

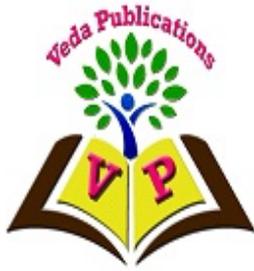


## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**INTERPRETATION OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S *THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE *BHAGAVAD GITA***

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Email: [sumanacharjee20@gmail.com](mailto:sumanacharjee20@gmail.com)Doi: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2025.12403>**ABSTRACT****Article history:**

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This paper explores Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) through the philosophical lens of the *Bhagavad Gita*. By juxtaposing Santiago's solitary struggle with the marlin against Arjuna's moral and spiritual dilemma on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, the article demonstrates how Hemingway's narrative resonates with the Gita's principles of *karma yoga*, detachment, endurance, and the pursuit of duty without attachment to results. Santiago's respect for the ocean, his compassion for the marlin, and his stoic acceptance of defeat parallel the Gita's teachings on selfless action, unity of existence, and the transcendence of success and failure. Drawing on textual references and comparative insights from thinkers like Camus and T. S. Eliot, the article argues that Santiago embodies the qualities of a modern *karma yogi*, whose journey is both existential and spiritual. Ultimately, Hemingway's novella, when read in light of the *Bhagavad Gita*, emerges as a profound meditation on the meaning of human struggle, sacrifice, and spiritual resilience.

**Keywords:** *Karma Yoga, Duty and Detachment, Existential Struggle, Karma Yogi, Comparative Literature, Spiritual Endurance, Symbolism.*



Ernest Hemingway's novella 'The Old Man and the Sea' (1952) has often been interpreted as a parable of endurance, human dignity, and the indomitable will to struggle against the odds. The narrative of Santiago, the old fisherman who engages in a titanic struggle with the marlin in the Gulf Stream, is simultaneously a realistic account of a fisherman's life and a symbolic reflection on human existence. To interpret this novella from the perspective of the 'Bhagavad Gita', one of the most revered texts of Indian philosophy, provides fresh insights into Santiago's struggle, his attitude towards life, and the meaning of success and failure. The 'Gita' addresses questions of duty, action, detachment, and spiritual realization, which parallel Santiago's experiences in striking ways.

This article aims to provide a comparative and interpretive framework by juxtaposing Santiago's struggle with the philosophical wisdom of the Bhagavad Gita. Quotations from both texts will be integrated to highlight key thematic resonances. Furthermore, reference will be made to other secondary sources to reinforce the analysis.

The 'Bhagavad Gita' teaches the doctrine of 'Karma Yoga', the path of selfless action. In Chapter 2, verse 47, Krishna tells Arjuna:

"You have a right to perform your prescribed duty, but you are not entitled to the fruits of action. Never consider yourself the cause of the results of your activities, and never be attached to not doing your duty" (Bhagavad Gita, 2.47, p. 114, Prabhavananda & Isherwood Translation).

Santiago embodies this principle throughout his struggle with the marlin. Despite his physical weakness and his long streak of bad luck (eighty-four

days without a catch), he persists in going to the sea, because fishing is not just his livelihood but his duty. When he hooks the marlin, he does not despair at the enormity of the task. Instead, he engages in it fully, knowing that the outcome—victory or defeat—is secondary to the act of engagement itself. Hemingway describes Santiago's mindset:

"A man can be destroyed but not defeated" (The Old Man and the Sea, p. 103, Scribner Edition).

This echoes the spirit of Karma Yoga to engage in the struggle of life without attachment to the results. Santiago knows he may lose the marlin or be overtaken by sharks, yet he remains steadfast, much like Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra.

In the Bhagavad Gita, the battlefield of Kurukshetra is not only a physical arena but also a metaphorical field (kshetra) where the human soul confronts its duties and moral dilemmas. Similarly, the ocean in Hemingway's novella functions as Santiago's battlefield. Santiago acknowledges the ocean as a living force, both friend and adversary:

"He always thought of the sea as 'la mar' which is what people call her in Spanish when they love her" (The Old Man and the Sea, p. 29).

This perception aligns with the Bhagavad Gita's vision of the divine permeating the universe. In Chapter 9, verse 4, Krishna declares:

"By Me, in My unmanifested form, this entire universe is pervaded. All beings are in Me, but I am not in them" (Bhagavad Gita, 9.4, p. 211).

For Santiago, the sea is the dwelling place of his struggle, but also the divine field where his dharma as a fisherman is enacted. His respect for the sea and



its creatures reveals his alignment with the cosmic order.

One of the central teachings of the 'Bhagavad Gita' is the cultivation of detachment while remaining engaged in life's struggles. In Chapter 6, verse 6, Krishna asserts:

"For one who has conquered the mind, the mind is the best friend; but for one who has failed to do so, the mind will remain the greatest enemy" (Bhagavad Gita, 6.6, p. 157).

Santiago exhibits remarkable mental discipline and detachment during his struggle with the marlin. Though exhausted, hungry, and injured, he maintains his composure. He tells himself,

"Pain does not matter to a man" (The Old Man and the Sea, p. 84).

This stoic endurance mirrors the Gita's ideal of equanimity in the face of pleasure and pain, success and failure. Santiago's heroism lies not in the conquest of the marlin but in his inner victory over despair and fear.

The Bhagavad Gita frequently emphasizes the oneness of all beings, teaching that the divine self (Atman) dwells in every creature. Chapter 5, verse 18, proclaims:

"The wise see with equal vision a learned and gentle Brahman, a cow, an elephant, a dog, and a dog-eater" (Bhagavad Gita, 5.18, p. 143).

Santiago's relationship with the marlin reflects this philosophy of unity. He addresses the marlin as his brother:

"Fish, I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends" (The Old Man and the Sea, p. 54).

The paradox of loving and killing is central to both the novella and 'the Bhagavad Gita'. Arjuna, too, is compelled to fight against his relatives in the battle. Krishna teaches him that duty must be performed even when the heart resists, for the soul is eternal and cannot be slain. (2.19). Santiago's battle with the marlin is therefore not merely about survival but a confrontation with himself, an encounter with the sacredness of existence.

At the end of the novella, Santiago returns with only the skeleton of the marlin, devoured by sharks. On a superficial level, this seems like failure. Yet, from the perspective of the 'Bhagavad Gita', his struggle is not wasted. Krishna assures Arjuna:

"No effort on the path of selfless action is ever lost, nor can it ever be wasted" (Bhagavad Gita, 2.40, p. 111).

Santiago's true triumph lies in his unwavering commitment to his duty, his courage, and his dignity. His struggle is an offering, a yajna (sacrifice), aligning with the cosmic order. Though materially he gains nothing, spiritually he embodies the Gita's wisdom.

The resonance between Hemingway's novella and the Bhagavad Gita can also be understood in the light of other philosophical and literary traditions. For example, Albert Camus' existentialism, particularly in 'The Myth of Sisyphus' (1942), emphasizes human perseverance in the face of absurdity. Like Sisyphus, Santiago embraces the struggle itself as the meaning of life. However, unlike Camus' nihilistic undertone, the Gita provides a spiritual dimension that affirms



the value of duty and devotion. Similarly, T. S. Eliot's 'Four Quartets' (1943) emphasizes detachment and timelessness, which resonate with the Gita's teaching and Santiago's calm endurance. Thus, the comparative framework enriches the interpretation by showing how Santiago's struggle transcends cultural boundaries.

### CONCLUSION

Hemingway's 'The Old Man and the Sea', when read through the lens of the 'Bhagavad Gita', reveals Santiago as a modern-day karma yogi, whose struggle with the marlin symbolizes the eternal human confrontation with duty, suffering, and transcendence. His detachment, endurance, and respect for life reflect the Gita's wisdom that one must act without attachment to results, find divinity in all beings, and remain steadfast in the face of success or failure.

Thus, Santiago's story is not merely about a fisherman's battle with a giant fish; it is a parable of human existence, echoing the timeless teachings of the Bhagavad Gita. His struggle is a spiritual offering, his defeat a victory, and his solitude a communion with the cosmic order.

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