

## A Reading of Bulgakov's the Master and Margarita from the Perspective of the Karma Theory

Kavya Das T<sup>1</sup>, Dr. PP Vijayalakshmi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Kochi Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, India Mail: kavyadast@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Kochi Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, India Mail: drppvijayalakshmi@gmail.com

### Abstract

The Master and Margarita is generally regarded as the finest masterpiece on Soviet Russia and the Stalinist regime written by Mikhail Bulgakov. The objective of this paper is to attempt to show how the theory of karma is justified by analyzing the actions of major characters in the novel. The devil disguised as Woland punished the modern materialist man who is enclosed in a machinist world ignorant of the relevance of karma in their life. The law of karma is applicable to the novel as the majority of characters undergo mental conflict and their immoral actions driven by intention lead to future consequences. The society immersed in materialistic prosperity is satirically portrayed in this novel in relation to the concept of their karma. Though the author is rooted in western theology, the present study aims to show that he must have been influenced by the Eastern philosophy of karma theory.

**Keywords:** Karma theory, immoral actions, mental conflict, future consequences

### INTRODUCTION

Russian writer Afanasyevich Bulgakov began writing his masterpiece, *The Master and Margarita* around 1928, the era of Stalin and his purges. His writing style was mainly influenced by Russian classical writers such as Gogol and Pushkin. He was never an atheist but respected the religious teachings and the role of morality in shaping one's future. Bulgakov was totally distressed by the brutalities of World War I. He had gone through a spiritual crisis and gave up his medical profession, turned to literature.

The Master and Margarita can be considered as a reflection of the Soviet society and the absorption of the aristocrats in a materialistic life. The novel is basically structured in three parts and portrays the anti-Stalinist theme through an intricate allegory of good and evil. The multi-layered narrative switches forward and backward between Jerusalem in the time of Christ and contemporary Moscow. The devil who takes the name of Woland visits contemporary Moscow with his assistants and causes havoc in the city. They wreak havoc by targeting the materialistic atheist people, especially the literary elite that comprises of corrupt social climbers and their trade union Massolit. The second set of the novel is Yershalaim, described by Woland in his conversation with Berlioz and his friend. Between these two themes revolve a beautiful and tragic love story of the Master and Margarita. The novel is pervaded by the element of magical realism in which reality and fantasy are intermingled to delineate the kind of life under the Stalinist regime.

"Now as a man is like this or like that,

according as he acts and as he behaves so he will be

a man of good acts will become good, a man of bad acts, bad; he become

s pure by pure deeds, bad by bad deed;  
and here they say that a person consists of desires, and as  
is his desire, so is his will;  
and as is his will, so is his deed;

and whatever deed he does, that he will reap.”

-Brihadaranyaka Upanishad-4.4.5, 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad is an ancient treatise that emphasizes on Atman which refers to the soul or self. According to this scripture karma is a universal principle which affirms that the life of an individual is governed by a system of cause, effect, actions, and reactions. The principle of karma which originated in India can be referred to as the law of karma or karma theory. Karma literally means action. It cannot be considered as fate, our actions create our own destiny. It is also related to the spiritual principle that the cause and effect of an individual's past action has an impact on his future. So the present, past and future of one's life is directly connected as per the law of karma.

## OBJECTIVE

This research paper makes an attempt

1. To analyze the reactions of contemporary Moscow society towards Woland's magical powers.
2. To analyze how the theory of karma is justified by studying the actions of major characters in the novel.

## HYPOTHESIS

It is significant that no one can be free from the fruits of their karma, whether it is good or bad. Woland and his retinue easily tempted the materialistic and greedy citizens and their reactions to the temptation result in the ultimate fate of insanity. According to the quality of our deeds, the universe responds to us. The concept of karma works in this novel as shown in the consequences of the actions of the people.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A.C Wright in his scholarly article "Satan in Moscow: An approach to Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita" investigates the presence of satanic elements along with the story of Pilate and Christ. Edythe CHaber emphasized on another dimension of the novel, where he analyzed the evil in Goethe's Faust with that in Bulgakov. His paper "The mythic structure of The Master and Margarita" focuses on the structure of the novel by investigating the free blending of lyricism and myth, everyday life and fantasy. Michael Glenny in his research paper "The existentialist thought in The Master and Margarita explores possible Neo-Platonist influences in the novel. Although several scholars commended on the complex and fractured narrative of the novel, MLD Kennedy focused on how madness serves as a literary tool in his study "A method to his madness: role of insanity in the novel The Master and Margarita".

## ANALYSIS

The visit of a strange, self-proclaimed magician and his retinue of servants had well shaken the Russian literary world. The reactions of the supposedly atheist people in the society towards Woland's supernatural play is analyzed using the concept and ideology of the law of karma. The vanities and pride of the characters are exposed and they are punished in the novel as a

result of their immoral actions. Ivan experienced intense mental conflict after witnessing his companion's death as predicted by Woland. Most of the characters in the novel are victims of schizophrenia, unable to comprehend what is happening around them. The fact is that they failed to understand that the illness is a consequence of their actions. Through Woland's narrative to Berlioz the story of Pontius Pilate is unveiled. Pontius Pilate experienced a severe headache before the trial of Yeshua-Ha-Nozri. The headache is a symbol of moral dilemma caused by the action that he is going to perform.

Yeshua is a perfect example of karma yogi, the one who is selfless and practices detachment from the fruit of all the actions. According to Yeshua, a new temple of truth will be built after the fall of the temple of old faith. Ultimately the new temple of truth is the epitome of peace, truth and justice. Mary Jo Meadow a professor of religious studies, mentions that karma is more or less related to the Christian beliefs on sin and its consequences. Christianity generally underlines on morals like the one reaps what she or he sows and lives by the sword, die by the sword. It is also evident that Jesus was well aware of the law of karma. He freed all of his followers from their sins by willingly taking over the effects of their bad deeds. They acknowledged them as their savior. He suffered on the cross for the benefit of His followers and took over the karma of many people during his lifetime on earth.

Woland explicitly points out that the citizens are very much obsessed with materialistic possession because of the technological advancement. As the rain of money starts falling, the people hysterically started to snatch maximum amount of money. It is apparent that man is bound to the materialistic world which he lives in. The illusory society built around him by the money ultimately gives him despair and disillusionment. The performances put up at the variety theatre causes much chaos to the masses. The clothes they distributed disappear and the money gets converted to mere strips of paper after the show.

Here it is evident that Woland is selective about his victims. Rimsky is least affected by the punishment of Woland, because he is basically not an evil person. He possesses self-control over the supernatural powers of the Woland. Styopa Likhodev, the director of the variety theatre and Nikanor, both of them suffer because of their greed and gluttonous actions. Styopa Likhodev is mysteriously transported to Yalta for his wicked and greedy deeds. In the same way Nikanor, the chairman of the tenants association is easily tempted by Koroviev by the promise of free tickets to the variety theatre and a bribe. After he accepts the money, it is converted to illegal foreign currency and he is arrested by the officials for secretly keeping illegal currency in his house. The character Woland can be interpreted as the master agent of karma phala and the society symbolizes the world as a microcosm which experiences loss and destruction, due to the actions of crime and injustice perpetrated.

Karma and karma phala are two major concepts in Buddhism related to karma theory. The concept explained how a person's deliberate and conscious actions can keep them tied to the concept of rebirth in samsara. Karma phala is its fruit, effect or result. The actions that are driven by the deliberate intentions are referred in the Buddhist tradition. Accordingly, karma phala cannot be enforced by God or a deity or any supernatural elements, but instead, it is the product of the natural process of cause and effect. Peter Harvey, a contemporary British scholar of Buddhism states that:

“It is the psychological impulse behind an action that is karma that which sets going a chain of causes culminating in karmic fruit. Actions then must be intentional, if they are to generate karmic fruits” (Harvey pp.39-40).

According to Hindu scriptures even lords are committed to the law of karma. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, the trinities of Hindu purana have attained the positions of divine responsibilities as a result of the good deeds that were done in their earlier birth cycles. Even Lord

Krishna is said to have had his death as a result of his inadvertent actions that he did in the past in his earlier life where he was incarnated as Lord Rama. In Bhagavad Gita, chapter three is entitled as karma yoga. In chapter three, verse four of Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna says that,

“man does not attain freedom from action without entering upon action nor does he reach perfection merely by renunciation of action” (BG 3.4).

The soul is constrained into numerous cycles of rebirth until it reaches the final state of liberation or moksha, after confined in a temporal world. The state of liberation is achieved only through a process of purification to be experienced while in the confines of a temporal world. The liberation in Buddhist tradition is called the state of nirvana, and whoever wants to attain nirvana must follow the Eightfold Noble Path that includes: Right view, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

The Pilate narratives in the Master's novels suggest that Pilate feels guilty of his actions and underwent insomnia for two thousand years, as a result of his karma. Pilate feels that “there had been no execution” and that it would be “terrible” to execute such a man as Yeshua. He achieves the realization that his cowardice and subsequent unrighteous deeds would torment him forever. Pilate complains about Yerusalem that:

“There's no unreliable place on earth. And I'm not talking now about nature! I'm unwell every time I have to come here. And even that wouldn't be such a bad thing. I'm unwell every time but these feasts—the magic, the wizards, the magicians, these flocks of pilgrims... Fanatics, fanatics” (Bulgakov, p.310)

Woland's moral purpose becomes clear when he acts as a predominant factor in reuniting the Master and Margarita. Margarita inspired the Master to publish his masterpiece about Pontius Pilate. But his entire attempt ends in vain because of the stringent attacks by the critics on Pilatism. The Master lost control of his mind and ends in an insane asylum.

Margarita suffered a lot by being the hostesses as naked in order to get back his lover. Margarita's selflessness is best seen in the ball conducted by Woland and his retinue. After the spring balls she chooses to use a wish granted by Woland to help Frieda, rather than fulfilling her own desire to reunite with her Master. Even though she was now in a state of opposition to express any of her deepest wish, her words seemingly suggest her goodness. She told frankly to Woland that:

“I'm a frivolous person. I interceded with you on Frieda's behalf only because I was incautious enough to give her firm hope. She's waiting. Messire, she believes in my power. And if she is deceived, I find myself in a terrible position. I won't have any peace for the rest of my life. Nothing can be done! It's just turned out this way” (Bulgakov p.289).

And it gets proved that selfless action leads to salvation and redemption. The Master is saved from an insane asylum as promised and they get reunited. Hence Margarita can be considered as a Karma yogi who is in the path of unselfish action which ultimately leads to spiritual liberation. According to Stephen Philips, a professor of philosophy and Asian studies, “Karma yoga applies to any action in any profession or family activities where the yogi works selflessly for others benefit” (Philips pp.100-101).

## CONCLUSION

The conduct of the citizens of Moscow is analyzed on the basis of the universal principal

of karma theory. In Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna said, "The meaning of karma is in the intention. Those who are motivated only by desire for the fruits of actions are miserable, for they are constantly anxious about the results of what they do." Through his supernatural powers Woland evokes the worst part of an individual's character and exposes it before the world. The literary elites of the state and the aristocrats are mostly interested in materialistic possession and do not attribute any sort of sincerity or authenticity to their art or professions.

The superficiality and vanity of modern life in general is mostly revealed through exposing the worst side of an individual's character. Majority of characters in the novel are tied to Pilate in some way or other, as they faced a moral dilemma prior to their wicked and unethical actions. Man's excessive fascination for materialistic gain and the many illusions he builds give him a false sense of security. The role of madness played in this novel can be analyzed as a direct outcome of the insatiability of the people towards money and coziness. Bulgakov asserts his principle of good through the characters of Master and Margarita and their selfless actions eventually give them the fruit of their karma. Bulgakov's writing mirrors his deep belief in the destructive nature of material atheism and the novel explicitly portrays that, he might have been influenced by the Eastern philosophy of karma.

## REFERENCES

1. Bulgakov, Mikhail. *The Master and Margarita*. Translated by Hugh Alpin, Alma Classics, 2012.
2. Dayananda, Swami. *The teaching of the Bhagavad Gita*. Orient paperbacks, 2005.
3. Harvey, Peter. *Introduction to Buddhism*. Cambridge University Press, 1990.
4. Kuhn, Hermann. *Karma: The Mechanism*. Crosswind publication, 2001.
5. Proffer, Ellenda. "Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*: Genre and Motif." *The Master and Margarita: A Critical Companion*, Ed. Laura Weeks. Northwestern UP, 1996.
6. Wilson, Annie. "Theory of Karma in Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita." *Spreading the light of wisdom*, 2015. [www.inner-light-in.com/2015/03/karma-theory-in-hinduism](http://www.inner-light-in.com/2015/03/karma-theory-in-hinduism).
7. Milne, Lesely. *Mikhail Bulgakov: A Critical Biography*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.
8. Haber, C. Edythe. "The Mythic Structure of *The Master and Margarita*." *The Russia Review*, 1975.
9. Philips, Stephen. *Yoga, Karma, and Rebirth: A Brief History and Philosophy*, Columbia University Press, 2009.