strength which leads to form codes so that they can resist and come over any problem. And third is that this spiritual development is very close to Gita's philosophy and Arjuna's spiritual development.

**Keyword:** Development of hero, the inherent spiritual strength and dove-tail of Hemingway's and Gita's philosophy.

### Introduction

A lot has been said and searched about Hemingway, his art, prose style and symbolism. Critics have also categorized his heroes in two groups. One is called Hemingway hero and the other, code hero. We can also term them as "tyro"<sup>1</sup> and "tutor"<sup>2</sup> figures. The 'tyro' or Hemingway heroes are heroes who have several flaws in their characters while the 'tutor' or code heroes are perfect characters who have very few flaws in their personality. Now these distinctions give a black and white picture of the long list of the Hemingway's heroes. Actually it is not as black and white as these pictures try to project. And in my view it would be our mistake to draw a line and separate them. They are creations of the artist who was too much involved with the questions of how to live in a world which has been destroyed and uprooted by the two consequent world wars. This war brought the whole civilization on the brink of apocalypse. Hemingway was very much concerned with life and death. It seems that several questions bothered him much. Should we escape life and run away like cowards and accept suicide as the only solution? Is death so horrible which always snatches away things which you love most? Is life so inhuman, unlucky and bed of thorns that there is no ray of hope or rose of love? These sort of questions gripped Hemingway's mind and all his works are an honest attempt, dressed in new style, to unlock the mystery behind it and come up with some solid answers. With every new novel Hemingway seems to be moving closer towards the answer. This means that there is a kind of gradual development of the heroes taking pace in the novels of Hemingway. This progress is not merely physical but also spiritual. In this context it would be a sheer mistake on the parts of critics to tag Hemingway and his thoughts as thoroughly irreligious. Though, in his novels, he time and again, can be seen as a non-believer of the taboos, customs and rituals attached with religion. The practice of going to church, offering prayer and doing confession bored him. He even seems to be against all sorts of idol worshipping. But he knows that he is a catholic and he likes spirituality as such. He does not believe in philosophy which changes in every age. He likes and adopts what is good and permanent in religion. Thus, Hemingway was able to search out these spiritual ways and codes that can refuel hope in the so called 'lost generation' of his era and

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help them to lead their lives in a significant way. Hemingway's search ended with his last novel 'The Old Man and The Sea' where he propounds and champions the religion of man.

But my research work would highlight this spiritual growth of Hemingway's heroes in the light of the famous Hindu religious book 'Gita'. I have, to my surprise, found many elements that Hemingway deals with in his novels, having a co-relation with situations, philosophies and verses in 'Gita'. I hope in my novel attempt I may remain successful. I would delineate my points logically and rationally. This comparison with 'Gita' is not meant to prove that Hemingway was inspired by it but the progress of his heroes on the path of spiritual development by sticking to some of the basic codes matches with that of the messages of lord Krishna to Arjuna. Arjuna's depletion of ignorance and enhancement in knowledge can be compared with the spiritual development of the heroes of Hemingway. Arjuna's case is similar when he reflects his weakness and ignorance by putting down his arms and deciding to die than to fight. But Krishna's Updeshas dissipates all doubts and fear from his mind and he comes out shining like the sun covered from clouds of moha and mayas. Similarly, we find that the young Nick Adams and Frederick Henry, in utter frustration and desperation, are ready to go to seclusion and develop a very negative theory of universal workings i.e. it is inhuman and cruel. Gradually with the passage of time their bereft soul is calmed down, refined and enlightened with the gradual development of the spiritual strength. This development also acts as a beacon to the 'lost generation' of the world wars.

Thus, the aim of the thesis is to highlight the gradual spiritual development of the heroes of Hemingway in the light of Lord Krishna's sermons to Arjuna in 'Gita'. The first chapter of this research work is entitled as "Vindication of Romantic World" where the hero of 'A Farewell to Arms', Fredrick Henry has been studied. Henry is the developed character of Nick Adams who joins the war without any serious reason as he fails to give any satisfactory answer to Barkley. He does not take war very seriously or in other words he considers it a big fun. He is beguiled by his romantic fancies that he will not be killed and that everyone should participate in it. But, once he gets fatal injuries in his leg, he becomes face to face with the cruel realities of war. He realises that this war has no meaning and without motive. It is only an outcome of some mad people who has some hidden vested interests and they befool common man by boastful speeches. He starts hating war and ultimately escapes it by jumping into the cold water of the river. His immediate decision was to run back to Catherine to find peace and happiness in her arms. He realised that there is nothing glorious about war and regards love as the only way out. But very soon his, this, illusion was also going to be proved futile when Catherine will die during child-labour. At that point Henry learns life's first great lesson that death is the ultimate reality. One cannot dodge death and life's

problems either by war or love. It will catch hold of you and turn you into dust. So, the real way is to except challenges and fight or struggle like a man which the successor heroes do. One must discharge one's duty without getting attached to its results or bothering about its consequences. This is also the basic theme running throughout 'Gita'.

From here begins the spiritual journey of Hemingway hero. Now, the real world is before him. His romantic fancies fade away. He, now, knows that neither sticking to religion nor fully submerging oneself in the world of senses a man's welfare is hidden. Death is the reality. Who that is born has to die. God, in one way or another, kills everyone. So, war or love alone is not the right way to live life. Man's welfare lies in imparting one's duty well. In the path of duty one has to take challenges and bear pain. But one cannot afford to lose one's nerve and commit suicide, which is a reflection of extreme cowardliness. As Krishna asks Arjuna to come out of all Mohas and Mayas which are misleading elements of our life causing illusions and restrict us from attaining true knowledge. Those whom you are not willing to kill are mortals and are already killed by me. May be not you but another would kill them. Their death is predestined and imperative. So, Arjuna, shed the clouds of ignorance and focus over your duty, for which you have taken birth on this earth. Your betterment lies in the fulfilment of your duty. Similarly, Henry comes out of the world of senses and emotions. He decides to face problems and take challenges that life throws at him rather than showing back to it. He returns with determination to develop certain qualities of fortitude, stoic endurance of pain and suffering and grace under pressure. We meet a completely transformed man at the end of the novel who has bid adieu to the arms of War as well as beloved's.

At the core of both 'Gita' and Hemingway's philosophy lies their stress over the importance of duty in man's life. Krishna keeps karma yoga at the highest level amongst all other kinds of yogas. In the same way we find Hemingway's heroes to be focusing over their duty; regarding it as their primary goal in life. One cannot flee away from one's duty. No one on earth is free from duty or action. To try to escape action is the worst form of evil and an act of a coward. Knowledge and wisdom can be gained only by performing one's duty.

"na karmanamanarambhannaiskarmyam puruso  
snute; na ca sannyasanadeva siddhim  
samadhigacchati"<sup>3</sup>

Neither without starting one's work nor by refraining from it can one attain wisdom. It is for this reason that we find Jake Barnes saying that he does not want to know the reason behind everything that happens rather he wishes to perform his duty; may be by walking on the path of duty he will get to know what it is all about i.e. attain wisdom. And similarly Robert Jordan while talking to pillar reveals that he has no fear except of not performing his duty.

Now, in our actions our sense-organs (indriyas) play a vital role in attaining knowledge but at

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the same time they are also the cause of diversion, frustration, pain and anger. Until and unless we over power rather control our indriyas we cannot attain wisdom. But to control does not mean to deliberately suppress it. One must give a free exploration and exposure to these senses and gradually one should switch to the driver's seat and move according to one's judgement. Lord Krishna teaches Arjuna that those beings are foolish and false who suppress their desires overtly but covertly longs for them. Only that person is great who does all his duties using all his sense organs and yet not becoming a slave of it.

Hemingway's heroes very well realised this fact and so we find them focused over their work than in other emotional activities. The first step they take in this endeavour is to control their emotions and check themselves from becoming a foolish slave of their passions and senses. Jake's character in 'The Sun Also Rises', is structured around the basic Hemingway code of holding tight which is also the theme of the second chapter entitled, 'Mastering One's Senses and Emotions'. Jake Barnes, in the entire novel, is trying to control his senses, not to be governed by it as Cohn is. He behaves gracefully under extreme psychological pressure which other characters fail to do and this goes positively with Jake's image in the eyes of other characters. Though controlling one's senses and emotions is a very difficult thing and we find Jake realising the pressure or difficulty. In 'Gita', Arjuna's words do explain the pressure very well. He says;

"cancalam hi manah ksrna pramathi balavaddrdham; Tasyaham nigraham manye vayoriva suduskaram."<sup>4</sup>

Meaning, our heart is very fickle in nature and controlling it is as difficult as taming wind. It is difficult to control this restless, turbulent, strong and obstinate mind. As one cannot catch hold of wind in the same way mind cannot be controlled easily.

Hemingway's phrase of 'grace under pressure', Krishna's updesha to hold the reign of one's senses and critic's remark of holding tight for the heroes of Hemingway have same meeting point. The essence of all these phrases is to learn to behave properly like a true gentleman amidst the external pressure (evil surrounding us) and internal pressure (emotional surcharge, fear of nada and unlimited fatal desires of senses). Since, it is the first step towards perfection so we find Jake Barnes to be faltering and again balancing himself. The best part of these heroes is that they know their weaknesses and like an artist keep on doing a lot of chiselling, scraping and polishing work. Jake's effort is clearly seen in a number of instances in the novel where we find other characters to be led by their nose like an ass but Jake acts wisely despite of exposing himself fully to the wounds and pains of life. He does not deliberately suppress the demands of his senses but always makes sure that it should not cross the limit and consequently gets unchecked leading to irreparable damage. He acts very much like a bull-fighter whose art lies in exposing himself to the fatal danger and working as close as possible with the bulls. He then

gradually calms down the furious bull like a tame animal. Bull here stands for the unbridled sensual desires and evil forces of nature which if not handled with master's hand may lead to death. An imperfect matador becomes the victim of bull's ferocity. Either he is gored by the bull or bear fatal injuries. The mass running in front of the bull symbolises entire world which is driven by senses but only a few perfect ones like the matadors know the art of controlling the bull of senses and passion. Those who control it are people admired and honoured by common men or spectators.

After practicing the art of controlling one's senses, Hemingway hero moves towards his next step/code i.e. performing one's duty on the path of becoming a perfect hero. As a result it becomes the title of our third chapter i.e 'Prominence of Duty'. Thus, we find Jake Barnes's developed form in Robert Jordan, the hero of 'For Whom the Bell Tolls'. Here, Jordan appears much clear in his objective and vision of life. He takes firm decisions and remains all the time calm and stable from mind. The very milieu, action and background of this novel are in contrast to the previous novel. The hero unlike Robert Jordan, is involved in Spanish civil war, moves with purpose in Spain and governed by his sense of duty. The theme of this novel can be highlighted as the passion and determination of the hero for his duty which he keeps at the highest place in the list of importance. This duty is not projected as something narrow and self-centred; rather it has a very wide humanitarian range. The hero feels his duty towards the whole society. He calls himself an anti-fascist and feels his moral duty to contribute as far as possible in extricating and defeating the fascists so that this world could become a salubrious place to live in. Robert Jordan moves with the ideologies of freedom, liberty, equality and fraternity. Thus, with the development of the hero, his vision has enlarged. He is not like the weaker heroes Nick Adams, Frederick Henry and Jake Barnes. They were wounded men, both internally and externally and their whole time is spent in healing themselves up and overcoming their emotional weaknesses. But, here the hero is neither wounded nor engaged in controlling his senses. He is fully mature and healthy man both physically and mentally. He is a soldier, a dynamiter, who is guided by his moral duty to save the whole humanity from the evil of fascism. His sense of duty with its broad spectrum has become the title of the novel, 'For Whom the Bell Tolls'. Hemingway by quoting lines from the poem of John Donne's 'Devotions' has very beautifully expressed the whole theme of the novel. Robert Jordan is a loyalist. He is against the barbaric acts and brutal killings of innocent people, especially of Spain, by the fascist. His moral conscience compels him to help such people and destroy the demonic fascists.

Robert Jordan's passion for his duty is so much so that it almost seems to be his religion. And Lord Krishna also tells Arjuna that his duty as a soldier is his religion and the best way to achieve Him/salvation. While distinguishing all sorts of yogic

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practices for attaining the supreme-being, Krishna puts karma or duty on the highest rung and declares it to be the best and easiest way (marg) to reach to Him.

““sannyasah karmayogasca nihsreyasakaravubhau;  
Tayostu karmasannyasatkarmayogo visisyate”  
[sannyasa (discipline of knowledge) and karmayoga  
(discipline of action) both lead to salvation. But the  
two ‘karmayoga’ is superior to ‘sankhyayoga’.”<sup>5</sup>

The demands of the cause are great, even extending to a form of martyrdom. He is aware of the fact that it may take the lives of people with whom he feels attached now. Those guerrillas, for whom he is doing this, will have to lose their lives as well as move from the place but he has to sacrifice all that for a greater cause. He may have to sacrifice his love for this and he will because he knows that the individual has to subordinate himself and part of his personal autonomy to the general movement. “Neither you nor this old man are anything,” think Jordan, “you are instruments to do your duty.”<sup>6</sup> Here we reminded of Krishna’s that revelation to Arjuna, that he is not killing people but they are killed by the Lord Himself. And, also, if we go by the code of Hemingway, the measure of a man’s worth is the degree to which he can sacrifice his own personal ends for the sake of the cause.

Jordan is almost one step ahead of his precursor, Jake Barnes. He has already honed up those codes of controlling one’s senses and made them a part of his personality. Be it anything, love, hunger, or execution of work, he never lets the emotions overpower his intellect. He knows that an emotionally weak person is a coward and they cannot make firm decisions. He possesses the power of overlooking his physical needs while involved in a work of great importance that demands concentration and sacrifice. He calls anger, “another damned luxury you can’t afford.”<sup>7</sup> And he feels that “getting angry is as bad as getting scared.”<sup>8</sup> Though, at one point of time in this novel, Jordan’s anger goes unchecked when he discovers that Pablo has stolen his detonators. It is for this reason that he cannot be called a code hero or tutor figure. He has to learn and practice a lot to turn into a tutor figure that has attained control over his behaviour and sense through hard practice. Improvement in one’s behaviour through yogic practice to turn oneself into a wise and ideal man is the main purpose of ‘Gita’. The present situation of Robert Jordan is the situation of a person who is at a middle stage of improvisation. Jordan has learned to control over his hunger, fear, sadness, passions and other emotions. But two major shortcomings of his character are that he is still habitual of drinking and secondly he sometimes burst into anger which is not in accordance of attaining a balanced state of mind, wisdom and perfect character. ‘Gita’ says,

“ dukhesvanudvignamanah sukhesu vigatasprah; Vitaragabhayakrodhah sthitadhirmunirucyate”<sup>9</sup>  
“yah sarvatranabhisnehastattatprapya subhasubham; Nabhinandati na dvesti tasya prajna pratisthita”<sup>10</sup>

These lines mean that only that man, whose heart does not rends at crisis, nor jumps in pleasures and whose emotions, fears and anger have

destroyed, can be called a balanced nature man or a saint. Just as a tortoise shrinks by enfolding all its limbs, similarly, a person should cut himself aloof from the pleasures of senses. Only then he can attain balanced state of mind. Reflections of such saintliness can be seen in the character of Santiago.

Richard Cantwell is another sequel that is added in this spiritual development of Hemingway’s heroes. He is a middle aged man who has been in several wars, killed many and has been wounded himself. This brief introduction to his life history makes him the descendant of the series of Hemingway heroes who share almost similar life incidences. Nick Adams was the teenage period of Hemingway. While Frederick Henry and Jakes Barnes belong to the 20s to 30s who have just left war. Robert Jordan, too, belongs to prime age of 30 to 40 where he is full of idealism and enthusiasm for duty or to serve the whole humanity. But Richard Cantwell has moved far away from his youth and now entered into old age where he is awaiting death. Before dying he confesses everything to Reneta. Being far away from the major incidences of war, Cantwell is able to form an objective and unprejudiced judgement of his past. Now standing at distance far away from the time of his vindicated and devastated youth he can weigh his life in a better way. He has lost as many battles as women in his life. He knows that he fought every war with a mission to win and has killed many soldiers with whom he has no personal vengeance. But Cantwell is not concerned with the morality question of Robert Jordan over killings and coldly counts that he has 122 “sures”<sup>11</sup>. He has overcome, in his old age, all those feelings of emotional remorse or bad dreams because now reaching to a certain level of maturity and wisdom, he is fully aware of the fact that on this earth one has to kill the other for bigger causes as part of their duty. This awakening of the knowledge of truth give rise to a feeling of bondage between himself and the enemy, a kind of sympathetic love which eliminates the feeling of hatred and enmity with them. This feeling of love for all including his enemies takes the Hemingway hero one step ahead towards his spiritual growth. Cantwell feels that he is more in love with those people he has killed than anyone else. In the same manner Santiago confesses to marlin that though he will kill him, he loves him. This is a great leap on the path of spiritual growth of Hemingway hero as it uplifts him from the lot of common ignorant people. While talking about Rommel, Reneta asks Cantwell,

“ ‘Did you really like Rommel?’  
‘Very much.’

‘But he was your enemy.’  
‘I love my enemies sometimes more  
than my friends.’”<sup>12</sup>

The last chapter of this research work is ‘Attainment of Sainthood’. With the publication of ‘The Old Man and the Sea’, Hemingway reached to the pinnacle of his success as a writer of novels. This book is the sum total of Hemingway’s literary career. Here he has been able to deliver the philosophy which he was weaving for so long in his novels. All his tyro figures’ ultimate destination was to attain this highest level of purified and spiritually strengthened soul like Santiago.

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. He is fully balanced character who has a complete control over his emotions and behaviour. He is an emotionally stable personality unlike the young boy, Manolin, whose innocent heart easily gets affected by seeing deep scars on the palms of the old man (telling the tale of the ordeal Santiago went through in the fight) and starts weeping. We can compare Manolin with Nick Adams. Their innocent world is highly vulnerable to any bad external event. In contrast, the old man, with the passage of time has developed immunity to pain and vicissitudes of life. He can bear a lot of pain and would not accept defeat easily. He has been through many dangerous expeditions and adventures. He has fought many fatal contests which continued for many days.

"his hands had the deep-creased scars from handling heavy fish on the cords. But none of these scars were fresh. They were as old as erosions in a fishless desert."<sup>13</sup>

That is why he has firm believe in his art and skills in fishing and always remains ready to take up challenges that are thrown at him by nature or life. His personality matches with such great men as Gandhi ji, who has developed capacity, through practice, to endure a lot of pain and penance upon his body; he could perform fast for several days. Defeat or ill-luck cannot deviate the old man from his duty.

"his hope and his confidence has never gone. But now they were freshening as when the breeze rises."<sup>14</sup>

Even his recent defeat with the greatest Marlin, he has ever seen or heard of, could not push him to the abyss of sadness. He quickly realises his mistake and is ready to make a fresh start with the boy in fishing. Here is a hidden message for the whole modern world that has turned hopeless after the destruction caused by the two world wars. One should never become hopeless and cease making effort. Thus, Hemingway has sung, with full enthusiasm, the song of man's glory and virility. He has championed the religion of man; the inherent spirituality which is age old and with which a man is born with. We just have to realise that strength and use it. This strength has nothing to do with man's mussel power. It has mainly to do with the internal spiritual strength which has tremendous capacity to stand against tornadoes and face all odds.

To conclude we can say that Hemingway's series of heroes should not be divided into two categories rather they are the developed forms of one personality. The basic traits of an adventures spirit are there in all the heroes; they differ only in their spiritual development. The major highlight of this thesis was the spiritual development of the heroes of Hemingway in the light of the philosophy of 'Gita'. Though, 'Gita' is a religious book of Hindus, yet the message given in it covers the entire humanity because its focus is over man's real nature and role in life. We often get lost in the maya of this physical world and are pained at the loss of our dear ones. Many get diverted to the path of self-destruction and inaction as Arjuna does but Lord Krishna come for the rescue of his dear friend and enlightens him with true knowledge and wisdom that make Arjuna able to perceive this illusionary world of senses with glasses of knowledge after which their remains no space for doubt and grief. Similarly Nick

Adams and Frederick Henry are riding on the same boat of immaturity. War's destruction and horrors bring a complete change in their perception towards life and death. Their innocent and romantic world is vindicated by the bitter realities and harsh truths of life. They are physically wounded and mentally depressed. From here arise those questions which change the heroes completely by wiping out the dust of ignorance from their minds. For the first time we see the Hemingway hero to be pondering over questions related to life, death, universe, love, duty, religion and knowledge. The questioning never ends. Even in the last novel, 'The Old Man and the Sea', Santiago tends to brood on the questions related to man's necessity for struggle and his relationship with the universe. Robert Jordan learns a lot in a very short span of time. This self-questioning is the process of refinement of soul, depletion of ignorance and attainment of knowledge. This is the spiritual development that I have tried to highlight in my research work. It is spiritual because it carries religious essence with itself barring religious customs, rituals and prayers.

The comparison of Hemingway's novels with the philosophy of 'Gita' dove tails well because both celebrates the religion of man and focus over the question of how man should live in this world of mortals. 'Gita' does not deal with God's actions but it registers the spiritual growth of ignorant but powerful Arjuna. As Arjuna was ignorant in the beginning where he, under the grip of illusionary world of senses, relinquishes his duty like a coward, similarly Nick Adams and Frederick Henry, being unaware of reality or truth, come under the grip of anxiety and depression as many other men of world war period felt. They want to escape from life or from their duty deeming it cruel, futile and hopeless. But slowly and steadily their ignorance is shed away and their anxiety is calmed down turning them into a saint who has controlled his senses and remains stable in the dual forces of life.

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