



National Journal of Hindi & Sanskrit Research

ISSN: 2454-9177

NJHSR 2025; 1(58): 276-280

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www.sanskritarticle.com

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The Seven Ages of Man: A Vedantic Reflection on Life's Stage

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Abstract:

William Shakespeare's monologue "The Seven Ages of Man", extracted from *As You Like It* (Act II, Scene VII), stands as one of the most celebrated reflections on the human condition. Presented through the metaphor of a theatrical performance, the poem divides life into seven distinct stages. This research paper delves into its literary techniques, structure, thematic essence, tone, philosophical depth, and cultural relevance, offering a comprehensive interpretation of this timeless work.

Preface

The timeless monologue "The Seven Ages of Man" from William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* stands as a powerful reflection on the transient, cyclical, and performative nature of human life. Though penned in 16th-century England, its philosophical essence transcends temporal and cultural boundaries. This research paper is an attempt to explore how Shakespeare's poetic insight resonates with the ancient spiritual wisdom of India, particularly the teachings of the **Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Shrimad Bhagavatam**, and the **Vachanamrut**.

By examining the poem through the lens of **Sanātana Dharma**, we uncover striking parallels in the understanding of the self, the impermanence of worldly roles, and the ultimate purpose of life. The metaphor of the world as a stage and human beings as mere players bears a profound resemblance to Vedantic teachings that see the world as **māyā** (illusion) and the soul as an eternal witness. This study is a humble offering to bridge Western literary brilliance with the enduring spiritual philosophy of the East, illuminating the universality of truth across civilizations.

1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech

Shakespeare masterfully weaves numerous literary devices into the monologue to enhance its expressive power:

• Metaphor:

The overarching metaphor likens the world to a **stage** and human beings to **actors**:

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players."

This transforms life into a scripted performance, emphasizing the impermanence of human roles.

• Simile:

Several similes vividly describe human behaviors:

○ "Creeping like snail" – portraying the reluctant schoolboy.

○ "Sighing like furnace" – the passionate lover.

• Personification:

Time and life are subtly personified. Each life stage appears almost animated, possessing traits and behavior.

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• Imagery:

Vivid visual and sensory imagery make each age tangible:

- “*Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms*”
- “*Bearded like the pard*” (leopard)
- “*Spectacles on nose, and pouch on side*”

• Alliteration:

○ “*Shrunk shank*”, “*Mewling and puking*” – these heighten musicality and rhythm.

• Assonance & Consonance:

Assonance appears in “*Sans teeth, sans eyes...*”, creating an echo effect that emphasizes decay and emptiness.

• Oxymoron:

Although not overt, a subtle oxymoronic contrast exists between “**manly voice**” and “**childish treble**”, illustrating the irony of aging.

• Irony:

The journey from strength to weakness, from wisdom to “*second childishness*”, is deeply ironic and tragic.

• Symbolism:

Each of the seven ages symbolizes a phase of life—from helpless infancy to oblivion—serving as a microcosm of human existence.

2. Structure and Form

• Rhyme Scheme:

The poem is written in **blank verse**, i.e., unrhymed **iambic pentameter**, a Shakespearean hallmark that gives a natural yet elevated rhythm.

• Meter and Rhythm:

Iambic pentameter provides a steady, heartbeat-like rhythm, mirroring the natural flow of speech and life’s progression.

• Stanza and Line Breaks:

Though delivered as continuous prose in the play, the speech is structured thematically into seven distinct “stages,” each functioning like a mini-stanza.

• Enjambment:

Many lines flow into the next without pause, reinforcing the idea of life’s uninterrupted and inevitable passage.

3. Theme and Subject Matter

• Central Theme:

The poem explores the **transient, cyclical nature of human life**, dividing it into seven archetypal stages.

• Deeper Message:

Beneath the surface lies a **philosophical meditation on mortality, futility of worldly pursuits, and the universality of human experience**. Every individual, regardless of status, walks the same path from birth to death.

4. Tone and Mood

• Tone:

The tone is **contemplative and ironic**, with undercurrents of melancholy. The speaker, Jaques, presents a detached and somewhat cynical view of life.

• Mood:

The reader experiences a mix of emotions—**amusement, empathy, nostalgia, and sorrow**—as they recognize themselves or others in the described stages.

5. Philosophical and Spiritual Interpretation

The poem “*The Seven Ages of Man*” by William Shakespeare aligns remarkably with Upanishadic and Vedantic wisdom, despite originating from a vastly different cultural context. Shakespeare’s philosophical outlook on the transitory nature of human life, the illusory roles we play, and the ultimate dissolution of identity, finds strong parallels in Sanātana Dharma, particularly in the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Shrimad Bhagavatam, Vachanamrut, and Vedic thought at large.

1. The Central Metaphor: Life as a Play

Shakespeare:

“*All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.*”

Vedantic Parallel:

• **Brahma Sutra (1.1.2):** “*Janmādyasya yataḥ*”¹ — All creation, maintenance, and dissolution arise from Brahman.

• **Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad (2.1.20):**

“*As a spider weaves and draws in its web, as sparks fly out of a fire...*” — The world is projected and withdrawn like a cosmic drama.

• **Bhagavad Gita 3.27:**

“*Prakṛteḥ kriyamāṇāni guṇaiḥ karmāṇi sarvaśaḥ...*”²

"All actions are performed by the modes of nature, but the soul, deluded by ego, thinks itself the doer."

• **Vachanamrut Gadhada I-6:**

“*The jiva itself does nothing; it is the three gunas that act.*”

Interpretation:

Both Shakespeare and Vedanta see life as a performance or illusion (māyā). Just as actors come and go on stage, jivas (souls) take up roles based on karma and guṇas. The true self (Ātman) remains untouched.

2. The Seven Ages and the Doctrine of Change

Each of the seven ages—Infant, Schoolboy, Lover, Soldier, Justice, Old Age (Pantaloon), and Second Childishness—symbolizes transience and impermanence, a core theme in Vedanta.

Vedic & Upanishadic Teachings:

• **Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad (4.4.22):**

“*As a caterpillar moves from one blade to another, so the soul moves from one body to another.*”³

• **Bhagavad Gita 2.13:**

“*Dehino ’smin yathā dehe kaumāraṁ yauvanaṁ jarā...*”⁴

"Just as the boyhood, youth, and old age come to the embodied soul in this body, in the same manner, the soul passes into another body."

Interpretation:

Each age corresponds to a temporary bodily condition. The soul remains the same, while the body ages and dies. Shakespeare's progression reflects samsāra (cycle of birth and death).

3. Ego and Role-Playing

Shakespeare highlights the illusory nature of identity—how people behave according to social roles.

Vedantic and Gita Wisdom:

- **Katha Upanishad (2.2.13):**

*“The Self is not born, nor does it die... it is eternal, unborn, undying.”*⁵

- **Bhagavad Gita 5.8–9:**

*“He who knows the truth thinks, ‘I do nothing at all,’ in seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, eating...”*⁶

- **Vachanamrut Gadhada II-13:**

“Understand that this body and the world are perishable. Only the jiva and Paramatma are eternal.”

Interpretation:

Just like actors confuse themselves with their roles, the jiva mistakenly identifies with body, mind, and ego. True freedom lies in knowing the self as different from these.

4. Old Age and "Second Childishness"

Shakespeare poignantly ends with a return to dependency:

“Second childishness and mere oblivion – Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.”

Vedantic View:

- **Bhagavad Gita 13.8–12: Lists birth, death, old age, and disease as inevitable aspects of the material world.**⁷

- **Vachanamrut Gadhada I-16:**

“Even if one has performed great austerities, without realization of the self, one again becomes attached to māyā in old age.”

- **Bhagavatam (Canto 11.23.47):**

The story of the Avadhūta brāhmaṇa and 24 gurus teaches that everything—youth, power, and beauty—are fleeting and illusory.⁸

Interpretation:

Old age and helplessness reveal the fragility of material existence, urging the seeker to turn inward toward the eternal ātman.

5. Philosophy of Detachment and Realization

Shakespeare subtly critiques attachment to worldly reputation and ambition (e.g., “Seeking the bubble reputation even in the cannon’s mouth”).

Bhagavad Gita:

- **2.47: “Karmanye vadhikaraste...”**⁹

"You have a right to perform your duties, but not to the results thereof."

- **Bhagavatam (1.2.11):**

“Vedānta-vijñānam...” — Real wisdom is to know the difference between matter and spirit.¹⁰

- **Mundaka Upanishad 1.2.12:**

*“Parīkṣya lokān karmachitān brāhmaṇaḥ...”*¹¹

"After examining the ephemeral nature of the world attained by action, the wise renounce."

Interpretation:

This aligns with Shakespeare's tone of disillusionment, suggesting a turning away from external pursuits toward self-realization and detachment.

6. Spiritual Liberation and Moksha

Though not explicitly stated, Shakespeare's final tone—“oblivion”—may be interpreted either as nihilism or, more charitably, as a release from worldly roles.

Vedanta:

- **Chandogya Upanishad 6.8.7:**

*“Tat tvam asi” (Thou art that) — Self-realization is the recognition of one’s identity with Brahman.*¹²

- **Bhagavad Gita 18.66:**

*“Sarva-dharmān parityajya...”*¹³

"Abandon all varieties of dharma and surrender unto Me. I shall liberate you."

- **Vachanamrut Gadhada II-28:**

“A person who realizes the distinction between the body and the ātman is never grieved at the time of death.”

Interpretation:

Vedanta sees the end of worldly life not as despair (oblivion) but as moksha, the return to the eternal self, beyond roles, beyond “stage.”

Conclusion

William Shakespeare's *“The Seven Ages of Man”* resonates deeply with Upanishadic, Vedantic, and Bhagavad Gita philosophy. Both traditions:

- See life as a series of temporary roles,
- Emphasize the illusory nature of worldly identity,
- Advocate detachment from ego and sensual pursuits, and
- Point toward spiritual awakening and liberation as the true goal.

Though separated by geography and culture, Shakespeare and the seers of Vedānta converge on the timeless wisdom that life is a performance, and the soul must eventually awaken to its eternal nature.

6. Historical and Cultural Context

- **Time of Composition:**

Written around **1599**, during the **Elizabethan era**, a time when life was uncertain due to plagues, wars, and political instability.

- **Influences:**

The **“Ages of Man”** was a common medieval and Renaissance motif. Shakespeare adapts this theme into poetic theatre.

- **Literary Movement:**

The monologue reflects **Renaissance Humanism**, which explored human nature, destiny, and the balance between free will and fate.

7. Poet's Perspective and Emotional Mindset

• Inspiration:

Shakespeare, through the character Jaques, possibly channels his own philosophical reflection on **theater as life**—a frequent theme in his later plays.

• Emotional State:

There's a sense of **cynical wisdom**, perhaps stemming from disillusionment with social roles and ambition.

• Autobiographical Hints:

Though not overtly personal, the monologue's depth suggests a mature understanding of **theatrical life**, perhaps reflecting Shakespeare's own mid-life awareness of aging and legacy.

8. Target Audience and Purpose

• Audience:

While part of a play, the poem speaks universally to **every individual**—men and women, young and old.

• Purpose:

It aims to **provoke introspection**, highlight the **futility of ego**, and reinforce the **shared destiny of all human beings**.

9. Personal Interpretation

• Final Takeaway:

Life is a **fleeting drama**, and all identities are roles played on a stage designed by fate. Shakespeare emphasizes the **impermanence of identity** and the **inevitability of decline**, ending in "*second childishness and mere oblivion*."

• Personal Resonance:

The poem strikes a chord by prompting reflection on one's own journey—recognizing each stage in oneself or others fosters **empathy, humility, and existential clarity**. It invites readers to **embrace life's play** with awareness, compassion, and detachment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, "*The Seven Ages of Man*" is far more than a poetic inventory of human life stages; it is a mirror held up to the eternal truths of existence. Shakespeare's portrayal of human beings as actors entering and exiting a grand stage echoes the Vedantic worldview of **jīva** (soul) taking birth and moving through **samsāra** under the influence of **karma** and **guṇas**. His subtle mockery of ego, ambition, and temporal glory harmonizes with the **Upanishadic call to self-realization**, the **Gita's doctrine of detachment**, and the **Bhāgavata Purāṇa's vision of bhakti and liberation**.

The poem ultimately reminds us that all worldly roles, no matter how grand, end in dissolution. However, in the light of Vedantic wisdom, this "oblivion" is not a loss but a liberation — the shedding of illusion and the return to the eternal Self. Shakespeare's insight, when read alongside the ancient scriptures of India, transforms from existential melancholy to spiritual awakening. Thus, this poetic expression becomes not only a literary masterpiece but also

a **universal spiritual reflection** on the drama of life, the futility of ego, and the timeless quest for truth.

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1 जन्माद्यस्य यतः ॥ २ ॥

2 प्रकृतेः क्रियमाणानि गुणैः कर्माणि सर्वशः ।

अहङ्कारविमूढात्मा कर्ताहमिति मन्यते ॥ २७ ॥

3 स वा एष महानज आत्मा योज्यं विज्ञानमयः प्राणेषु य एषोऽन्तर्हृदय आकाशस्तस्मिञ्छेते, सर्वस्य वशी सर्वस्येशानः सर्वस्याधिपतिः; स न साधुना कर्मणा भूयान्, नो एवासाधुना कनीयान्; एष सर्वेश्वरः; एष भूताधिपतिः; एष भूतपालः; एष सेतुर्विधरण एषां लोकानामसंभेदाय; तमेतं वेदानुवचनेन ब्राह्मणा विविदिषन्ति यज्ञेन दानेन तपसाऽनाशकेन; एतमेव विदित्वा मुनिर्भवति । एतमेव प्रव्राजिनो लोकमिच्छन्तः प्रव्रजन्ति । एतद्ध स्म वै तत् पूर्वं विद्वांसः प्रजां न कामयन्ते, किं प्रजया करिष्यामो येषां नोऽयमात्मायं लोक इति; ते ह स्म पुत्रैषणायाश्च वित्तैषणायाश्च लोकैषणायाश्च व्युत्थायाथ भिक्षाचार्यं चरन्ति; या ह्येव पुत्रैषणा सा वित्तैषणा, या वित्तैषणा सा लोकैषणा, उभे ह्येते एषणे एव भवतः । स एष नेति नेत्यात्मा, अगृह्यो नहि गृह्यते, अशीर्यो नहि शीर्यते, असङ्गो नहि सज्यते, असितो न व्यथते, न रिष्यति; एतमु हैवैते न तरत इति—अतः पापमकरवमिति, अतः कल्याणमकरवमिति; उभे उ हैवैष एते तरति, नैनं कृताकृते तपतः ॥ २२ ॥

4 देहिनीऽस्मिन्वथा देहे कौमारं यौवनं जरा ।

तथा देहान्तरप्राप्तिर्धीरस्तत्र न मुह्यति ॥ १३ ॥

5 नित्योऽनित्यानां चेतनश्चेतनानामेको बहूनां यो विदधति कामान् ।

तमात्मस्थं येऽनुपश्यन्ति धीरास्तेषां शान्तिः शाश्वतीनेतरेषाम् ॥ १३ ॥

6 नैव किञ्चित्करोमीति युक्तो मन्येत तत्त्ववित् ।

पश्यञ्शृण्वन्स्पृशञ्छिञ्चन्श्चान्छन्स्वपञ्चसन् ॥ 8 ॥

प्रलपन्विसृजन्गृह्णन्निमिषन्निमिषन्नपि ।

इन्द्रियाणीन्द्रियार्थेषु वर्तन्त इति धारयन् ॥ 9 ॥

7 अमानित्वमदम्भित्वमहिंसा क्षान्तिरार्जवम् ।

आचार्योपासनं शौचं स्थैर्यमात्मविनिग्रहः ॥ ८ ॥

इन्द्रियार्थेषु वैराग्यमनहङ्कार एव च ।

जन्ममृत्युजराव्याधिदुःखदोषानुदर्शनम् ॥ ९ ॥

असक्तिरनभिष्वङ्गः पुत्रदारगृहादिषु ।

नित्यं च समचित्तत्वमिष्टानिष्टोपपत्तिषु ॥ १० ॥

मयि चानन्ययोगेन भक्तिरव्यभिचारिणी ।

विविक्तदेशसेवित्वमरतिर्जनसंसदि ॥ ११ ॥

- अध्यात्मज्ञाननित्यत्वं तत्त्वज्ञानार्थदर्शनम् ।
एतज्ज्ञानमिति प्रोक्तमज्ञानं यदतोऽन्यथा ॥ १२ ॥
- ⁸मनोवशेऽन्ये ह्यभवन् स्म देवा
मनश्च नान्यस्य वशं समेति ।
भीष्मो हि देवः सहसः सहीयान्
युञ्ज्याद वशे तं स हि देवदेवः ॥ ४७ ॥
- ⁹कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥ 47 ॥
- ¹⁰वदन्ति तत्तत्त्वविदस्तत्त्वं यज्ज्ञानमद्वयम् ।
ब्रह्मेति परमात्मेति भगवानिति शब्द्यते ॥ ११ ॥
- ¹¹परीक्ष्य लोकान्कर्मचितान्ब्राह्मणो निर्वेदमायान्नास्त्यकृतः कृतेन।
तद्विज्ञानार्थं स गुरुमेवाभिगच्छेत्समित्पाणिः श्रोत्रियं ब्रह्मनिष्ठम् ॥१२॥
- ¹²स य एषोऽणिमैतदात्म्यमिदं सर्वं तत्सत्यं स आत्मा तत्त्वमसि श्वेतकेतो
इति
भूय एव मा भगवान्विज्ञापयत्विति तथा सोम्येति होवाच॥६.८.७ ॥
॥ इति अष्टमः खण्डः ॥
- ¹³सर्वधर्मान्परित्यज्य मामेकं शरणं ब्रज ।
अहं त्वां सर्वपापेभ्यो मोक्षयिष्यामि मा शुचः ॥ 66॥