



## **Philosophical Study of *Guṇa* in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*: In the light of the *Bhagavad Gītā***

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### **Abstract:**

When a person takes birth, only then does he remain free from any dominating personality. As a free spirit, he remains blissful until and unless he learns to behave in a certain way decided by his surroundings. After getting gradually accustomed to the worldviews and common norms in which he has been nurtured, he acts in a certain way, taught by his surroundings. This nurtured behaviour of humans can be understood with the theory of *Guṇa* mentioned in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. *Guṇa* is a Sanskrit word that means quality or attributes; it is one of the main concepts in Indian philosophy that believes that a certain proportion of any *Guṇa*, or humour, develops one's nature, and the imbalance of these *Guṇa* can cause a loss of self. There are three *Guṇa*: *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, which define goodness, passion, and ignorance, respectively. These three *Guṇa* play an important role in the disclosure of human nature. The works of Leo Tolstoy can be well understood with the implication of these *Guṇa*. The characters in Leo Tolstoy's works are shown to be trapped in the realm of material life. Various religious philosophies have heavily influenced Tolstoy, which he has shown in his works through the mental and physical struggles of his characters to reach a transcendent state, and for this, they develop some attributes, or *Guṇas*, to achieve that desired transient state in their personality. The purpose of this paper is to study the internal thoughts, external situations, and other traits that develop Tolstoy's characters' nature in light of the *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita's* philosophy.

**Keywords:** *Guṇa*, Leo Tolstoy, Indian Philosophy, The *Bhagavad Gītā*.



The concept of *triguṇa* has been mentioned in the *Atharva Veda*, the *Shrimad Bhagavad Gītā*, and the *Samkhya Darshana*. These energetic qualities reside in all living things, but just in a different proportion. Everyone is filled with *Guṇas*, which play a vital role in developing one's personality in a certain way. All the aspects of human behaviour can be well understood with the *Guṇa* theory. It is still used in today's world to define not only human nature but also the food we eat and other living beings around us. This theory is an important part of the *Shrimad Bhagavad Gītā*, a holy scripture of India that answers all of the questions that can arise in one's mind. It is an undeniable fact that the universal philosophy of the *Shrimad Bhagavad Gītā* applies to everyone living on this earth. All the behaviour of mankind in the real world as well as in the world of fiction can be understood with the eternal knowledge of the *Shrimad Bhagavad Gītā*.

Among all the Russian writers, Tolstoy is the one who, not just in his characters, showed a path of self-transcendence but also in his life applied it. He is often considered one of the world's greatest writers, universally known for his epic works *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. Not only do his longer works captivate his audience, but his shorter works, such as *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886), *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (1894), and *Resurrection* (1899), have captivated readers throughout the ages. In his works, most of the characters are shown struggling and fighting with their inner selves, which resembles the inner dual of Tolstoy that he had faced in his life. This changing nature of the characters from darkness to light or the reverse can be well understood with the eternal philosophy of this Holy Book. We can find a different language of expression in his works, which he puts into words so magnificently. The characters of his works seem so true to life that one can find a replica of himself or someone he knows in Tolstoy's fictional world. For this magnificent depiction of his character, Isaac Babel once said, "If the world could write itself, it would write like Tolstoy".

Tolstoy was heavily influenced by many religious philosophies from the early stage of his life, which left a deep impact on his perspective of life. Tolstoy once said about religion that, "Religion reveals the meaning of life, and science only applies this meaning to the course of circumstances" (*My Religion* 121). From his early life, he often wandered from one religion to another in search of meaning and answers to his inner conflicts. He belonged to an aristocratic

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family where he got every comfort; later in his youth, he joined the army as a career but left it after getting tired of the bloodshed. He later chose writing as a career, and after earning money and fame from his writings, he gave up everything and started living like a saint during his mid-fifties. This greatly harmed his relationship with his wife, who always forbade him from giving up everything. Before his death, he started to live like a monk, to transcend his earlier self or material lifestyle.

Assumed to be an epic, *War and Peace* has more than five hundred characters, among which more than two hundred are real historical characters. His works are primarily concerned with the themes of glory, meaning in life and death, and the duality of the inner self between the material and transcendental worlds. His novels show the gradual changes in one's personality throughout life that lead a person towards misery or transcendence. This novel is about five families: their lifestyles, their struggles to maintain their class standards, and a search for fulfilment in worldly glories, possessions, and a search for peace. There has been a transition from one nature to the other and a confrontation with the outcome of such a way of life. This analysis revolves around Pierre, Helen, and Prince Vasily, some of the main characters in *War and Peace* (1867). The study of these characters' personalities is analysed in the light of the philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

In the *Shrimad Bhagavad Gītā*, ŚrīKṛṣṇa discusses the three modes or *Guṇas*, known as *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, which shape one's personality, in chapter fourteen, named *GuṇaTrayaVibhagYog*, which discloses the wisdom which is highly assumed to help to attain the highest perfection in one's nature. The three qualities do not reside solely in an individual but, in their combined form, are present in every living being in varying proportions. This difference in proportion defines one's nature as *Sattvic*, *Rajasic*, or *Tamasic*. Those who come under the traits of a *Sattvic* person are discussed in this way:



*tatrasattvaṁnirmalatvātprakāśhakamanāmayamsukha-saṅgenabadhnātijñāna-saṅgenachānagha*(Amongst these, sattvaguṇa, the mode of goodness, being purer than the others, is illuminating and full of well-being. O sinless one, it binds the soul by creating an attachment for a sense of happiness and knowledge.)

(*BhagavadGītā* 14.6).

In *War and Peace*, the central character, Pierre Bezukhov, shows the characteristics of a *sattvic* person, such as purity, knowledge, and harmony, as well as being a forgiving and kind-hearted person who always tries to be as good as he can be and is generous towards everyone around him. People with *sattvic* tendencies are less affected by the miseries caused by material desires because they always try to find the solution to their problems in the spiritual path rather than in material possessions, as the character of Pierre in *War and Peace* demonstrates. After getting all the inheritance from his father, he became one of Russia's richest and most influential people. Even after that, he never ran after material happiness and devoted himself to the well-being of others. This character was assumed to have a resemblance to Tolstoy. There are many moments when the transition occurs from *sattvic* to *rājasic* nature. Earlier, Pierre being submerged in his sensual passion, falls into the trap of Helen, who seduces him to marry him for his position and money. He marries Helen and later, for her affairs, tries to kill her lover. But this nature, which arises in him an instant passion of jealousy and anger, soon fades away, and a new eagerness to find his true self and meaning in his life arises in his conscience. In this new quest, he joined Freemasonry; this transition from one nature to the other continues to take place because of the existence of all the *Guṇas* in one's personality, whose proportion in a person keeps on changing. According to the *Samkhya* School of philosophy, an individual can never be wholly *sattvic*, *tāmasic*, or *rājasic*. It is always a mixture of the *triguṇa*. Only the excess of any proportion leads one person towards a *sattvic* or *tāmasic* nature.

In his search for peace and happiness, Pierre liberates his slaves, builds hospitals, schools, and churches for their well-being, and even forgives his wife for her adultery. Although people make fun of him and misuse his donated money in their favour. When the French occupied Russia, he



participated in the war to help his people fight against the enemy. After that, when he returns, he is imprisoned for several weeks, where he witnesses the executions of several other prisoners and his only companion. Living like this, where he barely gets any food or clothes to warm himself, and hard labour with other chained prisoners makes him grateful for wherever he has gotten food, sleep, and warmth by working and walking all day. With this new experience, a great change takes place in his personality. "With his heart overflowing with love, he loved people for no reason at all and then had no trouble discovering many sound reasons that made them worth loving" (*War and Peace* 1254). This unexpected experience taught him a lot and left him even purer than before. He is the one, among other characters, who goes through such a huge transformation. As the novel progresses, the character of Pierre becomes closer to becoming a *sattvic* person.

Another *guṇa* is the *rājasicguṇa*. The word *rajas* means passion or desire in Sanskrit. People who are more influenced by *RājasicGuṇa* are more attached to the outcome of their actions and the desire to receive a reward or something in exchange for any work. They were consumed by self-interest. They are filled with endless desires and always work for the satisfaction of those endless desires; they always give preference to prestige and wealth. As stated in the *Bhagavad Gītā*:

*rajaṛāgātmakam̐vidhitṛiṣhṇā-saṅga-samudbhavamtan nibadhnātikaunteya karma-saṅgenadehinam* (O Arjun, rajoguṇa is of the nature of passion. It arises from worldly desires and affections, and binds the soul through attachment to fruitive actions.)

(*Bhagavad Gītā* 14.7)

In *War and Peace*, the character of Prince Vasily exhibits such personality traits; he is always concerned about his wealth and position in society. He always tries to do everything possible to secure his position. To seize the inheritance of Pierre, the son of one of his rich relatives, he tries to destroy his father's will. When he cannot do so, he increases his closeness with Pierre and tricks him into marriage to his vicious daughter, who, like his father, tricks Pierre with her physical charm only to get his wealth and position. In the name of guarding him,



Vasilydeceptively took a lot of money from him. A great intriguer by nature, he always tries to get as much for himself and his children as possible.He even tries to marry his son to a wealthy heiress for her dowry but cannot do so. He is always eager to use people for his self-interest and profit by establishing relationships with people of higher status. It does not matter to him who has been destroyed or manipulated in the way of his happiness. Later, when the war started, his son died in the battle because he took part to avoid being killed by Andrey, whose fiancé he had tried to seduce. Vasily's daughter Helenalso died because of the abortion of an illicit child. The wealth he had achieved was also ruined when the French occupied half of the Russian empire,destroyed it, and looted everything valuable there. As a result of this sudden occurrence, he was left with nothing, neither a child nor wealth, for whom he had caused much trouble for others. The children, who had learnt to live only for their self-interest and satisfaction, like their father, by using others in their favour, did not survive, and in his grief and pain, Prince Vasily was left all alone for the end of his life. This is how, with his self-interested nature, he got nothing in the end but just pain. With such personality traits, we can define him as a *Rājasic* person who is always attached to desires and worldly things.

The third *Guṇa*that describes human nature is*Tamoguṇa*, which means ignorance, delusion, unfaithfulness, infatuationonly towardsfulfilling personal desires and sensual pleasure and full of venomous nature and vices. As described in the *Bhagavad Gītā*:

*tamastvajñāna-jamviddhimohanaṁsarva-dehinām*

*pramādālasya-nidrābhis tan nibadhnātibhārata*

(O Arjun,*tamoguṇa*, which is born of ignorance, is the cause of illusion for the embodied souls. It deludes all living beings through negligence, laziness, and sleep.)

(*Bhagavad Gītā*14.8)

The person with *TamoGuṇa*, or the mode of ignorance, always leads a life filled with illusion, ignorance, lust, and foolishness. A person with such passions couldn't distinguish right and

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wrong and always led an immoral life to satisfy their desire for pleasure. Their duties always seemed burdensome to them. The desire to achieve or lead a spiritual life never entered their heads. These traits always bind one to destruction. In *War and Peace*, many characters have shown such personality traits. For instance, Helen Kuragin, her brother Anatole, and Dolokhov never felt satisfied and fulfilled by their materialistic and sensual lifestyle. Helen, one of the main female characters in *War and Peace*, has been defined as the most beautiful woman in this novel, as the name suggests, but she does not possess any moral qualities. From the start of the novel, she leads an immoral life and even helps her brother in leading such a life. She always tries to get the attention of every influential person by showing her beauty and intellect, and that so-called intellect depends on the outward display of worthless things that seem valuable. She always shows her cunning and vicious nature. The more the work progresses, the more she falls on moral grounds and dies miserably. She never worked for the fulfilment of her desire on her own but always remained intending to exploit others for her gain, never considering the consequences of her actions. Since the day Pierre became his father's sole heir, she tries to seduce him with her beauty and eventually tricks him into marrying her. She also starts to have illicit relationships with other men behind Pierre's back. She always remains self-centred and cares only for her comfort and fulfilment. She and her father fooled Pierre for his money. When Pierre goes away to participate in the war, she begins an affair with two men from high positions and persuades them to marry her. In her confusion about choosing one match, she decides to choose the older one because, after this man's death, she will be the owner of his wealth, and, with sympathy, she can again marry the other suitor as well. With such kind of personality, her sensual thrust was never satisfied and led her to her doomed end. Where she died of an illness, which is assumed to be an abortion, which she tries to hide from everyone. This is how, with her disillusioned life and foolishness, she dies tragically. She always tries to convince others of the fulfilment of her desires, which leads her only towards destruction.

This is how the *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita* classified human beings by their nature or attributes. These attributes bind one person to happiness, attachment, and delusion. These three *Guṇas* always dominate an individual's character. The *sattvic* traits lead one towards illumination, purity, peace, and generosity, and these actions always result in goodness. The *RajoGuṇa* leads

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one towards greed, ambition, and passion, and action with such traits results in pain. The *TamoGuna* dominated one's core self towards ignorance, delusion, and foolishness, and the result of the action taken in this trait always leads to darkness. The theory of Id, Ego and Superego given by Sigmund Freud is somewhat similar to this concept of Indian Philosophy. Which states that human works under the influence of these three parts of our personality. The people who rise above these three *Gunas* are no longer trapped in these modes of nature and achieve the divine attribute called *Nirguna*.

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