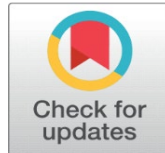
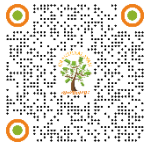


## A SPOKE IN THE WHEEL: A NOVEL ABOUT THE BUDDHA BY AMITA KANEKAR. NEW DELHI: HARPER COLLINS, 2005. PP. 447. RS.395/-. ISBN 81-7223-574-7

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### ABSTRACT

Amita Kanekar is a Mumbai based writer whose debut novel is *A Spoke In The Wheel: A Novel About The Buddha*. She teaches Comparative Mythologies and Architectural History at the University of Mumbai, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India. The novel begins with the story of Upali, a monk in the Maheshwar monastery on the banks of the river Narmada. He begins rewriting the life of the Buddha as he sees contradictions in the Suttas. We have a dual narrative structure- alternate chapters are devoted to the story of Upali set in 256 BCE, during the emperor Ashoka's reign, and the story of the Buddha three hundred years earlier (as retold by Upali). The novel has two parallel plots. It depicts specific moments in history such as the death of Tara because of a slave revolt in Buddha's time or of Buddha's charioteer Gopal during the war with the Koliyas or his stay in Benaras that changed Siddharth to Buddha. Upali's life on the other hand is shown to be affected by the life and teachings of Buddha, by the Kalinga war and by the historical figure of Ashoka that makes him cynical towards the imperial power and the king's efforts to spread the message of Dhamma. Both Buddha and Upali are typical men of their age who epitomize the processes of change in the society.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Amita Kanekar is a Mumbai based writer whose debut novel is *A Spoke In The Wheel: A Novel About The Buddha*. She teaches Comparative Mythologies and Architectural History at the University of Mumbai, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India. The novel begins with the story of Upali, a monk in the Maheshwar monastery on the banks of the river Narmada. He begins rewriting the life of the Buddha as he sees contradictions in the Suttas. We have a dual narrative structure- alternate chapters are devoted to the story of Upali set in 256 BCE, during the emperor Ashoka's reign, and the story of the Buddha three hundred years earlier (as retold by Upali). The novel has two parallel plots. It depicts specific moments in history such as the death of Tara because of a slave revolt in Buddha's time or of Buddha's charioteer Gopal during the war with the Koliyas or his stay in Benaras that changed Siddharth to Buddha. Upali's life on the other hand is shown to be affected by the life and teachings of Buddha, by the Kalinga war and by the historical figure of Ashoka that

makes him cynical towards the imperial power and the king's efforts to spread the message of Dhamma. Both Buddha and Upali are typical men of their age who epitomize the processes of change in the society.

The novel examines a plethora of issues that gives a truthful description of the times: the bloody wars fought by the Shakyas as well as by Ashoka to further their expansionist ideas or to establish their supremacy or to defend their territories leading to disastrous consequences such as in the case of Bhima, the deportee; the ill-treatment meted out to the slaves and to the low caste people, for example, the Shakyas were responsible for the gory death of Tara because she had aided her fellow slaves during a slave revolt and Upali had to endure insult in Milindachanda's house as they spat on his face for being a chandala. The novel explores the plight of women during those ages through the fate of Vassabha who was a half breed slave used by her father Mahanaman to save the Shakyas from Pasenadi's aggression but she is never given the honour she deserved in her father's household and Sutanuka, the devadasi, is not allowed by the noble family who own the temple to marry her lover Devadina. The novel also explores the issue of religion through the debates between Upali and other monks regarding the interpretation of the Suttas and on the status of Buddha as a god or an ordinary human held in the court of Ashoka which in turn focus on the misinterpretation of religion and religious scriptures. Wilhelm Dilthey in *Pattern and Meaning in History: Thoughts on History and Society* asserts that reliving an experience evokes the life of the present, for historical life is understood only in its connections with present life. These issues evoke the life of the present. Therefore, historical thought is seen here as moving from the present to the past in order to be reflected back to the present with enhanced powers of meeting the problems of life.

Avrom Fleishman in *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* states that the historical novelist fills the gap in the received data with imaginative threads where there is room for alternative hypothesis. Amita Kanekar makes the protagonist Upali write a deglorified and factual account of Buddha's life in which he not only strips away the godly aura of Buddha and reveals him as an ordinary man with an extraordinary approach to problems of life thereby subverting the authorized versions of the religious scriptures but also compares Buddha's life with his life. The novel tries to challenge stereotypes such as that of Buddha's through Upali's account; we get a new perspective on Ashoka through Nigrodha's statement that Ashoka was neither a demon before the war of Kalinga nor had he become a saint after it. The novelist makes Upali, a chandala, who belongs to the lowest caste and occupies a marginalised position in the society, the protagonist and makes him write an account of Buddha's life thereby transferring him from the peripheral position to the centre of power politics. The language of the Suttas and that used for writing the account of Buddha's life is Prakrit, the language of the common masses, while Sanskrit which is the language of the elite upper castes is discarded in favour of the former. This further leads to the subversion of power of the upper castes.