



Critical Analysis of Television Serial Buddha as a Didactic Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This research seeks to critically analyse the portrayal of the life of Gautama Buddha in the Zee TV serial *Buddha* telecast from 2013. The television serial presents itself as a didactic religious discourse and for the first time it offers to present Buddha's teachings on the small screen. Through the narrative, the show successfully attempts to answer some of the fundamental questions which are essentially sought after by anyone on the path of eternal truth, like what is reality, what is one supposed to do in life, what is life, who are we, what is our goal of existence. The research also investigates the various ways in which the text serves to express spirituality in an approachable manner. It intends to look at how the show contributes to the first representation of Buddha on the small screen. The aspects explored do not include portrayal of characters and the acting prowess of the cast.

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Introduction

"Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one."

-Albert Einstein

The paper critically analyses the idea of reality as presented in Buddhism through the visual representation of the life of Buddha in the television serial *Buddha*, telecast on Zee TV from 2013 to 2014. *Buddha* comes across as a didactic religious discourse that professes Cosmopolitanism among other values. So, the research uses the lens of Cosmopolitan theory to look at the text of the serial.

An age-old philosophical question is, "If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?" The scientifically proven answer is *No*. What is reality? Realists hold the view that reality is ontologically independent of any concepts, beliefs, perceptions, etc. On the other hand, anti-realists believe that reality is dependent on the mind or cultural artefacts. The Mathematical Universe Hypothesis says that everything we are surrounded by is only a fragment of a mathematical structure. Is reality perceived, or is it constructed? Is reality just a concept in our minds or *does reality really exist?* And, if reality is just a concept, do you and I exist, or are we just figments of imagination? Well, one would say, matter can't be unreal. It can be touched and felt. But, if we literally travel to the root of it, matter is made of molecules, which are further made of atoms, which can be broken down to sub-atomic particles, particles that have spin and charge, which are purely mathematical properties. Are we saying then, that we are just pure maths? Numbers, so to speak? Well, cosmologist Max Tegmark believes it to be so, "If you accept the idea that both space itself, and all the stuff in space, have no properties at all except mathematical properties, then the idea that everything is mathematical starts to sound a little bit less insane." What is reality? What our senses perceive is just a parameter in the function of a series of creative processes that fetch us the final reality as we see it, which leads to another interesting question: What consciousness is. Does consciousness create reality? Or is it

the other way round? Maybe a Derridian deconstruction of reality is required so as to make sure we are not putting reality and the meaning of it, in buckets of preconceived notions and moulds of concepts and ideologies we have grown up with. Our mind is extremely smart and has a speed many times more than the biggest supercomputer on the Earth, but it fails in one aspect: It can't differentiate between what is real and what is not. Meditation, as professed by Buddha, helps one tame the mind, and hence reach a high level of consciousness. Buddha said, "We are what we think."

The serial *Buddha* showcases right from the birth of Siddhartha Gautama, his journey of becoming an enlightened one: The Buddha. As soon as he became aware of the reality of life that life is all about suffering, he renounced the world. When Gautama Buddha suddenly proposed abstention from war after he saw the pitiable condition of mankind due to mass destruction, his comrades vehemently protested. He asked them to whom do they think the Earth they are fighting for belongs, to which they all responded unanimously: "Our ancestors." He said that if their ancestors were asked the same question, they would have also answered similarly that it belonged to their ancestors, and if they went on asking like this, there would be one moment, when it would be known that the Earth does not indeed belong to anyone at all. "So why fight for something that is not our own?" What is ours? Is nothing ours, or is the whole universe ours? Do we give and take, or do we share? Do we make and break, or do we perceive? Are we the doers, or are we the seers? What is the "difference"?

We can choose to be citizens of a city, a state, a nation, or one of the world, or the entire cosmos. It is only a matter of "concern." The concern one has for his kith and kin is not the same as one has for the others. When Nature does not distinguish among its consumers on the basis of their caste, creed, class, colour, gender, or other such manmade walls, who gives us the authority to practise and advocate biases? There is a strong need of developing a mindset that engenders prioritization of needs of others above personal needs, which

though appears one distant dream, can be manifested as we first rotate our camera and take a selfie of our mind and observe the way it functions, realising the way it can be “enslaved” so as to not be affected by circumstances, which will in turn lead us to attaining the wisdom of compassion and hence cosmopolitanism. In the serial, even before and also after the enlightenment of the Buddha, there are various instances portrayed where he advocates that all mankind be it of any caste is equal. He believed in the oneness of mankind.

Siddhartha Gautama was born a compassionate being. He could not see others in pain before his eyes. His undeterred faith in humanity and a wild hunger for truth and pure knowledge drove him to renunciation of worldly pleasures. Siddhartha was a warrior of Kshatriya clan and the ruler of India. His father wanted him to be the greatest king ever, and thus kept him away from all sorrow in the world. But, as soon as he grew up, he realised the futility of war, and compassion and cosmopolitanism led him to the truth that life is full of suffering and that this suffering is caused by desire or attachment.

Once, as Siddhartha was on the task of distributing meals to the poor, he encountered a *Sanyasi* who on being offered grains declined politely. On being asked the reason, the *Sanyasi* replied that he did not require any food or shelter as he considered the whole Earth his home, and Nature his nurturer. Whatever fruit fell from the trees would fill his stomach. He even told Siddhartha to keep the bag of grains for himself. At this, Siddhartha wondered how there were rich and prosperous who could not be satisfied with anything in the world, and on the other hand there was a poor person who was not needy at all, a person who did not want to horde anything. He was not even attached to food and shelter which are the basic needs for self-preservation, and yet he was happier than all of the people Siddhartha had ever met.

The serial also shows that as Buddha is in the process of enlightenment and is meditating for days, he once dreams of birds of various colours flocking towards him, and on touching him they all turn white. He calls this a signifier of the fact that people from diverse backgrounds would come to gain refuge in him. He also dreamt that the whole of the Earth was his bed thus instigating the Indian concept of *Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam* which is synonymous with the idea of cosmopolitanism.

Nirvana or complete freedom from suffering and rebirth can only be achieved if one lives a life of moderation, away from temptations and worldly desires. Consciousness is the first step to attaining the eternal truth and hence freedom from all *Maya*. In the serial, after enlightenment, Buddha is seen meditating for most part of his day, which shows how consciousness and solidarity is of paramount significance when it comes to reaching the pinnacle of wisdom. As Khurshed Batliwala puts it, in India, the sages of the ancient past were the scientists. As has been proven time and again, the nature of reality, the truth of life, though is continuously being researched by scientists all over the world, Indian religious texts like the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Ashtavakra Gita*, and the *Hanuman Chalisa*, have already elucidated in Sanskrit.

Immanuel Kant claimed that reality could not be known in a direct manner. Reality is created in our minds. “All our knowledge begins with the senses, proceeds then to the understanding, and ends with reason. There is nothing higher than reason.” He gave the theory of Transcendentalism according to which, for the understanding of the nature of reality, one must assess the nature of experience. Kant published *The Critique of Pure Reason*, a seminal breakthrough in philosophy, in 1781, where he criticised dogmatism and empiricism. He said that if not totally, at least reality is partly subjective. It is not purely objective. Though we may romantically imagine that the mind shows us what it sees, but in reality, reality is not directly mirrored by our clever mind. It is shuffled and reorganised as it passes through the filter of the brain. “All human cognition begins with intuitions, proceeds from thence to conceptions, and ends with ideas.” Kant is believed to be an “inaugurator of modern cosmopolitanism” (Lyotard 2) as he asserted the idea of citizenship of the world. The concept of the whole world as a single community comes across as one of the tenets of Buddhism. Buddha advocated unity of mankind. Buddha was a strong believer in non-violence since a young age. When there was a competition held wherein Siddhartha and his cousin Devdutt had to shoot a flying bird with bow and arrow, Siddhartha refused to participate. He said that he would better lose than shoot a bird. Later, when Devdutt shot and injured the bird, Siddhartha offered water to the suffering bird. His aim was to relieve all living beings from suffering.

Today, terrorism, corruption, violence on civilians is a result of the lack of feeling of oneness we have. We all lack a feeling of compassion for the other. Selfishness wraps us and forbids us to work for the common good. But true happiness can only be achieved when one has a feeling of brotherhood for the whole world. Only when we consider every being as our kith and kin can we reach eternal bliss. Maybe the fact is just that there is no difference between one and the other. Only this can lead us to realisation of truth.

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