

Portrayal of Women in Religious Texts: Case Study of Buddhist and Brahmanical Text

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ABSTRACT

All religions, be it, Christianity, Jainism, Buddhism or even Brahmanical Hinduism claims equal rights for women. But it is very unfortunate that the religion becomes itself a tool of exploitation of women. Even so called progressive society of the Europe and America do not provide equal status to their women as given to men. The male members acquire their power from religion. Religion provides power to the male members of the family or religion to protect the chastity and honor of women. In other words, religion is the basic source of patriarchal system. Women are being marginalized even in the most marginalized sections of our society like dalit and Adivasi. The condition of dalit or Adivasi women is worst as compare to their male counterpart. So we can say that they are subaltern within the subaltern groups. They are being suppressed in the name of culture, tradition, morality, ritual and values. They face restriction at various levels, from home to outside. What should they eat, drink, and wear, how should they talk to their family members, their friends and strangers, it all decided by the male members of their families. So religion basically restricts and control women's life in the name of their protection.

Key Words : Jataka, Women, Buddhism, Brahmanism, Patriarchy, Kunala Jataka

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of 'civilization' the most oppressed community of 'civilized' society is woman. All religions, be it, Christianity, Jainism, Buddhism or even Brahmanical Hinduism claims equal rights for women. But it is very unfortunate that the religion becomes itself a tool of exploitation of women. They are being marginalized even in the most marginalized sections of our society like dalit and Adivasi. The condition of dalit or Adivasi women is worst as compare to their male counterpart. So we can say that they are subaltern within the subaltern groups. Even so called progressive society of the Europe and America do not provide equal status to their women as given to men. They are being suppressed in the name of culture, tradition, morality, ritual and values. They face restriction at various levels, from home to outside. What should they eat, drink, and wear, how should they talk to their family members, their friends and strangers, it all decided by the male members of their families. The male members acquire their power from religion. So religion basically restricts and control women's life in the name of their protection. Religion provides power to the male members of the family or religion to protect the chastity and honor of women. In other words, religion is the basic source of patriarchal system.

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Diana Paul very candidly pointed out that how the Buddhist text lost its originality over the time with every translation. She also discussed the impact of contemporary faiths or existing religion on the translation work of Buddhist text. She asserted that “A Buddhist text may have had two periods of development. A Sanskrit text, after its original composition, sometimes underwent generations of revision even before further development, revision, and editing, when the text was exported to China. These factors preclude identifying all variables necessary for reconstructing the historical context of each text. Many of the texts no doubt have incorporated what were originally non-Buddhist ideas and attitudes, but it is almost always impossible to identify the cultural context of such borrowings. The argument may be put forth that Hindu and Confucian values, as well as indigenous folk beliefs, are the origins of Buddhist non-egalitarianism. However, if Buddhists accepted non-egalitarian beliefs from outside their original teachings and incorporated them as sutras, that is, as part of their scriptural canon, they had to have accepted such beliefs as worthy of the status of scripture. To that extent, they could not have considered such non-egalitarian views as the antithesis of the Buddha’s doctrine; therefore, they cannot be said to have consistently or wholeheartedly advocated equality of the sexes.”¹

There is no disagreement here with Diana when she says that the indigenous folk beliefs or Hinduism or for that matter Confucianism must have played a greater role in ‘diluting’ the originality of the basic tenets of Buddhism but at the same time it would be difficult to believe that Buddhism in its original or pure form (unpolluted Buddhist teaching) was preaching egalitarianism. No religion can preach egalitarianism on gender basis because religion is itself a construct of male dominant culture.

According to Uma Chakravarti, the ‘status of women’ was the main focus of the studies of women in early Indian history, which unfortunately focused only on limited sets of questions like property rights, marriage laws and rights of religious practices, normally viewed as indices of status. She further says that the limited focus has left a major lacuna in our understanding of social processes which have shaped men, women and social institutions in early India. What she suggested is that, instead of focusing the status of women, we should study the basis and nature of the subordination of women in early Indian society.²

She asserts that the subordination of women took a severe form in early India through the powerful tool of religious customs which shaped social practices. All most every religious texts depicted women as a sinful creature. Manu associates women with the habit of sitting around, lying, bad conduct, anger, treachery, betrayal, duplicity, nastiness and cruelty.³ Manu gives all power to the men. Manu clearly instructs husbands to guard their wives. Through their lust for men, wives become unfaithful to their husband. So it is their husband’s duty to control their wives.

“Knowing their disposition, which the lord of creatures laid on them at creation (*i.e.*, their reproductive power, their sexuality, their essential nature) every man should most strenuously exert himself to guard them).⁴

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1. Paul, Diana Y., *Women in Buddhism: Images of the feminine in the Mahayana Tradition*, University of California Press, 1985, pp. xxiii-iv
 2. Chakravarti, Uma, *Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State*, Critical Quest, 2013, p. 1
 3. Das, R. M., *Women in Manu and His Seven Commentators*, Kanchana Publications, Varanasi, 1962
 4. Manu IX. 16, Quoted in Chakravarti, Uma, *Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State*, Critical Quest, 2013, p. 16

Mahabharata, the great Indian epic maintains the same view while portraying women's character as destructive and demonic. In the epic, *Bhishma Pitamah* narrated a story to *Yudhishtira*, where an old aged woman was repeatedly trying to seduce *Astavakra*. The old woman supposedly told *Astavakra* that the sexual desire of a woman never ends not even after her death. Her sexual lust could not determine by her age.⁵ According to this story, for a woman nothing is more important than the sex. So the message from the story was to control the uncontrolled sexual desire of women and for that men should have all the powers over women.

The character or the nature of a woman was divided into two different or opposite categories, *Strisvabhava* and *stridharma*. Most of the Brahmanical legal texts associate woman innate nature with sexuality (*i.e.*, *strisvabhava*) while *stridharma* is associated with ideal woman who control their sexual desire. *Strisvabhava* of a woman constantly tries to overcome the *stridharma* of a woman. In other words, a woman is always controlled by her sexual desires. Therefore, it is a duty of the husband to protect the chastity of her wife and for that man should always control the woman. This patriarchal notion can go to the extent that what Leslie says, most of the Brahmanical legal texts suggest that *stridharma* which is the duty of ideal woman, is basically a paternal heritage of a woman whereas *strisvabhava*, which is 'demoniac' in nature is maternal heritage.⁶

This is how the Brahmanical ideology set the way to control woman by the male members of her family. Chastity becomes the tool to put the woman under the subordination of man. So in the name of controlling sexual desires, woman becomes subordinate to the man.

According to Uma Chakravarti, "women's general subordination was essential in this stage because it was only then that the mechanism of control upon women's sexuality could actually be effective. The mechanism of control operated through three devices and at three different levels; the first was through *ideology*, through *stridharma*, or *pativrata dharma*, internalized by women who attempted to live up to the ideal notion of womanhood constructed by the ideologues of the society. In the case of Hindu society the design of the patriarchal caste-class structure was mapped out by the brahmanas; *pativrata* the specific dharma of the Hindu wife then became the ideology by which women accepted and even aspired to chastity and wifely fidelity as the highest expression of their selfhood".⁷

As far as the depiction of women in the Buddhist religious literature is concerned, the *Jataka* tales are not different from Brahmanical texts. Mentioning the 'wickedness' of a woman, *Andabhuta Jataka* says that "what crime will they not commit; and then, to deceive their husbands, what oath will they not take—aye, in the light of day—that they did not! So false hearted are they! Therefore has it been said":—

"A sex composed of wickedness and guile
Unknowable, uncertain as the path,
Of fishes in the water,—womankind
Hold truth for falsehood, falsehood for the truth!
As greedily as cows seek pastures new,

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5. *Mahabharata* XIII, Quoted in Leslie, Julia, *The Perfect Wife: The Orthodox Hindu Wife according to the Stridharma Paddhati of Tryambakayajavan*, Oxford University Press, 1989, p.268
 6. Leslie, Julia, *The Perfect Wife: The Orthodox Hindu Wife according to the Stridharma Paddhati of Tryambakayajavan*, Oxford University Press, 1989, p.266
 7. Chakravarti, Uma, *Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State*, Critical Quest, 2013, p. 16

Woman, unsated, yearn for mate on mate.
 As sand unstable, cruel as the snake,
 Women know all things; naught from them is hid!”⁸

So the moral of the story was, never trust a woman. To satisfy their sexual desire they are bound to cheat their husbands. So it is husband’s duty to control the freedom of his wife.

“Tis nature’s law that rivers wind;
 Trees grow of wood by law of kind;
 And, given opportunity,
 All women work iniquity.”⁹

So the woman’s innate nature is ‘sinful’. Soon she gets opportunity; she will fly with her sexual desire.

In another story, to prove the wickedness of a woman, Bodhisatta did not even spare his old mother. In *Asatamanta Jataka*, it was narrated that even a blind old lady at the age of 120, can go to the extent, of trying to kill her son to full fill her sexual desire. In this story, Bodhisatta was teaching his disciple that how wicked women are. In the story Bodhisatta told his student that “from today you shall take my place about my mother, and with your own hands wash, feed and look after her. As you rub her hands, feet, head and back, be careful to exclaim, ‘Ah, Madam! If you are so lovely now you are so old, what must you not have been in the heyday of your youth! And as you wash and perfume her hands and feet, burst into praise of their beauty.”¹⁰

As an obedient student he did whatever his master told him to do. After getting so many compliments, one day the old lady broke her silence and asked him,

“Is your desire towards me?
 He replied: It is indeed, madam, but my master is so strict.
 Old lady: If you desire me, kill my son!

Youth: But how shall I, that have learned so much from him,—how shall I for passion’s sake kill my master?

Old lady: Well then, if you will be faithful to me, I will kill him myself.”¹¹

Thus, the story very clearly conveys the message that how wicked women are and how sinful they can be. They can kill their own obedient son to satisfy their sexual need. So like Brahmanical texts, *Jataka* also portrays women’s innate nature as sinful and wicked.

According to Diana, the Mahayana Buddhist texts perceive women character as “the feminine is mysterious, sensual, destructive, elusive, and closer to nature. Association with this nether world may be polluting and deadly for the male and therefore must be suppressed, controlled, and conquered by the male in the name of culture, society, and religion. Female sexuality as a threat to culture and society provides religion with a rationale for relegating women to a marginal existence. Simultaneously, the mystery of the female body and its powers are associated with disruptive cosmological powers.”¹² She goes on saying that, contrary to this above description of women

8. Cowell, E. B., *The Jataka*, Volume-I, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2002, p. 155

9. Cowell, E. B., *The Jataka*, Volume-I, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2002, p. 151

10. Ibid, p. 149

11. Ibid, p. 149

12. Paul, Diana Y., *Women in Buddhism: Images of the feminine in the Mahayana Tradition*, University of California Press, 1985, p. xxiv

character, Buddhism provided legitimacy to the prostitution. “A prostitute’s sexuality, although feared, is also desired. She is powerful because she is not subjugated by any single male authority figure. She is appreciated because she gives of herself indiscriminately.”¹³

But for some scholars the development of Buddhism was emancipatory for women. According to them, before the Buddhist era women enjoyed hardly any rights even in their family matters but with the spread of Buddhism one can witness the visible change in the society. Horner opined that “during the Buddhist epoch there was a change. Women came to enjoy more equality, and greater respect and authority than ever hitherto accorded them..... The exclusive supremacy of man began to give way before the increasing emancipation of woman....they were now allowed a good deal of liberty.”¹⁴

Discussing the change in power relation at household levels, he further says that “as wife a woman was no mere household drudge, but she had considerable authority in the home, ranked as her husband’s helpmate, companion and guardian, and in matters both temporal and spiritual was regarded as his equal and worthy of respect..... A woman was no longer regarded as so much part of her husband, so completely his possession, that when bereft of him her life virtually ceased..... Under Buddhism, more than ever before, she was an individual in command of her own life until the dissolution of the body, and less of a chattel to be only respected if she lived through and on a man.”¹⁵

Thus the main focus of Horner’s study was to explain how women got empowered through the spread of Buddhism. But unfortunately Horner, consciously or un-consciously ignored to discuss about the punishment, prescribed by *Jataka*, of committing adultery by a woman. He avoided of mentioning how the *Jataka* tales in its moral lecture, supported the death penalty for woman who committed this crime. All the stories narrated in *Kunala Jataka* focuses how the innate nature of a woman is sinful. A woman cannot be loyal just to her husband. They need more and more man to full fill their sexual desire and for that a woman can sleep with a cripple also. This is what the crux of *Kunala Jataka* is all about. In a story of *Kunal Jataka*, the text even supported the death penalty for committing adultery. We will just summarize one of the stories narrated by Bodhisattva in *Kunala Jataka* to understand its outlook towards women.

Once upon a time, Benares was ruled by a good-looking king called *Kandari*. He married to a beautiful woman, *Kinnara*. Just behind the palace, there was an apple tree. A cripple started living on the tree of which, king had no clue. One day when the queen saw the cripple, she immediately developed passion for him. When her husband had fallen asleep, she went out, climbed the tree and had her pleasure with him. Every night she used to do the same thing. One day when the king was entering to his palace, he noticed cripple sitting on the tree. He said to his chaplain, “‘just look at this ghost of a man.....it is possible, my friend, that any woman moved by lust would come nigh such a loathsome creature’. Hearing what he said the cripple, swelling with pride, thought, “‘What is it this king said? Methinks he knows nothing of his queen’s coming to visit me. O my lord, thou guardian

13. Paul, Diana Y., *Women in Buddhism: Images of the feminine in the Mahayana Tradition*, University of California Press, 1985, p. xxv

14. Horner, I. B., *Women Under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen*, George Routledge and Son, London, 1930, pp. 2-3

15. Horner, I. B., *Women Under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen*, George Routledge and Son, London, 1930, p.3

spirit of this tree, excepting thee no one knows about this.” The chaplain noticing his action, told to the king, “Well, sire, whatever may be the case with other woman, your queen *Kinnara* misconducts herself with him.” What is this you say, my friend? Would such a charming lady take her pleasure with this disgusting creature”? “Well then, sire, put it to the proof.” “Agreed, said the king”. When she was caught red-handedly, the king said to the chaplain, ‘Friend, you spoke the truth; go and have her head chopped off.’”¹⁶

Very evidently, the story allowed men to kill those women who are not truthful to their men. The chaplain, in the story, went ahead to suggest that *Kinnara* should not be punished because she is not the only woman who did this but it is an essential character of women. Being a woman she was bound to deceive on her husband.

“Sire, be not angry with the queen *Kinnara*: all women are just the same. If you are anxious to see how immoral women are, I will show you there wickedness and deceitfulness. Come, let us disguise ourselves and go into the country”¹⁷

Thus, according to the *Kunala Jataka*, women are not trustworthy; their inborn character is immoral, and they can't be loyal to their husband. This was asserted repeatedly in this *Jataka*.

*“As lion fed upon raw flesh and blood,
With his five paws fierce ravening for food,
In others' hurt will his chief pleasure find-
Such like are women.
Man, beware their kind.”*¹⁸

The above lines very clearly avowing that a man should never trust a woman. Disloyalty or treachery is a part of their innate nature. They are wicked by their nature. Freedom is not meant for such treacherous characters. So, to avoid such things to be happened, husbands should always control their wives. Diana Paul asserts that “Male Buddhists, like male religious leaders in other cultures, established normative behavior for women by creating certain ideals of femininity.”¹⁹ She further says that, “When we find texts in which the sacred is represented as masculine while the profane or imperfect is represented as feminine, we have a polarization that suggests both internal psychological conflicts and external social barriers between the sexes.”²⁰ Thus, we can say that the patriarchal structure was in its initial stage. In other words, the story indicates the beginning of patriarchal system.

In a concluding remark we can say that as far as the depiction of women in the religious texts is concerned, the Buddhist texts are no different from other religious texts. The study of Buddhist religious literature makes it very clear that the seed of misogynistic idea among the male followers of any religious faith has been sown by the religious texts.

16. Cowell, E. B., *The Jataka*, Volume-V, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2002, pp. 234-35

17. Cowell, E. B., *The Jataka*, Volume-V, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2002, p. 235

18. Ibid, p. 225

19. Paul, Diana Y., *Women in Buddhism: Images of the feminine in the Mahayana Tradition*, University of California Press, 1985, p. xx

20. Ibid., p. xx

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