

## Between Form and Emptiness: An Exploration of Buddhist Theme in the Novel The Book of Form and Emptiness

### ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of Buddhist ideas in Ruth Ozeki's *The Book of Form and Emptiness*, with an emphasis on the central concepts of form and emptiness. Using qualitative methods, this study involves an in-depth analysis of the novel's text to explore how Ozeki integrates Buddhist teachings in the narrative and characters. In the novel, the concept of "form is emptiness, and emptiness is form" is not only a philosophy, but also reflects the dynamics of the characters' lives. Through the depiction of experiences and internal conflicts, the author highlights how Buddhist practices serve as tools to deal with personal and social challenges. This study found that Ozeki effectively utilizes multiple narrative voices to illustrate the complexity of spiritual beliefs, while creating space for readers to reflect on the application of the teachings in a modern context. Moreover, Buddhism has broader potential than just a spiritual dimension, it also enriches the literary experience by providing emotional depth and philosophical reflection. This article emphasizes that fiction serves not only as a form of entertainment, but also as a powerful medium for Buddhists to share wisdom and address contemporary issues, such as identity crisis, loss, and social uncertainty. As such, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between literature and spirituality, as well as opening a dialogue on how literature can be a means to understand and deal with the complexities of life in a modern context.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Form and Emptiness, Contemporary Issues, American Buddhism.

### ARTICLE INFO

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**Article History:**  
Received: 20-01-2024  
Revised: 01-05-2024  
Accepted: 10-05-2024  
Published: 31-08-2024

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**How to Cite (APA Style):**  
He, Yuemin. (2024).  
Between Form and  
Emptiness: An  
Exploration of Buddhist  
Theme in the Novel *The  
Book of Form and  
Emptiness*. *Subhasita:  
Journal of Buddhist and  
Religious Studies*, 2(1), 43-  
52.  
DOI: 10.53417/jsb.107

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### INTRODUCTION

The background of this research explores complex themes in the novel *The Book of Form and Emptiness* by Ruth Ozeki, particularly the concept that "form is emptiness and emptiness is form." In real life, many teenagers, like Benny, struggle with the emotional impact of parental separation and social problems, which often leave them feeling alienated and not understood. Ozeki uses the character of Book as an active narrator, which creates a space for reflection and dialog, similar to how therapy or support from close people can help individuals understand their feelings. When Benny communicates with intangible objects, it reflects how people

often seek meaning in seemingly trivial things. For example, someone who feels lonely may talk to everyday objects as a way of coping with their sense of emptiness. This dialog highlights the importance of subjective experience in shaping an individual's reality, suggesting that what is considered insignificant can be a mirror of emotional depth.

Buddhist references in the novel, such as the concept of Bodhisattva, invite us to accept absence and emptiness as part of a complex life. In real life, this acceptance can help individuals find strength and beauty in difficult moments, changing the way challenges are viewed. As such, Ozeki not only presents a story of personal struggle, but also invites readers to reflect on the relationship between form and emptiness, inspiring us to see that emptiness can be a space for growth, change, and deeper connections with oneself and others.

Basically, many researchers have done research on emptiness in Buddhism. For example, research conducted by Mahara, (2019) who said that emptiness is synonymous with the middle way, where both when viewed from the point of view of ignorance, are interdependent and mutually supportive (Mahara, 2019). In addition, the Buddhist philosophy that focuses on emptiness is the best approach to combine the essential and absolute ways of thinking (Kim, 2017). This statement is also reinforced by Valey, (1998) who said that emptiness in Buddhism is a Buddhist way of thinking that has advantages over other ways of thinking (Valey, 1998). In practice, dwelling in emptiness leads to the simplification of the contents of the mind. For example, monks have to partially empty the mind of the relatively coarse in order to gain a more refined and simple mind (Gethin, 2019). Therefore, the universal prohibition of Buddhism says that nothingness and emptiness should not be called more than existence or mind (Nelson, 2010).

From the description above, it can be said that there have actually been many researchers who have conducted research on the concept of form and emptiness in Buddhism. However, what is different in this paper is that the researcher wants to elaborate on form and emptiness and the important role of Buddhism in the search for vitality as contained in the novel entitled *The Book of Form and Emptiness*. This research will be a new finding because no one has ever discussed form and emptiness associated with the important role of Buddhism in the search for vitality.

## **METHOD**

This research is a desk research with qualitative research methodology. Desk research is a series of activities involving library data collection methods, reading, recording, and processing research materials (Brown, 2008). This research involves obtaining information through sources provided by libraries, including books, magazines, documents, historical records or conducting bibliographic research specifically relevant to the research topic (Bowen, 2009). This research was conducted by collecting data from primary sources and secondary sources. The primary source refers to a novel entitled *The Book of Form and Emptiness* by Ruth Ozeki. Journals, books, and articles related to this topic are considered as secondary sources. Data analysis in this literature research is content analysis, which is research in the form of in-depth discussion of the content of written or printed information, then drawing conclusions based on the

data that has been collected and analyzed (Lotto, 2016). The research process carried out in this study are: 1). Reading the object of research in this case, namely the novel *The Book of The Form and Emptiness*; 2). Conduct reading with the Heuristic and heurmeuneutic approaches; 3). Analyzing the reading results by describing the data regarding form and emptiness in the novel; 4). Drawing conclusions from the results of the reading and analysis that has been done before.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **1. *The Duality of Existence: Understanding 'Form Is Emptiness, and Emptiness Is Form'***

This research begins with an emphasis on the title of the novel *The Book of Form and Emptiness*, which is considered a key element to understanding the core themes and questions raised in Ruth Ozeki's work. In an interview with Ethan Nichtern on *The Road Home* podcast, Ozeki revealed that the title of the novel was inspired by Avalokiteśvara, a bodhisattva known in China as Guanyin and in Japan as Kannon. The mention of Avalokiteśvara is particularly relevant, given the profound concepts it promotes regarding compassion and the interconnectedness of all beings.

In the Sanskrit tradition, Avalokiteśvara expresses the fundamental sentence: "Form - void; void - form." This phrase, when translated into Chinese, is often augmented with the word 'is', resulting in the statement "form is emptiness, and emptiness is form." This statement is closely tied to the teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism and is recorded in the Heart Sutra, which is one of the most famous and widely discussed sutras by Buddhist teachers, scholars, and practitioners, including renowned figures such as Thich Nhat Hanh.

The essential element in the interpretation of the various versions of this sentence emphasizes that the true nature of all phenomena is interdependent arising. This means that no phenomenon has a fixed, independent, or unchanging existence. In this context, 'emptiness' is not nihilism, but rather the recognition of the interdependence and interconnectedness of all things in the universe. It shows that all living things, as well as objects, are interconnected and inseparable from one another.

Ozeki, through the novel's narrative, encourages the reader to understand the consequences of such connectedness. He asserts that clinging to the view of a separate self can lead to dichotomous thinking, which in turn is bound to human suffering. This is in line with Chen, (2001) opinion that not understanding the connectedness of all beings can worsen an individual's mental and emotional state. Thus, the recognition of oneness and no-self becomes crucial in the process of liberation from suffering.

Furthermore, the understanding of emptiness in the novel is not only a tool to relieve suffering, but also a pathway to nirvana or true freedom. Northam, (2023) emphasizes that when individuals understand this connectedness and treat all beings-including inanimate objects-with compassion, they will be able to achieve a state of freedom from suffering caused by narrow and selfish views.

Therefore, the title *The Book of Form and Emptiness* is not only a representation of the novel's central theme, but also serves as a gateway to exploring and contemplating the various layers of philosophy contained within. As such, this study seeks to explore the interplay between philosophical concepts within the narrative context and how Ozeki uses these elements to offer new insights into life, relationships, and our understanding of ourselves in a challenging world.

## ***2. A Story of Duality: Form and Emptiness in Life***

In Ozeki's novel, the author carefully incorporates references that relate directly to the central theme of the work. The research identifies various social issues faced by the characters in the narrative, which include bullying at school, climate change, consumerist culture, existential disparity, indifference to technology, the development of subjectivity, and the nature of reality. These issues are not merely background, but are at the core of the personal suffering experienced by the characters. For example, Anabelle is a character trapped in a pattern of compulsive hoarding behavior, which reflects her inability to find strength in herself. Her dependence on her husband's belongings shows how individuals can become isolated from themselves and society, creating a cycle of loneliness and dissatisfaction.

On the other hand, Benny is caught up in his personal problems, where his inability to provide meaningful support to Anabelle highlights the dynamics of relationships that are often characterized by selfishness and indifference. Dr. Melanie and the landowner's son display social insensitivity, oblivious to the suffering around them, reflecting a larger problem in society that tends to ignore the voices of the marginalized. Aikon, a nun, struggles to carry on the teachings of her teacher, but faces difficulties in connecting spirituality with the realities facing her community. These three characters serve as representations of the symptoms of a society that fails to understand the interdependence between individuals, leading to isolation and collective suffering.

It is important to note that transformation can occur when individuals begin to appreciate their relationship with the world around them. In this case, Anabelle finds strength through recognizing the value of the things she owns, whereas Aikon and his assistant, Kimi, go out of the temple to interact with society. This active approach allows them to listen and contribute, creating a bridge between the spiritual world and the practical needs of society. Through this interaction and understanding, the suffering experienced by the characters is not only reduced, but also paves the way for collective salvation. This research shows that an understanding of interdependence and respect for every individual, no matter how marginalized they may be, can lead to the improvement of broader social conditions, and help create a more empathetic and connected society.

In this study, in-depth analysis shows that the path to individual transformation, particularly for the characters Annabelle and Benny in Ozeki's novel, opens up when attachments and selfishness are removed. These attachments create barriers that hinder progress and healing. In this context, healing is not only individual, but also involves social interaction. When Cory and his team, along with the homeowner and her son, begin to provide support to

Annabelle and Benny, they create an atmosphere of togetherness that is crucial to the healing process (Ozeki, 2021).

Thich Nhat Hanh provides a relevant perspective, stating that the circle does not symbolize nothingness, but rather totality and wholeness. In this context, the concept of 'emptiness' is defined as a state of being free of separate identities, but still full of everything. This implies that in emptiness, individuals can find deeper connections with others and the environment. When the characters in the novel support and are present for each other, they feel a deep sense of connectedness, which in turn allows them to overcome their sense of isolation and loneliness.

The process of realizing the true emptiness of intrusive thoughts, feelings, and desires plays a central role in this transformation. When the characters, especially Annabelle and Benny, realize that the burdens they bear are largely mental constructs, they are able to release themselves from the pressure. This creates a significant experience of freedom and lightness, where they begin to see life from a new perspective, one that is no longer burdened by oppressive expectations and social norms. The novel's narrative also refers to the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, who emphasizes that the state of Prajnaparamita, or ultimate wisdom, is available to all humans. This statement implies that every individual has the potential to achieve full realization and understand the nature of their existence as Buddhas. By accepting the concept of emptiness, individuals can connect with the Buddha nature that underlies their existence, and thus, can understand themselves and others better.

Furthermore, the novel implies that an understanding of emptiness can serve as an antidote to the misunderstandings that often lead to suffering. By understanding that existence is not separate and that all beings are interconnected, individuals can overcome various conflicts and sufferings arising from egoism and attachment. Ozeki's work is not just a narrative, but also a reflection on Buddhist principles that emphasize the importance of emptiness awareness as the key to resolving various problems in life. The main theme of the novel is the relevance of Zen Buddhism as a solution to the challenges facing individuals and society, showing that by understanding and internalizing the concept of emptiness, individuals can find the path to freedom from suffering and alienation.

### ***3. A Narrative of Reality: Form and Emptiness***

The Buddhist teaching that "form is emptiness, and emptiness is form" becomes a central element in the narrative of Ozeki's novel. The novel is structured into five sections, each beginning with an excerpt from Benjamin Walter's "Unpacking My Library," "Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels," and "One Way Street" (Van Gordon, Shonin, & Griffiths, 2017). Interestingly, the phenomenon of parallelism between Ozeki's novel and Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* provides a broader context for the use of narrative voice in narrative. In Rowlandson's work, dual narratives serve to recount the experience of colonial female captivity at the hands of Native Americans, with one voice narrating the experience and another interpreting it (Rowlandson, 2016). Rowlandson uses her book to show how her faith served as a source of strength and salvation during her captivity, as also demonstrated by her fellow writers such

as Anne Bradstreet and William Bradford. In this context, the voice in Rowlandson's narrative functions as a Puritan testimony to God, reflecting a deep belief in divine intervention. Meanwhile, Ozeki uses the novel to highlight how Buddhist teachings and practices can be effective tools in helping individuals deal with personal and social challenges. Here, Book's voice serves not only as a narrator, but also as a representative of the principles of Buddhism, demonstrating how an understanding of emptiness can help overcome a sense of alienation and suffering. In this way, Ozeki emphasizes that an understanding of emptiness and interdependence is the solution to the various problems that individuals face in society.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the main theme of the novel is the relevance of Buddhism in a modern context, conveyed through innovative narrative methods. The narrative voice in both works, although rooted in different religious traditions, demonstrates how literature can be a medium to convey spiritual values and deepen the reader's understanding of the human experience. Ozeki's work functions not only as a fictional narrative, but also as a reflection on how Buddhism can provide a new perspective in facing life's challenges.

In this study, in-depth analysis shows that Ozeki's novel subtly integrates the principles of Transcendental Meditation (TM) as the foundation of Zen Buddhism to depict the practice of zazen meditation undertaken by the main characters-Annabelle, Benny, and Cory. While Mary Rowlandson's book emphatically uses the term "remove" to describe her path of spiritual progress, Ozeki opts for a more subtle approach, where TM appears as a symbol of the transformation process.

First, TM enters the narrative when Annabelle is trapped in an obsession with shopping and hoarding, reflecting her inability to let go of the past. When Benny, in a state of frustration with Annabelle's perceived dysfunctional behavior, discovers TM among the items, this becomes an important starting point. It not only catches Benny's attention, but also becomes a means for them to understand and address the issues in their relationship. This suggests that TM served as a bridge that connected them on their journey towards self-understanding and acceptance.

Over time, as Benny migrates to Annabelle's "Mission Control" - essentially her computer workstation - he begins to interact more deeply with the book. Here, the TM book reappears as a tool of reflection, as Benny repeatedly reads it, and further symbolizes the journey to higher consciousness. When Annabelle contacts Aikon and Kimi, the book reappears as Cory and his team come to help clean the apartment. This marks a pivotal moment where TM is internalized into collective action, creating a physically and mentally clean space. The removal of the TM book after the apartment is clean signifies that the characters have reached a stage where they no longer need external guidance to realize their Buddhist potential. Here, TM can be viewed as a representation of the journey to enlightenment, which is in line with the idea that enlightenment often occurs through a repeated process of learning and practice (Van Gordon, Shonin, & Garcia-Campayo, 2017).

Ozeki also presents Japanese Zen Buddhism as the foundation of this narrative. Through public interviews and the influence of his grandparents, Ozeki describes how Zen Buddhism emphasizes the practice of meditation (zazen) and

active cultivation towards emptiness. Dogen Kigen, a highly respected Zen master, argued that a deep understanding of reality is integral to the practice itself (Kigen, 1986). This illustrates how direct experience and practical engagement in meditation can lead to a deeper understanding of self and existence. The dual narrative voice in the novel exposes the complex dynamics of characters trying to traverse the sea of suffering, while contributing to the development of the storyline. With this duality, readers are invited to reflect on how each voice can bring a different perspective to the same experience. This is in line with Susan Sontag's assertion that artworks can be used to interpret life, providing space for readers to reflect on their own meanings and experiences.

The novel also serves as a unique meditation on spiritual beliefs and practices. Ozeki emphasizes that although he humorously presents himself as a secondary character in the narrative, he actually plays a crucial role in conveying the teachings of Zen Buddhism to the reader. This becomes relevant when considering how the Book character serves as both a narrator and an introduction for readers, helping them to tidy up their minds and revolutionize their outlook on life. Through this narrative technique, Ozeki manages to create a space where readers can explore the concepts of emptiness and interdependence, which are central to Buddhism. By combining the characters' experiences with Zen philosophy, the novel not only presents a story, but also becomes a tool for understanding and internalizing deeper spiritual teachings. As such, Ozeki's work serves as a practical and reflective guide for individuals on their journey towards enlightenment and better self-understanding.

This research shows that many individuals face challenges in letting go of the past, which is reflected in excessive spending behavior. This habit often stems from an attempt to cope with loss or emotional emptiness, which can lead to hoarding of items that add stress and chaos to life. In this context, the practice of meditation, particularly Transcendental Meditation (TM), has proven to be an effective tool for self-reflection and awareness of harmful behavior patterns. The integration of meditation practice in daily routines provides an opportunity for individuals to explore thoughts and feelings that may have been overlooked, including anxiety and grief stemming from past experiences. This process is often enriched through social support, where the involvement of friends or family members in activities such as cleaning the neighborhood can create a more comfortable physical and emotional space. Being together in these activities facilitates emotional bonding and shared reflection, which is important for the healing process.

Furthermore, interaction with literary works and in-depth discussions can serve as a source of inspiration, allowing individuals to reflect on their personal experiences in a broader context. This indicates that the journey towards self-understanding and spirituality is not only individual, but also community-based. When individuals share experiences and perspectives with each other, they can build bridges of deeper understanding, which supports personal growth. Finally, this study confirms that the journey towards self-awareness and self-acceptance is an ongoing process. Moments of reflection, whether in the silence of meditation or in meaningful conversation, contribute to a deeper understanding of the self and create space for positive change in individuals' lives. As such, engagement in

meditation practices and social support are expected to result in greater balance and meaning in individuals' lives.

The Buddhist teaching that 'form is emptiness, and emptiness is form' is reflected in our everyday interactions. In real life, many people face challenges and losses, similar to Benny's experience in the novel. The process of writing or creating in our lives also involves deep reflection and exploration. When someone learns to write or express themselves, they often face questions about how to begin and share their life story. For example, one might ask, 'How do I begin writing about my experiences?' or 'What should I share about my life?' This process encourages us to understand the value of our personal stories.

In real life, the lessons of these experiences are often not apparent until we reflect on our own journey. Over time, we learn that we have control over our life narrative, despite the sadness and challenges that often come with it. Eventually, with that realization, we realize that despite limitations, our creative journey is an important part of our search for meaning and understanding in life."

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the Buddhist teaching of "form is emptiness, and emptiness is form" is deeply integrated into the narrative of *The Book of Form and Emptiness*. The author effectively utilizes their narrative voice to communicate diverse spiritual beliefs while illustrating how Buddhist practices can serve as a source of support in facing personal and social challenges. The interactions and dialogues in this novel not only reflect a profound understanding of Zen teachings but also serve as a medium for elucidating aspects of fiction writing. In this way, the novel illustrates that Buddhism is not only relevant in a spiritual context but also has the potential to enrich literary experiences. Furthermore, this study indicates that fiction can serve as a powerful tool for Buddhists to share wisdom and address contemporary issues. This approach allows readers to reflect on the relationship between form and emptiness and to understand how they interact in the context of everyday life.

However, it is important to note that this study has limitations. The primary focus on the concepts of form and emptiness in this novel may be seen as narrow compared to the richness of themes present. This research covers only one perspective of a broader work, and the findings may not fully encompass the complexity of Buddhist teachings or other dimensions of the existing narrative. Therefore, the researcher hopes that further studies can explore more diverse and in-depth topics, which would not only contribute to academic knowledge but also offer new insights into the interaction between fiction and spirituality. Thus, future research is expected to enrich our understanding of how literature can function as a bridge between human experience and spiritual teachings.

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