

A Yogic Reading of *Lootera*: Tracing Patanjali's Philosophy of Ashtanga Yoga in the Cinematic Retelling of *The Last Leaf*

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Abstract

Yoga is a philosophy embedded in the storytelling traditions of Indian culture, where the yogic state is not merely physical discipline but a metaphysical union of energies. It is rooted in the figure of Shiva, a symbol of stillness and awareness in Hindu traditions. Yoga as a practice is incomplete without the awakening of Shakti, the dynamic feminine force. This balance is echoed in devotional literature dedicated to feminine energy, which highlights that spiritual realization is unattainable without the presence of Shakti. As expressed in the *Durga Chalisa* "जोगी सुर मुनि कहत पुकारी । योग न हो बिन शक्ति तुम्हारी॥" (Great yogis, gods, and sages all proclaim that Yoga, spiritual union is not possible without the Goddess's energy.) This verse reinforces the philosophical ideas of Yoga, particularly the unity of Purusha (consciousness) and Prakriti (energy), which has long been a part of Indian storytelling traditions and continues to resonate in modern narratives such as cinema, as reflected in the cross-cultural adaptation of O'Henry's *The Last Leaf* into the Indian film *Lootera* (2013). *Lootera* integrates the philosophical lens of Yoga, which emphasizes *Darshana* (perception of truth), *Dharma* (righteous living), and *Moksha* (liberation), to present a narrative of spiritual transformation and self-realization. The paper reimagines the narrative through Patanjali's philosophy of Ashtanga Yoga, exploring how the eightfold path manifests subtly within the film's emotional and spiritual arc. The protagonists' evolving relationship becomes a metaphor for the Yogic journey, where love serves as a transformative force, guiding both characters toward inner awakening, self-realization, and liberation, leading to freedom that comes from dissolving the difference between masculine and feminine and becoming one. Drawing from Sri Aurobindo's concept of the psychic being, *Lootera* reinterprets universal themes of hope, suffering, and compassion as part of an inward journey toward higher

consciousness, resonating with S. Radhakrishnan's understanding of Indian philosophy as a spiritual culture rooted in the unity of existence.

Keywords: Yoga Philosophy, Psychic Being, Self-realization, Moksha (Liberation), Redemptive Love, Indian Storytelling Tradition

Introduction:

The essence of Indian culture lies in its rich storytelling traditions. Through sacred texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, and epics like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, India has preserved some of the world's oldest and most profound stories. These tales were not meant only to entertain people but to carry deep wisdom about life, nature, and the universe. In many of these stories, the concept of Yoga is introduced not just as physical exercise but as a way of balanced life, self-discipline, and connection to the divine. The Upanishads are rich with anecdotes and profound stories of sages engaged in deep contemplation and the timeless quest for truth. In exploring the nature of the Self (*Atman*), for example, the *Brihadaranyaka* Upanishad presents a powerful vision of the Self as the inner controller, present within all elements of existence yet unseen by them. As *Yajnavalkya* explains, the Self dwells within the earth, water, fire, air, the sun, the sky, and even within the senses and faculties like sight, hearing, and knowledge, guiding all from within, yet remaining beyond their awareness (Dasgupta, 1930). Similarly, the Bhagavad Gita explains different types of Yoga, such as the Yoga of action, devotion, and knowledge. These ideas later come together in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, which suggest eight steps to achieve peace and self-realization called 'Ashtanga Yoga'. In Indian tradition, Patanjali is believed to be an earthly incarnation of *Ananta Shesha*, the divine serpent upon whom Lord Vishnu rests. It is said that Lord Shiva, the supreme Yogi, blessed him with the knowledge to teach people the path of self-realization through Yoga (Varga, n.d.). From ancient to modern times, the yogic journey of self-realization has travelled through various mediums, scripture, oral traditions, performance, and contemporary narratives, consistently addressing the fundamental questions and struggles of human life. According to Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Patanjali outlines five key causes of human suffering in his Yoga philosophy. These include *Avidya*, or ignorance, which leads to a distorted perception of reality; *Asmita*, the ego or false sense of self; *Raag*, the attachment to pleasurable experiences; *Dvesha*, the avoidance of pain or discomfort; and *Abhinivesha*, the deep-rooted fear of losing one's existence (*The Times of India*, June 21, 2025). These miseries are not viewed in isolation but are understood within the broader framework of the

karmic cycle in Indian tradition, where actions (*karma*) and their consequences shape the course of human suffering. This understanding of suffering is deeply embedded in Indian storytelling traditions, where the cyclic nature of karma becomes a recurring motif, suggesting that the moral worth of every action is preserved, and everyone gets their due either in this life or another. It thoughtfully explores themes of depression, isolation, suffering, hope, and compassion, using love as the central thread. Through this journey of love, the protagonists are gradually led toward self-awareness, truth, and ultimately, redemption.

The paper further explores how the effect of causality leads the characters to reflect on their past actions. Through this inward journey, they begin to follow a path of *dharana* (concentration), a key aspect of yogic philosophy, which gradually leads them toward pure consciousness. The film also highlights the Eastern artistic view that nature is not separate from consciousness but an essential part of it. This connection is portrayed vividly and becomes a path toward self-realization. Additionally, the film also presents the concept of the psychic being as the deepest layer of consciousness, through which the divine is experienced not as a distant, external deity, but as a presence inherent in all things. In this paper, *The Last Leaf* and its cinematic adaptation, *Lootera*, are examined through the philosophical lens of Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga. The film's emotional and spiritual journey subtly echoes the eightfold path, offering a layered narrative where the protagonists' evolving bond symbolizes a Yogic quest. Love, in this context, becomes a transformative force, guiding the characters toward inner awakening, self-realization, and ultimately, liberation through the dissolution of dualities. Drawing on Sri Aurobindo's idea of the psychic being, *Lootera* reframes universal themes of hope, suffering, and compassion as stages in an inward ascent toward higher consciousness. This perspective resonates with S. Radhakrishnan's vision of Indian philosophy as a spiritual culture grounded in the essential unity of existence.

Background and Context:

The short story was first published in 1907 in the collection "Trimmed Lamp and Other Stories". The story depicts the significant changes the United States of America saw in its early 20th century. This era witnessed rapid urbanization, industrialization, social injustices, migration, as well as immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. Overpopulation and overcrowding led people to poor living conditions, which were depicted in the story. *The Last Leaf*, among many, is a classic, having been revisited time and again, and has become an

integral part of popular culture. The story is set in the New York neighbourhood of Greenwich Village, which became a diverse and vibrant community of young artists. The short story is about Johnsy and her neighbour, Behrman, and his sacrifice to save Johnsy's life. Johnsy is an artist who lives in Washington Square, a colony for poor artists. She shares the room with her friend Sue, and desires to paint the Bay of Naples, but due to her circumstances, she gets sick with pneumonia and loses all her hopes to start believing that when the ivy vine on the wall outside her window loses all its leaves, she will die too. However, Behrman, a failed artist, tricks her by painting a leaf on the wall to release Johnsy from her dilemma.

Lootera is the film adaptation of the same story and is situated in recently independent India. The film extends the original story by shifting focus from the sufferer to the savior, redefining the narrative and justifying its transformed title *Lootera* or Conman. The theme of love becomes the centre of the story in the first half as it unfolds many facets of love and its intricacies. Varun enters the life of Pakhi and introduces himself as an archaeologist. Soon, love starts to grow between Pakhi and Varun, but on the night of his marriage with Pakhi, he does not gather the courage to tell the truth about his life and runs away. Varun's betrayal results in Pakhi's father, Roy Chaudhary's tragic death, leaving Pakhi devastated. However, as the narrative unfolds, the film delves into the transformation of both lead characters, shifting the focus from their personal desires to a deeper journey toward redemption. Through its poetic storytelling, *Lootera* subtly integrates the philosophical essence of Yoga, guiding its characters through a journey of inner transformation, ethical reflection, and eventual transcendence.

Yama and Niyama Reflected in *Lootera's* Narrative Arc as the Motif of Karmic Cycle:

As a cross-cultural adaptation, the film not only adapts the course of suffering that Johnsy embodies in the short story, which shifts from physical illness to mental instability, but also uses the element of causality effect, and structures the narrative as a cyclic plot. Varun's action to abandon Pakhi is motivated by his past life, having grown up as an orphan under his uncle's influence, he feels obligated to do what his uncle wants him to do. His decision is wrong, and as he realizes the harm he has caused to Pakhi, guilt consumes him, pushing him toward redemption. Similarly, Pakhi, the female protagonist, suffers as a result of both her past actions and circumstances. When Varun denies her desire to be married to him, she refuses to accept his rejection. As the only child of a wealthy Zamindar, she is not

accustomed to rejection and eventually forces Varun to marry her. “No doubt, too, the idea that our present sufferings are the results of our past action, imparts a calm, a resignation, an acquiescence to the Indian mind which the restless Western intelligence finds it difficult to understand or tolerate” (Aurobindo, 1997, pp.129). The film *Lootera* reflects these ideas through its character arcs, where suffering is not portrayed as random but as a consequence of past actions, desires, and emotional attachments. Both Pakhi and Varun struggle with the emotional consequences of their actions, consumed by guilt, anger, betrayal, and longing, they reflect the internal turmoil caused by adharmic choices. This aligns with the principles of Yama (ethical restraints) and Niyama (personal observances), as both characters begin to reflect upon their past actions (*karma*) and acknowledge their personal responsibility in the suffering they endure.

The Creative Path to Pure Consciousness: Pratyahara, Dharana, and Dhyana in Lootera:

As the story unfolds, both Pakhi and Varun begin to withdraw from the external world and turn inward, initiating a subtle but profound spiritual transformation. Pakhi, secluded in her ancestral home and battling illness, finds solace in nature and in the act of writing, which reflects the stage of Pratyahara, the withdrawal of senses from outward distractions. This quiet contemplation gradually leads her to Dharana, a focused engagement with her inner self. Varun, on the other hand, returns not merely to seek forgiveness but to redeem his soul by creating one final masterpiece. His artistic focus symbolizes Dharana, which deepens into Dhyana, a meditative state where his inner turmoil gives way to clarity and stillness. In both journeys, the chaos of the external world dissolves, and the characters access deeper layers of consciousness, revealing how art becomes a medium for Yogic transformation, healing, and silent transcendence.

Varun, upon his second encounter with Pakhi, realizes that her deteriorated state may be a consequence of his own wrongdoing. This realization shifts his perspective, leading him to seek an artistic and redemptive endeavour that aligns with the Indian cultural ideal of striving for a higher purpose. Varun’s artistic desire to create comes from a deep need for expression, and bringing that creation to life becomes an act of pure consciousness. This consciousness or the role of the conscious observer emerges in Pakhi’s journey through mental turmoil, as she reflects on her emotional struggles and inner conflicts through writing, perhaps engaging with her *Purusha*, the pure witnessing self. A creator or a person involved in the creative process

attains a sense of “beatitude and bliss” in the very process of it. This analysis highlights the experience of fulfillment that comes along with the process of creation (Vatsyayan, 1996). Vatsyayan further elaborates that the artistic creation leads the creator to a state of concentration (*samadhi*), which provides an experience of ‘undifferentiation’, where the awareness of one and the other diminishes (P.59).

Samadhi as the Union of Prakriti and Purusha and Awakening of the Psychic Self:

According to Samkhya-Yoga philosophy, Purusha, the pure, passive consciousness, remains inactive until it comes into contact with Prakriti, the dynamic creative force. It is this interaction that initiates the process of manifestation and transformation (Mahadevan et al., 2025). In *Lootera*, Varun’s relationship with Pakhi can be understood through this metaphysical lens, where Pakhi, embodying the qualities of Prakriti, emotive and intuitive, becomes the catalyst for Varun’s inner evolution. The film illustrates not only the deep attachment he feels for her but also the intuitive, non-cognitive journey he undergoes. As love and regret, both manifestations of Prakriti, begin to stir his consciousness, he gradually dissolves the guilt and karmic baggage he carries. This inner transformation leads Varun from a place of selfish attachment to a creative act of redemption, and ultimately, to liberation, mirroring the Yogic journey from bondage to self-realization. Pakhi is not just a passive figure of love; she becomes the steady force that makes Varun’s transformation possible. Her pain, solitude, and quiet strength reflect the still but powerful energy of Shakti, the creative feminine force. Through her writing and reflection, she also turns inward, indicating the presence of the *psychic being*, or the soul-consciousness that Sri Aurobindo describes as the inner guide toward spiritual growth.

Their union, rooted not in possession but in sacrifice and forgiveness. Love and remorse, both expressions of *Prakriti*, begin to dissolve Varun’s karmic burden and awaken his *Purusha*. His final act of painting the leaf is no longer driven by ego, but comes from a space of inner awakening. Pakhi’s forgiveness is not a sign of weakness, but of grace. It creates the space for both her and Varun’s psychic transformation. According to Sri Aurobindo, one reaches the psychic being, the deeper soul, through devotion to the Divine. But the Divine, as he explains, is not limited to a godly figure; it is present in all beings and personalities (Varma, 2024). Letting go of ego and ill will allows a person to awaken compassion and forgiveness, drawing closer to the true self. As Sri Aurobindo writes, “the main business of the heart, its true function is love” (Varma, 2024, p. 456). In this light, Pakhi’s story becomes a poetic

reflection of love as a transformative force, a psychic truth, where sacrifice and loss are not ends, but steps toward union with a deeper, eternal presence.

Conclusion:

By reimagining *The Last Leaf* through the philosophical lens of Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga, *Lootera* transcends its narrative of love and loss to become a profound exploration of inner awakening, karmic reflection, and spiritual liberation. The film's portrayal of emotional suffering, ethical reckoning, creative introspection, and eventual transcendence mirrors the eightfold path of Yoga, from Yama and Niyama to Samadhi. Through the symbolic union of Purusha and Prakriti, and the awakening of the psychic self, *Lootera* demonstrates how art, when infused with indigenous philosophy, can serve as a powerful medium for expressing Indian Knowledge Systems and the timeless journey from attachment to liberation.

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