



Can Therīgāthā Be Considered As Feminists?

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Abstract:

The question of whether the status of women in the society is the same as that of men, is a debatable topic, to which some may stand for it, while others may be against it (i.e. they consider women as inferior to men). So, in this topic “Can Therīgāthā Be Considered As Feminists”, I would like to bring out how the Therīgāthā of the Pali canon talked about women’s status in early Buddhism, in contrast to its male counterpart, the Theragāthā, with some introspection of western views on feminism. So question can be raised of ‘whether the Therīgāthā be considered as feminists?’

Key Words: Bhikkhunis, Nibbāna, Sangha, Theragāthā, Therīgāthā’

Feminism: What Is It?

Feminism is the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state.¹ The word “Feminism,” would mean the advocacy of women’s rights on the ground of equality of the sexes. It also means a collection of movements and ideologies which share a common stated aim: to define, establish, and defend equal political, economic, cultural, and social rights for women². This include seeking to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment .A feminist generally self-defines as advocating for or supporting the rights and equality of women.

¹ <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/feminism>

² <http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/feminism>.

From another point –Feminism can also be defined as a multi-disciplinary approach to sex and gender equality understood through social theories and political activism .Historically feminism has evolved from the critical examination of inequality between the sexes to move nuanced focus on the social and performativity, constructions of gender and sexuality. Feminist theory now aims to interrogate gender inequalities and to effect change in areas where gender and sexuality policies create power imbalances .Anytime stereotyping, objectification, infringements of human rights, or gender or sexuality bas oppression occurs, it is a feminist issue.

A Brief Definition of Therīgāthā:

Therīgāthā is supposed to a text written by women in Pali, and it is a part of Khuddaka-Nikāya, Collection of little texts. It has twin text: the *theri* for the nuns and the *thera* for the monks. It contains stories explaining why women joined the *sangha*. This text is conventional, where the stories are arranged in size i.e. the short stories come first and then followed by longer ones. In all the stories, liberation of women is emphasized. The Buddha is an active onlooker to all these verses. There was a patriarchal set up found in the text. The text is often called as the feminist text. In this text, the verses are older than the stories.

Therīgāthā is a gathering of 73 versified religious articulations in canonical *Pali*, and attributed to women members of the Buddhist Order (*theris or bhikkhunis*), is traditionally juxtaposed to a much larger companion collection authored by their male counterparts, the Theragāthā.

“The Therīgāthā is an exciting and provocative text. It is the only canonical text in the world’s religions that is attributed to female authorship and that focusses exclusively on women’s religious experiences”.³ In the specific context of Buddhism, it stands as a unique testimony to the experiences and aspirations of the community of women renunciates, the *bhikkhuni-sangha*. As such, it is important both for scholars interested in the history and doctrine of Indian Buddhism and to contemporary Buddhist women seeking liberative models from the past. Furthermore, as interest in the influence of gender in religious texts, institutions, and practices has developed over recent years, the Therīgāthā has become central to the studies of women in ancient India. Therīgāthā text contains great stories, and poems whose collections are beautifully constructed,

³ Kathryn, R. Blackstone: “ *Women In The Footsteps Of The Buddha: A Struggle For Liberation In The Therīgāthā*”, Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, Delhi, 2000, p-1

humorous, and emotionally powerful, even in translation. However, we simply cannot know with any certainty the dating authorship or geographical location in which the text was composed⁴. Though tradition maintains that all texts of Pali Canon were transcribed into written form in the first century B.C.E. in Sri Lanka, the earliest date we can identify for the Therīgāthā is the sixth century, with Dhammapala's commentary on the text, the Paramatthadīpanī. Yet even this date is misleading, as Dhammapala was working from an extant manuscript. There is also a very high probability that the text was transmitted orally for hundreds of years prior to its transcription. K.R.Norman concludes that it was composed over a three hundred year period from the late sixth to the end of third centuries. Not only are we uncertain about authorship, geographical location, and exact date of composition, but the long period of oral preservation means that the original utterance would inevitably become modified as generations of reciters memorized and performed the poems.

The Therīgāthā is a collection of five hundred twenty two verses compiled into seventy three poems. Therīgāthā has one thousand two hundred seventy nine verses arranged in two hundred sixty four poems. All the poems in both collections are ascribed to specific people, but the actual authorship of the poems is impossible to ascertain. Many of his poems are addressed to or are about their ascribed authors and three of the poems in the Therīgāthā have their author unnamed (1,23,67). The major emphasis of the poems is the quest for liberation. The Buddha is a relatively frequent character in the verses, but they are not primarily about Him. Rather, they detail the path to liberation followed by the foremost of His disciples. As for this reason they function as 'liberation manuals' i.e. they function as models of the successful quest for liberation that anyone can follow. This hypothesis opens up exciting possibilities for the interpretation of the Therīgāthā. If the poems in the text do indeed function as models of success, we can interpret them as symbols that reflect communal values and preoccupations.

The Therīgāthā bears witness to the claim of feminist scholars that women have a history of independent thought and action. Therīgāthā can be dated relatively on several grounds; traditional, historical, doctrinal, metrical and linguistic.⁵ The answers gained by these various methods may well be contradictory, for the last

⁴ Ibid,p-1

⁵ K.R.Norman," The Elder Verses Vol. ii, Therīgāthā", Luzac and Company Limited,1971,p-28

three tell of the composition of the verses, while tradition and history tell only of the recitation by the *therī* concerned.

The Attitude Towards Women and Their Status in Early Buddhism:

The path of practice as taught in ancient India by Gautama Buddha was, as far as the evidence allows us to judge, a path open to both women and men. The texts of early Indian Buddhism indicate to us that women were both lay followers of the Buddha and were also granted the right to ordain and become nuns⁶. Not only this, but they also report that certain women were conferred the privilege to ordain other women while others were known as influential teachers of men and women alike and as the inscriptional evidence bears out, considered qualified as experts in certain aspects of Gautama's *Dhamma*. While all of this has come to be accepted by modern Buddhist studies scholarship, it is imperative that we bear in mind that in actuality, for this to occur within an ancient religion practiced within traditional societies is really quite extraordinary.

Scholars investigating sexual stereotypes in our society are becoming increasingly aware of assumptions made about women and the effect of these assumptions on women. Like Judaism and Christianity, Buddhism is an overwhelming male-created institution dominated by male patriarchal power structure⁷. As a consequence of this male dominance, the feminine is frequently associated with the secular, powerless, profane, and imperfect. Male Buddhists, like male religious leaders in other cultures, established normative behavior for women by creating certain ideals of femininity. At the same time, men's opportunities for interaction with women were minimized by the restrictions of devout practice. When we find texts in which the sacred is represented as masculine while the profane or imperfect is represented as feminine, we have polarization that suggests both internal psychological conflicts and external social barriers between the sexes.

What was the Status of Bhikkhunis During the Buddha's Time?

When the Buddha allowed women to join the Order, a large number of women welcomed the opportunity given to women for the first time in Indian history. Some wanted to join the Order to escape the dreadful life of having to remain in the kitchen for most of their time, some wanted to escape from a meaningless life of

⁶Alice Collett, : "*Women In Early Indian Buddhism*", Oxford university Press, 2014

⁷Diana Y. Paul, "*Women In Buddhism; Images of the feminine in Mahayana tradition*"; Asian Humanities Press, Lancaster Miller Publishers, Berkeley, California, 1979, p-xiii-viv

widowhood, and some were doing it as a fashion, or simply followed their relatives.⁸ In the latter case, some proved to be trouble for the *sangha*, but for most of the cases, these women were sincere in their spiritual search as it was the first time they enjoyed such freedom. There were *bhikkhunis* who were recognized by the Buddha as being foremost in the *vinaya*, teaching dharma, etc. They were active in propagating the teaching of the Buddha in the same manner as the *bhikkhus*.

There were many enlightened *bhikkhunis*. The *Tripitaka* mentions 500 or more; There were some who were singled out and received praise from the Buddha with different distinctions, like:

- 1) Maha Pajapati, was praised for her long standing as the first *bhikkhuni*
- 2) Khema Therī, former queen of King Bimbisara was praised for her wisdom
- 3) Upalavanna Therī was praised for her achievement in performing miracles.
- 4) Patacara Therī, was praised for her good memory on the *vinaya*.
- 5) Dhammapadinna Therī, was praised for being capable in teaching.
- 6) Sona Therī, was praised for her patience.
- 7) Bhadda Kapilani, was praised for remembering past lives.
- 8) Sigalamata, was praised for holding fast to faith...⁹

Nietzsche in “Beyond Good and Evil” says, “But in the end, when we read what women write about ‘woman’, we are justified in a good measure of distrust that women really want-really can want – enlightenment about themselves.”

⁸ Chatsumarn Kalilsingh,” *Women In Buddhism (Questions And Answers)* “, Buddha ,net’s Book library, Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc.,1998. P-31.

⁹ Ibid, p-32-33.

A Glimpse Looks at Liberation as the Goal of Life (in Therīgāthā and Theragāthā):

The topic of women's liberation is a hot button issue with often times critical western eye assuming and even conceptualizing oppressions that other cultures impose or endure.¹⁰ According to the Pali textual sources, the religious goal of early Buddhism was nibbāna, liberation from the cycle of samsara. The life of renunciation and the *Vinaya* rules that circumscribe it are designed to propel people towards the goal. The goal, in short, is the definitive religious characteristic of Buddhism.¹¹ Nibbāna is frequently defined as the utterly transformative realization of the impermanence of all things, and the concomitant severing of the bonds of saṃsāra, the relentless cycle of desire, attachment, and grief to which human beings is bound¹².

The main emphasis of the Therīgāthā and the Theragāthā is the quest for the ultimate religious goal i.e. nibbāna (liberation). All the authors of both collections are described by the commentary as having attained liberation, that is, as having become *arahants*. Many of the poems in both collections contain both a poetic description and end with a recitation of technical terms and phrases, that is 'liberation refrain'.

There are also differences between the Therīgāthā and the Theragāthā: the Theragāthā is comfortable in its position of denouncing women and it does so vehemently.¹³ *Bhikkhus* view women as objects of seduction, whose only goal is to distract men from the more important values of life and *bhikkhus* from the goal of liberation. The portrayal of this general misogynist view of Buddhism, however, is problematic in the Therīgāthā, as women themselves are writing it. The *Therīs* did not view men as distractions; instead they talk of overcoming the material bonds of their own bodies by means of which, they can cease to become objects of distractions for men. The *Theras* present themselves as the ones who have realized the transient nature of the body and can overcome the desires of the women's body. The Therīgāthā, on the other hand, internalizes the lesson of the transient nature of the body. The body that is "evil smelling", "rotten", and "full of worms", belongs to the speaker of the poem.

¹⁰ Sabrina Diz, (sacred text): "Female renounces in the therigatha: Disembodiment and friendship" :URL: <http://www.academia.edu/2770557/> female_renounces_in_the_Therīgāthā_:disembodiment_and_friendship, accessed on 29-07-2024

¹¹ Kathryn R. Blackstone: "Women In The Footsteps Of The Buddhism :struggle for liberation in the Therīgāthā", Motilal Banarsidas Publishers; Delhi,,2000;p-13

¹² Ibid p-13.

¹³ <http://rinistudytable.blogspot.in/2012/08/a-comparative-analysis-of-the-theragatha.html>

In both the texts (Therīgāthā and Theragāthā), the attractive body belongs to a women except in one verse attributed to Sumedha. In Thi. 462,¹⁴Sumedha's parents tell her that she has been promised to the handsome King Anikaratta. But she however, wishes to lead an ascetic life and devotee of the Buddha. So the persuasion of the King was in vain. Thus, here, the King is not seen as a distraction for Sumedha, in fact, she hardly notices him. The Theragāthā and the Therīgāthā are different in the methods they employed to achieve liberation .The liberation for the *Therīs*, comes by observing their own bodies and through their own experiences. The *Theras*, on the other hand, achieved it by perceiving another .i.e. the desirous women and recalling to mind the images of putrefaction and the decay of decomposing corpses so as to establish 'disgust with the world'. It is a phenomenon catalyzed by external forces.

“The *Therīs* struggle against a false conception of self is much more immediate and personal than the *Theras* struggle against a false conception of other.”¹⁵This is what is the essential difference between the verses of the *Therīs* and the *Theras*- that of the personal in the Therīgāthā and the external in the Theragāthā and brings out the differences in the ways of projecting similar subjects in them.

Some Western Feminists Thought:

Here, let us take up some Western feminists, like- Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*), Carol Gilligan (*In a Different Voice*), John Stuart Mill (*The Subjection of Women*):

In “*The Second Sex*”, de Beauvoir discusses instances of women being oppressed throughout history, from early nomadic societies until the late grant of suffrage in France in 1947.¹⁶She draws impressively from a wide range of disciplines, including biology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, literature and of course history .She recognizes that men have been able to maintain dominant roles in virtually all cultures because women have resigned themselves to, instead of rebelling against, their subordinate status. The second sex has two major premises, first, that man, considering himself as essential being, or subject, has treated women as the unessential being, or object. The second, more controversial premise, is that much of women's psychological self is socially constructed, with a very few physiologically rooted feminine qualities or values. De Beauvoir

¹⁴ David, Rhys;” Psalms Of The Early Buddhists: Psalms Of The Sisters “; Pali Text society;London;1909;p-164

¹⁵ Kathryn R. Blackstone;” Women In The footsteps of the Buddha; struggle for liberation in the Therīgāthā” ;Motilal Publishers; Delhi;2000; p-81

¹⁶<http://www.enotes.com/topics/secondsex>

denies the existence of a feminine temperament or nature-to her all norms of femininity are artificial concepts

.In one of her most telling aphorisms she declares,” One is not born a woman; rather, one becomes one”

Carol Gilligan in her first major book,” *In a Different Voice*,” claimed that on the average and for a variety of cultural reasons, women tend to espouse an ethics of care that stresses relationships and responsibilities, whereas men tend to espouse an ethics of justice that stresses rules and rights. Thus for Gilligan, care retains its connection to the feminine. Her work represents a response to the Freudian notion that men have a well-developed moral sense while women do not.¹⁷

J.S .Mill, in “*The Subjection of Women*”, challenges the common notion that women are by nature unequal to men. He explains that “The legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong in itself, and one of the chief hindrances to human improvement”, and the systematic subordination of women by men “ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.”¹⁸ Mill hoped to pave the way for a new system of equality, based on theory, as no practice of gender equality had yet been allowed.

Conclusion:

Buddhism, as a way of living with compassion and insight, is radically liberating for women.¹⁹ Yet Buddhism as a historical institution reflects both 2500 years of men’s power over women, ‘patriarchy’ and women’s struggle for empowerment. The Therīgāthā text, which was believed to be the text written by women of early Buddhism, may be considered to have feminist approach for some reasons like;

- i) It depicts the pessimistic and anti-sensual side of early Buddhism.
- ii) It also expresses an awareness of the unique sufferings of women and the value of the freedom of monastic life.²⁰
- iii) The essential femininity of their authors is sometimes prominently and assertively proclaimed within the *gāthās*, a circumstance all the more significant once the strongly patriarchal social milieu in which Buddhism

¹⁷ Carol Gilligan; “ In a different voice: Psychological Theory And Women’s Development” ;Harvard University Press;1982;p-81

¹⁸ John Stuart Mill; “ The Subjection Of Women “; A Pen State Electronic Classic Series Publication;1869;p-3

¹⁹ <http://ieet.org/index.php/IEET/more/hughes20120305> –Buddhist Feminism(Part-1)

²⁰ibid

originated and developed is recalled.²¹ The articulations of Subha, for instance, begin with a poignantly invoked reference to her standing as a female;

A maiden, I, all clad in white, once heard
The Norm, and hearkened eager, earnestly,
So in me rose discernment of the truths.

iv) The text depicts instances of women to become a recluse and to join the Order need to take permission from their husbands or their male family members (the story of Rohini, who lives with her father and her father, is against becoming a recluse).

v) Significantly, ‘the Buddhist Feminism’, that one can discern in the *Therīgāthā* also entailed on occasion an inversion of male paradigms.

There are also demerits of *Therīgāthā* text, for instance; women must struggle to gain permission to renounce, to maintain their vows of celibacy, and to transform their emotional attachments to others. They must struggle to locate themselves in settings conducive to meditation and experiences of liberation. Clearly; the perspective of the *Therī* is oriented towards difficulty more than that of the *Theras*.

But in spite of all difficulties and social subordination, negligence, which is shown even by the Buddha, they successfully overcame these obstacles; it shows an optimistic hope for the liberation of all of us, a powerful message which is relevant even today. The very existence of a text that makes no apologies for its focus on women’s liberation shows us that women’s struggle for liberation has been going on for a long time now, even to this day.

In conclusion as to the question raised –whether *Therīgāthā* be considered as feminists, one can say that yes they can be considered as feminist on the one side, and on the other side, one can say that they cannot be considered as feminists as they are saying their views only from the point of theory and not bring out practically. The *Therīgāthā* has been an invaluable resource for a feminist reconstruction of Buddhism. According to Rita M. Gross, a prominent feminist Buddhist scholar, though Buddhist institution has been deeply patriarchal, there is nothing in fundamental Buddhist teaching that supports the oppression of women. Thus it may be argued that, despite the institutional history, a central theme in various Buddhist traditions is

²¹ Vijitha Rajapakse; “The *Therīgāthā*, A Revaluation “; Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka,2000,p-4

that all human beings (both men and women) are equal. This may be interpreted as providing the basis for equal human rights.

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