Beyond Domesticity: Revelations in the Therīgāthā

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Celebrated, perhaps the world over, as the earliest unique compendium of women's literature, the *Therīgāthā* is a collection of songs composed by the Buddhist *therī*s or senior nuns, dating back to the 6th Century BCE. The compilation has aroused the interest of the learned world, ever since they were "recovered" from Burmese and Sinhalese manuscripts published in 1883, and subsequently went on to be translated in various languages. The first translation in German by K. E. Neumann in 1899 was followed by that in English by C. A. F. Rhys Davids in 1964 (*Psalms of the Early Buddhists*) and subsequently in 1969-71 by K. R. Norman (*Elders' Verses*, 2 volumes) and in 1991 by Susan Murcott (*The First Buddhist Women*).[1]

Comprising of 73 poems with 522 stanzas,The *Therīgāthā* was incorporated withinthe *Khuddaka Nikāya*, which itself forms a part of the *Sutta Piṭaka*, one of the three *Piṭaka*sor canonical works of the *Sthaviravādīn*s. Originating in the oral tradition, the *gāthā*s have had a prolonged history, before appearing in a written form as an anthology. As scholars have claimed these compositions were used by the

"*itinerant therī*s *as they wandered around preaching their messages of release and were reworked over the five centuries in which they were circulated orally. In the process the sound values, the images, the color and detail in which feeling and situation were evoked would have been recast as the preachers responded to the requirements of the women they addressed. Obviously, the biographical accounts would have gone through a similar dialogical process of refinement before they were collected and committed in the fifth century A.D.*"[2]

Some of the *gāthā*s are found embedded in the prose commentary called *Paramatthadīpanī*, attributed to a monk from Kānchipuram, Dhammapāla, who provides us with notes on the songs and information on the *therī*'s life. Interestingly, verses in the *Thera* and *Therīgāthā* are by no means unique to them. While some of the verses occasionally ascribed to completely different authors occur in the *Jātaka*s and the *Dhammapada*, other Buddhist works contain verses the names of whose authors are similar to those mentioned in the *Thera* and *Therīgāthā*, though the verses themselves are not to be found in the collections. Probably, many of the *gāthā*s were drawn from or incorporated into other Buddhist compositions.

Interestingly scholars have observed that the entertainment value of some of the longer poems of the *Therīgāthā* is very high even in translation; these continue to evoke humour, sadness, and joy. The poems are in a major part devoted almost entirely to descriptions of liberation and methods to attain it, or the characteristics of those individuals who have attained it. All the authors are described within the commentary as having attained liberation, that is, as having become *arahant*s. These devotional sections which consist of a vast majority of repeated phrases and verses, are juxtaposed with poetic accounts of the situation, thereby establishing the emotional states of the ascribed authors.[3] Their educational and entertainment values are given further credibility by the status of the ascribed authors. However, the poems of the *Therīgāthā* are not only beautiful, devotional and instructive; these are also reputed to be the records of the experiences of the Buddha's first followers, all of whom were accredited with *parenthood*.[4]

The basic theme of the *Therīgāthā* poems revolves around the idea of *Nibbāna*. *Nibbāna* is frequently defined as the utterly transformative realisation of the impermanence of all things, and the simultaneous severing of the bonds of *saṁsāra*, which is the relentless cycle of desire, attachment, delusion, animosity and grief by which human beings are bound.[5] Similarly many of the verses also use more poetic descriptions of the experiences, emotional states, and characteristic attitudes of the *arahant* authors. The majority of the poems deal with the idea of liberation from the previous lives of these women. The text presents us with a variety of methods for attaining liberation and their diversity implies that anyone can attain liberation. In fact, *therī*s repeatedly emphasise their struggle for liberation. Some of the poems describe why these *therī*s have opted for the path of renunciation.

In this context, reference may be made to the *gāthā*s of *therī* Isidāsī.[6] She had been married thrice and was successively rejected by all her husbands. In her *gāthā*s, she has vividly described her life as a devoted wife and daughter-in-law. In spite of her discharging her household duties diligently and serving her husbands like a "slave girl", she could not win the affections of her husbands. Distraught and saddened, she, with the consent of her father, was initiated by *therī* Jinadattā, who had come to her father's house on her begging round.[7]

It is noticeable that the greatest impetus to join the Buddhist Saṅgha came from grief. As Roy remarks, "*Some of the most powerful and stark imagery of the texts centres around*

these mourning women".[8] In this context we may refer to Kisā-Gotamī, who was reborn inSāvatthī, in a poor family during the era of Padumuttara Buddha.[9] Distraught with grief for the death of her son, she went from door to door, begging for medicine to revive her son, but to no avail. She was asked to go to the Buddha who was purportedly the only one only who could have fulfilled her desire. She was asked by the "Exalted One" to bring a little mustard seed from any house in town where no death has occurred. While searching for such a house fruitlessly, it is said that by the might of Buddha, all frenzy left her and her natural mind was restored. She was finally ordained and attained *arahant*ship. She then joyfully exclaimed:

"*Nibbāna have I realized, and gazedInto the*
Mirror of the holy Norm.
I, even I, am healed of my hurt,
Low is my burden laid, my task is done,My heart is
wholly set at liberty.
I, sister Kisā-Gotamī, have uttered this!

Vāsiṭṭhī[10] is one of the more notable examples of this state of mind, where grief became an integral part for choosing the path of renunciation. Worn and crazy with grief at the death of a child, she wandered about for three years, until she met the Master, whenat the sight of him, self-controlled and self-contained, and through his power she was able to regain her normal mind:

"*And then at last I saw him as he went Within that*
blessed city, Mithilā;
Great tamer of untamed hearts, yea Him,
the very Buddha, Banisher of fear."

From a perusal of the *Therīgāthā*, it is evident that relationships play a prominent role.. A thorough study of the text reveals that the *therī*s tend to focus on relationships of all kinds;from their parenthood and the pain caused by their children, to adversarial confrontations with others, to friendships in the Saṅgha among the *bhikkhunī*s. Thus, we can site the example of Paṭācārā's Five Hundred[11], whose overwhelming grief, each on the death of her two sons,husband, parents and brother, was only restrained when alms women reminded her of impermanence as manifested in death, and of the migration to other births:

"*Lo ask thyself again whence came thy son To bide on*

earth this little breathing-space?By one way come and by

another gone,

As man to die and pass to other births –

So hither and so hence – why would ye weep?"

Relationships with friends can be best described by the example of the two Sāmā's[12] who renounced the world, distressed by the death of their friend Sāmāvati, a lay disciple and Vijayā[13] got ordained because of her friend Khemā's ordination.

On the other hand, the *Therīgāthā* also acknowledge the power of physical attraction. According to Kathryn Blackstone in *the Buddhist view of the world,* beauty is not an inherent property of a given object, but rather the product of human artifice. Ordinary individuals are fascinated by their own desires and fail to see through the deception. Liberation involves the elimination of those desires and the deluding filter they impose upon perception. She further points out that the *Therīgāthā* combat the delusory attractiveness of the body with descriptions of the artificial nature of beauty.[14] Here we refer to Abhayā's mother[15] and Ambapālī[16,] both of whom were courtesans. In the case of Abhayā's mother, it can be seen that she was converted by her son, who made her believe in the impurity of the body. Ambapālī too was motivated by her son's preaching to work for insight and studied impermanence, as illustrated in her own aging body. Thus we can see that the rules and regulations in the Order were created to subdue the senses. The instinct of sex is to be suppressed, and other bodily appetites carefully regulated, but the flesh is not otherwise to be subdued, and certainly not mortified. This is evident from instructions regarding the type of robes to be used by the *therī*s in the Saṅgha. The almsmen's addressing almswomen as *bhagini* (sister) also suggests the passionless relation between them. Even free mixing between *thera*s and *therī*s was restricted in some cases.

*Therī*s often chose the path of renunciation to be free from domestic drudgery and domestic tragedy. Their poems reflect their journey towards renunciation. The reasonsbehind choosing the path of renunciation have been presented in their writings. Many of the psalms recapitulate the shallow and unsatisfactory existence hitherto led by their reputed authors and then break out into utter joy that all this is now past and over for them,and has been replaced by some aspect of the bliss of *Nibbāna*.[17] Thus for Muttā[18,] leaving the world implied the glory of freedom "*from quern, from mortar and from my crookbacked lord*". Actually, Muttā practised self-control to attain the highest goal that is *Nibbāna,*which is reflected in her poem where she exclaims in ecstasy:

"*So free am I, so gloriously free,Free from*
three petty things –
From mortar, from pestle and from my twisted lord,Freed from
rebirth and death I am,
And all that has held me downIs hurled
away."

On the other hand, Sumangalā's mother[19] who had led a life of great poverty, revels in her new-found freedom "*from kitchen drudgery*", and in her escape from a life of stains and dirt among the cooking pot, where, "*Me, my brutal husband, ranked as even less than the sunshades he sits and weaves away"*:

"*A woman well set free! How free I am,*
How wonderfully free, from kitchen drudgery,Free from the
harsh grip of hunger,
And from empty cooking pots,
Free too of that unscrupulous man,The
weaver of sunshades.
Calm now, and serene I am,All lust
and hatred purged,
To the shade of the spreading trees I goAnd
contemplate my happiness."

It is apparent that seeking help, companionship and affection from family memberswas often very difficult, and for such women, the Order acted as a refuge. But even there, their lives were not so easy. They were bound by different types of rules and regulations. Obviously, the lives of the *therī*s were full of conflict and the path towards liberation wassurrounded by hardship and struggle. The poems of the *Therīgāthā* text reflect the conflictand struggle of a *therī*'s life. In the Order, the *therī*s' only duty was to devote themselves inattaining *Nibbāna* or liberation. Thus Sakulā utters in exhultation:

"*Saw that Norm, the Pure, Passionless*
Track to Nirvāna, past decease and birth?"[20]

On the other hand, there is also reference to Sumedhā[21] who joined the Order not from any kind of compulsion, but

with a definite devotion to religion. She was the only almswomanwho is represented as looking upon entry both as an escape from the world and as her real vocation to attain *Nibbāna*:

"*All my heart's love is to Nirvāna given .....What truck*
have I, then, with the empty life Of sense, that giveth
little, slayeth much?
Bitter as serpent's poison are desires
Of sense, where after youthful fools do yearn" (Verses 450-452)

Actually, those women in ancient India who chose to become *bhikkhunī*s faced difficulties unknown to their male counterparts. Their decision to lead a life of celibacy andcontemplation completely inverted the gender-stereotypes of their cultural milieu. Insteadof being content with the life of a married woman, brightened by the births of sons and overshadowed by the possibility of a childless widowhood, these women chose to follow the path of religious renunciation. Instead of devoting their lives to the needs of others, they concentrated on their own self-fulfilment, though they continued to help each other in the Saṅgha. Even for an aged *bhikkhunī,* the Saṅgha was a place of solitude and liberty. This has been reflected in a poem by Mettikā[22]:

"*Though I am weak and tired now,And my*
youthful step long gone, Leaning on this
staff,
I climb the mountain peak,
My cloak cast off, my bowl overturned,I sit here on
this rock.
And over my spirit blowsThe
breadth
Of liberty"

It appears from a critical analysis of the *Therīgāthā* that many thoughtful women were emancipated from the restrictions imposed upon their intellectual development by thetyranny of tradition. Many *gāthā*s highlight a genuine desire to overcome the gloom of ignorance and a craving for knowledge.[23] An organised educational environment in the Order must have been welcome to intellectual temperaments of intellect that were crampedin a conventional social set up.[24] As for example, Paṭācārā's *gāthā* suggests that she became well-versed in the Vinaya texts and was herself

responsible for bringing five hundred women to the Order[25,] and she is said have converted a group of thirty women to the Buddhist faith.[26] Though conversion of Sujātā, the daughter of a śreṣṭhī of Sāketa, to the Buddhist faith, was determined by the personal charisma of Gautama Buddha[27], many women, however, received inspiration to join the Saṅgha from erudite *therī*s like Gotamī, Paṭācārā, Dhammadinnā, and Jinadattā. It was quite plausible that Gautama Buddha was only an extremely revered name to them, whereas they were enthralled by the vibrant sympathy and passionate preaching of the venerable *therī*s. Significantly, Sonā excelled in physical feats, Nanduttarā in debate, Vaḍḍhamātā attained popularity for medical proficiency and Vasiṭṭhi for psychological counselling. These women stood out as teachers, preachers, makers of converts and saviours of many from intolerable socio-economic circumstances.[28]

Conventional approaches scarcely recognize that alongside biological differences between men and women, their religious and philosophical articulations are governed by gender considerations. That the ways of thinking and viewing can be "gendered" has been strikingly highlighted in certain philosophical circles and recognised by many contemporary feminists. Viewed from this perspective, the *Therīgāthā* assumes a new significance as an "exciting and provocative text" continually opening new arenas for dialogue.

In the tradition of the *Therīgāthā*, the *therī*s overcome their inconsolable grief occasioned through the loss of children, family members, widowhood and poverty, by seeking refuge in the Saṅgha. The *bhikhunī*s come from different walks of life – courtesans, young girls from noble families, matrons in advanced age, mothers of children, as well as those who aspired to the fulfillment of their religious aspirations. The model of liberation portrayed in the *Therīgāthā* is usually one of hardship and struggle.

It is noticeable that the apparent disrespect, enforced subordination and neglect shown by the society and the Saṅgha is perhaps reflected in the nuns' (*therī*s) conception of liberation as 'struggle'. Yet, they successfully overcame these obstacles. In their verses of *Therīgāthā,* we not only detect evidence of their difficulties, but also of their triumph. Surprisingly, the *therī*s did not reflect an attitude of dislike and bitterness towards the social and religious establishment that discriminated against them; but there was a compassionate hope among them that helped them attain the highest religious goal that is *Nibbāna* or liberation. Thus, it can be said that *Therīgāthā* (the set of poems by the older nuns) has a very powerful message to convey. It is evident that women's struggle for liberation had its genesis in early India, though the concept of women's emancipation was yet to gain acceptance.

It is refreshing to find that women could emerge triumphant from an existence thatthreatened to curb their ingenuity and desires and subject them to the whims of an overarching patriarchal society. It required great courage, determination and an inner strength to overcome the seemingly insurmountable adversities and establish their contention that women were potentially at par with men for the attainment of *Nibbāna* or enlightenment. More significantly, in the early Indian context, the *Therīgāthā* reflects the initial efforts of women writers to record their personal experiences and emotions in the form of narratives.

Notes and References

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4.Ibid., p. 5.

5.Ibid., p. 13.

6.Bhikkhu J. Kashyap (ed.), 1959, *Therīgāthā*, *Khuddaka Nikāya* (henceforth *TKN*), Nālāndā Devanāgarī-Pāli series, Pāli Publication Board (Bihar Government), trans. By C.A.F. Rhys Davids as the *Psalmsof the Early Buddhists*, Vol. II, London, P.T.S., 1948, pp. 400-447.

7.Roy, Kumkum, op.cit., p. 26.

8.Ibid., p. 27.

9.Rhys Davids, C. A. F. (trans.), 1989, *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns (Therigāthā)*, Canto X, *Psalm ofEleven Verses*, LXIII, The Pali Text Society, Oxford, pp. 88-91.

10.TKN, pp. 133-138.

11. Ibid., Commentary on xlvii, pp. 112-116.

12. Ibid., pp. 37-38, 39-41.

13. Ibid, pp. 169-174.

14.Blackstone, Kathryn R., op.cit., p. 69.

15.TKN, op.cit., pp. 33-34.

16.Ibid., pp. 252-270.

17.Horner, I. B., 1975, *Women Under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen*, Delhi, p. 189.

18.TKN, op.cit., p. 11.

19.Ibid., pp. 23-24.

20.Ibid., Verse 97.

21.Ibid., pp. 448-496.

22.Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, op.cit., p. 69; *TKN*, pp. 29-30.

23.TKN, pp. 3, 45-47, 72-73.

24.Rhys Davids, C.A.F., 1909, *Psalms of the Sisters*, London, p. xxxvi.

25. *TKN*, pp. 112-116, 127-132.

26. Ibid., pp. 117-121.

27. Ibid., pp.145-150.

28. Ibid., pp. 102-106, 87-91, 203-212, 133-138.