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**Influence of Vedantic Philosophy on World Literature: A Study of Bessie Head's works**

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**Dr. N. Lakshmi**HOD, Department of English, Government Degree College, Ramachandrapuram.  
Ramachandrapuram, Konaseema. AP

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**Article Received:** 04/05/2026**Article Accepted:**05/06/2026**Published Online:**06/06/2026**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.06.131

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**Abstract:**

This paper discusses how Vedantic philosophy has impacted world literature by analyzing its fundamental concept of the Atman-Brahman unity (the self and universal consciousness). It documents how Vedantic thoughts were reflected in the works of Western Transcendentalist authors like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, as well as in British modernist and Indian literary traditions. The paper is particularly focused on Bessie Head, whose literary productions carry Vedantic elements of spiritual oneness, moral duality, and the surpassing of social separations. The article reveals that Vedanta, as a universal philosophical system, influences literary articulations of identity, being, and the interrelation of humans on a worldwide scale.

**Keywords:** Vedanta, Transcendentalism, Bessie Head, Unity of Being, World Literature**Introduction**

Philosophy can be seen as the search for truth, wisdom, and understanding. Philosophy is a deep reflection on life and it also poses tough questions about the nature of the universe, human existence, and the destiny of mankind. In fact, humans have been pondering such timeless questions since the dawn of time. What powers the universe? Is there a God? What is the nature of the soul? Are there any links between the natural world, the self, and the divine? These are the types of questions that have driven humans to think philosophically, and thus from that moment onwards, they have been the primary concern of the human mind.

Since ancient times, India has often been called a "land of thinkers" due to its longstanding and deep heritage of philosophical discussions and spiritual quest for truth. One

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of its major influences on the world especially in the recent times is Vedantic philosophy which is the essence of the knowledge found in the Vedas. The term Vedanta is a Sanskrit compound composed of two terms Veda (knowledge) and Anta (end). So, in a way, Vedanta means the ultimate knowledge or the highest insight into reality (Radhakrishnan, 1953). On the main Upanishads, Vedanta is a path of spirituality that culminates in Brahman, the infinite and absolute reality that is the source of everything.

*The Bhagavad Gita*, called by many as the quintessence of the Upanishads, is a masterpiece that combines the elements of Vedanta and gives them in a form that can be understood by everyone (Easwaran, 2007). Moreover, Vedanta is a guide not only to understanding the world, but also to transforming one's own life through self-discovery, and living a life in accordance with moral principles. It brings to light the oneness of all things, the fact that the individual soul (Atman) is one with the universal soul (Brahman), and that one is not confined to the physical body or material world.

Vedanta's impact does not end with India and its philosophical or literary traditions. Indeed, Vedanta philosophy has been helping to shape both philosophical and literary traditions all over the world. This paper aims to trace the workings of Vedanta philosophy in world literature and, in that vein, focus on the influence of Western writers and even the literature of South African writer Bessie Head.

### **Review of Literature**

The appeal of Vedantic philosophy can be gauged from its impact not only on Oriental but also on Western philosophers. One of the means through which Vedantic philosophy came to Europe was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whose poems are deeply rooted in the God-nature-human unity thought (Safranski, 2017). By the same token, Debendranath Tagore considered the cosmos as a whole to be one divine spirit and stressed that God is present everywhere in all forms of life. In fact, as the U.S. was part of the 19th century Transcendentalist Movement, it was instrumental in the propagation of Vedantic philosophy.

The pioneer and the main proponent of Transcendentalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson, recognized that his ideas were greatly influenced by the Vedas and Upanishads. As a matter of fact, Emerson put a great deal of emphasis on the notion of a connecting force that binds all human beings together, a concept that he derived largely from Vedanta (Emerson, 1841/2003). This is the message that runs throughout his books *Nature* and *The Over-Soul*. In them Emerson reveals that, on one hand, God can be found in the world of nature and on

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the other hand, God resides in the human soul. Henry David Thoreau was one more Transcendentalist who extensively referred to the Vedas and the Upanishads.

World literature has shown a profound and consistent interest in Vedantic philosophy, especially the key concept that Atman (the individual self) and Brahman (the universal consciousness) are one. In European literature, this impact is noticeable especially among Romantic and post-Romantic writers who were attracted to Indian metaphysical philosophy. For example, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe displays a Vedantic awareness in his poetic description of a unified universe where God, nature, and mankind are one and the same. In the same vein, German Romantic thinkers such as Arthur Schopenhauer regarded the Upanishads as a highly significant metaphysical work and admired how it provides a perspective beyond the Western dualistic mindset.

This philosophical orientation was a determining factor in subsequent literary modernists such as T. S. Eliot whose poems very often refer to the spiritual unity that is beyond the fragmented modern existence thus they are a reflection of the Vedantic ideas of transcendence and inner wholeness (Eliot, *Four Quartets*).

While Zen Buddhism remains the major form of Buddhism in Japan, classical texts as well as aesthetic philosophy indirectly reflect the Upanishadic-Vedantic ideas such as impermanence, unity, and the understanding of truth through intuition, especially by the influence of the assimilation of Mahayana Buddhist thought which was historically influenced by Indian metaphysics. In the same way, in Chinese literature and philosophy, the main pillars of Confucianism and Daoism however Buddhism from India brought with it subtle Vedantic echoes, especially in the Chan (Zen) traditions where the focus on direct realization, the self as an illusion, and the breaking down of dualities are not only verbally but also conceptually the same as Advaita Vedanta. In fact, Vedantic and Vedic ideas in these regions do not always manifest themselves as distinct philosophical systems, but rather they exist as deep structural influences that shape literary imagination, spiritual symbolism, and cultural narratives of unity, morality, and transcendence.

Several British writers including T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats introduced Vedantic ideas in their plays and poems as a means to probe spiritual unity and going beyond one's self. Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Swami Vivekananda, and Ramakrishna were the key agents in the Indian context who through their spiritual and literary pursuits gave a new shape to the philosophy of Vedanta (King, 1999).

The role of Vedantic philosophy in African literature is not as overt but it is quite meaningful. Bessie Head is one of those few writers whose writings illustrate a great deal of

involvement with the theme of spiritual unity, human condition, and quest for purpose. In addition to being an exposition, her work is also a kind of social commentary of how Vedantic beliefs can be used as a cultural resource to respond to the needs of a changing and troubled society in South Africa.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative, interpretative approach to examine the influence of Vedantic philosophy on world literature. It involves close textual analysis of selected literary works and philosophical writings, focusing on thematic elements such as unity, self-realization, and the relationship between the individual and the universal.

The research adopts a comparative framework, analyzing similarities between Vedantic concepts and their representation in the works of Western and African writers. Particular emphasis is placed on Bessie Head's novels and essays, especially *A Question of Power*, to explore how Vedantic ideas are reinterpreted within the context of South African society. Secondary sources, including scholarly analyses of Vedanta and literary criticism, are also utilized to support the argument and provide theoretical grounding.

### **Discussion and Results**

Vedantic philosophy is fundamentally concerned with the realization of the unity of existence. The identification of *Atman* with *Brahman* suggests that all distinctions—whether social, cultural, or material—are ultimately illusory. This principle has had a profound impact on literary representations of identity, spirituality, and human relationships. A hymn from Goethe's 'Proemium to Gottund Welt' illustrates a genuine liking for Vedantic philosophy even by European depicts the same sublime philosophical thinking which is the practice of Indian thought:

God dwells within and moves the worlds and moulds,  
Himself and Nature in one form enfolds,  
Thus all that lives in Him, and breathes and is,  
Shall ne'er His puissance, ne'er His spirit miss.  
The soul of man, too, is an universe;  
Whence follows it that race with race concurs  
In naming all it knows of good and true,  
God-yea, its own God and with homage due,  
Surrenders to His sway both earth and heaven;  
Fears Him, and loves, where place for love is given.(Goethe 35-36)

The divine in the Universe makes itself implicit by the divine in man. Every glimpse of the soul raises the spirit of the individual.

In American Transcendentalism, Emerson's concept of the "Over-Soul" closely parallels the Vedantic notion of a universal consciousness. He asserts that individuals are not isolated entities but are interconnected through a shared spiritual essence (Emerson, 1841/2003). Thoreau's emphasis on simplicity and introspection reflects the Vedantic path to self-realization, while Whitman's poetry celebrates the unity of all existence, blending the physical and the spiritual.

In South African literature, Bessie Head offers a distinctive interpretation of Vedantic ideas. Her works move beyond external social critique to explore the inner dimensions of human experience. In *A Question of Power*, Head examines the psychological and spiritual struggles of her protagonist, Elizabeth, who confronts the dual forces of good and evil.

Bessie Head is a South African writer whose approach to South African problems is then from within the soul of man. 'It seemed to her as though all suffering gave people and nations a powerful voice for the future and a common meeting ground, because the types of people Sello referred to as 'the Gods' turned out on observation to be ordinary, practical, sane people, seemingly their only distinction being that they had consciously concentrated on spiritual earnings.

All the push and direction was towards the equality of man in his soul, as though, if it were not fixed up there, it never would be anywhere else; her most vivid memories were the memories of those souls who state this with the most impact. (Head, 31)

Head's portrayal of suffering as a pathway to spiritual growth aligns with Vedantic teachings.

The concept of *Maya*, or the illusion of the material world, is reflected in the transient nature of social identities and power structures. Similarly, the belief in rebirth provides a broader perspective on human existence, framing individual experiences within a larger cosmic context. A central theme in Head's work is the unity of all beings. She emphasizes that distinctions based on race, colour, and social status are superficial and that true understanding arises from recognizing the shared essence of humanity. This perspective resonates with Vedantic ideals of universal brotherhood and spiritual equality. Differences between mankind on the basis of race, colour, caste etc., have evolved.

Such differences might be criticized by the realization of the Supreme Spirit, the spirit or the soul in us – by the recognition of our individual powers – the powers present in us rather than by relying on the materialistic power only by imbibing the concept of universal

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brotherhood. The world is a miracle in which the soul can work wonders to make us stand the hardships of time and conditions surrounding us.

Bessie Head embraces the oneness with the divine and generates a life that does not consist of fragments but a life that is willing to work for humanity or, to put it better, humankind and has the whole future firmly embraced inside oneself by embracing the concept of Hindu philosophy, specifically, the Vedanta. Indeed, the belief in the doctrine of rebirth should be considered the very foundation of the metaphysics of Bessie Head. It should be stated that the above-mentioned premise is integral to the cosmology of the Hindu religion. Moreover, she emphasizes the balance between good and evil, and suggests that both concepts are important for human existence. Thus, her deep knowledge of the issues is consistent with the Vedantic conception of the world being the complex interrelation of contradictive principles. Bessie Head's heroes sometimes achieve spiritual enlightenment and realize the importance of love, gentleness, and self-knowledge. In addition to the above, Bessie Head takes the concept of oneness farther and includes into it all creatures in the world rather than just people.

### **Conclusion**

Vedantic philosophy stands out as one of the highest forms of thought that mankind has achieved. The ideas of unity, self-realization, and transcending material differences have found their way into literary works from different cultures across continents. For instance, some of the early works of Transcendentalists in America were influenced by these philosophical ideas. Similarly, even contemporary literary writers such as Bessie Head find their works to be significantly impacted by Vedantic philosophy.

Through her writing, Head illustrates the applicability of Vedantic ideas in addressing socio-psychological challenges and finding healing and solutions. What makes Vedantic philosophy so relevant and applicable is its capacity to cross cultural lines and offer insight into the nature of man. By highlighting the unity of all beings, it encourages people to embrace transcendence from divisions. In conclusion, Vedantic influences in literary works illustrate the power of philosophy and ideas.

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