

THE ZEN NARRATIVE AND ITS LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE IN RUTH OZEKI'S A TALE FOR THE TIME BEING

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ABSTRACT

A common man finds it hard to survive the immense pressure of this competitive, apathetic world. People resort to religion and spirituality for their sanity and peace of mind throughout the tug-of-war of the survival of the fittest, with the sole hope that it would teach them how to deal with this experience called life.

This research paper tends to analyse the incidents in the novel *The Tale for the Time Being* from the perspective of Zen philosophy and how lessons of Zen Buddhism are used vividly throughout the novel providing a stark contrast between the chaotic and tragic city lifestyle to that of Zen lifestyle in a temple, the cruelty of the city folks to that of the healing kindness of Zen Buddhist nuns. It will also throw light on how societal alienation affects a family so much that their whole psyche gets unhinged as they develop depressive and suicidal tendencies.

This research paper will also discuss the characters mental anguish, how cultural shock, a toxic work environment, and bullying drove them to consider suicide as their only option, how alienation and the cultural shock led them to a miserable existence, and how there was a recurring theme of contemplating suicide because the constant torment of their existence was too much to bear as they were all fighting their own battles while trying to survive.

The study would also discuss how the Zen teachings moulded their life and made a difference, the nun was their only saviour as she pulls them out of the dark void they were in, through her simple Zen lessons.

Keywords- Dogen, Zen Buddhism, Suicide, Japan, Shobogenzo, Mindfulness, Zazen

Man is a social animal and has been since the beginning of time. We are meant to thrive in society, but what happens when that same society turns into a source of suffering, and a never-ending reminder that you are not worthy of living for reasons so absurd, that you can't even possibly comprehend where humanity has ultimately arrived!

Dogen Zenji (the great Zen master, founder of Soto Zen in Japan and author of *Shobogenzo*, one of the finest texts to present the wisdom of Zen Buddhism) in his work *Shobogenzo* grieves the corrupt state of society, and states the cause for such a tragic fate in the following excerpt "Thus, a secular person grieves over the crisis in society. The Buddha's children should grieve over the crisis in buddha dharma and the buddha way. The cause of the crisis lies in mistakenly paying attention to the words of worldly people." (Dogen 585) In the 21st century, where people seek happiness by tearing others down, dark thoughts and mental anguish can take over a person's sane mind to a point, where he can only think of way s to end his life because he can see no other way out of the torturous life he has been living. It

is really difficult to make a living nowadays, due to the intense competition when there is always someone more qualified, more pretty, younger and more deserving. This immensely toxic Japanese culture is discussed in Ruth Ozeki's book *The Tale for the Time Being*, which also describes how the idea of suicide is so pervasive in Japanese man's mind that there is an entire forest named Aokigahara, or Suicide Forest, where people go to end their lives, which shows how prevalent the cases of suicide must be in Japan which is very alarming to others. Japanese people understand why and how a person's mental state could be so unstable that suicide is the only way out.

In *Shobogenzo*, Dogen describing the society says:

If you listen to what worldly people admire, you cannot attain true wisdom. If you wish to attain true wisdom, you should have resources to reflect on the past and see to the future. Those who are admired by worldly people are not necessarily wise ones or sages. Those who are criticized by worldly people are not necessarily wise ones or sages. (Dogen 585-586)

In the English translation *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye of Zen Master Dogen's Shobogenzo*, the editor Kazuaki Tanahashi talks about the relevance of Dogen's teachings in current scenario of the society:

In this state of the world, there is a tremendous need for us to slow down, relax, and heal. Dogen's way, along with meditative arts such as yoga and taichi, can be one of the practices that help us to calm down and remain peaceful while being attentive to body, mind, and outer situations. (Tanahashi 47-48)

In Japan, nobody humiliates or denigrates the individual who decides to commit suicide because they are aware of the burdens associated with human existence and how difficult it is to succeed in today's world. As Haruki Yasutani, one of the characters of the novel *The Tale for the Time Being* had stated "Suicide feels like One Authentic Thing. Suicide feels like Meaning of Life". (Ozeki 92)

The novel talks about the Yasutani family, the father Haruki Yasutani, daughter Naoko Yasutani, the mother and the hundred and four-year-old great grandmother, Zen Buddhist nun Jiko Yasutani who plays a major role in Naoko's (the protagonist) life with her teachings of Zen Buddhism. The story talks about a diary Naoko maintains which talks about her life as she's contemplating suicide and also documents the life of her great-grandmother Jiko. For Naoko Jiko's life was quite interesting as she was a novelist, feminist, anarchist, a woman with a lot of love affairs, and now a Zen practitioner.

As Naoko was determined to kill herself, she believed that her own life was not worth discussing or writing about, because she had led a pretty traumatizing existence and no one needed to know about it. Instead, Naoko decided she would make the most of her remaining time by recording the true story of Jiko, because she was an inspiration to her and that was the only thing she needed to do before she ended everything.

There's this concept of "Being-Time" that is there in the novel title itself. The term Being Time or Uji in Zen Buddhism talks about a period of time during which an action takes place in the same direction. This is a theory is also given by the Japanese Zen master Dogen in his work *Shobogenzo*.

In *Shobogenzo*, Dogen talking about Time Being says "As time is not marked by coming and going, the moment you climbed the mountains is the time being right now. If time keeps coming and going, you are the time being right now. This is the meaning of the time being." (Dogen 164)

In the first few chapters, Naoko is heard saying that she is a Time Being rather than a person with clearly defined characteristics. She does not confine herself to a set of boundaries and is aware that a person can change their reality at any time, which is what she believes in, she says “A time being is someone who lives in time, and that means you, and me, and every one of us who is, or was, or ever will be”. (Ozeki 3)

She has been applying Zen philosophy in this way because she had grown to love and respect Jiko's Zen teachings. She always noticed how her old Jiko did everything really slowly taking her time, being there completely in the present moment doing nothing in haste, even if she was sweeping, she would take her time and slow down, that is how she lived enjoying every moment, savouring every moment. This practice of Slowing Down was introduced by Dogen Zejin also known as Shikantaza, the Zen concept of slowing down and sitting with your own self which would feel like a waste of time to a common man or the person would even be labelled as lazy. According to Zen this causes a flow internally, bringing awareness to one's existence as well as the quality of actions one performed and helps one appreciate every moment of life.

Although Naoko and Jiko were generations apart, the teenage girl loved Jiko's lessons and was very fascinated about Zen Buddhism as if it was here only saving grace, the only thing that could keep her from dying. Humans make the mistake of thinking that they are here forever but it isn't true; everyone has a limited share of their time. Therefore, it is our responsibility to live through this time filled with nothing but gratitude, which is such a contrast to how Naoko has been living.

Naoko used to get assaulted at her school, she had cuts, bruises, and cigarette burns on her body due to the severe bullying she used to go through routinely. Sometime later, her mother saw the bruises and complained to the school and immediately her whole class started ignoring her, treating her as if she didn't even exist or had died. They found new ways to torment her indirectly. They all thought it would be fun to hold a funeral for her. They even included her substitute teacher Ugawa Sensei who was reciting Buddhist hymns, everyone paid respect to her, they put her picture with a garland around it and everyone gathered there for Naoko. The poor girl actually felt emotional as she was popular for the first time in her school life in Japan, she felt loved and cared for in that very moment which in a very twisted way shows how lonely Naoko really was and how she was desperate for any kind of human interaction and attention even if it came in the form of a sick joke, Naoko was happy that at least she is being the centre of attention, after being ignored for a long time. This is a peculiar incident that brings up the theme of alienation the teenage girl had to go through for doing absolutely nothing, but being a transfer student, she was even referred to as “Transfer Student Yasutani” as if she was not a human but an object, she faced the same fate as immigrant people who are mostly bullied in other countries but the irony was that Naoko was Japanese. It felt as if she was being punished for her American background, maybe they despised the American culture because it was the Americans who bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or it could be the jealousy between the teenagers.

The fake funeral incident was disturbing to almost everyone but Naoko, who while hearing the “Wisdom Heart Sutra” (a central text in Mahayana Buddhism) which Uguwa Sensei was reciting during her make-believe funeral remembers how she has heard it before from Jiko and it meant “Nothing in this world is solid or real, because nothing is permanent, and all things-including trees and animals and pebbles and mountains and rivers and even me and you are just kind of flowing through the Time Being”. (Ozeki 113)

These words help Naoko find peace and comfort as she understands that everything will perish soon enough and this torturous existence will not last forever and she's just like everything in this world, just a Time Being and it will all be over soon.

The Zen master Dogen in his work Shobogenzo talks about the effect the Buddhist Sutras had on an individual's being says:

When you read, recite, and penetrate the sutras, buddha wisdom, spontaneous wisdom, or no-teacher wisdom are manifested prior to the mind and prior to the body. At this time there is nothing new or extraordinary that makes you wonder. That the sutras are held, read, and recited by you means that the sutras guide you.

(Dogen 616-617)

After a while, Naoko's only friend Kayla, her only hope and remembrance of her previous good life in Sunnyvale, California stopped talking to her. She found out that Naoko wasn't leading some adventurous and fun Japanese life as shown in the Manga, instead her life was very dull and depressing. Kayla got tired of her constant whining and stopped talking to her which really left Naoko all alone. She thought she had become ikisudama, or a living ghost, are living people who are being illtreated, the spirits of these people manage to leave their bodies at nights to haunt or attack the culprits, which is what Naoko wished to become during her summer vacations. She had no fun plans to go on vacation like a normal teenager but fed up with all the cruelty she has been tolerating she wanted to train to become ikisudama so she can take revenge on her bullies.

Reflecting on the past when Naoko first got acquainted with Jiko, she recalls, she was ordered by her parents to go spend her summer vacation at a faraway temple with her great-grandmother, who was a Zen Buddhist nun, whom she had just met. She didn't want to go as she had just met Jiko that day, she wasn't even aware that she had some great-grandmother. Her parents forced her to spend her summer vacation at the temple with Jiko as it would be good for her considering the bullying she has been going through at school and the fact that she had no friends and her father was leading a very unhealthy lifestyle, unsuitable for a teenage girl to take inspiration from. He was unreliable, suicidal, and has turned into a hikikomori (a person who avoids social interaction at any cost) so he always stayed at home reading or making origami, smoking cigarettes, and even once tried to commit suicide by jumping in front of a train. The incident was all over the news the "Chuo Rapid Express incident" but he was saved. So, this is how Nao Chan ended up with her granny Jiko and that was the introduction of the Zen teachings into her life.

Jiko had taught Naoko everything about the Zazen meditation and how it would help her not take everything so personally and gain better control over her emotions, just as she has been practicing meditating daily and it had been working for her, as she was still alive fighting the suicidal tendencies within her, day by day. Jiko taught Naoko to be grateful for every little thing in her life by being mindful of every moment and living life with a heart full of gratitude, which is one of the most important Zen teachings.

They used to offer a prayer of thanks for everything. For instance, they prayed while washing their feet and even after taking a dump, they thanked the toilet for removing dirt and negative emotions like greed, anger, and foolishness from their bodies.

Naoko tried to adopt this habit and it felt very natural to her. Jiko has such a welcoming aura that made Naoko feel at ease. She opened up to Jiko about all of her life's problems, and Jiko would listen and pray for her intently, which made Naoko feel safe.

Now coming to Jiko's story on how and why she became a nun! It's really a tragic tale of how her son Haruki #I, the person whom Naoko's father was named after. He was a really peaceful, French poetry and philosophy-loving nineteen-year-old boy who was drafted in World War II as a Kamikaze suicide bomber. Jiko's whole world was shattered and she wanted to die too but couldn't as she had a fifteen-year-old daughter Ema (Naoko's grandmother) to look after. After the death of her beloved son, Jiko shaved off her head and renounced the material world and vowed to live the rest of her days teaching people how to, live in peace, and that is how she became a nun and ever since has been living in the temple in solitude. For Jiko, the isolation from society wasn't troublesome or causing her any anguish but it was her choice. To be with herself and live a peaceful, spiritually mindful existence instead of living in delusions as other people are used to living in.

Jiko tries to heal Naoko internally by teaching her about Zen Buddhism and showing her how to live a meaningful and mindful life. By showing her how to be in the present, and the Zazen meditation that could be her own superpower that could eventually help her deal with all the stuff she has been going through in her life.

Jiko offered Naoko a source of the peace she needed after learning how she has been harassed by her schoolmates and after seeing the cigarette burns, bruises, and cuts on her. Talking about Zazen Naoko says "Zazen is better than a home. Zazen is a home that you can't ever lose, and I keep doing it because I like that feeling, and I trust old Jiko, and it wouldn't hurt for me to try to see the world a little more optimistically like she does" (Ozeki, 195).

So, it is evident how Jiko's teaching had been helping Naoko deal with her negative thoughts as she had been trying to become optimistic and lively just like her old Jiko. Zazen was her very own superpower which helped her mind become so still that all her problems seemed to vanish away during her practice which was exactly what she needed, an escape!

In Shobogenzo, talking about the significance of Zazen Dogen says:

In meditation time is multidirectional. Yesterday flows into today, and today flows into yesterday, today flows into tomorrow, and tomorrow flows into today. Today also flows into today. Time flies, yet it does not fly away. This moment, which is inclusive of all times, is timeless. Further, time is not apart from the one who experiences it, time is the self. Time flows in "I," and "I" makes the time flow. It is selfless "I" that makes time full and complete."

While Naoko and Jiko were out they encountered some bullies while Naoko was used to being bullied, she had already considered a myriad of ways the bullies could harm them. She needed to fight them for the sake of old Jiko. She was hyperalert, but after seeing how Jiko had handled the situation, Naoko realised that she didn't have even a hint of evil within her. Jiko bowed to the group of bullies to greet them, and the bullies greeted her back with a bow.

Jiko had given her yet another lesson, that if one is pure and kind, one can definitely pass on that goodness. One shouldn't be picky and just show kindness to everyone without any exceptions. After learning from Jiko not to even kill or swat the mosquitoes that bit her during Zazen. Naoko's change in attitude due to Zen lessons can be seen in the following lines "Jiko had given me a bracelet of pretty pink juzu beads, kind of a starter set, and for every dead species I would move a bead around, whispering their beautiful names to myself during recess, or walking home from school, or lying in my bed at night." (Ozeki 283)

She also added that she would do it "with abilities bestowed upon me by Lord Buddha that included battling the waves, even if I always lost, and being able to withstand astonishing

amounts of pain and hardship. Jiko was helping me cultivate my supapawa! by encouraging me to sit zazen for many hours without moving.” (Ozeki 217)

Naoko was able to endure great amounts of agony and discomfort without having any negative thoughts cross her mind. Jiko had also taught her the use of exercise and manual labour as it would help one get tired mentally as well as physically and she won't be left with any energy to think about “troublesome thoughts” or perform some stupid actions people nowadays are keen on doing, as they are too fragile and sensitive to deal with their emotions.

And just when Naoko thought it was all getting better it became worse, she was assaulted at her school bathroom by a bunch of bullies, and at the same time she discovered her father passed out in their bathroom as he had just tried to commit suicide. She was so done with her family and her own life, she was in awe of her great uncle Haruki #1, who accepted his fate as a suicide bomber for the sake of his country, even though he was not a military man but a philosopher. She couldn't understand why her father carrying the genes and name of the great Haruki#1 was such a coward, she was frustrated and had given up all hope.

Normally, under such circumstances, she would have thought about killing herself but now she had superpowers of Zen. This was a huge turning point in Naoko's life when she decided it was time to change, to embark on a path of her own without caring about societal norms. She knew school life wasn't for her, she would never fit in, and since a long time she had even stopped trying to fit in, so she shaved her head off and wanted to leave her house and become a nun just like Jiko. She wished to spend her days in peace with her at the temple and not commit suicide but then her mother wouldn't let her go as she thought she was far too young to leave the house which made Naoko's life take a turn for the worse.

After sometime Naoko started working as a maid at a maid's café called “Fifi's Lovely Apron”. She was in a sexual relationship with a guy much older than her and her home life was a mess. Her father had gotten worse as he was at the last stage of his suicidal tendencies he was depressed and ignored Naoko and his wife, and was visiting suicide clubs on the internet. Jiko and Naoko were no longer communicating at the same frequency and her life was a complete mess. Naoko decided she might not want to become a nun after all and would rather commit suicide.

It can be seen how immensely did Zen influence Naoko's life and what role it played in her life, she was the happiest and had almost healed while she was at the temple leading a simple life, learning all about her ancestors and their courage. But now as she was back into her original toxic life, she had lost control of where things were going and again her life was a mess as her suicidal tendencies returned.

It is also revealed that Zazen had also helped Haruki #1 during his last days as he waited for his inevitable death, the process of waiting for death and when you are meant to jump and explode into a ball of fire has got to be the most traumatizing way to die. But Haruki found comfort in Zazen and Jiko's juzu beads helped him find solace in the inevitable, he felt calm knowing how he would go and he would be aware of the exact moment of his death.

The fact that Naoko and Haruki Yasutani, (Naoko's father) were saved by Jiko's death, sounds harsh but true. Both Naoko and her father were living a hellish life. Naoko's video where she was almost raped, was online and her father had seen it and was all set to kill himself as he had failed to protect his little girl from the cruel world, he considered himself a bad father and thought Naoko would be better off without him. He considered himself a failure and he was doing his family a favour by killing himself. While his daughter was going through the darkest phase of her life and had decided she would kill herself soon, as they both

heard about Jiko and how she was breathing her last breaths, they rushed to her, and as she was about to pass away the word she last wrote was “Live”. (Ozeki 388) while she looked at both of them and said, “For now, For the Time Being.” (Ozeki 389) As if she knew about their plans!

Jiko’s last words had such an influence on both of their lives that they pulled themselves up and decided that they were both going to survive this, that was the only way, there was no other option. It was what Jiko told them to do and they both loved Jiko so much that they didn’t want to disappoint her even after her death. Naoko went to a good international high school on scholarship and her dad developed an app and was now able to provide a comfortable life for his family.

Finally, they had made it out alive, when they thought the only answer to all their problems was to commit suicide. Jiko was a guardian angel in their lives with her Zen teachings and her optimism, it changed Naoko’s life for the better, at least now she was aware that there is a life beyond the darkness.

The Zen narrative of the novel is a necessary aspect of the story as it binds all the characters together. We know how Zen played a significant role in the life of every troubled character and whenever they turned to Zen Buddhism lessons, they found peace, they managed to find the strength to be grateful even in the hardest times, and be kind to even their enemies.

Zen taught them what it feels like to be a human, in a world so cruel that lacks empathy. It helped them heal their trauma and move forward after they had been stuck in the loop for a long time. Jiko, the Zen Buddhist nun was a perfect example of a person who had lost everything yet continued to live for such a long time, praying for everyone’s wellbeing. She was a soul so kind that it inspired others to be kind and live like her, even after going through such a hard time her face was illuminated by the light of the purity of her soul which shined bright on everyone. This was all, because of her spiritualistic lifestyle and how she stayed far away from all the materialistic ties of the world. She had taken a vow after her son’s tragic death that she would live the rest of her days teaching people how to be at peace with themselves and teach the doctrine of Zen Buddhism and that’s what she did, she was able to help the people she loved the most and even in her end she was able to find a way to save them.

Every struggling individual in the story was incredibly devoted to Dogen Zenji's teachings as if they were desperately trying to find relief from their problems in the Shobogenzo. They guarded the book like it would spare them from their doomed fate.

Jiko was unquestionably a saviour to them, she was a superhero with the superpower of Zen. Even though some couldn't be saved, they still found peace in their final moments, and others who were saved changed their lives for the better and were forever grateful to Jiko for her lessons and for being the only person who cared.

The idea that the spiritualistic precepts of ideologies like Zen are significant, especially in today's society is made evident by this study. The 21st century’s faithless, gloomy generation is one that is losing its sanity. The beautiful world once, now is a heap of crime and cruelty. Surviving with a sane mind has been difficult, yet it could get better if one leads a simple life and vows to always embark on the path of kindness, practicing mindfulness, practicing Zen.

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