

Swadharma and Human Existence: Reading the Bhagavad Gita through the Selected Novels of Ben Okri

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Abstract:

The ageless ethical framework of Swadharma, or one's own just responsibility as expressed in the Bhagavad Gita, emphasizes the balance between personal purpose and the welfare of all. With its roots in Indian spiritual philosophy, Swadharma promotes the idea that when people behave in accordance with their moral obligations, inner calling, and intrinsic nature, true fulfillment and social equilibrium result. By urging people to practice unselfish action, emotional control, and spiritual clarity, this principle not only promotes individual discipline but also promotes the well-being of society as a whole. This study examines the timeless significance of Swadharma in Ben Okri's writings, namely in *Songs of Enchantment* (1993), *The Famished Road* (1991), and *Infinite Riches* (1998). A remarkable conceptual alignment between the spiritual teachings of the Gita and Okri's postcolonial tales is revealed. Okri illustrates moral obligation as a means of achieving personal enlightenment and societal change via Azaro's journey and the hardships faced by his family and community. His fiction places a strong emphasis on moral conflict, empathy, creative awareness, and resisting injustice and hopelessness. This study illustrates how both traditions highlight the importance of moral behavior, inner fortitude, selfless service, and spiritual awareness as crucial pillars for peace, harmony, and human liberation by comparing Krishna's teaching to Arjuna with Okri's visionary heroes.

Keywords: Bhagavad Gita, Swadharma, Ben Okri, peace, harmony.

Introduction:

Similar to the battlefield of Kurukshetra in the Bhagavad Gita, the world of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* trilogy is rife with political unrest, moral decay, and existential uncertainty. Despite their cultural differences, both landscapes symbolize human struggle and the need for inward awakening rather than outside assurances to build ethical clarity. The spirit-child protagonist, Azaro, is born into a world full with injustice, corruption, and pain. However, Azaro feels obliged to address the moral degeneration surrounding him, much like Arjuna, who is torn between duty and lethargy. His voyage exemplifies the

Swadharma concept, which is to carry out one's inherent obligation in spite of hardship or miscommunication.

Okri highlights that loyalty to one's inner calling is the source of true spiritual and moral activity. He captures a core Upanishadic and Gita-based wisdom when he writes, "We must live our own lives, not the ones others imagine for us" (Okri, *The Famished Road*, p. 112): genuine life arises from self-knowledge, not social conditioning. Similar to how Krishna tells Arjuna that it is preferable to carry out one's own task imperfectly rather than another's flawlessly, Okri's story makes the claim that self-realization necessitates rejecting forced identities and accepting one's predetermined course. For Azaro, this entails embracing the hardships and obligations of the corporeal world instead of withdrawing into the spirit realm, which allures with its promise of tranquility.

Additionally, both scriptures emphasize that moral behavior must come from inside rather than from approval from others. Azaro becomes a witness—an ethical seer rather than a passive participant—as a result of his observations of human misery, spiritual exploitation, and political manipulation. Krishna's view of Nishkama Karma, in which duty is carried out selflessly and without regard for results, is reflected in his job. Azaro opposes corruption because his soul knows the truth and forbids collusion, not to acquire fame or influence. His observation turns into a kind of moral activity that is based on awareness rather than coercion.

According to the Gita, doing what is right is determined by alignment with dharma, cosmic order, and the soul's development rather than by success. Thus, Azaro's personal battle goes beyond personal survival to represent humanity's never-ending struggle between illusion and reality, hope and despair. His path is profoundly moral, not just political or mystical. He accepts hardship, disorder, and contradiction because he understands that engagement, not flight, is the path to spiritual understanding.

In the end, Okri's story and the Gita share a same understanding of moral obligation as a spiritual journey. Both promote inner bravery, defiance of moral decay, and a profound understanding of the sacred aspect of human conflict. Azaro's life serves as an example of resistance as a spiritual calling, hope as a duty, and witnessing as a transformational act. In this way, Okri's trilogy serves as a modern philosophical echo of Gita-style wisdom, confirming that peace and harmony arise from facing the world's instability with awakened consciousness and an unwavering dedication to truth rather than by escaping it.

The core of the Bhagavad Gita's ethical and spiritual philosophy is the idea of swadharma. Swadharma is a deep alignment between moral behavior, spiritual essence, and inner character rather than a strict societal duty. Krishna highlights that genuine righteousness is based on understanding one's soul-purpose rather than social norms, and that obligation must arise from authentic self-knowledge (Atma-jnana). Therefore, swadharma is a spiritual discipline that balances individual accountability with cosmic order (Rita), transcending mechanical morality.

Krishna calls for moral maturity in his teaching, "You have the right to perform your duty, but not to the fruits of action" (Gita 2.47). Without egoistic desire, fear of failure, or attachment to success, duty must be performed. Such detachment (Nishkama Karma) makes ordinary conduct into a path of liberation, improves character, and purifies the mind. Arjuna's hesitancy in the battlefield reflects common human struggles: whether to fight for justice or to turn away from pain and moral complexity. In order to address this issue, Krishna argues that neglecting one's proper responsibility in the face of injustice is a sign of spiritual failure in and of itself. True serenity comes from fearlessly carrying out one's ethical obligations rather than from running away. Swadharma, then, is an inside insight that directs external behavior and is both an action and an attitude.

Ben Okri's writings, especially *The Famished Road* trilogy, provide a contemporary literary echo of this profound thought. In addition to being a sociopolitical setting, Okri's fictional universe is a spiritual battleground reminiscent of Kurukshetra, a place teeming with unseen forces, conflicting impulses, and the never-ending struggle between hope and despair. Born between two worlds—spirit and human, dream and reality—Azaro, the abiku infant, experiences a journey that is similar to Arjuna's ethical enlightenment. Azaro chooses human life with all its unpredictability, violence, and misery despite spirits' temptation to return to a carefree existence. "I chose to stay because leaving would have been too easy," he declares (*The Famished Road*, p. 58), displaying a deep feeling of obligation based on spiritual purpose rather than taste.

Instead of heroic conquering, Azaro's burden is to see, endure, and illuminate truth in the midst of darkness. It is his duty to stay awake, to watch, and to testify in a society engulfed in political avarice, magical mayhem, and moral blindness. This is very consistent with the Gita's concept of Sakshi-bhava, or seeing consciousness. Azaro perseveres not to avoid suffering but to use it as a catalyst for change, much as Arjuna must battle not for fame but because morality requires it. Krishna's emphasis that spiritual understanding calls us toward life and action rather than withdrawal is reflected in his refusal to desert humanity. *Songs of Enchantment* is where Azaro reiterates his moral position: "I persisted because I thought there was hope for a better world" (p. 75) Echoing Arjuna's return to combat following enlightenment, this is a daring gesture of faith. Despite facing despair, both characters decide to fulfill their duties out of compassion and a greater purpose. Romantic ideas of transcendence through escape are called into question by their travels. Rather, they represent spiritual responsibility as moral courage, perseverance, and involvement.

Okri's story ethics are similar to the Gita's teaching that spiritual life is a dedication to changing the world rather than a flight from it. His characters work for the good of the world, or what Krishna refers to as Lokasangraha. Swadharma by Azaro emerges as a ray of hope in the face of fatalism and lethargy. He uses perception, memory, and inner fortitude instead of weaponry. His perseverance turns into a silent kind of heroism, his optimism into a force for revolution, and his witnessing into an act of resistance. In the end, both the Gita and Okri declare that genuine spirituality is embracing one's place in the drama that is playing out in the world and acting with both compassion and detachment. The realization of swadharma via self-awareness, selflessness, and constant moral presence transforms it from a responsibility into a destiny. As a result of this convergence, Okri's fiction becomes a modern expression of age-old moral knowledge, reaffirming that facing life's difficult and profound realities head-on rather than retreating is the way to transformation and serenity.

The Bhagavad Gita presents tranquility as the inevitable result of self-control and inner serenity rather than as a retreat from the outside world. Declaring, "A disciplined mind brings peace," Krishna highlights the transformational potential of self-mastery (Gita 6.7). Here, peace is a spiritual accomplishment that arises from self-control over wants, disassociation from the results of actions, and alignment with moral obligations rather than a passive state. In the Gita, compassion arises from clarity—realizing the immortality of the soul and acting without ego, animosity, or rage. As a result, peace becomes a moral force that upholds moral behavior rather than taking its place. This view of serenity as an inward transformation and spiritual fortitude is reflected in Ben Okri's philosophical outlook. His claim that "the real revolution is the revolution of the spirit" (*A Way of Being Free*, p. 27) emphasizes how human consciousness is where social change starts. Through inner fortitude, creativity, and compassion, Okri's

heroes fight turmoil in a society characterized by political degradation, poverty, and philosophical debate. In Okri's writings, peace is thus active and watchful, a barrier against desperation and corruption.

This moral position is demonstrated by Azaro's journey, where he consistently returns to compassion and awe in the face of violence, deceit, and spiritual upheaval. Similar to Arjuna, who fights without malice after enlightenment, his inner clarity opposes the forces of fear and hatred. Similarly, Azaro's parents are living examples of Swadharma. His mother's loving presence provides emotional and spiritual stability for the family, while his father's fight against exploitation symbolizes moral social responsibility. Together, they reflect Krishna's teaching that when people act with dignity and love in their rightful roles, harmony results. Therefore, the Gita and Okri both emphasize that genuine peace is not the passive absence of conflict but rather an ethical orientation that is intentional and disciplined, enabling people to face injustice with courage, compassion, and unshakable moral clarity.

Imagination, according to Ben Okri's literary world, is a holy capacity and an ethical tool that enables people to see the truth, fight hopelessness, and re-envision reality. It is not a means of escape. "We dream the world before we live it," argues Okri (*A Way of Being Free*, p. 32). According to this interpretation, imagination is a type of visionary duty—an internal discipline that influences and precedes external action. Characters are able to escape restrictive narratives imposed by corrupt governments, poverty, or metaphysical forces when imagination turns into moral responsibility. It opens the soul to the potential for justice, hope, and rebirth. The idea of jnana—enlightened wisdom that penetrates illusion (*maya*) and unveils eternal truth—found in the Bhagavad Gita strikes a deep chord with this vision. Spiritual vision separates fleeting appearances from eternal truth, according to Krishna's teaching, "The unreal has no existence; the real never ceases to be" (Gita 2.16). Similar to how jnana illuminates Arjuna's moral compass on the Kurukshetra battlefield, Okri's novels use imagination as a spiritual lens to reveal more profound truths hidden behind the surface of political unrest and human misery.

Okri's mystical realism serves a Gita-like purpose by revealing higher consciousness by shattering the illusion's hold. Azaro's dreams, visions, and encounters with spirit entities are moral cues that direct human consciousness; they are not works of fiction. He observes the fragile beauty of life, the scars left by colonialism, and the hidden effects of greed. Imagination transforms into Swadharma, a holy duty to behave compassionately, feel profoundly, and see clearly. Okri supports the Gita's claim that the morality of exterior conduct is determined by inner consciousness by demonstrating how perception impacts fate. As a result, ethical imagination serves as a link between spiritual understanding and moral behavior. Ben Okri's novels and the Bhagavad Gita both express a deep concept of universal unity as the cornerstone of morality and world peace. All beings are manifestations of the same cosmic essence, according to Krishna's heavenly viewpoint. "The wise see the same in a Brahmin, a cow, an elephant, and a dog," according to the Gita (Gita 5.18). Caste, class, species, and social hierarchy are all transcended by this extreme spiritual egalitarianism. Such understanding dispels ego and fosters humility, compassion, and nonviolence.

Okri's investigation of African cosmology reflects this metaphysical inclusion. He states that "we are all one and the same, bound by mystery" (p. 331) in *The Famished Road*. In this case, oneness is perceived in the interconnectedness of the material and immaterial worlds, humans and spirits, the rich and the poor, oppressors and oppressed, rather than in abstract theology. Through visions, dreams, and mystical experiences, Okri's characters consistently realize that humanity's fate is shared by all of us. Compassion and mutual upliftment are inherent laws; separation is an illusion. Okri's philosophy dismantles polarizing ideologies and promotes a global spiritual belonging, much like the Gita's Vedic teaching of Vasudhaiva

Kutumbakam (the world as one family). His fictional universe maintains that social change necessitates an awakening to our common humanity and that political freedom is insufficient without spiritual freedom. According to both religions, harmony arises from moral behavior, inner equilibrium, and the understanding that all life is holy. Peace naturally develops both inside the person and throughout society when people accept their inherent responsibility and establish a connection with universal oneness. As a result, the Gita and Okri agree that creativity and solidarity are moral requirements. The divine ties that bind all beings together are revealed by enlightened perception, whether by spiritual insight or imaginative vision. Both Krishna and Okri lead humanity toward a world based on fairness, love, and peaceful coexistence within this common philosophical perspective.

Conclusion:

According to the Bhagavad Gita and Ben Okri's imaginative fiction, swadharma is a global ethical path based on moral bravery, inner truth, and compassionate responsibility. Both faiths view responsibility as a spiritual calling—an inward need to behave in accordance with truth, conscience, and the well-being of the world—rather than a strict societal requirement. The Gita places a strong emphasis on self-control, disciplined behavior, detachment, and dedication. It teaches that inner peace results from doing the right thing rather than running away from life's difficulties. Similar to this, Okri's characters use fortitude, optimism, creativity, and unwavering moral devotion to get through the upheaval of postcolonial reality. Arjuna and Azaro are parallel seekers who, in the face of injustice, violence, and existential doubt, accept responsibility as a sacred act of taking part in the moral drama of life. Their experiences demonstrate that spiritual growth is found in transcending suffering via awareness, bravery, and love rather than in running away from it. Okri and the Gita both agree that balancing one's inner awareness with one's external behavior is the path to ultimate emancipation. Swadharma thus serves as a link between modern African spiritual humanism and ancient Indian philosophy, providing timeless counsel for social duty, personal integrity, and world peace in a world growing more divided by the day.

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