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Buddha in the Comics: A Study of *Record of Ragnarok* and *The God of High School*

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Abstract: Translation studies have taken into account the cultural turn. Writing within particular cultural and ideological contexts, the authors have taken recourse to the ‘appropriation’ of a theme, catering to the varied tastes of the readers. For *mangas* (Japanese comics, graphic novels) and *manhwas* (South Korean comics), visual representation has become an effective means to display this manifold adaptation. The presence of Buddhism in the two countries have ensured that the creators of *mangas* and *manhwas* have embraced the Buddhist ideals in their works, This paper will focus on the cultural imagination of the Buddha, as evident in Shinya Umemura and Takumi Fukui’s *manga, Record of Ragnarok* (2021), and Yongje Park’s *manhwa, The God of High School* (2015). It will look at how the visualisation of the Buddha has been influenced by modern culture, while also adhering to traditional conception. The iconographic comparison is therefore of utmost importance. In these two works, the Buddha has been endowed with several superhuman abilities. While the Buddha had presented himself as a philosopher, an enlightened human being, there were attempts to cast him in a superhuman light, with various miraculous feats attributed to him. The Buddhist texts are replete with accounts of *ṛddhi* or psychic powers that can be attained by *dhyana*. The Mahāsāṃghika, one of the earliest Buddhist schools of India, regarded him as a transcendental being, with limitless lifespan. The study will explore how the portrayal of the Buddha in *Record of Ragnarok* and *The God of High School* ties up with such religious doctrines. The relation of the Buddha to the mythical figure of the Monkey King will come within the ambit of this paper. The two works also give the opportunity to explore the Buddha’s position in the divine hierarchy, as imagined by the writers. The Buddha has been mostly known as offering salvation to humanity. The study will analyse how, in terms of iconography and narrative of *Record of Ragnarok* and *The God of High School*, the benevolent figure of the Buddha has been enlivened and whether there are any points of departure.

Keywords: *Buddha, cultural imagination, iconography, benevolent.*

Introduction

From the latter half of the twentieth century, comics and graphic novels have witnessed an explosion in production and consumption, with franchises like DC and Marvel built around the comics culture which has been embraced by people of all ages. Carolene Ayaka and Ian Hague in the “Introduction” to *Representing Multiculturalism in Comics and Graphic Novels* have opined that “comics is an inherently multicultural form” (3), assimilating both “cultures of images and cultures of words” (3). *Manga* has become an important part of this booming comics industry. *Mangas*, a type of comics created in Japan, can be defined as “illustrated serial novels that comprise juxtaposed panels that combine artwork and text” (Thomas *Drawing* 3), where panels are read from right to left and top to bottom. *Manhwa* refers to the illustrated novel of South Korea. Whereas *mangas* are mostly drawn in black and white, *manhwas* are characterised by the use of colour. They are read only from top to bottom. While *mangas* and *manhwas* may be said to be influenced by traditional American and Franco-Belgian comics, in recent years, the Asian comics have taken the western market by storm. While the western comics are heavily reliant on the superhero genre, *mangas* and *manhwas* are noted for wide variety in their genres and themes. Even in the superhero genre, there are differences, like the characters of American comics struggle with the theme of belonging after going through traumatic experiences, but for Asian comics, the main focus is on growing. Also, in respect of the decades-old American franchises, the plot is refreshed with different storyline and writers, for better or worse. But Asian comics are mostly about the vision of one author, making them easier for the new readers. There is also hardly any concept of alternate or shared universes like those of western comics.

Many of *mangas* and *manhwas* are invested in the theme of religion. The religious motifs have been used in *mangas* for didactic purposes by religious organisations as well as for only entertainment. Often, the readers come across the figure of the Buddha in these works. Buddhism

has a notable presence in both Japan and Korea. While the recent history of South Korean Buddhism is marked by opposition from the Protestants; in Japan, Buddhism is now the second professed religion. The representation of the Buddha in the comics is not a new phenomenon. Osamu Tezuka's *Buddha* (1972) was hugely popular, making it even recommended by Buddhist temples for the young generation to learn about the Buddha's life. He has also been portrayed in the modern setting, as in *Saint Young Men* (2006) by Hikaru Nakamura. This article will focus on *Record of Ragnarok* (2021), a *manga* written by Shinya Umemura and Takumi Fukui and illustrated by Ajyichika; and Yongje Park's *manhwa*, *The God of High School* (2015), both of which feature the Buddha. *Record of Ragnarok* is concerned with the fate of mankind as the Gods' Council¹ wanted to bring about the extinction of humanity. To resolve the matter, the tournament of Ragnarök was proposed where the humans must clinch seven victories out of thirteen fights against the gods to ensure their survival. In *The God of High School*, Mori Jin, a high school student, enlisted in "The God of High School," a fighting tournament that promised the winner anything he/she wanted. In the course of his journey, Mori encountered many powerful entities. A careful glance at the representation of the Buddha, through his appearance, supernatural abilities and use of weapons in these two works will open up an interesting canvas of exchange between tradition and modernity, coupled with artistic imagination.

¹ The Gods' Council in *Record of Ragnarok* is composed of the divinities of every pantheon. It is held once every millennium where the divine beings determine the fate of humanity through voting. In the Gods' Council of 2000 B.C., humanity was spared, though it was decided that the city of Thebes would be destroyed. However, even this punishment was stopped by Heracles.

Appearance of the Buddha

In *Record of Ragnarok*, the readers first encounter the Buddha in Chapter 32. He is presented as a tall, muscular man, wearing a tank top where an eyepatch-wearing rabbit is designed along with the word "USACHAN " written below it. In the Japanese language, the word 'usachan' refers to the rabbit. The sacrifice of the rabbit is a popular Jataka story. In that story, a monkey, an otter, a jackal and a rabbit, who was actually Buddha in this life, decided to observe fast on the full moon day. Pleased by their devotion, Śakra (Indra) visited them and asked for food. While the monkey, the otter and the jackal offered fruits, fish and milk curd respectively; the rabbit had collected only grass. As it resolved to offer itself, Śakra recognised its virtue and drew an image of its likeness on the moon. In the Japanese version of the story, as compiled in *Konjaku Monogatarishū*, the rabbit's companions were the monkey and the fox. The reference to the rabbit underlies the Buddhist emphasis on altruism, which is also reflected in this work. In the *manga*, the Buddha's robes were tied around his waist and wrapped around his hands. His hair was neatly tied backwards in an elaborate fashion. He also donned earrings and a pair of glasses, giving him a modern outlook. The two sharp teeth were his prominent marks. His forehead was also adorned with a bindi.



(Shinya and Takumi "Buddha")

In *The God of High School*, the Buddha is referred to as Tathagata. Tathagata is one of the most common epithets of Buddha. The term means “one who is thus gone” (tathā+gata), or “one who has thus come” (tathā+āgata) (Buswell Jr. and Lopez Jr. 1496). In the early Pali scriptures, the epithet ‘Tathagata’ was used to denote the infinite wisdom of Buddha. In this *manhwa*, he is held as a supreme god by other divine figures. We first encounter Tathagata in chapter 184. He is presented as a colossal figure, eclipsing even the earth. His complexion is light brown. Here, his eyes are white with no pupils, though in later chapters, we notice black pupils. The style of white eyes was started by Lee Falk in his famed character, Phantom. His inspiration was drawn on his mistaken notion that Greek busts had no irises. In the case of Batman, his white masked eyes can be viewed as instilling fear in the minds of the criminals, who view him as someone inhuman. In Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986), the cats symbolising the Nazis have eyes with no pupils, a mark of their atrocious nature. Here, Tathagata's white eyes give the readers a hint of his cruel nature, whose emotions are completely directed towards personal benefit. One interesting feature of iconography of the Buddha is his long ears. The scholars opine that early craftsmen modelled the Buddha's ears on the aristocrats of the time whose ears used to droop as they wore heavy jewellery. Buddhists also believe that long ears symbolise his compassion as he listens to the sufferings of people. In this *manhwa* too, his ears are elongated with large earrings around each ear. Tathagata is seen wearing a blue robe around his body. Park draws his head with snail shell curls as seen in art and architecture, though here they are more dispersed and are golden in colour. His lips are also thick. His hands are postured in the form of *gyan mudrā*.



(Park “Tathagata”)

Supernatural Abilities of the Buddha

In Buddhist doctrine, the Buddha is said to have performed several superhuman feats, like walking on water, becoming invisible etc. Many scholars believe that such feats were later additions to increase the popularity of Buddhism so that it can garner more followers. Such ‘miracles’, according to David V. Fiordalis, are “exhibitions of techniques connected to the spiritual accomplishments...at the same time, they are expressions of a truth that is not merely technical or mundane, but beyond ordinary conception” (19).

❖ *Record of Ragnarok*

It has been pointed out that for its illustrated nature, “the medium of the comic book readily lends itself to showing more heroic feats and is more closely related to motion pictures in this respect” (Pawuk and Serchay 271). *Record of Ragnarok* displays various techniques of the Buddha in the course of his battle against Zero, a Shinto God and Hajun, the Demon Lord of the Sixth Heaven. As typical of *manga*, the images are accompanied with the nomenclatures. In the *manga*, the Buddha’s feats were mostly based on him drawing power from the “Six Realms”. One of the central doctrines of Buddhism is that of ‘rebirth’ which is referred to as a “process in which

a mental continuum takes different (usually) physical forms lifetime after lifetime within the six realms (GATI) of SAṂSĀRA: divinities (DEVA), demigods (ASURA), humans (MANUṢYA), animals (TIRYAK), ghosts (PRETA), and hell denizens (NĀRAKA)” (Buswell Jr. and Lopez Jr. 1186), with *karma* playing the determining role in ensuring the place of rebirth. In Chapter 47, the readers are treated with a visual representation of the six realms.



(Shinya and Takumi “Six Realms”)

It follows the traditional representation of *bhavachakra* where six realms form “six segments of a wheel of existence: at the top, the heavenly realms of the gods, and moving clockwise, the jealous gods (separated by the wishing tree), animals, hells, hungry ghosts, and humans” (*Encyclopedia* 711). One interesting fact is that in the *manga*, each realm is depicted as being protected by a Bodhisattva Kannon. The sixth-century Chinese text, the *Mohe Zhiguan* had descriptions of six forms of Guanyin, another name of Avalokiteśvara. This concept was adopted by Japan under the name of Kannon who is described to have six esoteric forms:

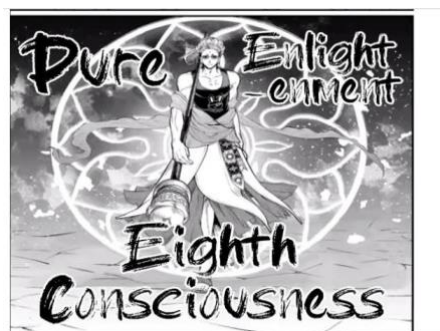
- a) Nyoirin Kannon, whose name is derived from the wish-granting jewel (*nyoi*) and the lotus (*rin*) held by him, presides over the heavenly realm. He has six arms; one is lowered, another is raised to chin in contemplation, the two are holding rosary and wish-granting

jewel and the lotuses are held in the other two. However, the *manga* follows the rare illustration of a standing Nyoirin Kannon.

- b) Jūichimen Kannon or the Eleven-Headed Kannon saves those in the asura path. Above his main head, the other ten small heads are arranged in the form of a crown. The left hand holds a vase containing a lotus and the right hand is held down in the *varada mudrā*.
- c) Senju Kannon or the Thousand-Armed Kannon protects the *preta* realm. Ajyichika, the illustrator of *Record of Ragnarok*, has followed the convention of depicting Senju Kannon with two hands of human proportion and forty smaller ones.
- d) Shō Kannon saves those in the infernal realm. He is modelled on the figure of Prince Siddhartha. His right hand is held down in the *varada mudrā* and left hand holds a lotus bud.
- e) Bato Kannon or the Horse-Headed Kannon protects the animal realm. The *manga* shows him in the traditional representation of three heads, each with three eyes and a horse's head above the topknot of the main head. His hand gesture is known as 'horse-mouth *mudrā*', with "the pair of hands in front placed together and index fingers pointing out" (Fowler 20).
- f) Juntei Batsumo Kannon saves humans. This deity is depicted with eighteen hands. *Record of Ragnarok* has maintained the oft-cited illustration of the Kannon making the *abhaya mudrā*.

In the *manga*, the Buddha was also bolstered by "Pure Enlightenment: Eighth Consciousness" (Chapter 46), a divine ability which allowed him to see into the future by reading the fluctuations of a being's soul. This enabled him to know about the upcoming attacks so that he could easily evade them. The first hint of this precognitive ability is seen when Ebisu, one of the Seven Lucky Gods, fired bullets at the Buddha who nonchalantly dodged them, making others bewildered. The

full application of this ability is displayed during his fight against Zero who wielded the “Misery Cleaver” that absorbed misery as the fight progressed and enlarged in size. However, in spite of the size, the Buddha remained unscathed. Göll, a valkyrie, realised that the Buddha was moving before his opponent’s attacks. As a result, rather than dodging, the “attacks are going where he’s already been” (Chapter 46). The Buddha had been able to master it because of his enlightenment. In the *manga*, when the Buddha activated this power, his black pupils became lily patterned. In Buddhism, water lily, which closes up at night and reopens in the morning, symbolises spiritual rebirth. This beautiful flower blooming from the mud also refers to enlightenment. The Buddha, however, could not use this ability if there was no light in the soul of a being. Initially, in his fight against Hajun, the Buddha was put at disadvantage because of this drawback. In Buddhism, “*bodhi*” or “enlightenment” entails liberation from the cycle of rebirth and leading to *nirvāna*, accompanied by knowing “the truth of things “as they truly are” (*yathābhūtam*)” (*Encyclopedia* 50). That is why when Hajun grew afraid and unsure of his victory, the Buddha, with his ‘enlightened’ eyes, could detect his movements and clinch victory.



(Shinya and Takumi “Pure Enlightenment”)

❖ *The God of High School*

In the *manhwa*, Tathagata's abilities are revealed in the course of Mori Jin's recollections of the past and Park Mubong's fusion with Tathagata. Tathagata, in lieu of being the supreme god, was very much powerful, like throwing concentrated beams of energy out of his mouth. To understand his enormous power, we need to take a look at the legend of the Monkey King whose fate is associated with Tathagata. In the myths, the Monkey King had risen to prominence by the virtue of his strength and charisma and later, rebelled against heaven. It was only the Buddha who brought him down by imprisoning him under a mountain and teaching him humility. In *The God of High School* too, the Monkey King had to face defeat in the hands of Tathagata. After the disastrous end of their journey to India, the Monkey King again faced him. In Chapter 184, standing on Geundoowun and clutching Ruyi Bang in his hands, he is seen confronting Tathagata who overwhelmed him initially. In Park's work, to bridge this vast gap in power, the Monkey King had to devour his master, Tang Xuanzang. Emboldened by the power of the prophet, he was ultimately successful in piercing the head of Tathagata with his Ruyi Bang. Tathagata's dismembered head (Chapter 108), which was left on the moon, was discovered by NASA at the time of the present narrative of the *manhwa*. As James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1960) put forward the notion of "dying-and-rising god", the instances of gods dying are found in several traditions. In Greek mythology, Dionysus was torn to pieces by the Titans. However, Rhea brought him back to life by putting some pieces of him together. Again, in Sumerain mythology, the goddess Inanna was turned into a corpse in the underworld. After three days and nights, she was resurrected when the two galla (the nomads), sent by her father, served her food and water. Jonathan Z. Smith, however, in his article "Dying and Rising Gods", made a distinction between the "dying gods" and the "disappearing gods", arguing that the gods who truly "died" could not return, and those who returned never "died". In *The God of High School* too, Tathagata is shown

to be not dead and Park Mubong, the main antagonist of the story, planned to resurrect him to usurp his power.



(Park “Tathagata’s Skull”)

David V. Fiordalis in his work *Miracles and Superhuman Powers in South Asian Buddhist Literature* (2008), has pointed out that Buddhist scriptures “evoke the metaphor of the Buddha as a great magician, who manipulates reality because magical illusion is itself a metaphor for the nature of reality” (20). One of the many abilities of Tathagata was that he could easily manipulate the size of his body. He could assume the height of a common individual and also enlarge his size matching that of a planet. In many myths and legends, we come across powerful beings wielding elemental control over nature. In *The God of High School*, Tathagata could manipulate his flesh. In Chapter 558, as Tathagata and Park Mubong continued to battle for dominance, Tathagata momentarily gained upperhand. As he manifested outside Mubong’s body, he grew roots that could transform into numerous bodies of himself. As his body continued to expand with his flesh slithering all over the world, Park draws an image of a six-armed Tathagata looking upwards, his lower portion formed of root-like structures.



(Park “Six-armed Tathagata”)

Weapons of the Buddha

The action genre in literature is nothing new, commonly concentrating upon the heroic exploits of its main character who triumphs over the villainous individuals through his ingenuity and strength. In both *Record of Ragnarok* and *The God of High School*, the Buddha is presented as a renowned fighter. Like many other graphic novels of the action genre, the creators have resorted to drawing various weapons in order to show the Buddha’s full potential and make the two works more entertaining.

Record of Ragnarok

In *Record of Ragnarok*, the Buddha’s primary weapon was the “Six Realms Stuff” (Chapter 43), an oversized prayer wheel. It was empowered by the six guardian Kannon of the six realms.



(Shinya and Takumi “The Six Realms Stuff”)

When the Buddha activated the technique of “Turn about, Six Realms”, scrolls materialised from the staff and engulfed it. The weapon, synchronised to the emotions of the Buddha, then assumed various forms during his battle in the sixth round of Ragnarok:

a) First Realm: Divine Realm, Wish-Granting Wheel Kannon - Loka Pala (Twelve Deva Axe):

The Six Realms Staff changed to a long axe (Chapter 48). The Buddha wielded it fluently to negate Zero’s sword attacks as they traded swipes at each other.



(Shinya and Takumi “Twelve Deva Axe”)

b) Second Realm: Animal Realm, Horse-Faced Kannon- Nirvana: The Six Realms Staff

transformed into a spiked club (Chapter 47). It is interesting to note that the Buddha himself was not completely sure of the shape that the weapon would take, as if the six realms were also guiding his battle.



(Shinya and Takumi “The Spiked Club”)

c) Third Realm: Human Realm, Unshakable Cord Kannon - Akshaya (Indestructible Vajra Sword): Robert Beer has pointed out that in “early Indian and Central Asian Art the *vajra* is often depicted in the form of a bar or club...” (234). Here, the Six Realms Staff transformed into a shortsword (Chapter 48), which the Buddha used to engage in close ranged fighting. In Buddhism, *vajra* symbolises the indestructible nature of Buddhahood, a *vajra* mind itself. When Zero’s attack reached the audience, the Buddha was there to deflect it, just as he had proclaimed that he would bear all consequences.



(Shinya and Takumi “Vajra Sword”)

d) Fourth Realm: Asura Realm, Eleven Faced Kannon - Ahimsa (Shield to Destroy the Seven Misfortunes): The Six Realms Staff became a long shield (Chapter 46), capable of withstanding Zero's strike without sustaining any damage. However, it was ineffective against Hajun's attack.



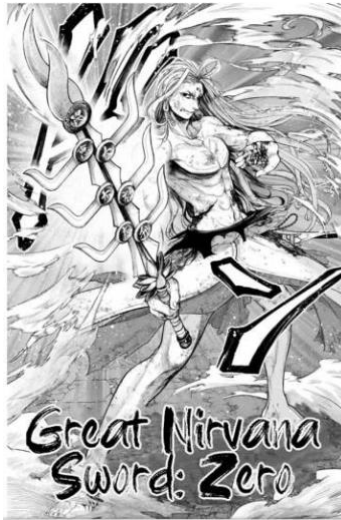
(Shinya and Takumi "The Shield")

e) Fifth Realm: Preta Realm, Thousand-Armed Kannon - Salakayas (The War Scythe of the Rough God): In this form, we are treated with the sight of a scythe with the head of a lion (Chapter 51). This form would only materialise when the Buddha was overcome with hatred as he vowed to kill Hajun who had goaded him, stating that Zero had been dead. In the Buddhist doctrine, hate is identified as one of three poisons or fires that cause suffering in *saṃsāra*. In the *bhavachakra*, it is represented in the form of a snake. The narrative of the *manga* points out that the Buddha, under normal circumstances, would not have condoned such behaviour. Hence, the form and the technique surprised everybody present.



(Shinya and Takumi “The Scythe”)

After the “Six Realms Stuff” got destroyed, the Buddha came into the possession of the “Great Nirvana Sword: Zero” (Chapter 52). In Chapter 52, Brunhilde, the valkyrie who proposed the tournament, observed that it was the “ultimate divine weapon which none but those who've attained the Great Nirvana in the Pure Lands could create.” This weapon took the form of a seven-branched sword, with bladed protrusions, associated with each of the Seven Lucky Gods. There was a lotus at the base of the sword and the top was marked by an intertwined structure. Earlier Zero had refused the Buddha’s help. The *manga* completes this thread when the Buddha, seemingly defeated, received help from Zerofuku. Using the power of "Fates Intertwined", Zero helped the Buddha to create a divine weapon from the hilt of his "Misery Cleaver". In place of the misery which had motivated Zerofuku, the new seven branched sword was associated with the Buddha’s compassion. The weapon was therefore also named as “Divine Weapon Lotus: Völund”. With it, the Buddha performed the attack of “Blade of the Celestial Eye's Awakening: Maha Parinirvana”. The term ‘Mahaparinirvana’ is associated with the passing of Sakyamuni Buddha who was able to eradicate all physical and mental constituents related to previous *karma* and was freed from the cycle of rebirth. In the manga, it has been used in the literal sense as the Buddha, with this attack, bifurcated Hajun’s body.



(Shinya and Takumi “Great Nirvana Sword”)

❖ *The God of High School*

Like *Record of Ragnarok*, Tathagata in *The God of High School* also wielded several weapons which have been known as “Eight Symbols”- a) Mandala, b) Diamond Sutra, c) Indra’s Stone Statue, d) Bardo (Kaleidoscope), e) Holy Book, f) Scroll of Reincarnation, g) Fairy Colony, h) Light, i) Blade of Tathagata. These weapons were later commanded by Park Mubong at the time of development of a new earth. The study will look at Mandala, Diamond Sutra, Badro and the Blade of Tathāgata as they were most used.

- a) Mandala- Mandala is a phurba-shaped weapon, with a triangular blade, an ellipsoid knot and the top is again characterised by three divisions. “The triple blade of the phurba, which is described as 'a ferocious striker issuing from the jaws of a makara', symbolises the overcoming or cutting through of the three root poisons of ignorance, desire, and hatred. The properties of its triangular shape, representing the element fire, symbolise wrathful activity” (Beer 247). In this *manhwa*, it is so potent in power that it can destroy its target even without touching.



(Park “Mandala”)

- b) Diamond Sutra- It is bell-shaped. In Buddhism, the bell represents “the feminine principle as the 'perfection of wisdom' (Skt. *prajñāpāramitā*) which directly realises emptiness (*shunyata*)” (Beer 246) as it is believed to proclaim the sound of emptiness. In *The God of High School*, Diamond Sutra is also known as the “Bell of All Evils”. It primarily attacked through sonic waves that decayed the soul of a person who heard it. Park has designated its attacks as “Agonies”. As it grew in size, its attacks became more lethal.



(Park “Diamond Sutra”)

- c) Bardo- It is a weapon in the form of a mirror. In Buddhism, the mirror symbolises pure consciousness. The mirror, one of the eight auspicious substances in early Buddhism, also represents “the offering goddess of light, Prabhavati or 'circle of light', who presented

Shakyamuni with a stainless mirror, symbolising the clear karmic vision of all his previous lives" (Beer 187). In the plot of the *manhwa*, it was a spatial weapon that could replicate itself, enabling the wielder to launch a large-scale attack, targeting a wider area and numerous beings.



(Park "Bardo")

- d) The Blade of Tathagata- It looked like an ordinary katana with grey hilt, yellow pommel and a black sheath. Traditionally, the sword is held as the weapon of justice and truth. In Buddhist doctrine, the sword, as a symbol of wisdom, represents the victory of enlightenment, cutting through the veils of ignorance and defeating those beings that thrive in illusions. In *The God of High School*, the weapon was forged by Hephaestus at the request of Tathagata, who wanted a blade that could cut through anything. It was made on the sacrifice of forty-eight thousand lives to be "The Greatest Sword in the World."



(Park "Blade of Tathagata")

Character of the Buddha

As most of the *mangas* and *manhwas* aim for profit, they have to be in touch with the pulse of the market. It gives the writers and creators a certain freedom in free playing with religious content without the censorship of any religious institution. The conservative scholars have often accused these works of “proactive poaching of religious imagery or content, the fusion of previously discrete doctrines, and parodic or irreverent portrayals of saints and saviors” (Thomas *Drawing* 8). Jolyon Baraka Thomas has called these works “iconoplastic” (*Drawing* 15) for they mould existing information for the sake of the narrative of the story. Therefore it is necessary to look at how the Buddha has been portrayed in *Record of Ragnarok* and *The God of High School*.

❖ *Record of Ragnarok*

Record of Ragnarok offers glimpses of the Buddha’s childhood and adolescence. The *manga* creators here have followed the history of the Buddha’s life where the Buddha is depicted as a prince by the name of Gautama Siddhartha enjoying the best facilities in education, swordsmanship, food and clothing. The first signs of change came when Siddhartha headed to the kingdom of Malla, one of the sixteen *mahājanapadas* in ancient Northern India. In Buddhist literature, Jataka’s stories are the records of the previous lives of Buddha. In this work, Jataka was the king of Malla who had been bedridden due to terminal illness. Just as the stories of Jataka provide moral insights, in *Record of Ragnarok*, Jataka made Siddhartha aware of the misery of the dictated life that he had been forced to lead and which Siddhartha would also have to follow, in lieu of being heir to the kingdom. Jataka’s death profoundly moved Siddhartha. This incident is similar to the popular account of ‘Four Sights’ in the Buddha’s life. According to that tale, Siddhartha encountered an old man, a sick person, a dead body and finally, an ascetic who inspired him to renounce his princely life. In a parallel of this account, in Chapter 47 of the *manga*, we see

an impressive panel where various stages of life, from birth to death, are presented in a circular model, emphasising that there is no route of escape by living within the conventions of *samsāra*.



(Shinya and Takumi “Circle of Life”)

As Siddhartha realised the sufferings brought about in this cycle of *samsāra*, he proclaimed- “I’ve got it.” (Chapter 47). The narrative of the *manga* aligns with the account of Siddhartha leaving his wife and son to attain enlightenment.

Buddhism became immensely popular in its anti-Vedic stance, shaking the foundations of the contemporary institutionalised religious system. In the *manga* too, the Buddha has been portrayed as a rebellious character. While the funeral of Jataka was being held, Siddhartha took away his coffin, disregarding everyone’s protest and placed it on a river to fulfil Jataka’s wish of exploring the vast, outside world. Just as Gautama Buddha was against the Vedic rituals, in the *manga*, he is seen opposing religious practices that swayed innocent people into accepting their fate, enticing them to sacrifice their lives for getting some benefit for others in this life or for themselves only, in the next life. In Chapter 47, the Buddha stopped a girl from being sacrificed to please the gods. Furthermore, when a monk was fasting for enlightenment, the Buddha asked him to partake of food (Chapter 47). This is related to the tale of the Buddha taking the food offered by Sujātā, which helped him to understand the Middle Path, “a religious path between the two extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification” (Buswell Jr. and Lopez Jr. 828) and attain *bodhi*.



(Shinya and Takumi “Buddha Giving Food”)

The Buddha propounded that an innate existence of *samsāra* is suffering which arises out of desire. To let go of desire and attain *nirvāṇa*, Buddhists believe in the ‘Eightfold Path’ of right view, right intention, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The traces of such principles are found in the Buddha’s first encounter with Zero who had strived to make people happy by literally taking away their suffering. While this took a toll on Zero’s body, the people he had helped became arrogant, immersing themselves in pleasure and debauchery. In sharp contrast, the Buddha’s procession consisted of people and animals that were content with their lives in spite of being ragged in their appearance. While the villagers were not even satisfied with lavish foods, the Buddha’s followers were happy eating only beans. Such acts influenced the villagers to stop being depraved. The Buddha disagreed with Zero's methods and told him that "Happiness isn't something you can give to other people. It's something you've got to attain yourself." (Chapter 45). Here, the *manga* creators have incorporated a passage from the second chapter of the Sutta Nipata, explaining the philosophy that one will have to carry the yoke suited to himself/herself and the difficulties borne by him/her will ultimately give him happiness.

The Buddha’s temperament has been starkly different from other divine beings. Brunhilde noted that the Buddha hated the gods, which is seen clearly when he ignored Loki and Ebisu,

infuriating them. In contrast, he wished to protect humanity, as he decided to fight for the humans in the sixth round in spite of being initially selected as the candidate for the gods. In Chapter 44, he declared, “If the gods won’t save them, I will. And if any god gets in my way, I’ll kill them.” A week before the convening of the God’s Council in which the fate of humanity would have been decided, Brunhilde had asked the Buddha about the concept of “*samavadhana*” or “Common Destiny”. The term “*samavadhana*”, found in the Buddhist text the Sukhavativyuha Sutra, signifies being brought together in the Pure Land, a place of maximum bliss made by the presence of a Buddha or a bodhisattva. Japanese monk Shiio Benkyo expanded this idea to include the notion of living in harmony, which entails that one’s life would be connected to the other, with his/her actions proving to be advantageous or disadvantageous to the other. While there was no prominent ‘pure land school’ in Indian Buddhism; in Japan, Jodōshū and Jodō Shinshū schools strive for rebirth in the pure land of Amitābha. In Chapter 33 of *Record of Ragnarok*, the concept of “*samavadhana*” has been illustrated in the form of a *mandala*, which “utilizes the structure of a family (*kula*), stressing that the deities never emerge alone and are always shown in a circle...” (Timalsina 24).



(Shinya and Takumi “*Samavadhana*”)

Here, at its centre, are two individuals standing on a lotus, surrounded by the Buddhas and the bodhisattvas, who remain connected from the outer circular frame to the centre through lotus stalks. Lotus is a symbol of purity; like a lotus remaining untainted from the muddy water, the lotus seat highlights the purity of the deity sitting or standing on it. In the Sukhavativyuha Sutra, Buddha stated that in the 'pure land', "Some of the inhabitants sit cross-legged on lotus blossoms while others are enclosed within the calyx of a lotus" (Buswell Jr. and Lopez Jr. 1447). In the *manga*, Loki suspected that the Buddha had access to "samavadhana" which allowed a person to bring out their full potential by entrusting their fate to another. Through this method, the soul of a human was tied to that of a valkyrie, turning the valkyrie into a divine weapon most suitable to that individual and capable of harming the gods. The Buddha, for the sake of protecting humanity, thus even risked being branded as a traitor.

❖ *The God of High School*

The presentation of Tathagata is a sharp contrast from the traditional conception. We can understand his nature as reflected in the *manhwa* by considering his role in the mythic tale of the Monkey King. In the popular account of *Journey to the West*, the Monkey King, in exchange for his freedom, offered to serve Tang Sanzang, a monk, who was ordered by the Bodhisattva Guanyin to retrieve the Buddhist sutras. They were joined by "Pigsy" and "Sandy", both of whom were atoning for their previous crimes. The Monkey King acted as the bodyguard of Tang Sanzang as many believed that his flesh would grant them immortality and great power. The group encountered a series of eighty-one tribulations before accomplishing their mission and returning safely. However, in *The God of High School*, Tathagata is shown to be disappointed at the Monkey King for his failure in the last test and inability to erase his corrupt nature. His cruelty is hinted at as he is shown to be smiling when he saw the Monkey King's rage over Tang Xuanzang's death. It is further implied that he orchestrated the deaths of the Monkey King's travelling companions.

Moreover, he had not hesitated to sacrifice forty-eight thousand lives for the creation of his sword and later killed Hephaestus after the work was finished. As opposed to altruism displayed in *Record of Ragnarok*, Tathagata in Park's work was only motivated towards his goal. The word 'buddha' is derived from the Sanskrit root √budh, meaning 'to awaken' and is referred to one who has awakened from the shackles of ignorance and opened up his mind to embrace all kinds of knowledge. However, in this work, Tathagata exhorted Mubong to kill the "Buddha within you" (Chapter 559) and go on a path of destruction.

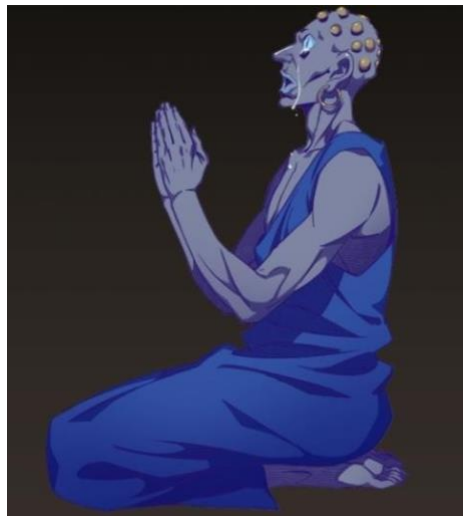
The God of High School revolves around a prophecy which heralded the arrival of a prophet who would prepare everyone for the Almighty God. He would offer himself as sacrifice, usher in the new sons of man and bring about a balance between the humans, gods and demons. In the *manhwa*, this Almighty God was held to be Maitreya. In the Buddhist pantheon, Maitreya has a dual role. He is believed to be the Future Buddha who will come to establish the doctrinal truths. Also, he is a bodhisattva residing in the Tusita heaven where Sākyamuni Buddha visited him and appointed him as his successor. In the *manhwa*, Maitreya is described as the one who can control the entire universe and is free from any type of restraint. Tathagata, therefore, strived to attain an even greater height by becoming Maitreya. That's why he had coveted to get his hands on Xuanzang, the prophet. At the time of the present narrative of the *manhwa*, Park Mubong decided to be the god of prophecy and bring an end to 'old humanity'. When he commenced his fusion with Tathagata, Tathagata wanted to be in charge and what followed was a battle for dominance. While this battle was going on inside the mind of Mubong, Chapter 559 of the *manhwa* has brought this out in the visual representation of Mubong literally consuming Tathagata to assert his control.



(Park “Mubong Consuming Tathagata”)

Human flesh is one of the ten types of meat that the Buddha forbade the monks from consuming, where as in the *Āṅgulimāliya Sūtra*, it is stated that eating other sentient beings is also a form of cannibalism since all share the same ‘*dhatu*’. It is interesting to note that such cannibalism is a common trope in *The God of High School*. It is revealed that the Tathagata had also risen to the position of supreme god by devouring and absorbing various gods and demons. One of his fragments even wanted to consume Park Yaejin, the daughter of Park Mubong and one of the children belonging to the Generation X, whom Tathagata identified as the next prophet. His indiscriminate killing of hapless individuals during the final confrontation between Park Mubong and Mori Jin paints him as anything but a benevolent figure.

For Xuanzang, the paradise built on the sacrifice of countless innocent lives is a false one. In the climactic battle, everyone passed on their powers to Mori who reached an unassailable zenith. In front of that power, even a supreme being like Tathagata is seen kneeling and bowing, proclaiming his devotion.



(Park “Tathagata Kneeling”)

Earlier, he had acknowledged that he had gone on the path of enlightenment only out of personal desire. The moment he prostrated, it signalled his letting go of his ego and undertaking an act of purifying from the defilements; just as Mori, with his superhuman abilities literally transformed the earth from its ruined condition to a state of advanced development.

Conclusion

Record of Ragnarok and *The God of High School* can be identified as “cosmetically religious” (Thomas *Drawing* 64) works where existing religious vocabulary and iconography have been used, without seeming pious. The creators have left their mark of artistry as they have not let the use of religious themes come in the way of entertainment value. With an apocalyptic tone set in both works, the gods have not been presented as only benevolent figures. They appear malicious, bent on obliterating the humans from existence because in their views, they are meant to be the rulers. The ‘Tokyo Subway Sarin Attack’ by Aum Shinrikyo on 20th March, 1995 that claimed fourteen lives, generated a lot of suspicion towards the religious cults. However, this does not mean total rejection of religious beliefs with the creators maintaining a fine balance between cavalier treatment and dogmatic approach of religious doctrines. In *Record of Ragnarok*, Buddhist

terminologies have been aptly used in the name of weapons, techniques et cetera. In *The God of High School*, while Tathagata is an ‘evil’ figure, the Buddhist ideals like compassion, karmic retribution are still upheld. In contemporary Japanese society, the influence of traditional religious institutions can be seen as waning in view of the closure of temples because of paucity of local parishioners. In the Gallup survey of 2005, 46.9% of the South Korean population revealed that they were not affiliated to any religion. The emphasis has therefore been on the marketization of religion to keep in touch with the consumer lifestyle of the twenty-first century. This role has been admirably performed by *mangas* and *manhwas* which are widely received in Japan and South Korea, more so with the recent popularity of digital copies. *Record of Ragnarok* is a seinen *manga*, appealing to 18-40 year old readers, while a *manhwa* of action genre like *The God of High School* is targeted at the young readers of 14-24 years. These works have been instrumental in familiarising the new generation with the religious belief system. The proportionate combination of images with texts have enabled *mangas* and *manhwas* to heighten emotional tension, “they can depict it, invoke it, or even be it” (Thomas *Religious Manga Culture* 25). What these works strive to do is “recreating religion” (Thomas *Drawing* 14), filtering religion through artistic prism. The push has been given to individual consumption, with the readers having been afforded more opportunities to dissect the religious beliefs.

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