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## The Philosophy of “Nishkam Karma” in Arun Joshi’s *The Foreigner*

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### Abstract:

Nishkam Karma, self-less or desire-less action, an action performed without any expectation of fruits or results, is the central tenet of Karmayoga path to Liberation. Its modern advocates emphasize upon achieving success following the principles of Yoga and stepping beyond personal goals and agendas while pursuing any action over greater good, which has become well known since it is the central message of *The Bhagavadgita*. It is a universal document as well as one of the concrete forces of Indian philosophy that embodies men’s perpetual doubts, withdrawals, quests and involvements as much as an affirmation of faith. The prime emphasis of *The Gita* is on man and how he should act. The question it raises and the answer it provides are both of a fundamental nature and universal relevance.

*The Foreigner*, Arun Joshi’s first novel, is based on the philosophy of ‘Karmayoga’. Sindi Oberoi, the protagonist undergoes a sort of spiritual transformation in his journey of life. He is preoccupied with philosophical problems of involvement (Asakti) and detachment (Anasakti). The relevance of some of the concepts of *The Gita* - action-inaction, attachment-detachment, involvement-non-involvement has been constantly shown in relation to the protagonist who is an embodiment of evolution of a blundering approach to the concepts of *The Gita* into its truer understanding and practice.

**Keywords:** Nishkarm Karma, Karmyoga, *The Bhagavadgita*, Spiritual transformation.

### Introduction:

In Indian philosophy, action or Karma has been divided into three categories, according to their intrinsic qualities or gunas. Here, ‘Nishkam Karma’ belongs to the first category, the Sattva (Pure) or actions which add to calmness, the Sakam Karma (Self-centred action) comes in the second, rajasika. (aggression) and Vikarma (bad-action) comes under the third, tamasika that correlates to darkness or inertia.

Nishkam Karma, gets an important place in *The Bhagavadgita*, the central text of *The Mahabharata*, where Krishna advocates ‘Nishkam Karma Yoga’ (the yoga of selfless action) as the ideal path to realize the Truth. Allocated work done without expectations, motives, or thinking about its outcomes tends to purify one’s mind and gradually makes an individual fit to see the value of reason and the benefits of renouncing the work itself. These concepts are vividly described in the following verses of *The Bhagavadgita*:

1. To action alone hast thou a right and never at all to its fruits; let not the fruits of action be thy motive; neither let there be in thee any attachment to inaction (Radhakrishnan 136).
2. Fixed in Yoga, do thy work, O Winner of wealth (Arjuna), abandoning attachment, with an even mind in success and failure, for evenness of mind is called Yoga (136).
3. Do thou thy allotted work, for action is better than inaction; even the maintenance of thy physical life cannot be effected without action. (154).
4. He who does the work which he ought to do without seeking its fruit he is the samnyasin, he is the yogin, not he who does not light the sacred fire, and performs no rights (218).
5. He who controls the senses by the mind, O Arjuna, and without attachment engages the organs of action in the path of work, he is superior (153). such persons performs Karma-Yoga. *The Gita* preaches action as the law of existence and right action as the law of purity and strength. To purify self, to discover the infinite power that is the true being, the person must act.

Arun Joshi, the novelist of rare vision and sensitivity, is a well known name in the field of contemporary Indian English Fiction. He has spun out some of the most compelling and thought-provoking fiction written in the twentieth century Indian literature; his credentials as an author of rare sensitivity and exceptional talent were firmly established. His works represent a unique depiction of the dual between the internal and the external, the intuitive and the imposed. Among the contemporary Indian English novelists, Arun Joshi has highlighted most effectively some of the eternal metaphysical and ethical questions. He is deeply influenced by the philosophical and ethical values of Hinduism as well as the ever-lasting impact of *The Gita* on Indian life and thought. His metaphysical leanings, basically, are towards Hinduism. He believes that “Hinduism is highly existentialist – oriented philosophy since it attaches so much importance to the right way to live (to exist)” (Banerjee IV).

It is because of the existentialist leanings that Arun Joshi was led to like Hinduism and love *The Bhagavadgita*. The emotions of responsibility, commitment, freedom, choice have been emphasized in his writing and he strongly believes in them. In his interview, he expresses to Purbi Banerjee ; “I strongly believe that individual actions have effects on others and on one self. So one cannot afford to continue with an irresponsible existence but has to commit oneself at



some point” (IV). He has firm faith in the concept of the right way to live and in the theory of “Karma” as exhibited in *The Bhagavadgita*.

*The Foreigner* presents a protagonist who undergoes a sort of spiritual transformation. The relevance of the concepts of *The Gita*-action-inaction, attachment-detachment, and involvement-non-involvement has been shown in relation to its protagonist Sindi Oberoi who is an embodiment of the evolution of a blundering approach to the concepts of *The Gita* into its truer understanding and practice.

Sindi’s early career is a picture of *The Gita*’s concept of non-attachment. In his actions, he is portrayed as detached from the world, but his detachment leads to inaction illustrating the following verse of *The Bhagavadgita*:

“He who does the work which he ought to do without seeking its fruit he is the samnyasin, he is the yogin, not he who does not light the sacred fire, and performs no rites” (Radhakrishnan 218).

Having lost both his parents at the age of four, Sindi gets his school education in Kenya, higher education in Engineering in England and lands on a job in the United States. He is a child of mixed parentage born of a Kenyan mother and Indian father. Having lost them both in his early infancy, he is deprived of parental love and affection. Further, he is brought up by his uncle but he too leaves him alone soon. This aloneness instilled in him a sense of detachment to everything. He is completely rootless and feels that he does not belong anywhere. The only reality of his parents for him is “ a couple of wrinkled and cracked photographs” (*The Foreigner* 12).

Sindi is spiritually detached from the world. He declares that he has lost all faith even in himself as a free agency. Parentlessness has its manifold implications in the different facets of his life, like his religion and his love for June Blyth. He is afraid of having any relation and permanent bond with anybody. He makes love to June Blyth, but is haunted by the meaninglessness of everything including his love. He expresses “I was afraid of possessing anybody and of being possessed” (91). Therefore, he does not reciprocate June’s desire for marriage and she leaves him for another Indian friend of his, Babu Rao Khemka. Later, June tells Sindi that she is going to marry Babu. His love for June ends tragically both for June and his friend Babu Rao Khemka primarily because Sindi is afraid of marriage as well as its demands.

A prisoner of his own “inaction”, Sindi cries on the news of June’s decision to marry Babu. When June again expresses her wish to return to him because of Babu’s dualism, he tries to comfort and help her to find herself by making relation to her but without any serious intent. This makes June confess her love for Sindi to Babu, who, unable to bear the shock commits suicide leaving June pregnant with his child. Soon after Babu’s death, June also dies in an attempted abortion. Thus, the confused approach of Sindi to the concept of detachment and non action cost the death of the two of his close friends.

Sindi, in a state of despair feels guilty and dreams of his father: “My parents, my uncle, my lovers, Babu and June, their parents, and finally myself, one by one all were called by the invisible judges and asked to give their evidence” (165). The non-action concept of detachment that Sindi holds for his life cause him two lives of his dear ones which shakes his consciousness. He experiences the first insight into the mystery of existence and expresses: “Detachment at that time had meant inaction. Now I had begun to see the fallacy in it. Detachment consisted of right action and not escape from it” (162).

The muddledom in Sindi’s approach of life that causes the death of his friend Babu and his beloved June drains out his confidence. A deep sense of affliction scourges him and he feels as if there is nothing left for him to depend upon. Finding his position unjustifiable he is seized with a sense of guilt and self-contradiction: “I had presumed that I could extricate her from the web of her own actions; that I could make her happy by simply standing still and letting her use me whichever way she wished. Nothing could have been farther from the idea of detachment. That was a fatal presumption” (165).

The suicide of Babu and the death of June, both arising from his confusion of attachment and detachment and his callous intent, mark a turning point in his life. The feeling of futility in the hands of existence grows with every passing day of his life and a strong urge overtakes him to move to a different place. He longs to be in place where he can experiment with himself and start a new life. He moves ahead in search of a new world entirely free from his past (162). Sindi is faced with the problem of putting together all that has happened to him and coming to grip with life. For career, he decides to leave America with a wish to return India, the land of his ancestors, where he joins Mr. Khemka’s industry as a Manager. His initial feelings after arrival in India and after seeing his employer Mr. Khemka (Babu’s father) get into serious trouble with Income Tax people. He still wants to remain uninvolved in this matter. He confides to Sheila: “I withdraw from action for another reason. I first want to know the purpose of action... There is no purpose in life. There is perhaps a little purpose in right action in action without desire” (120). His much-vaunted detachment ultimately crumbles down. Two of the strongest passions known to man are aroused in him – anger at Khemka’s dishonest practices and love for the suffering poor like Muthu who had been cheated by Khemka:

It was a sad sight. The worker’s clothes were falling off in rags and sweat poured off their backs as if they had just had a shower. What was the point in all those big men like Mr. Khemka talking about God and pain so long as half-naked men had to wrestle with a beastly mass of concrete under a scorching sun ? And all for three rupees a day. These are my people, I thought. And yet I moved among them as if I were a stranger (166).

Finally, he reaches the right conclusion that “detachment consisted in getting involved with the world” (189). He decides to accept the employees unanimous demand that he should take over the management of the imprisoned Khemka’s industry:



As I entered the room, I had a strange sensation, something I had never before felt in life. I felt as if I had been dropped on a sinking ship and charged with the impossible task of taking it ashore. The men looked up at me unblinking their expressionless faces reflecting neither love nor skepticism, but only the accumulated despair of their weary lives. Until that moment I had not realized how considerably my visit to Muthu's home had affected me. If that was the sum total of Muthu's life, God alone knew what massive suffering lay behind those vacant eyes. It almost overwhelmed me (189).

Consequently, Sindi surrenders to the right kind of involvement and the right kind of action with which his selfish desires have nothing to do. He decides "to concentrate on decisive action" (191). The fruit of it was really not his concern. Realizing the true nature of his situation he ultimately reaches the right objective of his life, surrendering self for the benefits of the others. This message of self surrender is the keynote of *The Gita*. Reminiscing over his past and now with a clear objective of his future, Sindi realizes:

Before I went to sleep that night I took a general stock of myself. In many ways the past had been a waste, but it had not been without its lessons. I had started adult life as a confused adolescent, engrossed with myself, searching for wisdom and the peace that comes with it. The journey had been long and tedious and still was not over.

And the future ? In an ultimate sense, I knew, it would be as meaningless as the past. But, in a narrower sense, there would perhaps be useful tasks to be done; perhaps, if I were lucky, even a chance to redeem the past (185).

Arun Joshi condemns both existential detachment and involvement with the self which Sindi embodies in the earlier part of his life. *The Foreigner* underlines the importance of non-involvement of the self but a sympathetic involvement with the world as a step towards the achievement of "Karmayoga" or non-attached action.

Sindi's earlier detachment with the world has now been replaced by a fervent but unselfish attachment. He gets the opportunity to practice what he has learnt out of his long quest – action without attachment. Sindi, who while in America lacked strength to endure his burdens of friendship and associated himself with the invention of a machine which could throw twenty thousand people out of work, now develops a selfless attachment with the world. He surrenders himself to the cause of others. Deeply aware of this new orientation in his way of life and thought, he gives a new orientation to his name too and instead of "Surendra" or "Surinder" he calls himself "Surrender Oberio". Sindi's new-found attachment with the world points to the secret of non attached action of *The Gita*. He seems to pursue the teachings of *The Gita* to enlighten his restless soul which expresses that "The yogins (men of action) perform works merely with the body, mind, understanding or merely with the senses, abandoning attachment

,for the purification of their souls”( Radhakrishnan 207).The soul earnest attains to peace well founded, by abandoning attachment to the fruits of works.

*The Gita* preaches, not to renounce works but to do them, offering them to the Supreme in which alone is immortality. When we renounce our attachment to the finite ego and its likes and dislikes and place our actions in the Eternal, we acquire the true renunciation which is consistent with free activity in the world. We are called upon to realize the self in us which is pure, free and distinct from the factors of objective universe. The constituents of the ego are impermanent, a flux which changes from moment to moment. When the grace of God descends on us, Divine knowledge floods our being with a light which illumines and transforms, making clear all that was before dark and obscure.

*The Foreigner* is a work of strong affirmation of the preaching of *The Bhagavadgita*. Arun Joshi uses the philosophy of Nishkam Karma of *The Gita* to enlighten the soul of Sindi to find out its salvation. Sindi’s long and tedious journey helps him to arrive at a meaning of his life. Joshi seems to add a footnote to *The Gita* by demonstrating that non-attachment can be reached by stages- an important intermediary stage being the individual’s attachment with the world combined with his non-attachment with himself. Sindi’s return to India, the spiritual home, opens his eyes to the miseries of this world and through the process of emotional involvement with the workers; he arrives at a re-adjustment of his values. Having become a sort of ‘Karmayogi’ he finds his equanimity and salvation at the end.

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