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## **The Theory Of Karma In The Philosophical Novels Of Indian English Literature.**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

*Most of Indian English literature quotes that the destination of each ones destiny is influenced by two important factors namely 'Karma' and 'Dharma'.*

*Karma is nothing but the action of life and the lessons we have to learn from it to correct our destiny, whereas Dharma means to live our life according to our duty to be done in this birth.*

*Many of the Indian English novels project this basic principle of the theory of Karma that one's past Karma influences the present. This has been realized by the protagonists as they progress/digress in their lives. Many novels also reflect the 'Law of Identical Harvest', which says that effects produced by our thoughts are more identical in nature to thought itself, like a corn reproduces only corn and a mango can reproduce only a mango.*

*The events or happenings in the novels, to the protagonists, though not visible but are acted upon by a supreme force. The various protagonists realize the impact of such a force and are much wiser, and change course and try to move in the right direction- a trial and error exercise to finally meet their pre destined end.*

**KEY WORDS:** *'Karma', 'Dharma', 'critical influence', 'Law of Identical Harvest', 'historic approach', 'Hindu concept', 'fruition', 'Karma Phala', 'action-reaction', 'predestined', 'designated', 'collective karma'*

Indian English has become a new form of Indian culture and voice in which India speaks. While Indian English authors have been making significant contributions to world literature since the pre-independence year; these few years have been a massive flourishing of Indian

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English writings in the international market. They are also receiving great deal of critical acclaim starting from Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan, Anita Desai, Toru Dutt to Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Baneerjee Divakaruni, Vikram Chandra...the parade of fine Indian writers is long and lengthening.

Indian English Literature perhaps seizes the most sublime attention, owing to its most ancient and pre historic approach by philosophical and spiritual thinkers. English fiction in India is wrapped up in Indian philosophy having its birth in the Vedas.

According to Indian religion and philosophy ‘Karma’ and ‘Fate’ play important roles in human life. Exponents of the theory of Karma hold the view that the present existence of an individual is the effect of the past and its future would be the effects of its present existence. It is a Hindu concept, which finds its ground in traditional upbringing, where the past actions of man are stressed. It is a belief that thoughts and deeds of one earthly life have “*fruit in a subsequent birth of a man*”<sup>1</sup>.The Law of Karma suggests that a person’s mental and physical actions are binding. Through our actions or inactions and our intention behind them we bind ourselves to ‘Prakriti’ and cycle of births and deaths. Broadly speaking, Karma means not only actions, but also the intentions and consequences associated with each action. The Bhagavad Gita , the Hindu book of religion within the epic ‘Mahabharata’ went a step ahead and included the desire for fruit of one’s action ‘Karma Phala’ also as binding but action without any expectation ‘Nishkama Karma’ as ultimate.

The Law of Karma has its echoes in the scientific world too. We find it in Newton’s Law of Motion, according to which every action has an opposite reaction. In nature also we see that we reap what we sow.

Our success and failures are mostly products of our own thoughts and actions. Some of the beliefs associated with Karma are well known; that it is self correcting mechanism; that it binds beings to the cycle of births and deaths; that it is responsible for the evolution of beings from one stage to another.

Hinduism recognizes four types of Karma:

1. **SANCHITA KARMA:** It is the sum total of the accumulated Karma of the previous lives. It is the burden of our past, which is in our account and which needs to be exhausted at some stage in our existence.

2. **PRARABDHA KARMA:** It is that part of our Sanchita Karma which is currently activated in our present life and which influences the course of our present life. Depending upon the nature of our actions, we are either exhausting it or creating more ‘*karmic*’ burdens for ourselves.

3. **AGAMI KARMA:** It is the Karma which is arising out of our current life activities whose consequences will be experienced by us in the coming lives. It is usually added to the account of our Sanchita karma.

4. **KRIYAMANA KARMA:** This is the Karma whose consequences are experienced right now or in the near future, but in any case in this life itself.

The whole of Bhagavad Gita is a dialogue between action ‘DHARMA’ (Duty) and ‘KARMA’ (Fortune). The philosophy of Karma –A process of *action* and *re-action*, theory of *cause and effect* is the guiding factor in shaping the psyche of protagonists in most of the Indian English fiction writers. It is heavily grounded on this theory and all actions and reactions in the plot are done without a sense of doer ship, without passion or prejudice, or by not seeking any fruit of actions.

‘*A Woman is bound to write like a Woman*’<sup>2</sup>, and in the past few years there has been a move to give a more humane and more balanced picture of female protagonist who refuses to place the reasons for all her travails and trauma on the threshold of her ‘Karma’, the old system which condemned woman to ‘*squint askance*’<sup>3</sup> at things through the prism of religion/bigotry/ or sheer misfortune or just ‘Karma’ or through the eyes or through the interests of her husband or sons or brothers. Now it has surely but slowly given place to direct and practical interests of one who must be independent of her ‘fate’.

Anita Desai’s Maya in ‘Cry, the Peacock’(1983) ‘*Maya. My very name means nothing, is nothing but an illusion*’<sup>4</sup>. Monisha’s supine acceptance of her ‘fate’ in ‘Voices in the City’ (1965) – ‘*Whose life is a silent, blurred film that has neither entertained nor horrified her*’<sup>5</sup> Nayantara Sehgal’s Rashmi in ‘This Time of Morning’(1983) ; Rama Mehta’s Geeta in ‘

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Inside the Haveli (1984) and Shashi Deshpande's Indu in Roots and Shadows (1987) are all victims of 'Fate' but they all turn this 'invisible force' upside down and make their individual 'efforts' to 'deliver them from Karmic hold'.

New age theory of Karma has been reinvented by these women writers wherein they try to convert their 'Woman into Heroine'. The heroism lies in not accepting meekly their 'fateful' existence and deal with their very existence in a stoical manner.

It is indeed a strategy of these women authors in particular to subvert the patriarchal control in their novels by quickly laying emphasis on the 'female capacity' to be 'their own deliverer' and try to find answers for their 'fortune or misfortune' from the present set up of things. The reality before them is more pulsating than the unknown forces of the previous lives filled with 'Karma'.

Anita Desai's female protagonists are fascinated by the idea of life being '*pre destined, pre designated, a question of programming*'. Maya, in 'Cry, the Peacock' tries to come out of a traumatic situation of being a wife not loved, understood or appreciated by her husband Gautama, by thinking that her 'Karma' in the past life is responsible for the state of affairs in this birth. We see here Anita Desai echoes something of the 'Sanchita' Karma in our lives. Just as an individual octopus has no choice but to die after giving birth to little ones, similarly Desai's heroines Monisha, Sita (Where shall we go this Summer?) are all doers of 'Kriyamana Karma' wondering what they are programmed for but unlike the female octopus, they are all destined by 'Karmic Forces' to survive. They all possess amazing powers of survival and adaptation. All these heroines accept life in all its deformed state because they all realize that they cannot reject it. In acceptance is their strength. If one opts for life, one must also learn the art of 'compromising'. Accepting the 'Karmic Force' is also a great 'show of strength'.

They all accept that there are no values outside life and that 'individualization' can take place only when one interacts with the outside world in an act of anticipation. One has to exhaust the sum total of the accumulated 'Karma' of the previous lives. One cannot run away from one's 'Sanchita Karma' affecting the present 'Prarabdha Karma'. However this revelation gives all of them a 'peace within themselves'. The harmony between their 'Kriyamana Karma' and 'Sanchita Karma' itself becomes a penance for all of them.

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Kamala Markandaya's Rukhmini in 'Nectar in a Sieve'<sup>6</sup> is 'both *an observer and participant in the long process of life*'<sup>7</sup>. Rukhmini is a classic representative of a 'simple, gentle and generous village woman of India' who believes that a woman gets a good or a bad husband depending upon the 'Karma' of her previous life -Sanchita Karma<sup>8</sup>.

In spite of all her sorrows and miseries staring at her family due to displacement to the city in search of livelihood, Rukhmini does not break down under the pressure of calamities. Her spirit '*vindicates human nature and glorifies the innate heroism of the soul*'. (Dilip Kumar Sen-p137). But her craving for a son and her confession like a typical Indian woman-'*I have no sons, only one child, a girl, what Karma have we done that we must be punished now? Am I not clear and healthy?*'(Nectar in a Sieve, p20).

Rama Mehta's Geeta in 'Inside the Haveli'<sup>9</sup> (Arnold Heinnemann-1977) talks about how a progressive educated woman like her accepts the discipline of a 'haveli' (fort like home) without protest because her 'match' was made in heaven. '*She is shut off from the outside world*'. (p70). She chooses her own way of life taking her cloistered existence as a 'predestined' scheme of things for her, but she goes a step further and decides to change the inmates of 'The Haveli' to a possible extent through patience and perseverance in analyzing her situation-'*the Haveli has made me a willing prisoner within its walls*'.(p137). Thus there is something beautiful, something active, and something creative in Geeta's apparent submission to her 'fate'.

*Indu in Shashi Deshpande's 'Roots and Shadows' is a modern day educated woman, facing problems of sex, marriage and individuality. Even she exhibits a streak of acceptance of her position with her un compatible husband – 'It is the way I want to be ...here I become fluid with no shape, no form of my own'* (p54). In being so she is neither vindictive nor bitter. She is just resigning herself to her 'fate'. She does not want any external catastrophe to take place in her life though she is very unhappy. A placid acceptance of her situation her 'Karma' is again the *liet motif* of this novel.

R.K Narayan's engagement with the theory of Karma is repeatedly visible in most of his short stories/ novels. He saw Karma surrounding the efforts of every man for success. He experienced how success was transitory and fleeting, and he came to the conclusion that what remains longer and firmer is in the end more painful and unwanted. Keeping his mind on

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Karma he says about death- *“The loss of my wife was sudden and not even remotely anticipated by me- although my father-in-law had his doubts while looking in to my horoscope earlier. But now I had to accept her death as a fact, one has to get used to the idea of death even while living. If you have to accept life, you are inevitably committed to the notion of death also<sup>10.</sup>”*

It means that if man has to accept victory, he will have to be committed to the notion of defeat. Further he says that death is not the end of everything as it seems –personality may have other planes of existence, and the decay of the physical body through disease or senility may mean nothing more than a change of vehicle. Loss and death are part and parcel of the Karma that we live without grudge.

It is Karma that keeps man engaged in multifarious activities of this transitory world. Man’s engagement in the all round play of **MAYA** accounts for his unhappiness. Joseph Campbell, a famous scholar of world mythology tells the story of a kitten before a mirror that sees what he thinks is another kitten. He stalks it, boxes with it, even rubs noses with it. Finally he peeps behind the mirror and realizes that he has been reacting to an image. Like the kitten, you and I spend our days loving and fighting over things that are ultimately illusionary, according to the theory of Maya. Even You and I in our separate forms are illusions for we are all part of ONE- BRAHMAN. Narayan’s characters follow the essence of Maya and aspire for something good in life, but their actions and efforts are often met with failures.

The failure is not a casual phenomenon in his novels. His characters play into the hands of Karma. The philosophy of Karma has made his characters look and behave like typical human beings with all their unflinching gestures, desires and efforts.

We see Rosie the heroine of The Guide(Indian Thought Publication-1985) trying to please her husband Marco , an archeologist and she considers it as her Dharma (duty) as an ideal Indian wife. Marco’s indifference towards her is because of her Karma, that’s what she surmises. The characters in the novels of Narayan find this Karma theory as a convenient outlet to get rid of their guilt conscience or the inability to face a critical situation. Rosie attributes the present incompatibility in her life to her karma and allows the matter to drift. She stoically accepts her fate even to the extent of preferring ‘any kind of mother-in-law, if it had meant one real live husband’ (p85). Rosie takes her loveless life in her stride and she

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gradually becomes aware of her husband's self centered attitude and his insensitivity to her individual needs and aspirations. But she does 'Nothing about it'.

The Guide(1985) presents Rajus, Rosie, Marco –all victims of circumstances but helpless to be agents of change. The life of the three characters shows that their hopes are beset with Karma. Rosie merely says, "*I felt all along you were not doing the right things. This is Karma. What can we do?*"(The Guide, p72).

It is also believed that just as each person incurs Karma through his or her actions, actions performed as groups also give rise to COLLECTIVE KARMA, which would impact their collective future. Bhabani Bhattacharya's 'So Many Hungers'<sup>11</sup> reflects such a collective Karma when he talks about the miseries, horrors of '*human existence*' during the terrible Bengal famine- "*Hungry children cried themselves to death; streams of desperate men turned out of their ancestral homes in search of food; corpses lay by the road, huddling together, picked to their bones, only the hair uneaten, the baby's hair, men's hair, the waist long hair of women.*"(So Many Hungers-p242).

Marlene Fischer says-"*In 'So Many Hungers', the Bengal famine is more than just a background, it is the very essence of the Karma of the protagonists*"<sup>12</sup>. Same is the case with nations that follow a policy of religious intolerance or economic exploitation. For Example we would realize that environmental pollution and bio degradation is a direct result of our indiscriminately exploiting natural resources and man's annihilation of millions of innocent animals whose consequences we suffer in the form of natural disasters, green house effects, new diseases, and scarcity of raw material. We are then the agents of our own destruction. We reap what we sow

Kamala Markandaya amply illustrates this very Collective Karma through the agony of the Indian peasants in her novel 'Nectar in a Sieve', who are helpless in the grip of a natural disaster, the vagaries of nature caused by the tannery set up near the village and the calm village life is disturbed due to the exploitation by a few landowners and natural calamities like flood and drought do not allow them respite. They are equally mystified by the uncertainties of life and they become fatalistic. The novel stresses upon the social, economic, and political determinants of human identity. It also talks about how as individuals we are also a part of the collective presence in this world.

A ruin is not achieved in a day. It is a result of a long, maturing process, unhampered vegetation, thorns, brambles, reptiles, wild beasts, fauna, flora, weather, mud and all elements have to combine to create a perfect ruin. Similarly our life would turn into a ruin if we have accumulated Sanchita Karma, the effect of which we would experience in the present life. Kamala Markandaya, R.K.Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, are all exponents of the ‘individual’ and ‘collective Karma’ Theory.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century one can see the abstract anxiety of helplessness, the angry young man’s restlessness, or the masked feature of any independent Indian human mind still perfectly intact in the core of Indian English literature, which however has taken towards fresh directions under the gradually arriving globalization and its influence on to Indian literature – the shapes change but the essence is the same.

The poet-seer Sri Aurobindo is most distinguished because of his poetic output which has an aroma of the spirituality of India. Like Aurobindo, K.S. Srinivasan rightly observes the spiritual elements of Indian Literature which constitutes the very soul of India.

*A reassessment of the Indian heritage through Indian perception is overdue; it must include a readiness to reckon with realities as manifest in tradition. For instance the recurring theme of ‘Karma’ in the literature of every language , the motivation of the four goals of life (Dharma, Artha, Karma, and Moksha) , the belief in five elements (Earth, Water, Fire, Air, Space) and in rebirth should be seen as part of the life that shaped India and the psyche of her people.*

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