



Mukesh Shrestha's Paintings: Visual Narration of Buddhist Myths

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Abstract

In Mukesh Shrestha's compositions, Buddhist icons, images, symbols and figures have been reread and reformulated along with altered abstract background having sublime setting with magical and mystical atmosphere. Spontaneous visual rhythm is ever present in both foreground and background due to sinuous shapes and flowing colorful form. The archetypal characters and contents in coherent colors convey the message of coexistence, meditation and peace. The artist is in the quest of harmony and order in the state of chaos. Friendly and comfortable color combination sustains the viewers' interest. The artwork creates its own unique world with multiple significances to explore. The fineness of form adds intensity to visual experience. The primitive textures arouse the tactile sensation giving way to the imaginative flight to the far distance in time and space. The unique visual compositions present the aesthetic blend of tradition and modernity, myths and mysticism, the individual self and the cosmos. The condensed visual form presents the retrospection, recollection of native cultural treasure and anticipation of prosperity and peace. Fine craftsmanship and minutely detailed works with precision give a clue to the artist's patience and dedication. Monumental figures of divinity decked with traditional decorum along with symbols like lotus and *vajra* suggest invisible and intangible dimensions of the reality. Ritual postures and gestures convey a sense of mystical procession, a journey to the world beyond.

Keywords: Buddhist myth, Bodhisattva, Green Tara, narrative.

Introduction

Mukesh Shrestha, one of the renowned contemporary Nepali artists, earned Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Painting with Gold Medal in 2008 from Banaras Hindu University, India. He taught painting at Central Department of Fine Arts, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal (2009-2018). He also worked as the Head of Department of Painting at Sirjana College of Fine Arts. Nepal Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) awarded his painting with the most prestigious "National Fine Art Award" (2012), and he achieved "Patterns Breakers Award" provided by Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark (2016), and "Merit Award" provided by International Contemporary Art, Italy (2019). He has held six solo exhibitions of his paintings. His works have been exhibited in more than eighty exhibitions in national and international art galleries. He was selected as a jury for NAFA to select award winning artworks in national-level art competition. He is deeply inspired by the native Nepali culture and tradition to select the subject matter of his paintings. His chosen forms essentially include distorted human forms to respond the contemporary context and common human emotions.

Find Nepalian Art (2023) writes that one of his major themes is the distorted socio-political situation of contemporary Nepal. He focuses on the emotions and sentiments originated from such circumstances and depicts the transient nature of human beings, and simultaneously manifest his



creativity in multiple forms. The molten and twisted human forms on his canvas suggest their ephemeral nature. Besides, he depicts spiritual thoughts of the Buddhism creating visual treat with the blend of traditional style and contemporary techniques of creation deriving the exotic fusion. The artist chooses Buddhist elements as healing components. Inspired by paubha painting, he wants to preserve the essence of this traditional art form (Find Nepalian Art, 2023). Some of his works explore suffering in life, enlightenment and compassion toward fellow human beings (Shrestha, 2010). Portraits of the members of ethnic communities in his works attempt to carve the identity of the nation (Shrestha, 2022)

Chitrakar (2016) comments on Mukesh Shrestha's paintings that spiritual thought of Buddhism go deeper in its diverse aspects: and express it in an exotic mix of traditional and contemporary idiom. The idyllic natural setting inspired him so high it resulted in a gala show of visual memories titled 'Echo of Mustang'. His thoughts on human life and the vulnerabilities have always been his favorite themes. A sense of strong aesthetic judgment matched by equally power skills can be found in his works. It is demonstrated by his choice of soft and rich matured color scheme to achieve the sober and holy mood Chitrakar (2016) takes him as an ideal modern painter of present time. Nepali cultural landscape and the composite fabric of art heritage occupy his broad canvas.

A colorful mosaic of cultural and spiritual images takes us toward our collective unconscious. A panorama of his art forms presents a spectrum of rooted tradition to open-ended modern artworks. Within short span of time, Mukesh has been able to make long strides in the national art scene. His wider exposure and liberal thinking mixed with all the needed academic tools make his creations unique in the wider context of national and international art scenario. The diversity in thoughts and presentation in his artworks provides a unique aesthetic sense. The union of individuals suggests a poetic love through subtle visual rhythm. The individual connection grows up to philosophical exploration of the self and the other. The visual response renders the ideal and refined dimension of the soft nature of human life. The shift of his thoughts frequently leads toward the spiritual undercurrent of Buddhism. An exotic mix of traditional and contemporary idioms connects the cultural root to present time. Despite the focus on spiritual and human values, the characters are connected to the natural setting for its serenity and mysticism. The amazing versatility of the artist leaves the lasting impression on the viewers due to the freshness of form. The dedication, awareness and inspiration contribute to his individual identity in the visual forms. His openness to all the new creative forms tunes him to the contemporary mood and attitude (Chitrakar, 2016). The fascination with female form suggests the artist's attachment with creative force.

Research Methodology

This research is qualitative, for it takes the artworks and interprets them to support the main points, and the interpretations may vary from one viewer to other viewers. The research area includes Mukesh Shrestha's paintings having Buddhist contents and subject matters. The theories of Carl Jung and Northrop Fry have been used as tools to interpret the paintings. Research gap has been found out through literature review. Theories have been clarified and applied to analyze the visuals. Interview of the artist and art critics has been taken. Artist's studio has been visited to view artworks.

Review of Literature



Many art critics have written criticism on Mukesh Shrestha's creations. Bajracharya (2023) states that Mukesh has introduced deities in various postures to convey the dynamism of the characters. The mysterious symbols suggest the invisible dimensions of the narrative. Mukesh is not only relying on his concept but also weaving in stories from earlier periods (Bajracharya, 2023). Sinha (2009) argues that his paintings show a growing grip on the medium he uses to make the expression intensive. The color in his compositions move, unite and delineate the form and pictorial space according to their own logic without being least disturbed by the thoughts of the 'realism' of the local colors and yet having the feel of its local surroundings (Sinha, 2009). About Mukesh's paintings, Singh (2007) says that human forms in drooping shapes with slightly molten postures represent the mortality which occupies the space extensively with a little in black or dark backdrops, suggesting the mysteries of the world. Figures are treated delicately with cool and calm colors in a contemplative mood that seems awakened and illuminated inner soul by the sacred sound of the holy bells executed meticulously with a strong impact (Singh, 2007). Mukesh's artworks aim to present the transient and ephemeral nature of all phenomena fusing both traditional techniques and contemporary forms. Attractive female forms have been created with energetic strokes and mild colors (Manandhar, 2006).

Pristine and primitive ambience along with the mystical characters in Mukesh's canvas create meditative mood in the viewers (Sharma, 2021). Sharma (2023) further points out that Mukesh Shrestha acquired the skills, techniques and iconography of traditional Nepali sculpture and paintings like manuscript illumination, *paubha* and *thanka*, then blended them with contemporary context creating an innovative aesthetic form having primitive and spiritual ambience. The artist rereads the native myths and cultures to regenerate his creative arts that respond to the contemporary context full of fragmentation, disillusionment, lust, craving and hatred. He expresses through metaphors, analogy and symbols. Thus, his works have layers of meanings. Rhythmic lines, cohesive images and coherent shapes are connected to spiritual, ethical and human values. The unusual and innovative compositions renew our perception lengthening our aesthetic experience. He dives deep into his creative process to materialize his vision without compromise in terms of time and effort (Sharma, 2023).

To respond the contemporary context, the artist recycles the myths (Sharma, 2023). Bhimsen, the mythical character, suppresses the four weaknesses of human life like hatred, violence, passion and delusion symbolized by four bulls. In Hindu culture, Bhimsen is worshipped for his bravery. Until and unless we control these destructive emotions, we suffer perpetually for the entire life. Despite the material development in the world, these human drives are getting intensive and ruling the world. The artist imagines that Bagh Bhairav would appear in the sky, survey the silent city and rescue the people from the dance of the death. The aesthetic visuals in compositions provide consolation to the people to go on living despite the hardship in life. His artworks also present the common roots of diverse cultural heritages and suggest the need of brotherhood among the people from different places. The presentation of different mythical characters in the same work suggests the proximity and importance of cross-cultural value and ideas. The artist appeals to build harmonious relationships across cultures for better understanding, respect and appreciation of other's feelings. The closely connected and assimilated figures of Kinnara and Kinnari, hybrid figures of human and bird, represent everlasting lover and beloved in perpetual pleasure. The visual compositions speak against the violence.



Human ego and selfishness have challenged the liberty and peace of the world. Different gestures of hand in his compositions suggest the greed and selfishness of the contemporary characters. This has given way to violence and tragedy. His paintings suggest that this is the time to reflect on ourselves and meditate upon this problem to figure out resolution to safeguard the liberty and peace (Sharma, 2023).

Earts Nepal (2023) writes that Mukesh Shrestha's paintings are dominantly related to the Hindu religious shrines and spirituality. He captures various events from the Buddha's life like the nativity, renunciation, meditation, enlightenment and preaching. He has also portrayed five transcendental Buddhas in their respective colours- Ratnasambhav in yellow, Akshobhya blue, Vairochana white, Amitaabha red, and Amoghsiddhi green. Lotus, wheel and *vajra* are recurrent symbols in his works. The meditating Buddhas are seated on the lotus seat. Lotus is the symbol of *prakriti*, the female principle and the universe. The union of *sadhaka* with the *prakriti* leads to the enlightenment and the nirvana. Thus the lotus seat, meditation and nirvana are the interconnected and coherent concepts. Likewise, *vajra*, the popular image in the Buddhist shrines, is also the symbol of the union of *prakriti* and *purasa*, the male and female principles respectively. The lotus in the middle is penetrated by the *linga* (phallus) thereby signifying the self and the cosmic being. On the other hand, the wheel is the wheel of life, that is, life is changeable. Nothing is permanent. Thus, why to be attached to the transient things? The concept of the wheel encourages the people for renunciation and seeking the truth beyond. Another formal quality of his paintings is the abstract decorative pattern.

He nestles the inner realistic images with the outer splashes of the fluid. The fluidity and the intricate and spontaneous fibers and nets give the sense that the images are within cosmic womb. In his works, sometimes, the form and structure itself, not the contents, carry meaning and significances. For instance, he juxtaposes dark and light, bright and dull colors, likewise, rough and smooth textures to signify the possibility of concentration and distraction, creation and destruction, and certainty and uncertainty as we experience in the life and the world. Mukesh's works are response to the contemporary situation like the people's discontentment, hatred, violence, fear, suffering, pain and death. He works with the mission to generate peace, compassion, love and enlightenment out of the chaos and disorder. Despite the fact that Mukesh captures the images of nature and critiques the socio-political concerns of the time, most of his works revolve around spirituality, tradition and ultimate peace in one way or other (Earts Nepal, 2023).

The inspiration from the holy city of 'Kashi' dissolves in his experience and comes out in the mystical art forms. The molten and twisted human forms suggest the ephemeral nature of all humans (Chitrakar, 2016). The new setting quickly sips into his experience and oozes out in colorful form. The cultural roots of Kathmandu have been blended with the personal narratives from his life. Paubha, the traditional medieval Newar School of painting, have been reread and recycled in novel form. The grandeur of nature has been presented representing the picturesque Mustang Valley in the western Nepal. The idyllic natural setting in the canvas is the celebration of visual memories as the echo of Mustang. He seems to be sensitive to the vulnerabilities, pains and sufferings of human beings and expresses the experiences through visual imageries. He provides the vivid glimpses of the invisible concepts. The stylized idioms leave the traces of his unique identity. He creates characters, events and atmosphere in meticulous manner through dedication and devotion. A distinct sense of aesthetic aspects is conveyed with equally power and plausible forms created with refined skills. The choice of soft and rich matured color scheme discloses the



sober and holy mood of the creator himself (Chitrakar, 2016). This literature review depicts that Mukesh Shrestha's paintings have been interpreted from various perspective but they have not been analyzed in terms of Buddhist myths, culture, archetypes and collective unconscious. This research attempts to fill this gap.

Art, Culture and Myths

Mukesh Shrestha's paintings are connected to Nepali culture and myths. The artist has been exposed to Hindu and Buddhist myths, culture and associated rituals since his childhood. From the setting and the early generation, the images, symbols and events entered his mind. The frequent exposure to the atmosphere contributed for the permanent print in his unconscious mind. In spontaneous manner, the same images and archetypes have been revealed in his aesthetic visual form (Sharma, 2021). Before analyzing and interpreting his paintings, the connection of art, archetypes, culture and myths has been explained here. Archetypes and symbols in artworks take viewers to cultural roots. Archetypes, the primordial images, are stored in the collective unconscious of the community. The symbols in artworks and culture are the common heritage of mankind. Frye (1992) argues that archetypes are the recurring communicable images and symbols that function as a mode of communication in society. Jung (1992) says that the collective unconscious is the storehouse of archetypes. They appear recurrently in arts and rituals in which the creative fantasy is expressed spontaneously. Archetypes in art give form to the experiences of our ancestors. When we analyze primordial images in artworks carefully, they suggest typical experiences of our forefathers. Similarly, Campbell (1971) states that archetypes are the images that inspire rituals, mythology and vision throughout the history of human civilization and culture.

The artworks reveal archetypes that are stored in the collective unconscious and aim to communicate social codes and norms to individuals. The archetypal figures, symbols, and images



Fig.1 Mukesh Shrestha, "Green Tara (Aarya Tara)", 2018, Mixed media on canvas, 172.72 * 121.92 cm

from antiquity are constantly passed down from one generation to another through mythical narratives, arts, cultures and rituals (Sharma, 2009). The archetypes and primordial symbols remain in the memory of the community. Myths include the ancestral wisdom and experience of human beings in the form of abstract or analogy. An individual artist is a container of his ancestral history, culture and civilization, and he is shaped by the cumulative experiences of the past. The primordial images are communicable symbols that connect the art to culture and society. In the process of creation, artists use symbols, figures and archetypes unconsciously signifying a broader

cultural context. The following section analyzes and interprets Mukesh Shrestha's paintings connecting the artworks to the culture and myths.

Analysis and Interpretation of Paintings



Mukesh Shrestha's mystical visual compositions are the visual narration of the Buddhist myths, character and culture. The artworks aesthetically trace back to the cultural roots. The painting "Green Tara (Aarya Tara)" [Fig.1] connects the artwork with the Buddhist mythical narrative. Green Tara, the goddess in green color, is at the center of the composition. She is holding lotus flower by right hand and blue lily by left hand. Among the primordial five elements, she represents the air. She is the consort of Amoghsiddhi, one of the five Dhyani Buddhas (five different forms of Buddha). Green Tara also symbolizes the success and achievements. She is also worshipped as mother nature, beauty and creativity (Shrestha, 2023). The *abhaya mudra* (gesture of fearlessness) of the goddess symbolizes the fearlessness towards the delusions. This is possible only to the enlightened ones who have already realized the unity of the self and the universe.

In the throne on the background, there are eight auspicious symbols: The *dharma chakra* (wheel), the *chattrra* (parasol), the endless knot, the conch shell, the lotus flower, the *kalas* (treasure vase), the golden fish and the banner of victory. On the left side, Avalokiteshvara (white in colour) is standing and holding white lily flower in his left hand. Among the three Bodhisattvas, Avalokiteshvara is one of the Bodhisattvas of love and compassion. Once Avalokiteshvara felt so sad for the suffering of all the beings that he cried. From his right eye, tear drops on his feet. From the drop of the tear, Green Tara, a beautiful goddess in green color immediately manifests (Shrestha, 2023). On the top left, there is Amitabha Buddha in red color. He is a teacher of Avalokiteshvara. At the bottom of left side, there are two spiritual son and daughter of Amitabha Buddha. The one on the left is Padmapani (son in red color) and the one on the right is Bhrikuti Tara (daughter in red). Likewise, at the top right, there is Amoghasiddhi Buddha in green color, and at the bottom of the right side, there are spiritual son and daughter of Amoghasiddhi Buddha. The left one is Bishowpani (son in green color) and right one is Bishwo Tara (daughter in green color). On the background, there are *garudas* and peacocks. *Garuda* is vehicle of Amoghsiddhi Buddha and peacock is the vehicle of Amitabha Buddha. *Garudha* is holding Bishwovajra (Double thunderbolt), the symbol (instrument, attribute) of Amoghsiddhi Buddha. Peacock is holding lotus flower, the symbol of Amitabha Buddha. This is the visual narrative of Buddhist myths and characters. The sweeping and spontaneous shapes create the visual rhythm of sublime experience. The ecstatic movement assimilates to our experience.

The composition "Karunamaya Rato Machchhindranath (Bodhisattva of Great Compassion)" [Fig.2] presents, Avalokiteshvara, the earthly manifestation of the self-born eternal Buddha Amitabha, flanked by goddesses Green Tara and White Tara. According to Buddhist myths, it is believed that Avalokiteshvara protects people against fire, assassins, robbers and wild beasts (Shrestha, 2023). In the painting, he is shown white in color red. It is said that seeing the sorrow and suffering of the world, he was overwhelmed by the compassion. Then tears fell off his eyes from which the goddesses emerged as mentioned earlier. Avalokiteshvara (Rato



Fig 2 Mukesh Shrestha "Karunamaya Rato Machchhindranath (Bodhisattva of Compassion)", 2023, Mixed Media on canvas, Size: 182.88x274.32cm



Machchhindranath) is also known as “Bunga Dyah” or “Karunamaya”. Karunamaya is revered as the giver of rain. This work depicts the mythical narrative behind the Karunamaya festival. According to legends, Guru Gorakhnath had visited the Kathmandu valley (Patan) in the Medieval period. As none recognized him, he had become upset. Then he captured all nine serpents of Kathmandu valley that are responsible for rain. He took them to Mrigasthali near Pashupatinath area and started to meditate and then drought followed in Kathmandu valley. King Narendra Dev from Bhaktapur was advised by tantric guru Ratnakar Bajracharya of Shwoyambhu to bring Machchhindranath from Kamarukamapee city from India to Kathmandu as Machchhindranath was the teacher of Gorakhnath. King Narendra Dev from Bhaktapur, Bandudatta (Pupil of Ratnakar Bajracharya) from Kathmandu and Ratna Chakra Jyapu from Patan, Karkotak Naga along with Hayagriva Bhairava red in color, Harisiddhi blue in color, Nandkunda Bhairava in yellow in color and Lupta Sambhara Bhairava black in color brought Machchhindranath in Kathmandu valley in the chariot. When Guru Gorakhnath knew that his teacher came to Kathmandu, he immediately stood up to bow down to his Guru. Meanwhile all the serpents were released. Then huge rain followed the return of the serpents, the source of water. The tradition of pulling the Rato Machchhindranath chariot was thus started in 879 by King Narendra Dev to honor Rato Machchhindranath. The balance of figurative foreground and abstract background conveys a sense transformation from mundane material world to infinite spiritual universe. The matter vanishes and dissolves into the invisible and intangible spirit.

The painting *Swyambhunath (Self Existent Lord)* [Fig.3] presents Swayambhunath, Aadi Buddha (the earliest Buddha) with highlight including other many forms, figures and incarnations of Buddha as mentioned in the myths. Swayambhunath or Adi Buddha is said to be self created, who exists without beginning and end. He emerged in the form of a blue flame coming out of a blue lotus in the middle of the lake (Shrestha, 2023). The lake was later drained by Manjushree Bodhisattava. Then the full form of Swayambhunath was revealed. Later the civilization of Kathmandu valley developed in the fertile soil of the drained lake. Manjushree Bodhisattava is the symbol of *prajna* or wisdom. Lotus is the symbol of purity and enlightenment. Manjushree with a flaming sword in his hand cut the brim of the lake and made the gorge in Chovar. Prajnaparamita manuscript in his hand symbolizes enlightenment and the blossoming of wisdom. Manuscript and lotus are the coherent symbols suggesting wisdom. The artist has created the rich mythological tapestry having symbolic significances.



Fig.3 Mukesh Shrestha, *Swyambhunath (Self Existent Lord)*, 2016.
Mixed media on canvas, 121.92 * 304.8 cm

Bodhisattava is the concept of Mahayana Buddhism which is different from Hinayana Buddhism (Sharma, 2014). In Hinayana or Theravada Buddhism, Buddha is a great teacher but not a god and his nirvana was possible due to his own effort and experience. This enlightenment is potentially reproducible by others who put effort and practice in appropriate manner (Aran,



1978, p.47). Mahayana Buddhism states that enlightenment is possible for human beings "not only by their own endeavor but also through the vicarious suffering of a bodhisattva, an intermediary between the passive Buddha and the suffering humans" (Aran, 1978, p.49). Waldschmidt & Leonore (1967) clarify the concept of Bodhisattvas: "Bodhisattvas, 'Being of Enlightenment', who are potential Buddhas or Buddhas designate. These blessed beings have come within reach of their goal, the rank of a Buddha, having travelled the way that leads through the ten stages (bhumi) of supreme virtue and perfection; they have, however, abstained from taking the final step to deliverance and extinction in order to stand by those who have remained behind on earth, their former companions in suffering, to help them in their troubles and guide them along the right path. These Bodhisattvas thus have the function of helpers to those who belong to this branch of the Buddhist religion" (p.29). Bodhisattvas, the enlightened ones function as the bridge between the Buddha and the common human beings who seek nirvana. They guide the *sadhakas* toward enlightenment.

According to Swayambhu Purana, in faraway China, on the mountain of Wu-tai Shan, Bodhisattva Manjushree entered into meditation and became aware of the existence of Adi Buddha (primordial Buddha) in the form of brilliant flame beyond the Himalaya in a huge lake. It is believed that Manjushree came on a pilgrimage. He saw a lotus flower in the center of the lake, which emitted brilliant radiance (Williams, 1989). He cut a gorge at Chobhar with his flaming sword to allow the lake to drain. The place where flower settled became the Swayambhunath Stupa. Adi Buddha became visible on the full moon day in the month of Kartika from the thousand-petalled lotus. This lotus flower is the symbol of the primordial Buddha, Swayambhu, the Self Existent One (Vajracharya, 1996). The symbolic sword in the hand of Manjushree is called the *prajna khadga* or the sword of wisdom, which is believed to destroy the darkness of ignorance by the luminous rays issuing out of it (Emmerick, 1992). Manjushree is believed to have been the teacher of the seven Buddhas.

The composition includes many images, icons, monuments and figures found in the premises of Swayambhunath stupa. The figure of Akshobhya Buddha is in *Bhusparsa* (Earth touching) *mudra* (gesture), which means calling the earth for witness. Next, Amitabha Buddha, exhibiting *Samadhi mudra* with his two palms folded face up one on top of the other lying on his lap. The figure of Lokeshvara is richly ornamented. There is full blown lotus at each shoulder. This form is emerged when Buddhist pantheons incorporated Shiva. Another Padmapani Lokeshvara, is also a form of Bodhisattva attached to the *Padma* (Lotus) family. Vajrapani, with the symbol of *vajra*, is the spiritual son of the Dhyani Buddha. Akshobhya is also known as god of rain. Manjushree, god of divine wisdom, Bodhisattva of wisdom, is



Fig.4 Mukesh Shresha. "Arvastangamarga: The Path to the Nirvana", 2016.
Mixed media on canvas, 121.92 * 304.8 cm



considered as the founder of Nepalese civilization and the creator of Kathmandu valley (Shrestha, 2023). Bodhisattva Avalokiteswara is also associated with popular Buddhist mantra, "OM MANI PADME HUM". He is four armed with full blown lotus in the left hand. Two hands are raised to the chest in *namaskar mudra*. Many Buddha's came and went in this world, and Gautam Buddha is believed to have been the twenty fifth. The artist immortalizes the art heritage of Swayambhunath in his canvas through the representation of Buddhist myths. The painting associates the life with the primitive creation as suggested by the colors, figures and mythical narrative.

The painting presents Buddha's Aryastangamarga (Noble Eight Fold Path) [Fig.4] that leads the *Sadhaka* toward enlightenment. This is supposed to destroy the craving hatred and delusion and release from the world of suffering. The eightfold path includes right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. The practice and combination of right things and right manner lead toward the right resolution (Shrestha, 2023). In the right view, Buddha is preaching to the wife of Bimbisara, King of Magada. In the right resolve, Buddha is preaching to the Brahmadatta, one of the disciples of Supriya. In the right speech, he is preaching to the Aakosh Bardwaj and Chenchha Madhavika, both from the Brahmin background. In right action, he is preaching to Angulimala, the cruel man who would cut the fingers of innocent people and make a garland to wear round his neck. In right livelihood, he is preaching to his father, Suddhodhana, a noble warrior and his wife Yashodhara. In right effort, Buddha is preaching to Kisha Gotame. In right mindfulness, he is preaching to Patacharya and in the right concentration, Buddha is meditating himself on the border between Shakya and Koliya to stop war between them. Practicing the eightfold path, one is believed to realize the noble truth breaking the chain of birth, death and rebirth. In the painting, Buddha is preaching all these concepts with various gestures of his hands. The aesthetic form presents the blend of myth and reality.



Fig.5 Mukesh Shrestha, "Milarepa, the Story of Struggle, Anguish, Resolution and Triumph"
2020, Mixed Media on Canvas, 182.88x274.32 cm

This painting (Fig.5) is the story of struggle, anguish and triumph of Milarepa, a Tibetan poet and *Siddha* (the enlightened one), who led an inspiring life of human and spiritual accomplishment. Milarepa inspired people and became a source of deep solace due to his energetic struggle against obstacles and odds on the way toward Nirvana. The faith and resolution contributed for the achievement (Shrestha, 2023). The myth of Milarepa encourages us to resolve the crisis. In the painting, Marpa in right side is his guru who would lead him to the pinnacle of realization. His two pupils Sun and

Moon on the left were his first disciples. Noropa, the Guru of Marpa is at right top and Trilopa the Guru of Noropa on the top left. His sister Peta, who had also become a beggar and his aunt along



with many students, are at the right bottom along with hunter with bow and arrow. In the middle left background, Milarepa's magic destroys his uncle and aunt's house and other villager's houses killing many people and animals and destroys the local harvest through hailstorm. At the middle right, Marpa ordered to build the nine storied building without assistants and plow the field. Marpa often beat him, because he was absolutely clear in his mind that Milarepa could not gain the desired transformation by any normal training.



Fig.6 Mukesh Shrestha, "Amalgam of Compassion", 2023, Mixed media on canvas, 106.68 * 137.16 cm

The painting 'Amalgam of Compassion' (Fig.6) is the combined form of Green Tara and White Tara that symbolizes the unity of different shades of life. Green Tara symbolizes fearlessness and White Tara symbolizes purity. The purity gives way to the fearlessness (Shrestha, 2023). When we do right *karma*, we become pure and fearless. Corruption precedes the fear. The Buddhist mythical narrative in visuals is didactic in aesthetic manner. Among the primordial five elements, Green Tara represents the air. She is the consort of Amoghsiddhi, one of the five Dhyani Buddhas (five different forms of Shakyamuni Buddha). Green Tara also symbolizes the success and achievements. She is also worshipped as mother nature, beauty and creativity. The

abhaya mudra (gesture of fearlessness) of the goddess symbolizes the fearlessness towards the delusions. Green Tara and White Tara emerge from the tears of Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, the same source. White Tara, is worshipped as the mother of all Buddhas and an embodiment of compassion since she was born from Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Her white color is a symbol of purity, truth, *dharma* and pure wisdom. People pray to White Tara for health, healing and longevity. Her pure compassion for our suffering is thought to be a mother's love for her child. The balanced combination of two dimensions is supposed to create the balanced human being. Princess Bhrikuti, the daughter of Nepal, is also worshipped as Green Tara. Through this mythical association, the painting glorifies the national identity.

Conclusion

Mukesh's Shrestha's artworks reread the Buddhist myths in visual form to respond the contemporary context through the message of compassion and peace. The paintings stressed that the liberation from mundane material greed gives way to Nirvana, enlightenment or absolute bliss. The age old mythical narratives in visual form are equally relevant in the present context. In terms of form, the paintings reformulate the traditional Nepali *thanka* paintings using contemporary techniques. His works attempt to bring positive vibes exploring the themes of love, compassion, patience and spirituality. They have a lyrical language of colors and shapes that originate at our heart and directly glide to the other's heart without hindrance. The harmonious coexistence of the diverse aspects makes the works worth viewing. Conflicts and contradictions are resolved to provide a stable relish. Instead of a superficial veil and decoration, he reduces the colors and shapes to their essence presenting the underlined structures of the works. This adds to the clarity of



aesthetic communication. His spiritual works convey the rapture and relish through the unity at the centre of the canvas. The atmosphere in the canvas creates a meditative mood in the viewers. He cherishes his own tradition and culture and integrates significant contemporary aspects in his creativity. His artworks attempt to appeal for coexistence, social harmony and peace through renewed and revitalized traditional dimensions.

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