

Applying the Alchemical Transformation Model (ATM) to Study the *Bhagavad Gita*

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Abstract

The alchemical opus could happen in a laboratory and symbolically in the mind of the alchemist. This study investigates the psychological aspects of alchemy rather than its laboratory operations. A discussion facilitating a broader understanding of the major stages of the alchemical process of transformation to create the Philosopher's Stone is presented. Stages of alchemy are identified and applied to develop a deeper understanding of the classic *Bhagavad Gita*.

Key words: Alchemical Transformation Model, stages of alchemy, Bhagvad Gita and Transformation of mind.

Introduction

The Great Work of alchemy aimed at bringing perfection to both matter and the soul, and the practice seemed to change the mind and spirit of the alchemist's. The alchemists believed that the purification of the practitioner could be achieved through the alchemical process and its successful culmination would result in the production of the Philosopher's Stone, which could transform base metals like lead into gold and render the alchemist almost immortal. The alchemical opus could happen in a laboratory and symbolically in the mind of the alchemist. As this study proposes to investigate into the psychological aspects of alchemy rather than its laboratory operations, a detailed analysis of the practical operation need not be made here. Thus a discussion facilitating a broader understanding of the major stages of the alchemical process of transformation to create the Philosopher's Stone will suffice.

Transformation Within and Without

Alchemical transformation of matter and mind into perfection, in a rudimentary sense, can be expressed through the three-stage process of Alchemy: *Nigredo* (the black stage), *Albedo* (the white stage), and *Rubedo* (the red stage). While the *Nigredo* is concerned with bringing the mind into the original state, *Albedo* brings light into the dark recesses of the unconscious, and ultimately in the *Rubedo* the union of all opposites (Conscious and Unconscious, Masculine and Feminine principles, Good and Evil, etc) takes place. The successful completion of this complex process results in the materialization of the Philosopher's Stone and the perfection of the alchemists themselves. In this process, colours played the role of omens, i.e., symbols suggesting measures of progress in the work and helped the alchemist to take necessary steps. The colours associated with the Great Work were originally four in number: the black (*Nigredo*), the white (*Albedo*), the yellow (*Citrinitas*), and the red (*Rubedo*). Over the passage of time, the yellow stage (also codenamed as "the Wise Old Man") was compressed or integrated into the red stage. The inversion of colours suggested the direction in which the work was moving. The original matter (or mind), called the *prime materia*, had to undergo these processes to produce the Philosopher's Stone. The Great Work culminated with the achievement of the Philosopher's Stone under the *Nigredo-Albedo-Rubedo* process of transformation. Though alchemists adopted several methods to produce the Philosopher's Stone, the most popular model of alchemical operation describing the transformative process included seven stages: (1) Calcination, (2) Dissolution, (3) Separation, (4) Conjunction, (5) Fermentation, (6) Distillation, and (7) Coagulation. The *prime materia* (original matter or mind) had to undergo these processes before it could produce the Philosopher's Stone.

The Nigredo Stage

The first stage of transformation in the alchemical journey is called *Nigredo*. This is known as the black stage. In laboratory terms, three terms describe this stage: Calcination, Dissolution, and Separation. *Calcination* in an alchemist's laboratory involves heating a substance (the *prime materia*) until it is reduced to ashes. *Dissolution* refers to the laboratory process of adding the element of water to the ashes of what has been burned by the fires of Calcination. *Separation*, in laboratory terms, is a process of isolation of the components of

Dissolution by filtration and then discarding any unworthy material. In the *nigredo*, all this happened to the matter as well as to the mind, which was projected onto the matter.

The *nigredo* is a period of maximum despair, which impels one to slow down and examine life, as one encounters the shadow side of one's personality. As such, it is a prerequisite for personal development. It signifies the difficulties a man has to overcome in his journey through the underworld. Psychologically, *nigredo* corresponds to the self-reflection induced by conflict and terrible depression. The confusion and gloom during this stage are so mortifying that it is sometimes called 'blacker than the blackest black'. The alchemist encounters dangers internal or external, or both: Shadows, monsters, demons, dragons, etc. One has to undergo difficult, sometimes painful and even dangerous, initiation tests. One has to encounter one's own shadow, and often in its inner as well as outer manifestation. The shadow is an unconscious complex defined as the repressed, suppressed or disowned qualities of the conscious self—the very qualities one is ashamed to possess. The villain is a shadow character. Fear, hatred, feeling of inferiority, conflict, discontentment, envy, apathy, and boredom are some of the states and complexes that continually hound the alchemist during the *nigredo*. Loneliness through separation is the characteristic of this stage. Intense suffering is an inevitable outcome. One has, however, got to face his shadow and crucify the ego before moving on to the next stage of transformation, when the ego is resurrected somewhat purified. The *nigredo* (or lead) stage, which is characterized by conflict, moral confusion and psychic distress, must be endured with patience, hope, and love.

The Albedo Stage

The second stage of transformation in the alchemical journey is called the *albedo*, which is characterized as the *washing* of the products of the *nigredo*. In other words, *albedo* is a further cleansing of the individual, chaotic consciousness or *prime materia* the putrefaction of which has occurred during the *nigredo*. *Albedo*, which in Latin means "whiteness", is also known as the silver stage and is expressed through three terms: Conjunction, Fermentation, and Distillation. *Conjunction*, as the name implies, is the recombination of the saved elements from Separation into a new substance. Psychologically, it is the empowerment of one's true self, the union of both the masculine and feminine sides of one's personality into a new or intuitive state of consciousness. The alchemists refer to it as the Lesser Stone, and after it is achieved, the adept

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begins to *understand* the true nature of the Self. This alchemical operation involves bringing together the opposites such as the conscious and the unconscious, good and evil, and especially the masculine and the feminine. This union of the male and the female may or may not involve sexual union: it is a union of the Yin (feminine) and Yang (masculine) principles or that of the two primary archetypes of the unconscious mind — the Anima and the Animus. The Anima is the feminine inner personality in the unconscious of a male and the Animus is the masculine inner personality in the unconscious of a female. The harmonious union of these contrasexual elements results in bestowing an integrated personality on the alchemist. It also represents the later stages of shadow integration, the shadow which was separated during *nigredo*. The integration of the shadow is an early need for transcendence. Jung refers to the masculine and feminine as two great archetypal principles, coexisting as equal and complementary parts of a balanced cosmic system, as expressed in the interplay of the Yin and the Yang.

Fermentation, a part of the *albedo*, is also known as Putrefaction or decomposition—the rotting of the dead self. This is a stage when one encounters one’s shadow. According to Jung, shadow or “shadow aspect” is a part of the unconscious mind consisting of repressed weaknesses, shortcomings, and instincts. One of the foremost archetypes, the shadow is a part of everyone’s psyche. It comprises the socially undesirable aspects of the persona which are relegated to the personal unconscious. Generally it is a disowned subpersonality which makes its presence felt in an uncomfortable way, often in our dreams. In dreams the shadow tends to appear as a sinister or threatening figure possessing the same sex as the dreamer and often appears belonging to a different community, colour, or race. The shadow is a complex and has an archetypal core (e.g., the Enemy). Not only do we repress the shadow in the personal unconscious, but we deny its existence in ourselves, and project it out on to others. Confrontation with the shadow is a painful experience because the shadow complex is associated with feelings of guilt and unworthiness and fear of rejection is anticipated if its true nature is exposed. If the shadow is made conscious, its after-effects following the initial struggle will be helpful: one will have a sense of greater vitality, be more creative, and more whole. Thus shadow consciousness is important for personal development. This stage should involve a struggle to retain awareness of the shadow, and acknowledgement of the shadow results in the breakdown of the persona. Jung spoke of the importance of embracing one’s shadow so that the darkness of it could be

illuminated through conscious efforts. “Everyone carries a shadow,” Jung wrote, “and the less it is embodied in the individual’s conscious life, the blacker and denser it is” (*CW 11*, p 131). When the shadow is embraced, regeneration and growth begin to take place. Its arrival is symbolically announced by a brilliant display of colours and meaningful visions called the “Peacock’s Tail” (with multiple colours). As we know, white itself consists of an array of colours.

Distillation is the sixth major operation in the alchemical transformation of *albedo*. In laboratory terms, this stage involves the boiling and condensation of the fermented solution to increase its purity. Psychologically, it involves another wash of the parts of the personality that no longer work with the illumined part of the psyche. This stage of the work, which precedes the final stage, calls for detachment with the selfish goals of life and to experience spiritual love. One feels the truth in the axiom that the One created all. Distillation is the sublimation of psychic forces necessary to achieve selfhood.

The *Albedo* phase, in the individuation process, corresponds to the integration of the inner contrasexual components, the *anima* in the case of man, the *animus* with a woman. We have already discussed that the Self embraces not only the conscious but also the unconscious psyche. The transformation has begun; the alchemist is waking from his ‘sedated’ life. In the brightening phase (*albedo*), one has to work with the feminine side. The dark night of the soul (i.e., *nigredo*) is over; the new phase marks a new beginning, a new dawn (Jung compared the *albedo* with daybreak, the preparation for the next and final stage, which is the sunrise: *rubedo*). During *albedo*, one has to purify oneself, becoming white from black (from the harrowing, chaotic, and torturous *nigredo*). However, the *albedo* contains all colours, and therefore how welcome it may be, all the same it is a transitional phase.

The *albedo* is a highly rewarding stage in the individuation process, but it is not totally free from dangers. The shadow has already been discovered in the *nigredo*. The *nigredo* stage has given much shock and shame; the whitening stage (*albedo*) must see the integration of opposites (in alchemical terms, it is basically the *initial* union of the contrasexual elements). The

white stage could well be a world of illusions even though inflated egoism and misleading conceptualizations are removed from the psyche.

The Rubedo Stage

The *rubedo* is the last stage of the alchemical process. In laboratory terms, it involves Coagulation, the precipitation or sublimation of the purified ferment from Distillation during the *albedo*. The purified matter of *albedo* requires blood or redness for active life. The King (*Sol* or Sun) and the Queen (*Luna* or Moon) revive to perform their *coniunctio oppositorum*, the union of all opposites, as symbolised by the conjunction of the archetypal masculine and feminine in the ‘chymical marriage’, the *hieros gamous*. In this context, Carl Gustav Jung observes that the alchemical process rejuvenates the soul and helps the practitioner achieve a *total* personality:

The alchemical operation consisted essentially in separating the prima materia, the so-called chaos, into the active principle, the soul, and the passive principle, the body, which were then reunited in personified form in the coniunctio or ‘chymical marriage’... the ritual cohabitation of Sol and Luna. (*The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Vol. 13; p 122)

The balance of the opposites creates a balance and harmony in the alchemist. This is the stage in alchemy that culminates with the production of the Philosopher’s Stone, the proof of perfection of the alchemist. Consequently, the alchemist is totally released from the fear of death or he is said to have achieved immortality as he is not at all affected any more by anything material. The unconscious parts of the psyche have been illumined with the light of the consciousness. The recognition, the acceptance and the integration of opposites has led to their transcendence and the experience of the Self. The alchemist has achieved Self-realization. He has been liberated from the impurities afflicting the soul: ignorance, fear, illusion, and other complexes. This stage is described as the phoenix’s rise from the ashes and completing the resurrection process. The Philosopher’s Stone is indeed the symbol for the perfected man, and Alchemy is thus an allegory of achieving personal transformation. Desire for self-transformation is not enough to succeed in the alchemy of the soul: the aspirant must possess great strength of will and character. The alchemists are, however, very optimistic, for they believe transformation

is possible. The transformation of matter, mind and spirit in Alchemy is more than a theory. Although Alchemy happens to be the mother of Chemistry and it is still being practised by many of its adherents, it can safely be concluded that it is safer to aim at inner transformation in the spirit of light, wisdom, and love than to attempt to transform materials into gold *per se*.

Alchemy as a Model of Transformation

The transformational process of Alchemy represents the individuation of the alchemist from an ordinary individual to a self-actualized being. It symbolizes the search for the Self that begins in the blackness of the unconscious and accentuates with the integration of the contents of the unconscious into the conscious till selfhood is achieved. The alchemical opus, on the matrix of *Nigredo-Albedo-Rubedo*, provides a model of personal transformation that culminates in the production of the Philosopher's Stone or Self-realization. An insightful study of the alchemical process of transformation reveals that it should be understood in terms of myth, magic, symbolism, etc.

The alchemist's quest for the Philosopher's Stone or perfection is an example of an archetypal quest. The quest archetype is typically a journey where the alchemist-hero overcomes his weaknesses and ultimately gets the desired object. Since an archetype is a universal symbolic pattern, symbolism is an integral aspect of the alchemical process of transformation. Besides, the alchemists' penchant for concealing truth justifies the use of complex codes or symbols. The turning of lead into gold, besides being symbolic, is also magical. Thus, myth, magic, and symbolism happen to be the very elements which are indispensable to a deep understanding of the alchemical process of transformation. Incidentally, these are also the very elements which carry great literary value. As such, the alchemical process of transformation offers a rich matrix for literature in terms of rich metaphor, powerful themes, narrative structures and techniques.

A critical study of Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter Series* gives rise to the conviction that Alchemy could itself be developed as a method of study or a form of analysis and can be used as a tool for the exegesis of a number of literary texts, particularly the ones which recount the story of personal transformation, involving a pattern of psychological journey akin to the alchemical opus or

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individuation (i.e., *Nigredo-Albedo-Rubedo*): a movement from ignorance, grief, fear, confusion to knowledge, light, joy, clarity of purpose to spiritual enlightenment, peace, freedom to live, and selfhood. While considering Alchemy as a method of study, a model could be developed on the pattern of the alchemical process of transformation or the alchemical opus—*Nigredo-Albedo-Rubedo*. Such a model may be named as the Alchemical Transformation Model (ATM), based on the transformational pattern or process of Alchemy. It can be used to narrate stories of personal transformation or to analyze and interpret similar transformative narratives. Myth, Magic, and Symbolism are identified as the basic constituents of such a model.

The nature of the progress of the alchemist in the alchemical process is an archetypal journey like that of a quest myth. Thus, myth is found to be a valid component of the ATM. The evolution of the lead into gold and that of the raw and mundane consciousness of the alchemist into psychic wholeness involves the magic of transformation. The magic underlying the transformation of man, matter and Nature pleads in favour of considering magic as a constituent of the ATM. Arguably, the alchemical process cannot be deciphered without an understanding of symbolism. Thus myth, magic, and symbolism are apparently suitable to be regarded as the chief constituents of the ATM. However, the rationale behind this model (i.e., ATM) will be elaborately explained in subsequent paragraphs. It may be noted that this dissertation proposes to study Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series of novels from an alchemical perspective, by applying the ATM. The following paragraphs will justify in detail the logic behind selecting Myth, Magic, and Symbolism as the core elements of the Alchemical Transformational Model (ATM).

One of the core aspects of Alchemy is myth. A myth can be defined as “a story or complex of story elements taken as expressing, and therefore as implicitly symbolizing, certain deep-lying aspects of human and trans-human existence” (Philip Wheelwright, cited in Robert Alan Segal ed. *Theories of Myth: Literary Criticism and Myth*, p 232). The definition of myth provided by Mary Magoulick, folklorist and Professor of English & Interdisciplinary Studies at Georgia College and State University, Georgia, USA, in her article “What is Myth?” appears to be more comprehensive: “Myths are symbolic tales of the distant past (often primordial times) that concern cosmogony and cosmology (the origin and nature of the universe), may be

connected to belief systems or rituals, and may serve to direct social action and values (n. pag.). In this dissertation, myth is basically understood as Joseph Campbell (1904–1987) interpreted the term, and particularly the *myth of the hero's journey*. While stating that “Freud and Jung both felt that myth is grounded in the unconscious” (*The Power of Myth*, p 71), Campbell observes that myths are stories fundamental to almost all cultures of the world. He asserts: “The goal of the myth is to dispel the need for ... life ignorance by effecting a reconciliation of the individual consciousness with the universal will. And this is effected through a realization of the true relationship of the passing phenomena of time to the imperishable life that lives and dies in all” (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p 238). Myths can help an individual undertake the journey of life toward fulfillment. In his book *Pathways to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation*, Campbell lists four functions of myth: (1) Mystical or Metaphysical function, (2) Cosmological function, (3) Sociological function, and (4) Pedagogical or Psychological function. The *mystical function* of myth acquaints human beings with the mystery of the universe and enables them to accept the burdens of life or the problems of existence. It helps them understand that beyond the surface or phenomenal world there is “a transcendent mystery source” (6). The *cosmological function* of myth is “to present an image of the cosmos that will maintain your sense of mystical awe and explain everything that you come into contact with in the universe around you” (8). The *sociological function* of myth is “to validate and maintain a certain sociological system: a shared set of rights and wrongs, proprieties or improprieties, on which your particular social unit depends for its existence” (ibid). The *pedagogical function* of myth leads one from childhood to maturity and teaches “how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances” (10).

Joseph Campbell, who followed Jung and extended his ideas on subsequent research, found that the basic pattern of all myths is similar and they share fundamental structures and stages (Bilsker 1). He named it as the Monomyth or the myth of the hero's journey. It is found that myths can be very personal in nature even as they represent the universal human aspiration. Since the journey of the alchemist to achieve the Philosopher's Stone or selfhood is a quest myth, the alchemist is a hero in his own right. In his celebrated book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell defines the hero in the following words:

The hero ... is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms. Such a one's visions, ideas, and inspirations come pristine from the primary springs of human life and thought. Hence they are eloquent, not of the present, disintegrating society and psyche, but of the unquenched source through which society is reborn. The hero has died as a modern man; but as eternal man—perfected, unspecific, universal man—he has been reborn. His second solemn task and deed therefore ... is to return then to us, transfigured, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed. (19-20)

The mythological adventure of the hero can be expressed through a formula: *Separation-Initiation-Return*. Campbell explains the pattern of the monomyth:

“A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won—the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (*Hero with Thousand Faces*, p 30).

As we see, the monomyth is compatible with the alchemical opus. The monomyth or the hero's journey can be subordinated to the *nigredo-albedo-rubedo* schema of transformation and can work as a tool under the Alchemical Transformation Model (ATM). Priscilla, a mythologist, has rightly claimed in her essay “The Literary Alchemy of ‘The Knight in the Cart’” that “the alchemical process is a convenient alternative to both the Jungian process of individuation and Campbell's model for the hero myth” (refer to her blog <http://mythicthinking.org/>). This clearly shows that these models are overlapping or at least compatible with each other and in turn they lend sanctity to the ATM as a logically sound model.

The myth of the hero's journey is personal in the sense that it is that of a particular individual's. It is collective in the sense that the hero represents the society, culture, or humanity as a whole and he pursues an archetypal quest. Myths express collective consciousness and help in manifesting the Self in an unconscious manner. As such, they facilitate self-realization. It may

be observed here that the monomyth in its most rudimentary pattern (Separation-Initiation-Return) is similar in structure with the *Nigredo-Albedo-Rubedo* pattern of alchemical transformation. Though the monomyth does not always completely result in Self-realization, the alchemist's journey is basically mythical: therefore myth is an essential aspect of Alchemy (hence an element of ATM).

Myths are central to all religions and cultures. According to Mircea Eliade, a Professor of Religious Thought at the University of Chicago, modern novels contain "mythological elements" which belong to the "transconscious", a set of universal human images, symbols, and sentiments (Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, pp. 16-17). This dissertation argues that all the novels undertaken for study have employed myth in one form or the other. Of course, for interpretation of the theme the function of myth has been referred to whereas for the analysis of the structure of the narratives the pattern of myth (in fact the monomyth) has been relied upon. As Alchemy is closely associated with culture, an alchemical study of the novels is in a sense cultural study too, and the myth as a cultural element is justifiably selected to be an element of the Alchemical Transformation Model (ATM).

Much like myth, magic is also an inherent feature of Alchemy. This aspect has been discussed in several books including H. Stanely Redgrove's *Magic and Mysticism: Studies in Bygone Beliefs* (2004), Rosemary Guiley's *The Encyclopedia of Magic and Alchemy* (2006), and Robert Michael Place's *Magic and Alchemy* (2009). Place defines 'magic' as "the technology of imagination" and finds that magic involves situations in which men or women attempt to create changes in physical reality using only their mental powers (11-12). He further observes that "magical thinking depends on believing that imagination can be as real as physical reality" (11).

The learned critic observes that paradoxically enough, although Christianity denounces magic, sainthood is conferred on people who are reported to have performed miracles (14). He argues that perhaps the strongest support for the validity of magic has come from psychologists in general and Carl Jung in particular. It may be mentioned here that Jung's 'synochronicity' highlights the magical aspect of reality. The alchemical transformation of lead into gold is both real and magical in a sense. Thus, Alchemy is compatible with, or rather, is an unacknowledged

system that has originally pioneered the concept of what now we call ‘Magic realism’ or ‘Magical realism’. Magic and realism were two aspects of the Reality for the alchemists, who believed that matter was real and so was the spirit (which though not apparent was nonetheless present) in matter. The alchemist harnessed these two levels of reality.

Since all the novelists under study (i.e., Coelho, Brown, and Rowling) have exploited Magic Realism, it is worth discussing the concept. In this context, the observations of Christopher Warnes are noteworthy:

There is a growing corpus of literary works that draws upon the conventions of both realism and fantasy or folktale, yet does so in such a way that neither of these two realms is able to assert a greater claim to truth than the other. This capacity to resolve the tension between two discursive systems usually thought of as mutually exclusive must constitute the starting point for any inquiry into magical realism. (2)

The magical realism narratives “seek ways of resolving the tension between miracle and truth, the magical and the real” (Warnes 3). As we had observed earlier, the alchemical texts embody such an attempt and the narratives using alchemical transformation model are prone to use this technique. Since magic per se is not entirely acceptable to the contemporary milieu, magic realism has emerged as a viable alternative. As we shall examine in the individual chapters, all the novelists under study have exploited this technique and most probably it has inspired them to fall back on Alchemy. This also proves not only the importance of magic but also the current relevance of Alchemy, which owes its origin to the medieval or earlier times.

Alchemy being a popular area of interest in the Middle Ages, it could not afford to remain totally aloof from magic. However, the magic sought by the alchemists were quite natural and harmless as contrasted with black magic or witchcraft which was diabolic. Turning lead into gold was nothing short of magic and the alchemists were magicians in this sense. The alchemists copied the magic of Nature: the emergence of a tree out of a little seed is magic; the interrelatedness of all beings is magic; the transformation of human nature from low animalism

to divinity is magic; and Nature is the greatest magician. The magic of Alchemy can be better understood in the light of the magic in the literary genre of Magical Realism, which will be discussed in the appropriate place in the main body of the thesis. Of course, the magic of alchemy is more psychological than physical. The union of radical opposites, including that of the conscious and the unconscious (which includes the integration of the masculine and the feminine, the good and the evil, etc.) is nothing but magic. True alchemy endorsed white magic and abhorred black magic, for how could the alchemist achieve selfhood or enlightenment through a destructive medium such as black magic?

The greatest magic in the universe is the magic involved in transformation, whether physical or psychological. The alchemists observed that the magic of transformation cannot be accomplished without the enabling magical force—Love—the transcendental force. It is the link or active agent that connects all things and beings in the universe, and helps them identify themselves with the One. Love is the guiding force behind the alchemical opus. The union of the opposites cannot be achieved without love. Love, and not lust, is indispensable for transformation of one's personality. This is what necessitates an understanding of others, including one's enemies or the Shadow. In the Great Work, love is an *agent*, sometimes active, sometimes passive, but nonetheless always present. Without Love no psychological transformation in the alchemical sense can be possible. The alchemists implicitly understood that Love is the greatest magic in the world as it connects the Above and the Below—Man, Matter, Nature, and the Soul of the World—and assists them to be perfect.

Like myth and magic, Symbolism is an essential feature of Alchemy. Symbols of alchemy represent the codes of personal transformation. They are metaphoric portrayals of psychic reality. The alchemical symbols are expressed in individual terms but at the same time they retain their universal qualities. The Philosopher's Stone, for example, is an archetypal symbol representing the Self. Similarly Sulphur, Mercury, and Salt are alchemical symbols. According to Paracelsus, these are the *Tria Prima* or Three Primes: Sulfur (♁) represents omnipresent spirit of life, Mercury (☿) represents fluid connection between the High and the Low, and Salt (♁) represents base matter. Similarly, the four elements, the animals and birds, metals and non-metals, etc. are alchemical symbols. The alchemical symbols not only

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represented psychological truths but also served as codes. By breaking code after code, a fledgling alchemist could proceed to achieve the Philosopher's Stone. For example, the various colours in alchemy (e.g., black, white, and red) were symbolic in significance. They acted as *omens* for the alchemist on his path to perfection. The alchemists used symbols as codes to talk of their sacred secrets. Jung claims, "the world of alchemical symbols definitely does not belong to the rubbish heap of the past, but stands in a very real and living relationship to our most recent discoveries concerning the psychology of the unconscious."²³ The use of animals and birds, the elements, astral bodies, anagrams, and colours—to mention a few—speak highly of the rich tradition of alchemical symbolism.

Among the various substances used in the alchemical opus, Sulphur, Mercury, and Salt occupy very significant places. Mercury represents fluidity, transformation, and intellect. Alchemical mercury is the "essence," salt is the "body," and sulfur is the "oil" clinging to mercury. Alchemists were convinced that mercury, commonly known as quicksilver, transcended both solid and liquid states, earth and heaven, and life and death. It was indispensable for the production of the Philosopher's Stone. The birds and animals represented in the alchemical symbolism generally include Black Crow, Raven, Toad, and Dragon in the *Nigredo*; White Swan, Unicorn and White Eagle in the *Albedo*; and the Phoenix in the *Rubedo*. Dragons were, however, used for several representations in alchemy. Sometimes the dragon represented danger, sometimes the unconscious, and at other times as a symbol of wholeness. The dragon or the snake in the Ouroboros (or Uroborus) eating its own tail represents psychic wholeness and the completion of the alchemists' opus. In alchemy, the Sun represented the masculine principle (King) and the Moon represented the feminine principle (Queen), and their union was sought after for balance. The elements and principles involved in the alchemical operations were Earth, Air, Water, and Fire. Thus, symbolism constitutes the core of the alchemical opus.

In the light of the above discussion, my selection of myth, magic, and symbolism as constituents of the Alchemical Transformation Model (ATM) is justified. Of course, its efficacy as a method of study has been proved by my study of Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter Series* are alchemical discourses

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built on the theme of Self-realization in my PhD thesis “Alchemy of the Soul: A Study of Paulo Coelho’s *The Alchemist*, Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, and J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter Series*”. While using the Alchemical Transformation Model as a method of study, a researcher may well consider the essential features of Alchemy: Myth, Magic, and Symbolism. However, one must consider all these aspects of Alchemy only within the parameters of the *Nigredo-Albedo-Rubedo* transformational model. It may be pertinent to state here that the basic structure and dynamics of the alchemical process of transformation is present in the Alchemical Transformational Model (ATM). My PhD thesis was highly appreciated by the examiners and one of them had suggested carrying on further research in the same line with the Indian literary and philosophical texts. In the subsequent sections, I try to briefly justify using the ATM to study the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Applying the ATM Method to Study the *Bhagavad Gita*

The Alchemical Transformational Model (ATM), which is based on the science, philosophy and psychology of Alchemy, can be used to study the most sacred text of the Hindus, i.e., the *Bhagavad Gita*. The underlying theme of the *Gita* is the journey of the *jivatma* (individual soul) to be one with the *Paramatma* (Soul of the World/God) through Self-development with a view to attaining Self-realization. The *Gita*, which is designed in the pattern of an Upanishad, happens to be the cream of all the Upanishads and the Vedas. The practical aspect of the treaties is that it highlights the various Yogas which lead to Self-realization of the practitioner. Advanced as a philosophy of life, the *Gita* enumerates a practical psychology with a thrust on experiential learning till one becomes identified with the One. Both the ancient works (the *Gita* and Alchemy) entail methods of Self-realization, and as such, they have many similarities and differences.

Alchemy, as we come to know from the fabled alchemical literature *The Emerald Tablet*, talks of the universe being created by the “One” (i.e. God). It highlights the similarity between the microcosm and the macrocosm as manifestation of the Divine will. While assuming that the world is made of the five elements (Earth, Air, Water, Fire, Ether), it claims that Man, Matter (Nature), and Mind, can be transformed in the light of the Above. Evolution towards achieving perfection is the binding rule for Man, Matter and Mind and everyone will be liberated by

achieving their potential (of divinity). Alchemy forwarded itself as the means of quickening this process of evolution, much like the Yoga. Both the systems believed that everything in the universe had a soul, though the limitations of consciousness (as per evolution) in them made them different, and that evolution is teleological (i.e., everything wanted perfection or realizing their potential that is union with God/Self). Both the systems asserted that it was ignorance which thwarted attainment of Selfhood. As we know, these systems took it *a priori* that self-questioning, self-examination, self-analysis, and self-development led to Self-realization. While Alchemy followed the *Nigredo-Albedo-Rubedo* method of transformation of the matter, mind, and Nature (individual soul or consciousness), the *Gita* highlighted on the methods of Yoga, to attain Selfhood. Against the similarities between Alchemy and the *Bhagavad Gita* insofar as personal transformation is concerned, it will be very interesting to ascertain whether the Alchemical transformational model (ATM) can be applied to interpret the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Pitted against the battlefield of the Mahabharat war (at Kurukshetra), the *Gita* is a spiritual dialogue between Arjun and Lord Krishna, the profounder of the Yogas. The sacred text details the spiritual journey of the soul till it is united with the Supreme Soul. Doubt, worry, confusion and self-pity numb Arjun to shun action as he become reluctant to kill his relatives in war; on the other hand, he feels it will be better to get killed instead. The inaction of Arjun on the battlefield is engendered by his attachment (moha) to the world. His inaction, however, is a byproduct of his despondency (visaad) and he implores Lord Krishna to guide him. Krishna tries to dispel Arjun's despondency by his narration of the nature of the Soul and finally he shows his biswarupa. A knower of the soul, now Arjun has a few queries and the exponent of Yoga dispels his illusion arising out of ignorance by the light of knowledge of the Self. Arjun realizes the Self by the wisdom of the *Gita* and returns to the war established in the Self. His winning of the war may be historically significant, but what is crucial is his action based on Self-knowledge.

Conclusion

The despondency of Arjun is akin to the Nigredo of Alchemy; his biswarupa darshan is Arjun's Albedo, and returning to action with Self-knowledge can be definitely called Arjun's Rubedo. Though it appears to be sketchy here, the *Bhagavad Gita* can be interpreted using the ATM.

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