



## DR. BABASAHEB AMBEDKAR'S *THE BUDDHA AND HIS DHAMMA* : AN EPIC NOVEL

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### ABSTRACT

*It is needless here to talk about intellectual genius of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. The paper directly enters into the probe of finding conventional literary evidences in The Buddha And His Dhamma similar to that of an epic novel. Surprisingly the novel is still out of canon. It is not considered as a part of English literature. It is the magnum opus of a literary giant like Dr. Ambedkar. Unfortunately still in search of its genre. The paper is a conscious effort to focus important aspects of epic in the novel. Now there is a need to do away with the hypocrisy and include this work as a part of English literature.*

**Key Words :** *The Buddha And His Dhamma , epic*

### INTRODUCTION

*Buddha and His Dhamma* is the culmination of Dr. Ambedkar's writing. It is entirely writing style, temperament and approach while handling the saga of Gautama Buddha. But at the same time a well disciplined writer and logically equipped lawyer in him is conscious while entering in various enquiries related to Buddha's life and teaching. He clears his intentions of important books ever written by Dr. Ambedkar. Here he has not only glorified the life of Buddha but also raised many questions and traditional problems and tried to answer them most logically and historically. Is it an epic or Saga? Is it a Novel or Play? Or is it Biography of the Buddha? These all interesting questions tempt scholars of literature to probe into this matter.

An epic is a long narrative often written in an elevated poetic style, that combines many episodes. Technically epic is expected to be written in poetic form. Especially due to the

**DR. UMESH B. BANSOD**

**DR. HITENDRA B. DHOTE**

1Page



great expansion of literary genres and styles of writing in the last 150 years, an epic no longer is defined only as a work written in some sort of poetic structure. While originally most ancient work -- and up into the middle ages -- was written in a poetic format, there are a number of prose works over the centuries that would certainly qualify as epics for various reasons:

e.g. Mort d' Arthur , Njal's Saga , - Don Quixote , Les Miserables , Moby Dick , War and Peace , The Grapes of Wrath and Lord of the Rings.

While the number of genres and their subdivisions has proliferated since classical times, the division of the literary domain into three major genres (by Plato, Aristotle, and, later, Horace), is still useful. These are *lyric*, *drama*, and *epic*, and they are distinguished by "manner of imitation," that is, by how the characters and the action are presented. The chart briefly summarizes the main differences in the way action and characters are presented in the lyric, drama, and the epic.<sup>1</sup>

The **epic**, in the classical formulation of the three genres, referred exclusively to the "poetic epic." It was of course in verse, rather lengthy (24 books in Homer, 12 books in Virgil, The Buddha and His Dhamma 8 books ), and tended to be episodic. It dealt in elevated language with heroic figures (human heroes and deities) whose exploits affected whole civilizations or even, by implication, the whole of mankind. Its lengthiness was properly a response to the magnitude of the subject material.

Today, we classify epics with other forms of the "mixed kind." That is, we see the classical epic as but one of the generic subdivisions of the epic or fiction. This broader classification can include many kinds of narratives, in prose as well as in verse. Thus the "mixed kind" now includes the novel, the folktale, the fable, the fairy tale, even the short story and novella, as well as the romance, which can be in either prose or verse. Of these, the novel and the romance tend to continue the epic tradition of length (we speak of the "sweep" of a sizeable novel).

It should be noted that the three-part division of lyric, drama, and epic or fiction, while useful and relatively comprehensive, does not provide a place for all of the known literary genres. Some obvious omissions are the essay, the pastoral, biography and autobiography, and satire.

## How Literary Critics Have Used Genres

<sup>1</sup> <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/genres.html>



Critics have employed the genre approach to literature in a number of ways. From the Renaissance through most of the eighteenth century, for example, they often attempted to judge a text according to what they thought of as the fixed "laws of kind," insisting upon purity, that is, fidelity to type. Thus the placement of comic episodes in otherwise predominantly serious works was frowned upon, and hybrid forms like tragicomedy were dismissed. There was also a tendency to rank the genres in a hierarchy, usually with epic or tragedy at the top, and shorter forms, such as the epigram and the subdivisions of the lyric, at the bottom. Modern critics have a different view of genres, and are likely to point out how, in actual practice, writers play against as well as with generic traditions and how specific conventions are imitated or defied, modified or renovated.<sup>2</sup>

If we were to stick strictly to the ancient Greek definitions of literature, ALL forms of fiction (including short stories!) would have to fall in the category of epic, as the other 2 ancient Greek literature genres were drama and lyric poetry.

Today we read Ramayana or Mahabharata as translated in prose. Does translation in prose form change the genre of these Epics? If they are translated in prose, are they called Novels?

The above discussion tempts to testify Dr. Ambedkar's *The Buddha And His Dhamma* as an epic in modern context.. Let us attempt an investigation in the light of conventional, traditional norms of Epic.

### Epic Definition and Origin :

1] Epics typically begin as oral traditions that are passed down for generations before being written down. To this end, epics have an order and repetition of events that made them easier to remember. Due to their length, these works often took days to tell!

With reference to the above cited information it also a fact that Buddha's teaching was preserved and forwarded in oral tradition. He preached his doctrine orally at his first sermon at Sarnath to five pari-vrajakas and later was preserved in written form. Such written doctrines are known as the Gospels. Anand, Upali and Kassiyap tried to recite and preserve Buddha's teaching. Later Ashoka tried to preserve Buddha's teaching in written form. Pali: Tipitaka, Sanskrit: **Tripitaka**) is the standard collection of scriptures in the **Theravadan** Buddhist tradition, as preserved in the Pali language. It is the first known and most complete extant early Buddhist canon. Various collections of teachings attributed to him were passed down by oral tradition and first committed to writing about 400 years later. After

<sup>2</sup> <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/genres.html>



Buddha's death even for 100 years there were no efforts to compile his teachings . If epics in the world remained preserved in oral form ,so is the case of Buddha's teachings .

## 2] Epics are Mythological Histories

Dr.Ambedkar's *The Buddha And His Dhamma* is also set on historical background of Buddha's life and many historical events related to his life story . Most of the events are historical . There mixture of mythological references as well.

## 3] A Hero of Legendary Proportions

The epic hero is typically well known in his time, often reaching superstar status. In ancient legends, the hero often is either partially divine, or at least protected by the gods.

The Buddha is the befitting character for Epic. He is well known personality of his time. He is a god like personality and there are many acts performed by him during his life time which equal any mythological hero . The story of his birth is extra ordinary . An eye witness , the Brahmin describes Buddha's personality and scanned the Lord's body for the two and thirty marks of a Superman, and in time observed them. Quite sure now about the presence of the two and thirty marks, Sale still did not know whether or not he had enlightenment. But he remembered hearing from old and aged Brahmins, teachers of teachers, that those who became Arahats, all enlightened, reveal themselves when their praises are sung, and so he made up his mind to extol the Lord to his face in the following lines of eulogy: " Perfect of body, goodly, Lord, art thou, well grown, well liking, golden-hued, with teeth which gleam lustre; vigour fills the frame; the body's full perfection manifests each single sign that marks a Superman.<sup>3</sup>

These all examples make it clear that there is involvement of supernatural agency which make the Buddha a divine character.

## 4] Adventures of Superhuman Strength and Valor

The hero accomplishes feats no real human could, both physically and mentally.

Asita observing the child, beheld that it was endowed with the thirty-two marks of a great man and adomed with the eighty minor marks, his body surpassing that of Sakra, Brahma, and his aura surpassing them a hundred thousand-fold, breathed forth this solemn utterance, " Marvellous, verily, is this person that has appeared in the world," and rising from his seat

<sup>333</sup> .Babasaheb Ambedkar : Writings and Speeches Vol.11 p .568





clasped his hands, fell at his feet, made a right wise circuit round and taking the child in his own hand stood in contemplation. <sup>4</sup> Siddhartha saves life of a bird. <sup>5</sup> He won Yeshodhara in marriage showing his skill in archery. <sup>6</sup> Though a prince, decided to denounce his kingdom and go in exile. <sup>7</sup> his determination for enlightenment, conversion of Nagas, <sup>8</sup> Conversion of Yashas., Kassiyapas, Sariputta and Moggallana, Bimbisara, Anathapindika, Pasenjit, Jeevaka, Ratthapala, Upali, the Barber, Sunita, the Sweeper. Sopaka and Supply a, the Untouchables, Sumangala and other Low Castes, Suprabuddha, the Leper, Mahaprajapati Gotami, Yeshodhara and her Companions, Prakrati chandalika, a Vagabond, Conversion of Angulimala, the Robber. and conversion of Other Criminals, who can say that these are not adventures of a superhuman character. These all episode make it clear that the Buddha accomplishes feats of physical as well as internal conflicts.

### 5] Multiple Settings

The where and when of a story or play; the local. In drama the term may refer to the scenery or props. <sup>9</sup> The nature, groves, mountains and rivers are an integral part of *Buddha and His Dhamma*. Buddha spent most of the part of his life amidst the trees, groves and forests. Not only this but he often drew on parables about animals and other aspects of nature to illustrate morals and other principles. He was born under a sal tree in a grove called Lumbini Park near Kapilavastu. After his great renunciation he wandered near about 45 years through the forests preaching Buddhism.

Nature was the context source of Siddhartha's search for and eventual achievement of enlightenment. For six years he pursued spiritual awakening with various gurus and through rigorous asceticism in the forest. Eventually, he pursued contemplation and meditation on his own for seven days at the base of a bodhi fig tree near the town Bodhgaya. <sup>10</sup>

After enlightenment under the bodhi tree, the Buddha subsequently spent a week meditating under each of several other trees. Then, he went to Royal Deer Park of Isipatana in Sarnath. For next 45 years of his life, the Buddha wandered over much of northern and eastern India as a religious teacher. He died at the age of 80 while reclining between two sal trees in a grove outside a small town of Kusinara and in the company of his many followers. <sup>11</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid p.6

<sup>5</sup> Ibid p.12

<sup>6</sup> Ibid p.14.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid p.28

<sup>8</sup> Ibid p.75

<sup>9</sup> Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory p. 812.

<sup>10</sup> [https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-94-007-3934-5\\_8564-2#page-1](https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-94-007-3934-5_8564-2#page-1)

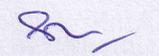
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Along with nature's setting, the political setting and historical background of *Buddha and His Dhamma* is also important. The Buddha's time refers to the period from 563 BCE to 483 BCE or roughly fifth to fourth century BCE.

### Geographical and Political Background :

In the sixth century BCE India was divided into a large number of independent states known as *janapadas* or *mahajanapadas*. The *Anguttara Nikaya*, one of the early Pali canonical texts, mentions sixteen (16) states of considerable extent and power known as the "Solasa Mahajanapadas". These states were tribal states and did not indicate real geographical states. From these states, four were becoming very powerful at the time of the Buddha, there were Magadha, Kosala, Vatsa and Avanti.

The kingdom of Magadha with its capital at Rajagaha (Sanskrit *Rajagṛha*) (afterwards at Pataliputta) reigned over by King Bimbisara and afterwards by his son Ajatasattu. It is said that at the time of the Buddha, the kingdom had 80,000 villages and 300 leagues (about 2,300 miles) in circumference.

Kingdom of Kosala with its capital at Savatthi reigned over by King Pasenadi and followed by his son Vidudabha.<sup>3</sup>)

The kingdom of the Vamsas or Vatsas with its capital at Kosambi on the Jumna reigned over by King Udena, the son of Parantapa.

4. The kingdom of Avanti with its capital Ujjeni reigned over by King Pajjota. The struggle of Kosala and Magadha was the leading point in the politics at the Buddha's time.<sup>12</sup>

### 6] Involvement of the Supernatural

Dr. Ambedkar has written not for eyes and ears but for brains and mind. He writes without using supernatural elements. Even then also BR is conscious about literary elements of epic and other art forms. He uses some of the supernatural elements for the cause of dramatic or literary effect. There are several examples even in the novel of supernatural element and agencies taking part in the story. The stories associated with the Buddha though rationalized by Dr. Ambedkar, are acts of an extraordinary man. Appearance of Sumedha and making prophesy of taking last birth. Asita heard that the gods over the space of the sky were shouting the word "Buddha" and making it resound. He had also tried to forecast his future.

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.academia.edu/4990710/India\\_at\\_the\\_Time\\_of\\_the\\_Buddha\\_Social\\_and\\_Political\\_Backgrounds](http://www.academia.edu/4990710/India_at_the_Time_of_the_Buddha_Social_and_Political_Backgrounds)





This he did by throwing the bowl of food, Sujata's maid brought, into the river Nairanja, saying : "If I am to have enlightenment let the bowl ascend the stream; if not let it go down." The vessel, indeed, began to float against the current and at last sank near the abode of Kala, a Naga king.<sup>13</sup> Conversion of Angulimala and many more episode are enough to prove involvement of supernatural agencies in *The Buddha His Dhamma*.

### 7] Epic Style of Writing

Dr. Ambedkar has proved that he is the master of style and technique in his own way. It will be injustice to find resemblance of his style. He not only uses literary devices but also shows his mastery in using them. His writing makes it clear that he has tremendous command on English and treasure of words is at his command. It is already asserted that this book is the culmination of Dr. Ambedkar's genius. And therefore, this is of technically most accomplished piece of writing. This is also a linguistic experiments of Dr. Ambedkar. It is a new experience for readers and literary world to read different angle of Dr. Ambedkar's personality. It can be easily identified by any Ambedkar's follower or reader that it's a different Ambedkar in *Buddha and His Dhamma*. There are many occasions in the book where Dr. Ambedkar molds himself to serve the requirement of literary writing. He use few supernatural elements, fantastic literary language, beautiful descriptions of nature and feminine beauty against his nature. It shows that he has taken all efforts to produce a quality literary document. There are numbers of instances which easily can prove that he can surpass any contemporary literary figure. The novel has abundance of similes, metaphors, alliterations, repetitions and many other literary devices.

### 8] Omniscient Narrator

*The narrator sees and knows all.*

Omniscient is a literary technique of writing narrative in third person in which a narrator knows the feelings and thoughts of every character in the story. Through omniscient narrative, an author brings an entire world of his characters to life and moves from characters to characters, allowing different voices to interpret the events, and maintaining omniscient form — that is keeping a distance. Omniscient narrative tells the story of every character by demonstrating that only the narrator possesses information.<sup>14</sup>

Literature produced by Dr. Ambedkar plays a significant role in the social movements of oppressed people. *Buddha and His Dhamma* is the culmination of Dr. Ambedkar's writing.

<sup>13</sup> Babasaheb Ambedkar : Writings and Speeches Vol.11 p .73

<sup>14</sup> <https://literarydevices.net/omniscient/>

**DR. UMESH B. BANSOD**

**DR. HITENDRA B. DHOTE**

7 Page  
PRINCIPAL



He dominates the entire book. His presence can be experienced on every page. He writes with complete authority. His interpretation, comments and observations are recorded all over at significant place. It is the story of Buddha but through Ambekarite perspective. Omniscient Narrator has always been the favourite technique in literature. It enables the author to get access into the character and situations and determine the course of novel's development, which otherwise would not be possible.

### CONCLUSION :

The research paper only can start a fresh discussion. It certainly can not reach to any final conclusion. But the prima-facie evidences are in favour of the title of the paper. It will not be the justice with the work to categories it as mere a religious book. The above discussed all points make it clear that Dr. Ambedkar's *The Buddha And His Dhamma* may not be called an epic in a conventional sense. But it is surely an epic novel.

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