



From Hearth to Holy Path: Exploring Women's Agency and Religious Resistance in the *Therīgāthā*

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Abstract

The *Therīgāthā*, a collection of poems from the ninth book of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, offers a rare and intimate glimpse into the lives of early Buddhist nuns (bhikkhunis). These 73 poems, spanning 522 stanzas, unveil compelling narratives of women who navigated the constraints of a patriarchal society to embrace a path of religious life. Beyond mere struggles and triumphs, the *Therīgāthā* presents a unique lens through which to explore counter-resistance to deeply embedded cultural norms and the construction of alternative power structures within a nascent religious order.

Positioned within the context of early Buddhism's evolving relationship with gender, the *Therīgāthā* provides crucial insights into the radical act of choosing a celibate life. This decision transcended the procreative expectations imposed on women by societal norms, offering a potent challenge to the existing social order. Furthermore, religious life presented a space for these marginalised women to articulate their own experiences, express agency, and contribute to the shaping of their communities. However, the voices of these women have long been obscured by the androcentric tendencies of early Buddhist textual traditions. Employing feminist critical hermeneutics, this research seeks to reclaim and amplify the narratives of the *Therīgāthā* nuns. By critically examining the social and historical context in which these poems were composed, we can begin to reconstruct their lived experiences and contributions to the evolving Buddhist landscape.

Ultimately, the *Therīgāthā* stands as a testament to women's resilience, agency, and transformative power within early Buddhist communities. By excavating their voices and re-examining their historical significance, we can enrich our understanding of early Buddhism and contribute to a more inclusive and nuanced narrative of human history.

Keywords: Therīgāthā, Bhikkhunis, Early Buddhism, Feminist Critical Hermeneutics, Gender, and Religious Resistance



Gender Equality

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Analysis of the Text

The sixth-fifth century BCE stands as a pivotal epoch marked by the advent of transformative religious orders - notably Buddhism and Jainism - which concurrently posed a challenge to the entrenched authority of Brahminical structures, offering new avenues for agency and self-definition. During this period, with its inherent disparities, the Vedic caste system had firmly taken root entwining function and heredity. Simultaneously, the landscape witnessed the dawn of urbanization, forging new avenues for commerce and giving rise to an artisan class (Kulke & Rothermund, 1998, p. 75). This metamorphosis triggered a comprehensive shift, reshaping the social, cultural, and economic milieu. Notably, it afforded unprecedented opportunities for women and individuals from low-caste backgrounds to exercise agency in choosing, exploring, and expressing their religious affiliations. The *Theñs*, enlightened women whose experiences echo through the verses of the *Theñgāthā*, encapsulate this evolving narrative.

This anthology finds its place within the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, a segment of the *Sutta Piṭaka* housing the "minor" works of the Buddhist Canon. As per Ceylon's preserved Buddhist textual tradition, the Canon underwent successive codifications in Rajagrha, Vaishali, Pataliputra, and ultimately in Ceylon around 80 BCE (Gombrich, 1996, p. 18). This compilation includes not only the *Theñgāthā* but also the *Dhammapada* and the *Jātaka*, a collection of over 500 poems narrating folktales and stories.

In a discerning departure, K.R. Norman expresses reservations regarding the authorship of the *Theñgāthā* verses. He posits an attribution to monks or *therās* rather than *Theñs*, thereby introducing a probing inquiry into the nuanced dynamics prevalent within early Buddhist communities (Norman, 1991, p. 77). This skepticism not only challenges conventional perceptions but also underscores the intricate relationships that existed between *Therās* and *Theñs*, as discernible in historical Buddhist texts. While unsettling conventional perceptions, Norman's scepticism invites crucial introspection into the intricate dynamics within early Buddhist communities. Were the *Theñs* truly autonomous voices, or did they navigate a complex landscape where male monastic influence might have shaped their narratives? (Norman, 1991, p. 80)

Thus, I urge the need to underscore the social backgrounds of the *Theñs* becomes crucial here in unraveling the complexities of their narratives and understanding why certain subjects are chosen over others. But a critical lens is vital here. While necessary, the inclusion of marginalized voices can be a double-edged sword. With their diverse experiences and perspectives, have these women become mere tokens, their narratives appropriated or romanticized to appease a modern sensibility? Are we truly listening to their voices or simply projecting our expectations onto their stories? These are not questions to be answered easily, but they demand ongoing dialogues and a constant commitment to genuine and respectful representation. We must engage in a conversation with their voices, deconstructing romanticized interpretations and uncovering the intricate web of motivations, aspirations, and societal constraints that

shaped their narratives, but as integral threads are woven into the very fabric of our understanding of the past and present.

Moreover, when considering historical sources such as the *Theṅgāthā*, it becomes apparent that multifaceted motivations emerge as an adaptive response to monasticism. Even within the verses of the *Theṅgāthā*, one can discern varied reasons prompting individuals to embrace monastic life. This recognition adds another layer of complexity to the historical understanding of the motivations associated with adopting monasticism. As reflected in texts like *Theṅgāthā*, the historical context underscores the adaptability and diverse motivations inherent in the decision to pursue a monastic lifestyle. The choice to embrace an ascetic life, don the attire of monks and nuns, and become immersed in a monastic community is a complex phenomenon with intricate motivations often concealed beneath the surface. Michal Hill provides a perceptive lens, interpreting this decision through the dimensions of psychology and sociology. She characterizes it as a manifestation of a "philosophy of sour grapes" rooted in emotional and cultural deprivation (Hill, 1973, p. 35).

Essentially, the concept of "relative deprivation," as articulated by Eysenck, subtly intertwines with the fabric of this decision. From the perspective of an experienced historian, this interpretation unveils a nuanced understanding of the intricate web of motivations that lead individuals to seek solace and purpose within the structured confines of monastic life (Eysenck, 1972, as cited in Hill)

Decoding Silence through Metaphor in Early India

By delving into the intricate interplay of metaphors within these *verses*, we can perceive the muted existences of diverse women in early India. The *verses* traverse a spectrum of experiences, from the mundane labour of grinding spices in the mortar and pestle embodied by *Mutta*, "she who is free," to the optimistic imagery of cultivating fields embodied by *Patacara*. These poetic depictions draw upon the everyday realities of village women like *Capa*, the lives of courtesans such as *Ambapalli*, and even those marginalized, like *Kisagotami*. The metaphorical nuances extend further, encompassing the stifling confines of the extended family, symbolised as *Isidasi*, and the profound grief of losing a child embodied in the poignant *Ubbiri* at the burning ground. These metaphors transcend mere descriptive elements, evolving into subtle acts of resistance against societal constraints. *Mutta's* very name echoes a yearning for liberation, suggesting the potential for personal and spiritual freedom, perhaps even through the avenue of monasticism. Approaching these *verses* through the lens of metaphor allows us to discern the whispers of agency and resilience amid prevailing narratives. This enriches our comprehension of the intricate tapestry of women's experiences in early India, revealing layers of complexity and depth that might otherwise be overlooked.

In my exploration of the *Theṅgāthā*, I adopt a methodological approach that lies in meticulously examining the *verses* within their historical and cultural context, treating the metaphors employed by the elderly nuns as more than mere literary devices. Instead, I see them as profound reflections of the women's experiences, offering a

nuanced understanding of their lives. By decoding the layers of meaning embedded in these metaphors, I aim to unveil the subtle articulations of *silence*—recognising that the choice of metaphorical expression is a purposeful and culturally influenced decision. This approach involves a comprehensive analysis of the socio-cultural landscape of early India, allowing me to shed light on the complex layers of the *Theṛīs'* existence and offer a deeper appreciation of the intricacies within their silenced voices. Within the depicted narrative, *Mutta* boldly articulates a transformative aspect of entering the Sangha, asserting that it not only bestows transcendent freedom but also liberates one from the burdens of mundane household chores and the weight of androcentric familial ties. *Mutta's* realisation echoes a shared sentiment among others, underscoring a collective recognition that this freedom is attainable through joining the Sangha. This certainly evokes some complex questions: did her embrace of the monastic life symbolise a mere escape from the drudgery of the mortar and pestle or a yearning for a more profound spiritual emancipation? Was it an act of rebellion against societal constraints or strategic navigation within existing power structures, potentially even finding fulfilment within them? Moving beyond idealised narratives, we must confront the shadows. Did all women within the Sangha experience equal freedom? Thus, my approach goes beyond surface metaphors to unveil the intricate tapestry of motivations and experiences concealed within the *verses' silences*. It acknowledges the individual journeys of women like *Capa* and *Ambapalli*, portraying their joys and sorrows in a kaleidoscope of hues rather than black and white.

***Nibbana* for All? Rethinking Gender in Early Buddhism**

In reevaluating the concept of *Nibbana* (Nirvana) within the framework of early Buddhism, we embark on a nuanced interrogation of traditional narratives within their sociocultural context. This critical approach challenges prevailing assumptions and discourses that contribute to the perpetuation of gender imbalances within the Buddhist tradition (Gross, 2000, p. 50).

The central question driving this exploration is: can *Nibbana* truly embody inclusivity and liberation for all, irrespective of gender? Are there hidden or downplayed narratives that offer glimpses into women's agency, voices, and spiritual journeys within the early Buddhist discourse? By critically examining how gender dynamics shaped and limited the understanding of *Nibbana* in this period, we aim to reclaim overlooked narratives and women's experiences. Through this process, we hope to pave the way for a more inclusive and egalitarian interpretation of *Nibbana*, challenging the androcentric assumptions that have historically confined it (Paul, 1979, pp. 3-5).

In this context, the concept of freedom, a recurring theme in the texts, transcends mere physical release. It actively challenges ingrained social and cultural norms, confronting the pervasive attitudinal biases imposed on women (Gross, 2000, p. 54). A significant facet of this struggle is exemplified in the representation of women associated with *Mara*, the Buddha's adversary. The epithet "Lord Death's snare" refers to *Mara*, who consistently attempts to divert Buddhists from the path to *Nibbana*, enticing them

back into the realm of sensual desire. The verses vividly depict *Mara* as a hunter deploying the allure of beautiful women as bait in his snare. This imagery, laden with the dangers of sensuality, reinforces a misogynistic theme prevalent in early Buddhist writings, associating women with the embodiment of worldly desires. The texts perpetuate a bias that aligns women with *Mara's* agenda, portraying them as obstacles to spiritual progress (Paul, 1979, pp. 5-8). Diana Paul notes the inherent misogyny in such representations, viewing women as symbols of samsara's endless cycle of desire (Paul, 1979, p. 7). However, Rita M. Gross posits that this misconception might stem from androcentric record-keeping practices, potentially obscuring crucial women-centric discourses (Gross, 2000, pp. 53-60). To comprehensively understand Buddhism's stance on women, a nuanced exploration of various sources and perspectives is essential, acknowledging the complexity and potential biases within historical narratives (Paul, 1979, p. 3).

The examined texts vividly portray a social milieu steeped in patriarchy, relegating women to a secondary status vis-à-vis men. This delineation establishes a realm where culture and religion intertwine, forging a space where women navigate their identity amidst the introduction of a new religious paradigm that challenges prevailing pan-Brahmanical notions. Through the lens of critical feminist hermeneutics, these spaces become discernible, providing a foundation for reconstructing women's active participation in historical narratives (Fiorenza, 1993, p. 138). Within the mainstream discourse, gender stereotypes inherent in Brahmanical ideologies often evade scrutiny, save for sporadic glimpses of women like Gargi and Maitreyan. An experienced historian engaging in critical reflection can unveil the nuanced layers of gender dynamics, illuminating the transformative potential of these emerging spaces within the evolving religious landscape.

The scarcity of sources detailing women's participation in religious construction stems from a pervasive gender bias inherent in androcentric texts that dictate societal norms (Fiorenza, 1993, p. 137). Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza astutely observes that these texts, reflective of normativity, tend to erase women as active historical participants (Fiorenza, 1993, p. 139). While the same religious traditions provide accounts for both genders, they often cultivate stereotypical, un-nuanced, and ambivalent attitudes that create distinctions between men and women (Paul, 1979, p. 8). In the early historical period, Brahmanical ideologies contributed to the construction of an overarching narrative that perceived women as spiritually weaker, viewing their bodies as physical barriers and characterizing them as more prone to sensuality than men (Gross, 2000, p. 58). This perception positioned women, particularly seen as potential seducers, as threats to the spiritual foundations of monastic establishments.

Diana Paul, in her work "Women in Buddhism," delves into the deep-seated masculine resentment within monastic Buddhism towards women as temptresses and seductresses (Paul, 1979, pp. 3-59). This is evident since the early Sangha, the community of monks, reveals a dichotomy in the objectives of the monastic order. While its pragmatic goal is to maintain organizational structure, its religious aim is spiritual growth. Symbolically, women come to represent the profane world, samsara,

and, more detrimentally, potential obstacles to men's spiritual progress (Paul, 1979, p. 57). From the organizational standpoint, wives or lovers become perceived as formidable competitors for members' loyalty and support. This critical perspective sheds light on the complex interplay between gender dynamics and religious ideologies, unraveled by an experienced historian's reflective analysis.

The perception of women as representative of a profane world within monastic establishments led to a concerted effort to minimize contact with them. The apprehension of potential sexual misconduct, as highlighted by Diana Paul, generated resentment among monks, fostering antagonistic attitudes towards women (Paul, 1979, p. 6). This fear of compromising the monastic path underscores the stringent measures taken to maintain distance from the perceived temptations associated with the female presence. Despite these restrictions, some women found avenues within the monastic structure, such as through the role of laywomen supporters, demonstrating a level of agency and participation in the Buddhist community (Gross, 2000, p. 60).

Uncovering the multifaceted experiences of women in early Buddhism necessitates a critical reading of the texts, acknowledging the embedded biases and androcentric perspectives. Employing feminist hermeneutics and drawing upon diverse sources, including archaeological evidence and oral traditions, can offer a more nuanced understanding of their contributions and struggles. Through this process, we can reimagine the path to Nibbana as inclusive and accessible for all, regardless of gender, dismantling the historical constraints that have limited its potential.

Reclaiming the Self: Decoding Personal Liberation and Social Critique in the *Therīgāthā*

Within the intricate layers of early Buddhist narratives, the *Therīgāthā* emerges as a vibrant anthology, offering a unique and nuanced perspective on the experiences of women who embraced the monastic life (Buddhaghosa, 1948, p. 3). These verses, echoing from female elders known as *Therīs*, unfold as "songs of triumph," weaving tales of personal liberation and social critique (Crangle, 2018, p. 5). Exploring these verses reveals the transformative journeys of women like Sakulā, Rohini, Chanda, and Soma, offering glimpses into the challenges, victories, and spiritual aspirations that shaped their lives. This engagement highlights a dynamic interplay between personal introspection, communal bonds, and the societal structures that both constrained and provided avenues for women in early Buddhism (Hurvitz, 1998, p. 7).

Delving deeper, this critical analysis aims to decode the profound meaning within the *Therīgāthā*. Shedding light on the complex negotiations of gender, spirituality, and societal norms, it ultimately reveals the resilient voices that have resonated through the ages (Gross, 2014, p. 12). As Charles Hallisey (2015, p. 23) notes in his introduction to the *Dhammapada* translation, a sixth-century Buddhist commentator referred to the *Therīs'* poems as *Udāna*, signifying "inspired utterances." This association aligns the *Therīgāthā* with a revered Buddhist speech genre, characterized by verses conveying knowledge and accompanied by euphoria in specific situations (Buddhaghosa, 1996,

pp. 10-11). Understanding the *Theṅgāthā* through the lens of *Udāna* becomes significant in interpreting the profound emotions expressed within its verses.

In contrast to early Buddhist teachings that emphasized unraveling the concatenation of the body with internal mental constructs, the *Theṅs* embarked on a journey to perceive themselves not as liberated from these constructs but through an innate lens (Hauer, 1956, p. 15). This transformative participation engendered profound structural changes as women embraced elevated forms of religiosity to navigate their marginalization within entrenched patriarchal patterns (Gross, 2014, p. 112). Sakulā's verse, in particular, serves as an eloquent expression of the outcomes derived from learning to perceive oneself in this depersonalized and impersonal manner (Buddhaghosa, 1948, p. 83).

Sakulā's reference to "all that fouls the heart" poignantly signifies the human desires and deep, *unsavoury* dispositions that often clutter the heart (Rayapalu, 2013, p. 12). As highlighted, the attainment of *internal peace* becomes a manifestation of the charms acquired through meditation, leading these women away from the complexities of the profane world (Rayapalu, 2013, p. 15). It is crucial to recognise that Sakulā's articulation is rooted in the *androcentric normative society* impinged upon her heart, with the monastery providing a *sanctuary* for relief (Thanissaro, 1997, p. 7). However, this *internal peace* is not solely achieved through meditation; it is profoundly intertwined with entering the *sanctuary of the Sangha*. In the context of these poems, women find peace not only by cultivating internal serenity but also by becoming part of the monastic community. The verses portray women forming a cohesive *moral and social understanding*, establishing *friendships* that symbolise the transition from lay life to ordained life (Thanissaro, 1997, p. 14). These women, united by shared experiences, forge bonds of care and intimacy, exemplified in verses such as those of *Rohini*, reflecting the interconnected journey of women navigating the intricacies of their chosen path (Rayapalu, 2013, p. 32).

The strategic placement of *Therika's* verse as the opening poem in the *Theṅgāthā* is indicative of the underlying emphasis on the value of relationships, mirroring the significance of women living together in a spirit of mutual care and intimacy (Hodge, 2007, p. 49). The very name "*Therika*" suggests the importance of communal living among women. The *Theṅgāthā* consistently highlights the role of charismatic female teachers, eclipsing the mention of monastic codes found in the canonical Vinaya. While this portrayal represents an idealised perception of social realities, it remains a keen reflection of the world envisioned for ordained women, starkly contrasting the social inequalities prevalent between men and women in lay life (Hodge, 2007, p. 52).

The *Theṅgāthā* goes beyond merely depicting a utopian vision; it actively challenges the hegemonic normativity of Brahmanism. A notable instance is the assertion of knowledge of *Tevijjā*, consisting of the ability to know one's past lives, understand where and why other beings are reborn, and discern one's moral corruption. This claim not only serves as a joyful affirmation of their attainment but also stands as a rejection of Brahmanical assumptions that deemed women, regardless of caste, incapable of acquiring "*the three pieces of knowledge*" (Thanissaro, 1997, p. 28). In doing so, the

Therīs challenge and redefine societal norms, showcasing their intellectual prowess and spiritual capabilities (Rayapalu, 2013, p. 67).

These poems intricately unravel the keen theme of scrutinised social realities, shedding light on the transformative impact of joining the monastery and finding a supportive, *hegemonic space* among fellow nuns. The verses illustrate how the presence of nuns alleviates the myriad forms of social suffering and poverty experienced by women (Rayapalu, 2013, p. 41). An exemplar of this transformation is evident in *Chanda's* poem, where her decision to ordain as a Buddhist nun is not fuelled by spiritual aspirations but rather by the pragmatic need for sustenance (Thanissaro, 1997, p. 37). Chanda recounts her past as a destitute widow, bereft of children, *friends*, or relatives, struggling to secure even the basic necessities of life. Her desperate situation led her to wander, enduring the torments of cold and heat while begging for sustenance (Rayapalu, 2013, p. 61). The turning point emerges when she observes a nun receiving food and drink. Inspired by this sight, Chanda approaches the nun, expressing her desire to embrace *homelessness*. The nun, in this case, *Patacārā*, responds with sympathy, guiding Chanda towards ordination, offering advice, and directing her towards the highest goal (Thanissaro, 1997, p. 86).

Chanda not only heeds the nun's words but actively implements her advice, highlighting the profound impact of the nun's *guidance*. Through this transformative journey, Chanda not only gains *spiritual insight* but also acquires knowledge of the *three things* that most people remain unaware of, cleansing her heart from any defilements (Rayapalu, 2013, p. 68). This narrative underscores how the presence and support of nuns within the monastic community become instrumental in transcending the social challenges and material deprivations faced by women, offering a pathway towards *spiritual growth* and empowerment.

In poems like Chanda's, the Therīs not only exhibit individual displays of *compassion* within unjust circumstances, such as *Patacārā's* treatment of Chanda in her hunger but also convey a deep awareness of the harsh realities of life. Remarkably, the trials faced by the Therīs are not perceived solely as karmic effects of past actions, as religious doctrines might traditionally embrace, but rather are understood within an isolated social context that demands a sympathetic acknowledgment of the undeserved suffering experienced by women (Hodge, 2007, p. 102).

The societal landscape of the time *marginalised* women, restricting them from engaging in religious rites and withholding the knowledge of the Vedas from them. The prevailing Brahminical religion during the Buddha's era entrenched a fixed rule that denied women participation in sacramental rites with sacred texts, reinforcing a patriarchal ideology that deemed women impure and lacking in strength and Vedic knowledge (Rayapalu, 2013, p. 25).

Contrary to this deeply ingrained patriarchal stance, the Buddhist order emerged as a progressive force, notably *inclusive* of women in the religious sphere—a domain previously reserved exclusively for men. In a milieu where the male principle (Purusha) dominated, women found an exceptionally marginal place in the patriarchy. The Buddhist order, in contrast, stood as a beacon of progress, challenging established

norms and offering women a significant role in the religious order. This shift marked a notable departure from the prevailing attitudes towards women in both spiritual and social spheres during the Buddha's time (Hodge, 2007, p. 121).

In the Theravada Buddhist framework, the position of nuns is perceived as inferior to that of monks, reflecting a hierarchical structure where women, at best, were considered helpmates and, at worst, *burdens*. Janice Willis captures the essence of women's status in Buddha's times, emphasizing their portrayal as inferior and second-class citizens (Willis, 2000, p. 79). While women within the monastic order might contend with an inherent sense of inferiority, in the broader social context, they may experience a relative improvement in parity. The Sangha, providing a community led by women, offers them a unique societal space.

Buddhist narratives mark a notable departure from the prevailing suffering of women, illustrated in stories like that of King Pasenadi of Kosala, who fervently wished for the birth of a daughter. Buddha, challenging the unheard-of notion of *gender equality* at the time, declared the equivalence of good daughters to good sons. Buddhism, therefore, emerged as a refuge for women, crucially *redefining* their status. The inception of this shift is vital, considering that women were initially assimilated with the lower and oppressed classes in terms of their suffering (Rayapalu, 2013, p. 49).

Blackstone (1998) asserts that both the *Theṅgāthā* and the *Therāgāthā* serve as "liberation manuals." However, the nature of freedom differs for monks and nuns. Monks seek liberation through escaping worldly life, while nuns take a *bolder step*, articulating their challenges and experiences in combating *day-to-day struggles*. The voices of women, evident in these texts, provide a unique perspective, accentuating the *heightened difficulties* they face compared to men (Blackstone, 1998, p. 18). In their narratives, women speak *candidly* about their lived experiences, offering a *nuanced portrayal* of their distinct challenges (Murcott, 2006, p. 12).

Rita M. Gross aptly labels the verses in the *Theṅgāthā* as "songs of triumph," where the nuns express their experiences in an arena resembling rebirth, bringing a definitive end to their sufferings (Gross, 2000, pp. 53–60). Gender negotiations in early Buddhism are *complex and, at times, blurred*. Blackstone highlights a significant distinction between the *Theṅgāthā* and the *Therāgāthā*: while the nuns' verses spring from personal experiences, those of the monks are more stoic and rooted in the Buddha's teachings (Blackstone, 1998, p. 22). Early Buddhism emphasizes that *gender is irrelevant*; what matters is merit, knowledge, and an emancipated heart (Murcott, 2006, p. 15). The records in the *Theṅgāthā* do not inherently acknowledge gender differences. In a conversation with Mara, Soma challenges the notion of harm in being a woman when the mind is concentrated, and insight is clear, asserting that such thoughts align with Mara's *deceptive language* (Blackstone, 1998, p. 25).

Instances within the *Theṅgāthā* further illustrate the *fluidity of gender roles*. Subha, for example, transforms the heart of a libertine who desires her. When he praises her eyes, she offers one of her eyes, leading the man to bow down in *remorse* (Murcott, 2006, p. 18). In Soma's dialogue with Mara, the *Theṅgāthā* becomes a powerful record of essential womanhood, challenging *traditional perceptions* (Blackstone, 1998, p. 27).

The path to Nibbana, while acknowledging certain complexities related to gender, opens the door to the ultimate truth for both genders (Murcott, 2006, p. 20). The *Therīgāthā* thus stands as a testament to the *triumphs and complexities* experienced by women on their spiritual journey in early Buddhism.

The aspiration for self-purification extends even to courtesans, as evidenced by *Vimala*, a former courtesan, who vividly describes her state of ultimate calm after embracing the monastic life. She shares, "Today, wrapped in a double cloak, my head shaven, having wandered for alms, I sit at the foot of a tree and attain the state of *no thought*. All ties – human & divine – have been cut. Having cast off all effluents, cooled am I, unbound." (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1997, Verse 75, p. 45) *Vimala's experience*, emanating from the heart, is portrayed as unparalleled, signifying a profound transformation (Murcott, 2006, p. 18).

Ambāpāli, another former courtesan, reflects on the inevitable changes that come with age but emphasizes the timeless truth of the teachings. Her realization underscores the enduring nature of the insights gained through the Buddhist path: "*Curved as if well-drawn by an artist; my brows were once splendid. With age, they droop down in folds. The truth of the Truth-speaker's words doesn't change*" (Hallisey, 2015, p. 39; Buddhaghosa, 1948, p. 78). The existence of the *Therīgāthā*, with its empathetic portrayals of women who wholeheartedly embraced Buddhism's message and attained its goal of peace and release, serves as a powerful challenge. Rita M. Gross encapsulates the essence of this challenge by noting that the *Therīgāthā* stands as a testament to the capabilities of women who fully embraced Buddhism, presenting a challenge to any notion that would limit the potential and role of women within the Buddhist tradition (Gross, 2000, pp. 53-60).

Poems preserved in the *Therīgāthā* anthology show women eloquently challenging biases, as seen in Soma's retort questioning what being female has to do with comprehending spiritual wisdom, forcefully asserting equality in intellectual capability regardless of gender (Blackstone, 1998).

Additionally, Sumedhā's story reinforces women's equivalent potential capacity for following Buddhism's path, as Sumedhā and friends' virtuous offerings of a monastery to Buddha facilitated profound realizations, contradicting notions that women face limitations in contributing spiritually (Murcott, 2006).

Analyses have explored how *Therīgāthā* poems feature women resisting stereotypical tropes that overly link them to physicality or sexual clinging. For instance, Amrapali's narrative shows alternatives concerning sexuality's role, with nunhood permitting renunciation of carnal pleasures, distinguishing such women from laypeople's ordinary sensual lives. By negating sexual desire, these monastics perhaps aimed for parity with monks, viewed as more detached from such cravings due to their maleness (Murcott, 2006).

However, feminist scholars question whether bodily enjoyment must be dismissed as an obstacle to spiritual enlightenment, pondering the discomfort some *Therīgāthā* women express regarding sexuality, even as they transcend associated cravings (Day, 2016). Comparatively, monks often visualize female corpses decaying to counter

attractions, whereas the nuns' verses suggest more body acceptance (Hallisey, 2015; Kloppenborg 1983). These contrasting attitudes spotlight intricacies around gender, asceticism and physicality in early Buddhism.

The tales recounting the struggles and succumbing of monks to their sexual desires are vividly portrayed in specific Buddhist scriptures. Within the Vinaya of Māhāsaṅghikā, an account unfolds where a monk initially resists the allure presented by one of Mara's seductive apparitions. Despite putting up an initial resistance, the monk ultimately succumbs to his sexual desires once the temptress disrobes. Shayne Clarke's translation (2015, p. 142) offers a detailed portrayal of the monk's descent into lust, stating, "Then the goddess proceeded to remove her necklace garment, revealing her body. Positioned before Nandikā, she propositioned him, saying, 'Come, let's engage in intercourse together.' Observing her form, Nandikā was consumed by lustful thoughts and responded, 'So be it.' Subsequently, the goddess slowly withdrew. Nandikā urged her to linger, suggesting they amuse themselves together. As Nandikā advanced, the goddess hastily retreated. Pursuing her to the Jetavāna moat, Nandikā encountered a deceased royal horse within the moat. The goddess concealed herself, becoming invisible near the lifeless horse. In the grip of fervent lust, Nandikā proceeded to engage in a sexual act with the deceased horse."

This narrative vividly illustrates the consequences monks faced when they failed to control their passions. The explicit nature of the story emphasizes the gravity of the monk's descent into unchecked desire and the subsequent consequences of his actions. Such narratives often contrast the challenges faced by monks and nuns in dealing with sexual desires within the broader context of Buddhist teachings and ethical guidelines.

The quest for equality with men among Buddhist women often coincided with a rejection of sex and a disdain for sexuality. In the dialogue titled "Sumangalamata," the conversation about sex unveils a complex dynamic between a mother and her son and reflects the broader struggle for female subjectivity. The mother recounts to her son the joy she experienced in overcoming her passion for sex. This narrative reveals a parallel between Buddhist women's endeavors and the early stages of the liberal feminist movement, both grappling with challenging the prevailing belief that women were ruled by passions and senses in contrast to men.

Interpreted by *Kustav Chakraborty*, this move is seen as an attempt by Buddhist *women* to assert themselves beyond being perceived as mere sex objects. In the poem, Sumangala's *Mother* addresses her son, granting *women* agency over their anger and passion for sex, suggesting a deliberate effort to be recognized for more than their traditional roles. This dual struggle—seeking equality with *men* and rejecting the notion that *women* are solely defined by their sensuality—reflects the nuanced challenges faced by Buddhist *women* in asserting their individuality and agency within the cultural and religious contexts of their time.

The religious ideologies of many traditions often reflected a profound divide in the roles assigned to *men* and *women*, with *women* navigating the periphery and pushing against the central dominance of *men*. While *women* sought to negotiate space for

themselves within these religious frameworks, their attempts often reinforced patriarchal control as they endeavored to secure a place within hegemonic structures rather than abandoning them entirely.

In the context of Buddhism, the *Theñs'* persuasion of Buddha to establish a *sangha* for *women* can be seen as an effort to escape the restrictive confines of patriarchal control. However, the rules applied to them within the *Sangha* were still formulated under patriarchal influence. The inclusion of *women* in the Buddhist *Sangha*, as depicted in the *Cullavagga*, occurred only after persistent insistence by *Mahāpajāpati Gotamī*, who was not only the foster mother but also the aunt of Buddha. Initially, Buddha resisted her request, and it was only through the intervention of *Ānanda* that *women* were eventually included in the *bhikkhuṇī sangha*. However, Buddha's supposed statement that with the inclusion of *women*, Buddhism would last only half the intended time (500 years instead of 1,000) reflects the challenges and reservations tied to gender inclusion within the religious order. This narrative underscores the complexity of *women's* struggles within religious contexts, where their efforts for inclusion may be met with resistance and constraints rooted in patriarchal norms.

Women's agency in historical religious contexts was often constrained, and their endeavors were frequently realized only through the assistance of men (Chakravarti, 1993; Sponberg, 2010). This limited agency stemmed from conflicting perspectives centered around the female body. While women were ostensibly "allowed" to attain *nirvāṇa* or *kaivalya*, the Buddha's teachings simultaneously curtailed the scope of the spiritual path (Sponberg, 2010). Even the entry of women into the *Sangha*, while providing a space for spiritual pursuit, can be viewed as a transition from one patriarchal space to another, illustrating the persistence of patriarchal structures within religious frameworks (Chakravarti, 1993). The complexities surrounding women's agency in the pursuit of spiritual goals highlight the intricacies and challenges embedded in historical narratives.

The representation of women in early Indian societies, as conceptualized in texts, often portrays their behavior and thoughts within a gendered context, with a particular focus on their bodies and a conscious anxiety towards sexuality (Juschka, 2001; Lerner, 1987). Understanding women's experiences, thoughts, sense of belonging, and identity in these societies is challenging due to the scarcity of sources providing insight into these aspects (Juschka, 2001). There is a need for scholars to focus on specific texts that can offer a more individualized understanding of women, moving beyond treating them as a distinct category confined by male-dominated textual traditions that often limit women to familial relations and identities (Juschka, 2001).

One transformative aspect worth exploring is the role of women as patrons in religious causes, channelling funds, garnering followers, and supporting the dissemination of certain cults over others. Inscriptions provide evidence of women actively participating in these roles, reflecting an increased agency in society (Chakravarti, 1993). However, certain *Dharmaśāstras* categorically deny women the right to carry out religious observances, with texts like *Manu* and *Viśṇu* stating that no separate sacrifice is designated for women (Chakravarti, 1993). The *Maṇu Smṛti* explicitly mentions, "No

rite is performed for women with the recitation of ritual formulas." (Juschka, 2001). Scholars such as Uma Chakravarti have emphasized how women, in such contexts, are compelled to accept ideologies, endure economic dependence, and face coercion from the state, society, and religious institutions (Chakravarti, 1993). This process, as highlighted by Juschka, leads to the internalization of gender ideology, with individuals believing that the mapped-out differences within the social domain are inherent in nature (Juschka, 2001).

The evidence presented suggests a notable preoccupation with the female body and a corresponding desire to control it, reflecting patriarchal religious views. Drawing a parallel with *Gerda Lerner's* exploration of slavery, one might consider the possibility that pollution taboos were initially imposed on women and subsequently extended to men (Lerner, 1987). This aligns with the Brahmanical texts consistently setting *Menarche, Menstruation, and Pollution Taboos* on women, indicating an attempt to control female bodies through biased notions about their functions, particularly the menstrual cycle (Lerner, 1987). Despite the acknowledgment of a certain degree of mysticism and sacrality associated with the female body, the imposition of pollution taboos serves to objectify women, positioning them in opposition to sacrality (Juschka, 2001).

Alan Sponberg's analysis of gender in early Buddhist tradition reveals a complex landscape encompassing soteriological inclusiveness for women to attain salvation. However, this inclusiveness coexists with institutional androcentrism and ascetic misogyny, contributing to a multifaceted view of women in the tradition (Sponberg, 2010). The conceptualization of female bodies takes center stage, emphasizing the need for sexual abstention and condemning activities such as homosexuality, masturbation, and bestiality (Sponberg, 2010). Notably, discussions on sexual abstention, particularly regarding women's bodies, tend to be lopsided, revealing misogynistic tendencies within the discourse (Sponberg, 2010).

The portrayal of the female body in Buddhist texts is laden with negative connotations, depicting it as vile, impure, defiling, and lascivious (Sponberg, 2010). These texts describe the female body as polluted, evil-smelling, diseased, and perishable, using metaphors such as a hut made of a chain of bones or a bag of dung tied up with skin (Sponberg, 2010). The *Therīgāthā* text goes further to compare a woman to a demoness with lumps on the breast, emitting an evil smell and obstructed by dung, emphasizing avoidance akin to steering clear of excrement (Sponberg, 2010)

Challenges intensify when a Therī's face is young and beautiful, highlighting the problematic nature of women's sexuality. For the bhikkhunī, it is her own body that becomes the issue, while for the male bhikkhu, the woman's body poses a distraction. Uma Chakravarti's work delves into how Bhakti traditions address the female body's complexities, attempting to transcend these challenges through devotion. By creating hagiographies of women and utilising their songs, bhakti provided women with a space to expand their selfhood beyond conventional gender and social relations. These songs also illustrate how these women sought to both free themselves from their

bodies and express their religiosity and devotion to their chosen deity. (Chakravarti, 2000, p. 123)

Therefore, the paradox of nun-donations cannot be fully understood through a single lens. It necessitates a multifaceted approach that considers individual agency, collective practices, gender dynamics, and the evolving socio-economic realities of the Sangha. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the *Therīgāthā* is not without its limitations. The text is a product of its time and reflects early India's cultural and social norms. As such, it is important to approach the text with a critical lens and recognise the ways in which it may perpetuate certain biases or limitations.

Additionally, the text is limited in its scope, offering only a glimpse into the experiences of a select group of women within a specific religious context. However, despite these limitations, the *Therīgāthā* remains a valuable and important text for scholars and readers alike. It offers a rare and nuanced perspective on the experiences of early Buddhist nuns, highlighting their agency and resistance in the face of patriarchal constraints.

In conclusion, the *Therīgāthā* offers a unique and invaluable perspective on the experiences of early Buddhist nuns, highlighting both their agency and resistance in the face of patriarchal constraints. Through the use of feminist critical hermeneutics, this research seeks to reclaim and amplify the voices of these women, shedding light on their contributions to their communities and the broader Buddhist tradition. The *Therīgāthā* challenges societal norms and expectations imposed on women, offering an inclusive and empowering vision of religious life. Overall, the *Therīgāthā* provides crucial insights into the evolving relationship between early Buddhism and gender and serves as a testament to the enduring legacy of these remarkable women.

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