

VEDANTIC INFLUENCES IN THE SHORT STORIES OF J D SALINGER

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Abstract

Vedanta the spirit of Sanatan belief, is the treasure of spiritualism and provides way to oneness with the Almighty power which is the ultimate goal of human life. Vedanta has captivated the attention of a great number of modern scholars and philosophers of all ages particularly Karl Jung, Mahatma Gandhi, Aldous Huxley, Somerset Maugham and others who have poured vedantic principles as solution to modern human problems in their writings.

J D Salinger, a literary giant and the renowned short story writer from the 20th century America, after publishing his famous novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, embraced the ideas of Vedanta which he learnt from his spiritual guru Swami Nikhilananda and beautifully crafted them into his short stories. He followed the doctrines of Vedanta and has tried to explore the messages in most of his short stories. Salinger says “*I read a bit from the Bhagwat Gita daily before I get out of bed*”. We find the influences of *Bhagwat Gitain* “*Franny and Zooey*”, “*Nine Stories*”, “*Raise High the Roof Beam*”, “*Carpenters and Seymour*”, and his last publication “*Hapworth 16, 1924*”. For his short stories, he crafts a family of seven brothers as Glass characters, who are modern and urban yet longing to have shelter under spiritual roofs. Teddy in the story collection from “*Nine Stories*” expresses Vedantic insight as he predicts for after life, Franny in “*Franny and Zooey*” holds a religious book and follows the doctrines of Karma yoga suggested by her brother Zooey, Seymour in “*A Perfect Day for Bananafish*” is looking for salvation after getting frustrated by the modern ideologies, similarly Hapworth the protagonist of “*Hapwoth 16,1924*” shows the resemblances of Bhakti yoga and offers tribute to Swami Vivekananda. Salinger finds solution to all

modern problems overruling the common human minds including frustration, depression, disillusionment and hopeless state of humanity caused by moral degradation in Vedanta which ultimately becomes the central theme of his writings. Thus we find that Salinger's short stories are pervaded with Vedantic approaches to modern human problems. The present article is an effort to explore the influences of Vedanta in the short stories of J D Salinger.

Key Words: J D Salinger, Vedanta, Short Stories, Modernism, Theme.

Work and Literature

Jerome David Salinger, after the publication of his famous novel *The Catcher in the Rye* became essentially devoted to the theories of Vedanta, the religious and philosophical teaching explored to the west by the great soul Swami Vivekananda. He embraced the ideologies of Vedanta from "*The Gospel of Sri Ramkrishna*" a book translated by his spiritual guru Swami Nikhilananda and crafted them beautifully into his short stories. Salinger followed the doctrines of Vedanta, with emphasis on the ideologies of karma, Reincarnation, Celibacy, Enlightenment and spiritualism and tried to explore the messages through his collection of short stories. Salinger says "*I read a bit from the Bhagwat Gita daily before I get out of bed*". We find the influences of *Bhagwat Gita* in almost his every collection of short stories. Salinger finds solution to all modern problems overruling human minds in the theories of Vedanta which ultimately becomes the central theme of his short stories. For his stories, he crafts a family of seven brothers as Glass family, who are modern and urban yet are longing to have shelter under spiritual roofs. We find Salinger's short stories pervaded with the doctrines of Vedanta and bringing forth the solution for modern human problems. The short stories of Salinger briefly delineates the aspects of *Reincarnation, Detachment, Enlightenment, Spiritualism and Karma yoga*.

We find the theories of Reincarnation and Detachment in the story "*Teddy*" a short story collection from "*Nine Stories*". Reincarnation suggests that God or sometimes great souls take rebirth on earth as the Avatara to fulfill a cosmic need. Whenever evil power prevails over integrity, God out of His mercy and love appears as the Avatara solely to redeem mankind and to re-establish spiritual order in the world and thus preserves and ensures the continuance of life in the universe. Here a ten years old boy Teddy, is spiritually and intellectually smart. He follows the doctrines of Vedanta and has the power of prophecies

and clairvoyance. He believes in the theory of reincarnation and thinks himself to be the Avatar of a great Indian spiritual soul who reached the state of enlightenment. We get insight into Teddy's spiritualism during his conversation with Bob Nicholas on the theory of reincarnation. He says that everything happens for a reason, we should not be afraid of death because it is the universal truth everyone has to face. Further he explains that if his sister pushes him into the vacant pool and his head gets cracked and he dies away then no one should mourn as it was supposed to happen. Teddy is a boy unconcerned by the trivialities of materialism which suggests detachment. He says

All you do is to get the heck out of your body when you die. My Gosh, everybody's done it thousands and thousands of times. The Vedantic principle of *Detachment - separation*, the separation from our ego, pride and the selfhood to get salvation is apparent here.

Throughout the story we come across the philosophies and ideologies concerning Vedanta and Hinduism. Similarly in the short story collection "*Franny and Zooey*", Salinger's best attempt to explore the Vedanta theory dealing the aspects of Detachment, Enlightenment and Karma yoga are evident throughout. In the true tradition of his art of characterisation, we come across Glass characters as the protagonists in this story too. Franny is the youngest among them and is a young college going girl. As the story begins we find that Franny has come to meet her boyfriend Lane but soon gets irritated by his supercilious behaviour. She shows her disgust towards the hypocrisy and phoniness of the modern society, and reluctantly tells Lane about *The prayer book* she is holding in her hand the way of pilgrim, a book of religious prayers concerning Vedantic philosophies. From here we get to know that Franny has earnest affinity with the prayer and believes that by reading it she may purge all hypocrisy. Although Lane is a normal boy, an intelligent undergraduate student but Salinger proves him antithetical at the point of Franny's religious quests.

"Quite probably, he resented and feared any signs of detachment in a girl he was seriously dating"

Here detachment is related to religious factors and Vedanta philosophy which teaches detachment from our ego and pride to unite with the God. Zooey later tells his sister that

"If you don't realise that only thing that counts for the religious life is detachment, I don't see how you'll ever move an inch. Detachment, buddy, and only detachment, Desirelessness. Cessation from all hankerings."

Zooey starts from where the tale Franny ends. Zooey is Franny's elder brother, who helps his sister to come out from the mental exhaustion she has been. Zooey, whose suggestions and advices console Franny, helps considerably to comfort his sister. He suggests his sister to read the diary of their late brother Seymour Glass. His brother directs her to become God's angel and to believe in The Fat Lady, the God. Here we get the evidences of Karma yoga a belief under Vedanta theory. Karma yoga delineates nishkama karma or action without the expectation from any kind of its result.

It is Zooey's love and Seymour's advices based on vedantic ideologies which help Franny to led from the state of sufferings and trauma to the state of peace and calm. Although Franny's problems are spotlighted but Zooey also has some problems in his life. He feels alienated in the world full of phoniness, disillusionment and also suffers from being partway among the educational stepladder. He says that without reading "*the Four great vows*", he doesn't even takes his meal. It shows his quest for religious life. Salinger here suggests that when enlightenment comes, it outweighs all human problems. Enlightenment describes complete understanding of life and the oneness with supreme power, which usually is accompanied by a detachment of all materialistic things and a complete awareness of everything that is union of individual soul with the supreme soul.

In the short story collection "*Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction*" we get to know the doctrines of Reincarnation, Karma yoga and Enlightenment. when the narrator Buddy Glass describes the afterlife of Seymour Glass, who embraced death to get salvation after getting frustrated by the modern ideologies. Seymour and Buddy Glass are different in a way as they have instilled the vedantic ideologies into their younger brothers. Seymour's religious aspects are evident from his diary where he says,

"I have been reading a miscellany of Vedanta all day. Marriage partners are to serve each other. Elevate, help, teach, strengthen each other, but above all serve....."

"*Seymour: An Introduction*" another story from this collection, explores the aspects of Karma yoga. Seymour's aim in life without any expectation and competition from others suggests karma yoga, which explains the theory of nishkama or an action that is exempted from the desires of its result. Victory and failure are equally meaningless to him and in this

way he appears to follow the ideologies of Bhagwat Gita. Pniker suggests that the incident may be explained beautifully through Vedanta,

“Karma yoga, especially, advocates Nishkama karma or action that is uncoloured by desire for its result. Such action truly liberates the man who performs it. He has no passions, hopes or aspirations. Success and failure are equally meaningless to him.....Hence, Seymour’s success and also his obliviousness of its implication...”

In the last collection of his stories “*Hapworth16,1924*”, influences of the doctrines of Vedanta are apparent in the life a seven years old boy, who follows the ideologies of Swami Vivekananda and possess the power of clairvoyance. He makes prophecies of the past as well as of the future. Here we find Spiritualism evident throughout the story. Seymour demands of books during the summer camp, which includes the tales of Christianity, Gayatri prayer, Rajyoga and Bhaktiyoga suggests his spiritual and religious attitudes. The protagonist offers tribute to Swami Vivekananda in order to show his affection towards Vedanta.

“Raja-yoga and Bhakti-yoga, two heartending, handy, quite tiny volumes, perfect for the pockets of any average , mobile boy of our age, by Vivekananda of India. He is one of the most exciting, original and best equipped giants of this century I have ever run into; my personal sympathy for him will never be outgrown or exhausted as long as I live, mark my words; I would easily give ten years of my life, possibly more, if I could have shaken his hand or at least said a brisk , respectful hello to him on some busy street in Calcutta or elsewhere”.

CONCLUSION

Through out Salinger’s short stories we find his affection for and his belief in the aspects of Vedanta philosophies and ideologies, which he considers the source of every modern human problems overruling the society. His short stories thus basically describe the growing frustration and disillusionment , hopeless state of human mind caused by the moral degradation in the modern world and shows affection with the hope of redemption that only Vedanta philosophy and religion could bring.

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