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KRISHNA AND INDIGENOUS ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT
This paper is an effort to make a comparative ethical analysis of the teachings of Krishna and the Native American theories of morality as articulated in the Native American thought. It goes beyond rule-based or universalist ethical frameworks that are prevalent in Western philosophy; the research argues that the discourse of Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita *is a relational and situational ethical framework based on responsibility, balance, and interdependence of the cosmos. The paper outlines a shared moral code, such as relational accountability, land-based cosmology, and moral action as a component of community life, based upon the Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita, and some of the Indigenous literature and philosophy. Placing this analogy in the context of the Indian Knowledge System and Indigenous epistemologies, the paper questions Eurocentric systems of moral hierarchy and proves the consistency of non-Western ethical systems. This paper argues that Krishna is not merely a theological figure but a civilizational ethical teacher whose vision in Indigenous philosophies of responsibility and sacred relationship is evident.*
KEYWORDS: *Krishna, Indigenous Ethics, Dharma, Relational Ontology, Indian Knowledge Systems.*

INTRODUCTION

Ethics in the mainstream philosophy of the West tends to center on abstract principles, codified laws, and the moral decisions of one individual. Such concepts tend to isolate the moral thought process from the world, soil, and collective memory ("History of Ethics"). In most non-Western cultures, ethics is perceived to be related to individuals, circumstances, and the natural and social environment. Indian stories on Krishna demonstrate such ethics. Krishna does not discuss ethics in abstract philosophy, but in a legitimate crisis. Arjuna was not able to make up his mind on what to do on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Krishna assisted him by transforming his perception of morals. According to him, dharma is doing what is appropriate to the situation and is a duty of nature and to other people, and not necessarily some moral set of rules or personal desires. Philosophical scholarship on dharma likewise clarifies that dharma reasoning is not mere rule-following but a rational, context-sensitive orientation of moral action grounded in lived obligations (Matilal). Such a perspective on ethics resembles Indigenous and Native American ethical frameworks, in which morality is grounded in balance, duty, and accountability to people, land, and ancestors. The article discusses the ethics of Krishna along with the ethics of Indigenous people, to reveal shared concepts challenging the universal standards of the Western world. A comparison of them supports a pluralistic ethic based on relationships and sacred responsibility, as argued in the paper.

The paper is based on a comparative ethical approach that is rooted in textual reading and a relational-ontology approach. It initially decodes the moral system of Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is found in the *Mahabharata*, by following the main ideas of dharma, *nishkama karma* (action without attachment), and the idea of moral agency that is inscribed in a larger cosmic system. It then looks at some Native American ethical theories expressed through Native American literary-philosophical texts, especially the ones that presuppose land-based cosmology, the use of stories to transmit moral knowledge, and responsibility to the community, ancestors, and the more-than-human world. Rather than conducting a doctrinal equivalence, the study conducts a structural comparison of ethical logics of responsibility, balance, restorative orientation, and narrative ethics, and interprets both traditions in terms of Indian Knowledge Systems and Indigenous epistemologies. The comparison is informed by a decolonial orientation, which denies Eurocentric universalism as the standard of ethical orientation and recognizes both traditions as internally consistent systems of morality with unique historical and cultural backgrounds.

This study is a selective textual comparison as opposed to an exhaustive survey of Indigenous nations or systems of ethics. The Indigenous model is mostly addressed by means of representative literary-philosophical statements, especially by Momaday and Silko, and thus, does not claim to exhaust the variety of Native American traditions. The study of the ethics of Krishna, likewise, is considered on a particular basis, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, as part of the epic of the *Mahabharata*, and not as part of the entire range of Krishna practices thereafter.

Krishna's Ethical Vision in the *Bhagavad Gita*

The *Bhagavad Gita* is a summary of the eternal ethical philosophy of Krishna, and it cannot be reduced to doctrinal morality. Rather than asking people to do nothing or to follow moral laws without question, Krishna reinterprets good conduct as *nishkama karma*- doing something without being attached to the consequences of the actions (Bhagavad Gita 2.47). This interpretive framing conforms to dharma-ethical philosophy, which considers moral reasoning as contingent and responsibility-oriented as opposed to a set code of law (Matilal). Verse 2.47 confirms that people have a valid right to act without making claims to the fruits of their acts, a major shift in the ethical deliberation process (Bhagavad Gita 2.47). As a result, moral value is measured not by the results in terms of success, failure, or personal benefit, but by the agreement with personal duties and obligations (Bhagavad Gita 2.47). In this paradigm, ethics is understood in a relational but not transactional sense. Adding to the idea of sustained

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participation, verse 3.19 encourages sustained act without attachment (Bhagavad Gita 3.19). Ending the worldly connection is rejected as a weak ethical option. The moral lucidity is gained through constant engagement in work, not through disengagement from world conflict (Bhagavad Gita 3.19). Therefore, the ethical perspective of Krishna is situational and context-based and based on lived experience.

In 2.47, Krishna states: "You have a right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions" (Bhagavad Gita 2.47). A critical examination of the reason behind this is that the verse draws the distinction between the right to act and the right to the consequences of the action. The ethical focus has shifted from the idea of reward-seeking, which is defined in terms of success, victory, and personal gain, to the concept of pure refusal, which is defined as the absence of action as a moral evasion. The verse then suggests that the agent be accountable to duty, relations, and the greater order, in which the ramifications are distributed wider than the locus of control. In this respect, *nishkama karma* turns into a practice of relational responsibility: the action will still be needed, but the self will be chastised on the grounds of considering moral life as a transaction, where fruits will be appropriated as personal property.

Moral realism of the vision of Krishna is brought out clearly through verse 11.33, which portrays Arjuna as an instrument in a huge process in the universe (Bhagavad Gita 11.33). This description does not undercut moral agency or deny it; it simply puts agency in the context of forces beyond the intention of the individual. In consequence of this, responsibility persists even in circumstances where there is no moral certainty (Bhagavad Gita 11.33).

Relational Ontology in Indigenous Ethics

The Indigenous ethical models, in particular those expressed in the Native American traditions, are based on relational ontology. Ethics is not conceived as the outer code of behavior but as a way of maintaining a balance between human, non-human animal, earth, and ancestral presences. Ethical behavior is therefore closely related to both communal and environmental responsibilities. Moral life cannot be separated from place and relation, as Burkhart suggests in Indigenous environmental ethics that land is not merely a place to know, be, and value but an ontological basis of knowing, being, and valuing (Burkhart). Knowledge in the Indigenous worldviews is ethical in nature. Moral knowledge is passed on through storytelling, ceremony, and place-based memory as vectors of transmitting moral knowledge across generations. N. Scott Momaday emphasizes that narratives have ethical memory, which makes people connected to land and ancestors. As a result, ethics is perpetuated in narrative continuity and not by formal teaching.

Momaday argues that the vastness of the terrain between the continental interior was a memory in the blood of his grandmother (Momaday Prologue). This remark re-conceptualizes geography as the embodied heritage in which land is interiorized as lived moral memory instead of being considered as property. In the same manner, Leslie Marmon Silko presents land as an agent of morality and not a neutral resource. In her work, moral degradation is present in the form of disruption of the relationship with the land and community. The ultimate ethical goal is to bring about balance as opposed to punishing or condemning. This healing attitude accompanies Indigenous theories of ethics, conceptualizing harm as the main form of disaffiliation in the relationship and introducing ethical conduct as the restoration of connections within their appropriate environment and community (Burkhart).

Silko starts *Ceremony* with the emphasis on how the world is made by storytelling and naming: "Thought-Woman, the spider / named things and / as she named them/they appeared" (Silko 1). These lines move away from mythic ornamentation to an ontological claim about language and reality. Reality is constructed by narrative and naming. Once things become visible through naming, language, story, and relationships, people, places, and memories are reconnected. These Indigenous moral systems are not anthropocentric or individualistic, so that humans are participants in a greater sacred system. This cosmology resembles the cosmology of Krishna, in which case, the self is absorbed into the cosmic law of order and balance.

Dharma and Indigenous Responsibility: A Comparative Framework

The principle of dharma, as explicated in the teachings of Krishna, is close to Indigenous principles of responsibility. Other than being a fixed code of law, dharma is a moving principle that maintains cosmic and social balance. The issue of ethical failure, in this context, becomes not based on the fact that one violates prescriptive rules, but on the fact that there is an inherent misconception of the obligations of relationships. Moral disruption in Indigenous systems of ethics is also caused by the violation of relationships with the land, ancestors, or community. An ethical practice is thus based on restorative efforts and not on moral absolutism. The advice to Arjuna by Krishna puts more emphasis on restoring cosmic order rather than on emotional disposition or social norms of the time, even when the action to be performed results in tragedy. Both traditions acknowledge the fact that ethical ambiguity is a part of human life. Krishna does not refute the violence and tragedy that come with war; rather, he places them in the context of a greater duty. Indigenous stories address the issue of suffering in a similar way without diminishing morality to purity or innocence. This brings out endurance, responsibility, and continuity as some of the central virtues in both paradigms.

Sacred Narrative as Ethical Transmission

One of the major points of intersection between the ethical tradition related to Krishna and Indigenous ethical traditions is the role of the sacred narrative. The *Mahabharata* is not only a literary epic but also an ethical reservoir, which imprints issues, obligations, and moral implications. The moral standing of Krishna is achieved through interactions with the story and not through moral dictums. Indigenous storytelling plays a similar role. The knowledge of ethics is inbuilt in myths, songs, and oral histories, which in turn allows moral insight to be developed in the form of participative action and shared memory. Ethics is practiced through experience, not theory. The availability of ethical knowledge is ensured by the existence of Krishna in epic, devotional, and folk narration

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("Mahabharata"). The retelling of each story is a re-enactment of moral thinking and, therefore, helps to maintain ethical awareness throughout temporal acts. This narrative tradition is a reflection of Indigenous traditions, in which morality is sustained in community memory and performance of rituals.

Decolonizing Ethical Universals

Non-Western ethical systems have often been described as mythic, religious, or pre-rational by colonial epistemology and are thus pushed to the periphery of moral discourse. With an ethical approach that is decolonial, Dussel argues that the so-called universal nature of ethics is always tinted with historical and geopolitical circumstances; it is impossible to imagine it as neutral. In this regard, any serious ethical theory ought to take its departure with the viewpoint of those who have been methodically marginalized or pushed to the fringes. Enlightenment rationalism is brought into the singular cause of moral universality, which, consequently, pushes relational ethical traditions to the periphery. The comparative analysis of Krishna's philosophy and Indigenous ethical systems is used to challenge this order. Ethics as conceived by Krishna avoids the tendency to separate moral considerations into the realm of abstract reasoning, and its conception does so intentionally, as seen in Bhagavad Gita 2.47, 2.48, 3.19. Similarly, Indigenous ethics opposes the existence of a cosmology and morality dichotomy. The two traditions offer consistent alternatives to individualist and extractive systems of moralities which dominate modern global discourse (Bhagavad Gita 3.20–3.21, 5.10). These systems of ethics present the means of addressing modern crises like environmental pollution, social disintegration, and alienation of morals by foregrounding relational responsibility (Bhagavad Gita 3.30, 4.7–4.8). This is what makes them relevant because they are not abstraction-resistant (Bhagavad Gita 18.47).

Indian Knowledge Systems and Indigenous Epistemologies

Ethical principles in Indian Knowledge Systems cannot exist outside of cosmological schemas, aesthetics, and lived praxis, and the figure of Krishna is a representation of the synthesis of these three elements and thus illustrates that ethical authority is not a transcendent ontological entity but a result of experience and practice. Indigenous epistemologies also focus on embodied and relational cognition, where ethics are learned by engaging in community, not through a structured or institutionalized way of learning. Such an epistemic convergence is what makes it crucial to redefine global ethical discourses outside Eurocentric paradigms. By placing Krishna in a dialogic context, where Indigenous ethics are in place, homogenization of traditions is not part of the equation, but instead it demonstrates civilizational similarities in orientation towards balance, responsibility, and continuity.

CONCLUSION

The current comparative study reveals that the ethical conception of Krishna is quite similar to that of Indigenous societies based on moral systems which are based on relational ontology and sacred fiduciary responsibility. Both traditions do not ascribe to dogmatic moral absolutism; instead, they propagate ethical judgments that are situational, social and ecological balances (Bhagavad Gita 18.47). Krishna cannot just be reduced to the status of a theological figurehead; he serves as a guide to the ethical principles of a civilization, the teachings of which resonate with the Indigenous philosophies that anticipate responsibility and religious interrelationship (Bhagavad Gita 2.47, 3.19, 11.33). To question the epistemic inequalities reinforced by colonialism, this paper places Krishna in a comparative Indigenous ethical context and, in so doing, emphasizes the sheer philosophical richness of non-Western moral cultures. These relational ethical systems pre-empt abstract metaphysical postulates that replace substantive alternatives to the individualist and extractive moral paradigms that prevail in current discourses (Bhagavad Gita 4.7–4.8).

Indian Knowledge Systems make it impossible to separate ethical principles from cosmological structures, aesthetic considerations, and lived praxis. Krishna is a model of this synthesis as ethical authority is described as the result of experience and practice instead of some transcendental ontological locus. Native epistemologies also focus on embodied and social cognition, where morals are developed in the context of the community, not by institutional means. This epistemic convergence justifies the need to rebrand the global discourse of ethics outside Eurocentric structures. The way Krishna is presented in a dialogical relationship with Indigenous ethics does not promote cultural homogenization but demonstrates similarity in civilizational orientations in balance, responsibility, and continuity (Bhagavad Gita 18.47).

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