

Buddha in the Slaughterer's House and Appeal for Ultimate Peace and Nirvana

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Abstract

This paper analyzes a post-conflict narrative written by Mahesh Bikram Shaha during the time when the Maoist insurgency in Nepal was at peak level and human life was a matter of news making in different media forms. Shaha's "Buddha in the Slaughterhouse", showing the extreme level of human cruelty and barbarism along with the possibility of peace and harmony among the fighting groups, portrays the situation symbolically along with various metaphors like slaughterhouse, chanting Buddha's hymns. Nepali citizenry was destined to be killed and victimized at any condition anywhere in the country either from the security forces or rebel groups, that everyone is inclined to kill and harm the others. In contrast, the reference of Buddhism and the presence of Buddha in the slaughterhouse would make the readers imbibe the importance of peace and harmony in the country. There are some people like the Emperor Ashoka, Angulamai and the slaughterer who were against the humanity in the beginning of their mission, but later they turned to be a true follower of Buddhism and spread peace and solidarity in the warring world. The paper is trying to answer three questions: why is the insurgency so horrific? What was the effect of the insurgency? How does Buddhism play a pivotal role in transferring a cruel mind into a soft one? The ultimate destination of human life is to get nirvana for the final peace and solidarity among the warring people.

Keywords: Massacre, Nirvana, Peace, Slaughter, Violence

Introduction

In this paper, I am deeply concerned on the issues like violence, mass killing, destruction and finally salvation from all kinds of redemption of vices – the refuge to Buddhism. In the modern context, violence has been a common issue to rule or overrule the world. The stronger has been dominating the weaker one at any condition. Be it Palestines or Ukrainians or any other victims who have been oppressed and suppressed without any serious issues. Israelis and Russians do not seem to be reluctant to destroy the habitats of the common people who don't have role to ensue them to common such inhuman acts. Mass killing, exodus, internal-external migration, physical destruction have been common agendas for print, digital and mass medias. Common people in partition India, Nigerian civil war, Nepal's Maoist insurgency and any other internal or external conflict have been sandwiched between the fighting forces and they have become the targets of achieving destination in their maximum extermination of human destruction. In the context of Nepal and the ten-year long Maoist insurgency, mass migration from the villages to the urban areas, extortions, abduction, mass killing in the name of punishment from both warring groups, amputations, intimidations, fear, confusions and ultimately trauma are some factors which were common chores, later narrativized in the literary works. The insurgency which became the news of the world was the outcome of some inherent causes like class discrimination, poverty, lack of education and awareness as a result of the “centralized but ineffective and unresponsive state that contributed to governance crises in the 1990s and eroded the performance legitimacy of the state” (Lawati 21), which became the causes of human sufferings. Besides, the authorized people who were assigned to maintain the law and order in the conflict-ridden zones remained ineffective; rather active with cravings to detect more power on the common people who were living in the hinterlands for corruption, about which Lawati quotes, “As the political parties, especially the ruling party, abused state power and administration to influence electoral outcomes, elections in particular and democracy in general began to lose legitimacy, the more so because the open polity allowed the articulation of dissatisfaction (22). Either the domestic or foreign perpetrators who used to be criminals, rebels, corrupted officials and warmongers also have turned to Buddhism and purified themselves by following Buddhism. Tadamasa Goto, Jimmy, Ho Chi Minh, Angulimala, Emperor Ashoka are a few such people to add in the list, who after a long political or other insurgent activities accepted Buddhism for peace and harmony.

“Buddha in the Slaughterhouse” a story written by Mahesh Bikram Shaha, a prolific Nepali short story writer who has been known to write human relations penetrating deep into their psychology talks of the maximum of human cruelty and barbarism – suppressing of the stronger and inhuman emphatic dictator upon the very downtrodden class who would not have even right to detect rather cope with the situation with their own destiny as an inevitable predestination in the words of Govinda Raj Bhattarai, “how violence has brought about a situation of genocide” (“Introduction...” vii). The story is written on the periphery of the ten year long Maoist insurgency (1995-2006) in Nepal, which consequently caused a huge destruction – more than seventeen thousand people’s lives, exodus of millions of people, internal violence – rape, abduction, collecting ransoms, starvation of poverty-ridden society in the words of Archana Aryal “systematic interrogation, intimidation and beating of villagers” (11), which became a good source of writing narratives about the victims who remained a center of discourse for all concerned authorial body by illuminating their pain, suffering “grief and pain, fear and terror, and scenes of deaths related to psychological horror and trauma that millions of people underwent with the greatest of all shocks, unforgettable in their memory” (Bhattarai “A Glimpse of ...” 8). The slaughterhouse as presented in the story is a symbol of massacre of the war in which innocent people are butchered from the hands of a slaughterer who must have been hired for the purpose and whose endeavor would be the outcome of human triumphant as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events” (Caruth 11). But, by the time he changes his heart, he starts hearing the echoes of the Buddha “*Buddham Sharanam Gachhami, Dharmam Sharanam Gachhami, Sangham Sharanam Gachhamai*” (Shaha 101), which is the metaphorical transformation of a cruelty into the softness and modesty – to the path of the refuge of the Buddha, Dharma and *Nirvana* for which many devotees are on the way to achieve. So I argue this text is a testimony of the war-ridden human society in which massacre is a pivotal, but the initiation of Buddhist path would a good route to the final salvation for all living being in this mortal world.

On the Way to *Nirvana*

In human history, there are many events in which in the name of achieving his or her destination or achievements, common people are always prone to be victims, that is to say, as many as they could massacre, they would make a declaration of their prolonged glory until they realize their past deed and come to the Right path. Among such people, the emperor Ashoka and his devotion to Buddhism can be an

example. He was responsible for the death of his own brothers and other along with the involvement in different battles and killing people considering his enemies as a product of the forces of evils, he recorded his revulsion from violence and his wish to spare and care for even animals spreading the sense of love and compassion to all living beings. He had begun in the usual warlike way, but after a successful campaign in Kalinga (Modern Orissa) that killed many people he had a change of heart by publicly declaring his remorse for the sufferings he had caused in the war and said that henceforth he would be conquered only by righteousness (*Dhamma*). Richard Gombrich argues that it was a remarkable conversion from one's traditional *dharma* to a universalistic *dhamma* of compassion - the essence of the conversion to Buddhism that the emperor Aśoka announced publicly and "he first became an *upāsaka*, a Buddhist lay follower, but did not make much progress for a year; then, however, he went to the Saṅgha and made a lot of progress" (30). By roaming different parts of the world spreading *Dhamma* – message of non-violence, peace and happiness among all living beings, the emperor conversed himself as a monk and spent the rest of life for the welfare of other beings

Similarly, the story of Ahimsaka, known as Angulimala, is also painstaking. To begin with, he was an obedient son to his parents, he went to Taxashila for his higher education, and he got enrolled himself as apprentice of renowned guru, Disapamuk, who in the beginning favored him as his best disciple, but later, and he renounced him very bitterly. He asked him to present him one thousand right fingers as his *guru dakshina* from him, which ultimately made him hideous and notorious murderer waylaying in the midst of Jalini forest by wearing a garland from the fingers of those whom he killed one after another and known as Angulimala among the people living in the area. The situation developed in such a way that he was going to kill his own mother who was coming to visit him so that he would stop butchering the civilians, but with the grace of Buddha, he was ordained as his disciple and started living a life of monk visiting door to door for alms. Dhammika illuminates, "He threw down his weapons, bowed at the Buddha's feet and asked to become a monk. He ordained him and together they set out for Savatthi. . . . Angulimala led a life of simplicity and solitude and under the Buddha's guidance eventually attained enlightenment" (72). The precepts of the Buddhahood healed his pain and brought him to the Right Path and became a legendary figure to initiate a modest life not only for himself, but the generations to come.

In this list but not last, the slaughterer whose name is not given in the story

and who can be anyone involved in mass killing without any serious reasons and is presented like a machine without any love and kindness to others, in the slaughterhouse is a merciless person whose only one obsession is to butcher human beings as many as he could; for that he is hired as a dutiful captive to his boss or leader as his “hands chained behind his back, he was once again brought to the slaughterhouse where he had diligently performed his special skill as an adept slaughter for many years” (Shaha 93). The slaughterhouse, a symbol of modern battlefield of warmongers whose sole mission is to exterminate the populace who they think are from the enemy side has given a sense of barbarism and human cruelty; as human beings are destined to be killed or victimized at any cost when there is nothing to be lost, in the word of the storyteller, “Seeing helpless people bowing their heads like hegoats for sacrifice” (94). The responsibility which the slaughterer is doing is part of his “*karma*; having formed the intention one performs acts by body, speech and mind” (Adam 3). Humans have become a tool to materialize one’s mission at any condition.

Unlike the slaughterer, there is a youth who, a fearless and ever smiling figure has been brought to be killed by the slaughter and whose remark “You can destroy me, but you can’t defeat me” (95) is a turning point to unfold the possibility of emancipation and salvation from all kinds of evils, which can “correspond to Buddhist wisdom (*prajna*) while the transcending of the self to reach out to external existence which corresponds to the practice of compassion (*maitri-karuna*) in Buddhism” (Kawada 104). His presence and coping with the bloody scene of the execution for him is divinized to be an illuminating factor which has enlightened a spark of nonviolence inside the slaughterer by embodying him like this, “He looked peaceful. No sign of pain or terror is manifested in his face. He was calm” (Shaha 94), which can be compared with the divine appearance of the Buddha who seems to be spreading the “ideas that are primarily designed to bring about a spiritual experience” (Brassard 12). His appearance and remark, “Executioner, you couldn’t defeat me even after beheading me” (Shaha 95), an exemplary discourse for the transformation in his responsibility towards his boss or leader who had hired him to do this work, yield the truth just as valuable and valid of what David E.R. George says “the aesthetic apprehension or intrinsic perception” (41). The tackle of the slaughter with the youth, as an eye opener to him even after beheading him, he doesn’t feel winner, rather a loser, shook him from the heart as his “unfeeling mind was shaken by the youth’s glowing face, bright eyes, innocent smile and calm posture. The fact that he could not stand a winner even after killing the youth mortified him” (Shaha 95). To exemplify this situation, the

following extract can be seen,

While we act individually and locally, we must think globally, so that selfishness can slowly become selflessness. Only then can one respect other religions and ideologies wholeheartedly. Although you may not agree entirely with those of different views and beliefs, you can certainly respect them. Even if they are your oppressors you need not hate them because that hatred is also harmful to you. Instead of hating an oppressor one should try to understand the oppressive system and try one's best to change it with the help of good friends who want to help one to overcome suffering and obstacles in the way of cultural and spiritual development ... (Sivaraksa 138) To have a significant change, there should not be any meditative practices or other important steps, a small anecdote would be sufficient to transform one into another.

But, on the one hand, he gave up his duty and ascertained whether he had done all this massacre himself or how he did it all, on the other hand, his leader ordered him to be killed in the same way as he used to kill others for his disobedience, which can be seen in these words, “The turncoat slaughterer was singing the tune of nonviolence” (Shaha 97), an emphasis on the significance of his transformation as “manifestations of buddhas or bodhisattvas in order to save sentient beings and lead them to enlightenment” (Vollmer 204). This “defamation of the slaughterhouse” (97) forced the leader to execute him and he was “brought to the middle of the slaughterhouse and was tied to the maulo, the sacrificial post” (Shaha 97) where he had beheaded many others. Still, his punishment as ordered by the leader or boss was again to kill prisoners more rigorously than he used to do earlier.

Final denouement of the complexity of his dilemma, after realizing the facts of human life, observing all the dead bodies, blood, skeletons, crying and sobbing humans in the slaughterhouse, and finally the disillusionment of the work he was doing for a long time there, came to an end as he felt “he had an epiphany that the feeling of victory was nothing more than the madness of an inveterate killer” (100/1), that the ever smiling face of the youth haunted him time and again as in the following extract which was an absolute transformation,

“They won’t be able to uproot my thoughts of nonviolence even after killing me. They won’t defeat me,” he thought as the light of his *Nirvana* illuminated his face. The slaughtered youth’s peaceful bright face, half opened eyes, and gently smiling lips flashed before him. The youth’s lips began to move and the slaughterer heard his gentle voice, “Hey, follower of nonviolence! You also have Buddha in you. Search for

it and find it in yourself. The ultimate truth of this slaughterhouse is to attain Buddhist *Nirvana*.” (101)

After this attainment, there would not remain any other step except to go ahead in the path of Buddhahood or *Nirvana* which he as a killer, destroyer and a great sinner of the living being as others like Angulimala, the Emperor Ashoka, would have a transformation in his deeds and thinking. In a way it is a “certain restraint of action is considered integral to the religious life—both as a means of preventing harm and as part of the path of cultivating the awareness that leads to awakening (Bodhi)” (Adam 4). Besides, everyone has to remain aware of each other’s condition and “environment, avoiding injury to others whenever one can but balancing such considerations is a realistic recognition that one must engage in wide variety of everyday activities in order to reach the final goal” (5). The conformation of his conviction to the right path can be seen when “a solemn voice came from his throat *Buddham Sharanam Gachhami, Dharmam Sharanam Gachhami, Sangham Sharanam Gachhami* – I wish to go to the shelter of Buddha” (Shaha 101), which brought a change in the whole of the slaughterhouse and everyone is inclined to the path of *Nirvana*. It is the Buddhist way of life where monks abandon worldly pleasures, and with it worldly cares and ultimately live in the places of meditation and be strictly guided by the rules of the order. With the clarity of thought that would be born of detachment, a capacity for higher understanding which is not only to themselves but to all those who wish to tread the path of Buddhism, and to society itself. In the way of modern life, “the place of the monk as one who devotes his whole life to his calling must be accepted. His endeavor must be supported not only for his own sake, but also for the benefit of society as a whole. A society which does not accept this responsibility will suffer sooner or later from moral degradation” (Nilamasuria 29). Finding a way to *Nirvana* from all the sorrows and suffering in human life would be a final destination for all living being in this mortal world which is destined to be doomed.

Conclusion

War or conflict would not remain continued for a long time because it would end sooner or later in any condition. Either it is the world great wars or civil wars happened within the country. And those involved in the war or conflict, later, would realize what they did before and come to reconciliation with the opposite groups. The world that has seen or still seeing war, kidnapping, massacres and at present drone or nuclear wars needs peace and harmony among the diversified groups of people not more enmity among them. “Buddha in the Slaughterhouse”, a short story about the

maximum level of human cruelty and barbarism due to the inclination of violence and mass killing during the ten year long Maoist insurgency when the value of human life was nonetheless a matter of sacrificial body, has metaphorically brought a fore for the final denouement of human existence that human life is not for harming each other, rather to live in peace and harmony along with achieving *Nirvana* – the level of extreme ecstasy. On one hand, there is violence and human cruelty from which one can hardly escape, on the other hand, there is also possibility of living life in a harmony among the heterogeneously multi-faceted diversified humans. It is possible with the help of following some important tenets of Buddhism.

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