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Echoes of the Dharma: The Effect of Buddhism in Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's Literary World

Dr. Ajoy Kumar Das
ajoykumar.das@visva-bharati.ac.in

This paper examines the complex interplay between Buddhist philosophy and modern existential crises in the literary works of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892–1927), a pivotal figure in contemporary Japanese literature. Akutagawa's fiction is frequently noted for its psychological realism, historical allusions, and aesthetic control, yet beneath the surface lies a persistent engagement with Buddhist concepts such as karma (業), impermanence (*mujō*, 無常), suffering (*dukkha*, 苦), illusion (*māyā*), and selfhood (*anatman*, 無我). Drawing from canonical texts such as *Rashōmon*, *The Spider's Thread*, *Hell Screen*, and *Kesa and Morito*, this paper examines how Buddhist themes are not merely decorative or historical motifs but are deeply woven into the ethical and philosophical fabric of Akutagawa's narratives.

Rather than embracing Buddhism as a source of spiritual solace or redemption, Akutagawa often subjects it to irony, reinterpretation, or tragic distortion, thereby reflecting the tensions between traditional moral paradigms and the disenchanted, fractured consciousness of the modern subject. The paper argues that Buddhism functions as a lens through which Akutagawa confronts the collapse of meaning in a rapidly modernizing Japan, where religious certainty is undermined by psychological doubt and societal decay. His stories reveal a world where karmic justice is ambiguous, compassion is fragile, and the promise of liberation is overshadowed by moral relativism and existential despair.

Ultimately, this study situates Akutagawa's reimagining of Buddhist thought within the broader context of Taishō-period anxieties and the crosscurrents of Eastern and Western intellectual traditions. It proposes that Akutagawa's ambivalent yet profound engagement with Buddhism contributes not only to the ethical complexity of his fiction but also to a uniquely modern literary expression of spiritual fragmentation. This paper aims to explore how Buddhist ideas shape Akutagawa's literary imagination and how he reconfigures them in his fiction. The central hypothesis is that while Akutagawa draws heavily from Buddhist imagery and themes, his outlook is often skeptical, even tragic, thereby signaling a modern re-reading of traditional values.

Keywords: Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, Modern Japanese literature, Buddhism in literature, Karma, Impermanence (*Mujō*), Suffering (*Dukkha*), Zen Buddhism, Moral ambiguity, Taishōperiod, Japanese modernism, Literary Buddhism, Existentialism.

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Introduction:

Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (芥川龍之介, 1892–1927), one of the most influential figures in modern Japanese literature, is celebrated for his mastery of the short story, his psychological insight, and his ability to navigate the cultural and philosophical tensions of early 20th-century Japan. Living during the Meiji and Taishō eras—a time of intense modernization, Westernization, and intellectual upheaval—Akutagawa wrote in a landscape where traditional belief systems were being questioned and reconfigured. Among these systems, Buddhism held a particularly complex position: deeply embedded in Japan's cultural memory yet increasingly challenged by modern rationalism, Christianity, and individualistic humanism.

While Akutagawa was never a practicing Buddhist in a formal sense, his writings are permeated by Buddhist ideas, symbols, and ethical quandaries. This is not surprising, given the Buddhist-infused heritage of many of his source texts, especially from collections like the 今昔物語 (*Konjaku Monogatari*) and 宇治拾遺物語（*Uji Shūi Monogatari)*. These ancient tales, themselves saturated with karmic justice, supernatural retribution, and spiritual transformation, became fertile ground for Akutagawa's modernist reinterpretations. However, rather than presenting Buddhism as a coherent moral or metaphysical system, Akutagawa often explores its concepts through a lens of irony, ambiguity, and disillusionment.

The aim of this study is to analyze how Akutagawa engages with key Buddhist concepts—such as *karma* (業), suffering (*dukkha*), impermanence (*mujō*), illusion (*māyā*), and selflessness (*anatman*)—across selected stories, and how these ideas are transformed to reflect the anxieties and crises of modern life. In works like 蜘蛛の糸（*The Spider's Thread)*, 地獄変（*Hell Screen)*, and 羅生門（*Rashōmon)*, we find characters navigating moral ambiguity, facing the consequences of desire and ego, or confronting a world that offers no clear path to redemption. Rather than reinforcing faith, these stories often depict the Dharma as collapsing or in contradiction, underscoring the gap between Buddhist idealism and human frailty.

This paper argues that Akutagawa does not merely incorporate Buddhist elements as part of Japan's literary or religious heritage. Instead, he reconstructs and critiques them, using Buddhist tropes to dramatize a fractured moral universe in which the search for meaning is itself suspect. His reimagining of Buddhist thought serves both as a reflection of Japan's intellectual transformation and as a broader meditation on the nature of suffering, identity, and the possibility (or impossibility) of salvation in the modern world.

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To situate Akutagawa's work within this framework, the paper will begin with an overview of Buddhism's cultural role in Meiji-Taishō Japan, followed by close readings of key texts that exemplify his philosophical engagement with the Dharma. Through this lens, we can better understand how Akutagawa's fiction bridges the past and the present, the spiritual and the secular, and how his narratives become sites of tension between karma and chaos.

Buddhist Philosophy and Akutagawa's Moral Universe:

Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's stories are often populated by characters caught in ethical dilemmas, moral contradictions, and crises of conscience. At the heart of this moral universe lies a subtle and usually ironic engagement with Buddhist philosophy. Rather than affirming Buddhist doctrine as a path toward liberation or moral clarity, Akutagawa frequently reinterprets its core tenets—such as karma, impermanence, ego-denial, and compassion—through a modern lens of doubt, disillusionment, and existential fragmentation.

Karma and the Collapse of Moral Certainty

One of the most central tenets of Buddhist thought is the law of *karma* (業)—the idea that intentional actions have moral consequences that shape one's present and future experiences. Akutagawa engages with this concept in stories like 羅生門 (Rashōmon), where a destitute servant must choose between starvation and theft. The setting—a war-ravaged Kyoto and a decaying Rashōmon gate—symbolizes a world in which traditional moral and social structures have crumbled. The story echoes the karmic theme of ethical choice but presents it in a context where that choice is morally compromised and driven by desperation.

Rather than presenting karma as a metaphysical law of justice, Akutagawa shows its moral ambiguity. The servant's act of robbing a corpse may be "wrong" by conventional standards, but the narrative does not condemn him. Instead, it exposes the erosion of values in a society where karma no longer functions as a reliable guide. The story thus invites the reader to reflect on the limits of karmic morality in an unjust and chaotic world.

Suffering (*Dukkha*) and Psychological Realism

Buddhism teaches that life is marked by *dukkha*—suffering or dissatisfaction—caused by attachment, desire, and ignorance. Akutagawa's characters often suffer not just physically but existentially. In 地獄変 (*Jigokuhen*) *Hell Screen*, the artist Yoshihide seeks to paint the Buddhist hells with such realism

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that he ends up engineering the actual suffering of his daughter. This perverse act of artistic obsession blurs the lines between aesthetic creation and karmic consequence.

Although the imagery is deeply Buddhist—evoking the 地獄草紙（*Jigoku-zōshi*）Hell Scrolls，which is an illustrated handscroll and medieval didactic art—the message is ambivalent. The narrative does not offer transcendence or moral resolution. Instead, it underscores how the Buddhist notion of suffering can be transformed into spectacle and how ethical ideals can be subordinated to personal or aesthetic ego. In this way, Akutagawa's moral universe is aligned with the Buddhist recognition of *dukkha*, but devoid of Buddhist compassion or the possibility of liberation.

Impermanence (*Mujō*) and the Fragility of Truth

The Buddhist concept of *mujō* (無常), or impermanence, is a constant theme in Akutagawa's fiction. The mutability of truth, perception, and morality is dramatized most famously in *"In a Grove" (Yabunonaka)*, where multiple eyewitness accounts of a murder contradict one another, leaving the truth forever ambiguous. The story reflects not only narrative relativism but also the Buddhist view that all phenomena—including memory and selfhood—are impermanent and illusory.

However, where Buddhism sees *mujō* as an insight leading to detachment and eventual enlightenment, Akutagawa treats it as a destabilizing force. Impermanence, in his hands, leads not to clarity but to alienation. The modern subject cannot trust even his own perception, much less the cosmic order. Thus, Akutagawa uses *mujō* to explore the psychological consequences of spiritual and epistemological uncertainty.

Ego, Illusion, and the Failure of Compassion

Buddhist philosophy emphasizes the illusory nature of the self (*anatman*) and encourages compassion as a path toward liberation. Akutagawa, however, often portrays egoism as overpowering and compassion as fleeting or ineffective. In 蜘蛛の糸，*The Spider's Thread*, the bodhisattva Shakyamuni offers the sinner Kandata a chance to escape hell by climbing a thread. But Kandata, concerned that others are following him, tries to kick them off—and the thread breaks. While the story appears to support a Buddhist lesson on compassion and selflessness, Akutagawa's tone is ironic. The Buddhist worldview is presented as mechanistic, and redemption is undermined by human nature itself.

The failure of compassion in this and other stories reflects Akutagawa's broader skepticism. While he draws from Buddhist teachings, he strips them of their metaphysical assurances. Instead, he presents a

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world in which the self is not only illusory but also irreparably flawed, and where moral action is often driven by fear, pride, or instinct rather than enlightened wisdom.

Akutagawa's engagement with Buddhist philosophy is neither doctrinal nor devotional in nature. Instead, he interrogates Buddhist principles through the lens of psychological realism and literary modernism. His moral universe is one in which traditional ethical frameworks—Buddhist or otherwise—are no longer sufficient to explain human behavior or provide spiritual solace. Through this critical appropriation of Buddhist thought, Akutagawa creates a literary space where karma and chaos coexist, where impermanence leads not to liberation but to anxiety, and where the failure of compassion reveals the deep fractures of the modern soul.

Case Studies: Buddhist Motifs in Selected Stories:

To further illustrate how Akutagawa engages with Buddhist philosophy in his moral universe, the following section analyzes four major short stories—地獄変（*Hell Screen),* 羅生門（*Rashōmon*）, 蜘蛛の糸（蜘蛛の糸 *The Spider's Thread*, and 今朝と盛遠（*Kesa and Morito)*. These texts are selected for their explicit use of Buddhist imagery, ethical conflict, and their interplay between traditional religious values and modern psychological introspection.

羅生門（*Rashōmon*): Moral Ambiguity in a Decaying World

Set at the dilapidated Rashōmon gate in Kyoto during a time of social collapse, this story presents a nameless servant contemplating whether to starve or steal from the dead. The choice he faces is framed in stark existential and moral terms, echoing the Buddhist principle of karmic decision-making. However, the context—the rotting gate, the corpses, and the breakdown of law and compassion—symbolizes the erosion of karmic order.

In traditional Buddhist storytelling, a character's moral decision leads to clear karmic consequences. In 羅生門 (*Rashōmon),* however, morality is fluid and subjective. The old woman justifies stealing hair from corpses to make wigs, citing the need for survival as justification. The servant, initially repulsed, then mirrors her act by stealing from her. Akutagawa undermines the Buddhist ideal of *dhamma* (moral law) by portraying a world where survival takes precedence over ethics, and compassion has become irrelevant. This bleak vision replaces karmic causality with relativistic moral decay, signaling Akutagawa's modernist reinterpretation of Buddhist ethics.

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蜘蛛の糸 (*Kumo no Ito*): Ego and the Fragility of Redemption

In this parable-like tale, Shakyamuni Buddha observes the sinner Kandata suffering in hell and decides to offer him salvation by lowering a single spider's thread. As Kandata climbs the thread, he notices others behind him and selfishly shouts at them to stay away. At that moment, the thread breaks, and he falls back into hell.

This story is deeply embedded in Buddhist allegory. The thread symbolizes the bodhisattva's compassion (*karuṇā*), and Kandata's fall represents the karmic result of clinging to ego and selfishness. However, Akutagawa's treatment of this Buddhist narrative is not wholly affirmative. Although the structure mimics a Jataka tale or a Zen parable, the story's tone is ironic. The mechanism of karmic punishment seems cold and automatic—devoid of grace or possibility for inner transformation.

What is notable is that Kandata is given a chance not based on intrinsic virtue but on a single act of mercy—sparing a spider's life. This conditional and limited view of compassion subtly critiques Buddhist narratives that appear formulaic or impersonal in their karmic logic. In 蜘蛛の糸 (*The Spider's Thread)*, Akutagawa uses Buddhist symbols to portray a tragic rather than hopeful view of human nature: compassion is short-lived, ego prevails, and the possibility of salvation is slim.

地獄変 (*Jigokuhen*): Artistic Obsession and the Buddhist Vision of Suffering

In this disturbing story, the painter Yoshihide is commissioned to depict the Buddhist hells with unprecedented realism. To fulfill his artistic vision, he demands to witness a woman burning alive in a carriage—and is granted this by the lord, using Yoshihide's own daughter. The painting is completed, but Yoshihide dies shortly after, likely by suicide.

The Buddhist underpinnings of the story are unmistakable: the theme of *jigoku* (hell), the didactic tradition of *jigoku-zōshi* (hell scrolls), and the karmic retribution for cruelty. However, Akutagawa transforms these conventions. Rather than using the Buddhist notion of hell to promote ethical clarity or moral instruction, he interrogates the violence underlying religious art, power, and even devotion.

Yoshihide's single-minded pursuit of artistic truth mirrors the Zen ideal of 悟り *satori*—but in grotesque distortion. His detachment from worldly concerns becomes monstrous. The story critiques both the artist's ego and the cruelty of a feudal lord, suggesting that the hells of Buddhist imagination are not otherworldly realms, but psychological and social realities on earth. Thus, *Hell Screen* becomes

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a profound meditation on the limits of aesthetic transcendence and the moral cost of art, all within a Buddhist visual and narrative frame.

今朝と盛遠（*Kesa and Morito*): Desire, Illusion, and the Denial of Self

Loosely based on a Heian-period tale with Buddhist overtones, *Kesa and Morito* is structured as two internal monologues—first from Morito, then from Kesa. Morito is consumed by lust and convinces Kesa to allow him to murder her husband. However, Kesa ultimately tricks him by switching places and becoming the victim herself.

The Buddhist themes here are subtle but powerful. Morito's desire represents *tanhā* (craving), which leads to suffering. Kesa, in contrast, appears to accept death as a form of spiritual liberation, embodying the Buddhist virtues of detachment and self-sacrifice. However, the psychological intensity of the narrative, with its themes of guilt, illusion, and identity, reflects modern concerns about the fractured self.

The story critiques the delusion (*māyā*) that fuels passion and violence. Kesa and Morito are not merely actors in a karmic drama—they are victims of misdirected desires and inner emptiness. In choosing death, Kesa asserts a form of control, but it is also a tragic escape from a world without moral resolution. Akutagawa thus overlays Buddhist motifs on a deeply modernist psychological framework.

These four stories exemplify how Akutagawa appropriates and reinterprets Buddhist concepts to probe human frailty, moral decay, and the collapse of transcendence in a modern world. Each tale engages with Buddhist symbols—karma, hell, compassion, illusion—not to affirm doctrinal truths, but to question whether such truths can survive the psychological and social crises of modernity. Akutagawa's fiction is thus not Buddhist in the devotional sense, but in a philosophical and critical mode—using Buddhist thought as a mirror to reveal both the aspirations and limitations of the human condition.

Zen Aesthetics and Psychological Depth:

Among the many strands of Buddhist thought that permeate Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's work, Zen Buddhism occupies a distinctive place. While Pure Land and Esoteric Buddhism often appear as narrative and visual motifs in his stories (especially in depictions of karma and hell), **Zen Buddhism's aesthetics—marked by simplicity, paradox, silence, and direct experience—deeply inform Akutagawa's narrative structure, character psychology, and philosophical ambiguity.** In Akutagawa, Zen becomes less a system of belief and more a

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subtle way of seeing the world: detached yet profound, minimal yet suggestive, serene yet paradoxical. Akutagawa's narratives, particularly in *Kesa and Morito* or *The Spider's Thread*, use such Zen-like contradictions. In *The Spider's Thread*, for example, a sinner in hell is offered salvation by a single thread—only to lose it through selfishness. The story can be read as a parable on ego and compassion, central to Mahayana ethics. Yet Akutagawa's tone is didactic and ironic; he questions whether proper redemption is ever possible.

Zen aesthetics—characterized by simplicity, ambiguity, and paradox—profoundly shape Akutagawa's literary sensibility. His fiction reflects Zen's influence in its structure, tone, and philosophical orientation, particularly in the themes of impermanence, ego-deconstruction, and the ineffability of truth. Yet Akutagawa does not simply adopt Zen principles; he complicates them. Instead of ***satori***, his characters often find madness or moral paralysis; instead of spiritual calm, they encounter psychological rupture. Thus, Akutagawa's engagement with Zen represents a modernist reworking of traditional Japanese spirituality: one that preserves its aesthetic and philosophical sophistication while exposing its insufficiency for the crises of the modern soul.

Buddhism and Madness: The Interior Landscape:

Akutagawa's own descent into mental illness, as documented in his letters and final work *A Fool's Life*, mirrors a Buddhist-like questioning of the self and the world's reality. Themes such as ***mujō*** (impermanence) and ***ku*** (suffering) from Buddhist thought resonate deeply in his later works, not as paths to enlightenment, but as symptoms of existential despair. Here, Buddhism becomes not a solution but a framework through which to dramatize the collapse of the self.

Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's later fiction, letters, and personal writings reveal a profound preoccupation with the mind's fragility, the unreliability of perception, and the descent into madness. His own life ended in suicide at the age of thirty-five, after years of psychological deterioration marked by hallucinations, anxiety, and existential dread. In both his personal crisis and literary output, **madness becomes not only a medical or psychological condition but a deeply philosophical and spiritual problem**—one that intersects with Buddhist thought in complex, often paradoxical ways.

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While traditional Buddhism views delusion (*moha*) as one of the Three Poisons (alongside *raga* [greed] and *dvesha* [hatred]) that bind beings to the cycle of suffering (*samsāra*), it also holds that liberation (*nirvāṇa*) comes from insight into the true nature of reality. Akutagawa's portrayal of madness often mirrors this Buddhist dichotomy—but in his work, the line between delusion and insight is blurred. Rather than pointing toward awakening, madness in Akutagawa's fiction often signals the collapse of both spiritual and psychological structures.

For Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, madness becomes a modern expression of Buddhist delusion, ego loss, and the futility of grasping for permanence or meaning. Yet his portrayal of mental breakdown is neither romanticized nor sanctified. It reflects a deep skepticism about both the mind's reliability and the capacity of religion to offer solace. Akutagawa internalizes Buddhist metaphysics and transforms them into psychological narratives of fragmentation and dread. In doing so, he opens up a unique interior landscape—where the borders between spiritual insight and mental collapse blur, and where the path to enlightenment is lost in the fog of modern consciousness.

Buddhist Imagery and Cultural Memory

Akutagawa also used Buddhist settings—temples, statues, monks, scriptures—not merely as backdrop, but as cultural palimpsests. Stories such as *The Martyr* and *The Dragon* explore the tension between faith and illusion, ritual and absurdity. In *The Dragon*, the farcical rise of a fake miracle subtly critiques the blind devotion often present in religious culture, echoing the Zen tradition of using humor to expose false attachments.

Beyond philosophical themes and psychological motifs, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's fiction is richly infused with **Buddhist imagery**, much of which draws upon the **deep reservoir of Japan's cultural memory.** As a writer deeply engaged with classical literature, art, and religious traditions, Akutagawa frequently employs Buddhist symbols—temples, statues, scrolls, robes, miracles, and monks—not merely as aesthetic or historical elements, but as powerful carriers of collective memory and spiritual meaning. These symbols often serve as narrative anchors, cultural mirrors, or ironic contrasts, illuminating both Japan's religious past and its crisis in modernity.

Akutagawa's engagement with Buddhist imagery is layered: it is at once reverent and ironic, nostalgic and critical. While he draws upon the visual and textual legacy of Buddhism, he also

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subverts or recontextualizes it, revealing the disconnect between spiritual ideals and human frailty in modern life.

Akutagawa Ryūnosuke employs Buddhist imagery not only to evoke Japan's rich religious and aesthetic heritage but also to interrogate its role in a secularizing, psychologically fractured modern world. Temples, statues, robes, scrolls, and miracles populate his fiction—but they are often stripped of their sacred power and reimagined as vessels of irony, longing, or existential confusion. This use of Buddhist imagery as cultural memory underscores a central theme in Akutagawa's work: the tension between inherited spiritual symbols and the modern individual's loss of faith. In his hands, Buddhist imagery becomes a mirror—not to reflect doctrinal truth, but to reveal the enduring human struggle with suffering, illusion, and the desire for transcendence in a world that may no longer offer it.

Conclusion:

Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's relationship with Buddhism is not one of simple reverence or rejection. Instead, he engages Buddhist thought as a literary and philosophical resource to examine the human condition. His stories reflect a world haunted by the Dharma but devoid of its consolations. Buddhism becomes a mirror through which he reflects on suffering, morality, illusion, and identity—key concerns of both classical spirituality and modern literature. In this way, Akutagawa emerges not only as a literary craftsman but also as a subtle philosopher of impermanence and ambiguity.

Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's literary engagement with Buddhism is complex, layered, and profoundly modern. Far from offering a conventional or didactic portrayal of Buddhist values, his fiction interrogates the very foundations of Buddhist thought—karma, impermanence, compassion, ego-loss, and the nature of suffering—against the backdrop of a morally fragmented and spiritually disenchanted world. Drawing upon Japan's rich cultural memory and Buddhist visual and narrative traditions, Akutagawa reworks these symbols and doctrines into fictions that are profoundly philosophical, psychologically acute, and aesthetically restrained.

Across his body of work, Akutagawa does not present Buddhism as a source of salvation or clarity. Instead, it becomes a medium for exploring the collapse of meaning and the limitations of human agency. Stories like 羅生門（*Rashōmon*) and 今朝盛遠　(*Kesa and Morito*) challenge

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the efficacy of karmic justice and moral absolutism; *The Spider's Thread* and *Hell Screen* transform Buddhist imagery into tragic or ironic allegories of ego and cruelty; *In a Grove* (藪の中) and *Cogwheels* destabilize truth and perception, echoing Zen paradoxes while offering no path to *satori*. Even when Akutagawa evokes Buddhist ideals such as detachment or self-sacrifice, they are often distorted by psychological torment or rendered hollow by the pressures of modern subjectivity.

Moreover, Akutagawa's later autobiographical writings—characterized by hallucination, fragmentation, and existential despair—suggest a transformation of Buddhist notions, such as *anatman* (no-self) and *śūnyatā* (emptiness), into secular expressions of madness and nihilism. Where Buddhism seeks to liberate through the dissolution of the self, Akutagawa's fiction shows the self-unraveling into anxiety, guilt, and death. His moral universe reflects a world where the Dharma is no longer a guiding light but a fading echo—where karma is obscured by ambiguity, and compassion falters before the weight of ego and suffering.

Yet, Akutagawa's use of Buddhist philosophy and imagery is not merely cynical. It reveals a profound yearning for ethical coherence and spiritual meaning, even as such ideals remain elusive. By dramatizing the tension between Buddhist tradition and modern uncertainty, Akutagawa offers a deeply original literary vision: one that holds onto the forms and resonances of Buddhism, while confronting its insufficiency in a rapidly changing world. In this way, Akutagawa's work participates in a broader discourse on the fate of spiritual thought in modernity. His stories are not Buddhist in the orthodox sense, but they are unmistakably Buddhist in texture and tone—echoing its aesthetics, evoking its dilemmas, and ultimately exposing its vulnerabilities. They remind us that literature, like religion, can serve as a mirror to the human condition. In this space, the sacred and the profane, the ethical and the absurd, karma and chaos are held together in a fragile yet resonant tension.

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