Women and their Intersection with Class, Work, and Spirituality in Pāli Jātakas

Kumari Priya Ranjan* and Prof. Heeraman Tiwari**

Abstract

Historical writing has traditionally marginalized women often stemming from gender stereotypes that portray women as less capable leading to unequal treatment and confining them to patriarchal stereotypes. This approach shifted in the 1970s with feminist movements that introduced gender-based methodologies, emphasizing a sharp deviation from patriarchy and establishing gender relations as key forces in history. However, reconstructing women's histories in early India remains challenging due to the biases in Brahmanical texts, prompting scholars to turn to alternative sources like Pali Buddhist *Jātakas*. The *Jātakas*, a collection of tales depicting the Buddha's past lives, also reflect societal structures and offer insights into women's roles in early urban spaces. *Jātakas* reveal diverse representations of women in public and private spheres, including courtesans (*gaṇikās*), slaves, and labourers. Often depicted as financially independent and socially influential, courtesans occupied stratified roles based on beauty, status, and patronage. In contrast, slave women were largely relegated to domestic and agrarian labour, reflecting economic and social hierarchies. The narratives also highlight women's participation in textile production and other public economic activities, particularly among lower castes, while upper-caste women remained largely confined to household roles. Although some women, such as queens, appear in positions of narrative importance, their portrayals often reinforce patriarchal ideologies. The *Jātakas*, therefore, provide a nuanced lens to study the condition of women in early Indian society, capturing both women's subordination and agency within evolving social and economic frameworks.

Keywords: Jātakas, Gaṇikās, Pracārikā, Darika, Nagara-shobhanis, Boddhisatta, Ascetic Misogyny, Institutional Androcentrism, Soteriological Inclusiveness, Soteriological androgyny, Arahats

Introduction

Women have been the voice of history writing, and gender-based issues in historical studies were mostly silent until the 1970s. History writing previously was male history, in which women were mostly stereotyped as representations of patriarchal creative imagination.[1] This writing projected women or confined them into the "domestic." Therefore, this male agency in history writing tends to move between bi-polarities like housewife and prostitute, public woman and private woman, pious woman and scheming, evil woman. Multiple waves of feminism, particularly woman feminism, salvaged these facets of women's history writings and provided a new gender-based methodology and perspective to history writing from the 1970s onwards. This new pattern of history writing brought patriarchy and gender relations into the focus of history writing. This new process of state engendering history writing balanced the historical canvas and history, and now, history does not remain just chronicles of the statement and ideal woman. However, the role of gender and gender relations was being studied as a major influential force in historical changes and developments. The role of women in various spheres of social and economic life is being unearthed. However, constructing and drawing the history of gender relations

* Research Scholar, Ph.D. (Ancient History), CHS, JNU, New Delhi. Can be reached at kumaripriyaranjan1994@gmail.com

** HOD of Centre for Historical Studies, CHS, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

and women became difficult in early Indian sources, for which literary sources are largely grouped into two categories: 1) *Brahmanical* and 2) *Sarmanic* literature. Brahmanical texts are largely instructive. Therefore, they try to draw a picture of an ideal household, as Donald R. Davis Jr. argued, and lack information on the "totality" of society. Therefore, Rhys Davids pointed out that understanding of early Indian society can be constructed based on the Pali Buddhist texts rather than Brahmanical texts.[2] Therefore, by using Pali Buddhist *Jātakas*, this paper aims to understand the condition, class, and occupation of women in the private and public life of early historic urban space and their relationship with their male counterparts. In addition to this, it also focuses on pursuing Buddhist conceptions of women and gender relationships in early India through Pali Buddhist *Jātakas*.

Writing Gender History and Locating Woman in the Past

The history writing around gender began with the socialist reform movement, which unearthed ancient Indian text to support their reformist objectives, which was initiated and carried forward by the upper class, who studied women and their identity entirely from the perspective of *Sanskritic* texts and myths. However, this reformist movement and its counter-movements necessitated the study of the position of women in ancient Indian society and its structure. These studies largely confined themselves to households, institutions of family, and their relationship with their male counterpart while locating the women in ancient India. The studies in question were largely based on *Brahmanical* sources, which carried the inherent biases and perspectives of the *Brahmanas*. These sources predominantly focused on upper castes and presented women's roles in an instructive rather than analytical manner. The nationalist historians sought to place women's status within a historical framework to challenge imperialist critiques. They emphasized that women held a high status during the Vedic period, which later declined due to foreign invasions. For instance, Shakuntala Das, in her work *Women in the Sacred Laws*, argued that practices like purdah, sati, and female infanticide arose as a response to the abduction and violation of Hindu women during invasions. Similarly, R.C. Dutt, a well-known nationalist historian, attributed the seclusion and restrictions placed on women to the societal upheavals caused by Muslim invasions. Both writers presented these arguments to underscore the historical changes in women's status while countering colonial narratives that critiqued Indian society. However, the historical exploration in texts presents a different spectacle of these arguments, which undermine the frameworks, particularly patriarchy, that used to govern the women and gender relations in early India and based on a selective focus on early Indian literary sources.

These patterns of historical writing were largely driven by the cultural encounter of imperialists, which shaped nationalist historiography. Therefore, nationalist historians also attempted to carry out a comparison between women's position in ancient India and other civilizations, particularly Europe, which was a wide theme in Altekar's survey of women's position in ancient India in his *"Position of Women in Hindu Civilization: From Prehistoric Times to the Present Days*." He studied the position of women from the earliest time to the mid-fifties when the Hindu Code Bill was about to pass by surveying the opinion of ancient Indian lawmakers. He visualized women in his household and family context, who were "stock breeders" and carriers of civilization by countering the imperialist critics of Hindu civilization and framed his arguments in the framework of the "physical inferiority of woman." These views of biological and psychological explanations of the social relationship between men and women were obscured.[3] Thus, he fails to see the position of women in specific organizations and recognizes the patriarchal subordination of women as well and he broadly undermines the socio-economic context within which women were subordinated or their subordination was achieved. Therefore, his multiple arguments are followed by weak explanations.[4] Even his studies focus on "*Aryan* Women"; therefore, he also overlooked *Sudra* women, who were more dynamic and active kind of womanhood in Hindu society.[5] Somehow, this limitation of nationalist historians on cultural aspects regarding women's history was the cause of their limited understanding of factors deriving the historical position of women.

This mobility factor in women's historical position provided a new dimension with the growth of the Marxist pattern of history writing, which focused on the economic and social relations as a driving force of history. However, they visualized women's history as the same as the history of men in their "mode of production" and "productive relationship" spectacles and somehow marginalized the mode of social reproduction. Thus, this pattern of history writing of "powerless" had ignored the "most powerless among the powerless in their framework." The feminist movement of the 1970s, as Tanika Sarkar wrote, provided sustaining and self-conscious values to women's history writings in India. When multiple forms and structures of the patriarchy were explored and questioned by women scholars by looking at the experience of the women.[6]

Jātakas: Structure, Historical Contexts and Women

Jātakas, which are the tales of the past lives of the Buddha, illustrate the virtue that a *Boddhisattva* must possess to attain perfect enlightenment. These stories are divided into four parts: *paccupannavatthu*, the *atītavatthu*, the *gāthā* or verses, which form the basis of how tales would be organized in texts like *Ekanipata*, *Dukanipata*, and *Tikanipata,* etc., and the *samodhāna* (connect the character of the present with the character of the past).[7] These *Jātakas* are said to have been in oral tradition before their compilation. Therefore, locating Jātakas within a particular literary and historical context is difficult. However, E.B. Cowell pointed out that two historical sources could clarify the time and historical context of *Jātakas.* The first sources are art and inscriptions on the Bharhut, Sanchi, and Amaravati, dated to the 3rd century BCE. It indicated these stories were in social spaces in oral tradition till the 3rd century BCE. Another source is Fa Xian's record in the 5th century CE, which mentioned the depiction of 500 bodily forms of *Bodhisatta* in Ceylon.[8] This indicates that The Jātaka stories were widely circulated and gained significant prominence during the period spanning from the 3rd century BCE to before the 3rd century CE, as noted by Uma Chakravarti. However, Kumkum Roy highlights that the composition of these stories was not a singular event but rather a "long drawn-out process." This suggests that the *Jātakas* were not created in a fixed time frame but evolved over an extended period, with multiple layers of stories and structural components gradually coming together. Roy's argument emphasizes their development's dynamic and continuous nature, reflecting contributions from diverse contexts and periods, rather than a fixed point of origin.".[9]

K. R. Norman pointed out that some of *Jātaka* stories might have "un-Buddhist roots" " in which the "Buddhist qualities" of the text belong primarily to the prose section and where the *Bodhisatta* is depicted as central teaching. These were in existence before their composition. He further pointed out that the similarities in fable short of texts like *Jātakas, Pañcatantra*, and *Hitopadeśa* suggest that they were independent components and were brought together in a particular period in the fold of *Jātakas.*[10] Winternitz also believes that these stories are a combination of old and new tales. Thus, they have characteristics of folklore that are not only concerned with the notable character but also shed light on the lives of normal people. Thus, it is especially important to look into the history of those women who have not been in the central structure of 'historical artefacts and literature" and provide a good insight into everyday compared to other texts. A.K. Ramanujan also pointed out that these stories or tales preserve societal memories. Thus, these *Jātaka* can be fruitful to look into the historical process of early India.

Social Aspects of Women in *Jātakas*

The *Jātaka* tales, as storytelling texts, serve as "custodians of societal memory," preserving and reflecting their time's cultural and social ethos. While primarily focused on recounting the previous lives of the Buddha, these stories also shed light on the lives and experiences of ordinary people, offering valuable insights into everyday life in historical contexts, as Winternitz has pointed out. However, these tales used spaces as central metaphors and platforms to construct "memory-based teachings," which expressed different desires and socio-economic constructs. These spaces were utilized by different sections of women differently in the socio-economic context of the second urbanization. Buddhist *Jātaka* tales portray women from diverse socio-economic contexts who were functioning in both public spaces as *Gaṇikās, Pracārikā,* and- *Darika*, as well as slave workers in different sections of the economy and in households as homemakers and laywomen. These two spaces often define their social positioning in the structure of patriarch and household.

The public spaces depicted in the *Jātaka* tales were shaped and contextualized by the second urbanization, a period that saw the disruption of traditional socio-economic relationships due to the rise of urbanization and the expansion of the urban economy these new opportunities and power in newly formed social structure was primarily captured by the men and women were reduced in the limits of the household. However, these changes did not cut off all the opportunities for women.[11] She can be noticed in the urban milieu with different occupations in urban culture during the second urbanization as depicted in Pali Buddhist *Jātaka* tales. However, their occupation is generally constructed about gender and sexuality, which occurred due to the pressure on social norms and control over social intercourse.[12] However, the control over sexuality was often diverse according to the social context of women in ancient India, particularly in the case of *Gaṇikās*, which, as a profession, is intensively narrated in Buddhist Pali *Jātakas*. *Jātaka* stories used various terms like *vesī, nāriyo, gamaviyo, gaṇikā, nagara-sobhānī, vanadāsī* and *kumbhādāsī*[13] for them, which indicate that the courtesan or the gaṇikā culture was in wide prevalence in the urban centre during that period. That's why they drew wide attention to Buddhist literary work.

Buddhist *Jātakas* contain diverse narratives of these '*Gaṇikās*' or courtesan as an institutionalized profession since the age of the Buddha. These courtesans used to

hold a respectable social position in society and were patronized by the royal court and urban rich males.[14] These courtesans might be those women who were at the edge of poverty and disturbed by married life or being given in religious/ secular events or violated other social norms, abducted, sold by parents and were denied an honourable status in society. The stories of the *Ambapālī* and *Vasaṇtasenā* show that it was primarily family that used to decide whether one could become "*gaṇikā"* or not. But they might have the independence to make decisions. Working as professional, financially independent women who had previously worked in urban public spaces to earn money to support their livelihoods and family. Buddhist literature informs that this institution occupation was the "successive nature of occupation, which daughters inherit from their mothers.[15] But all these *Gaṇikās* did not enjoy the same social status within the urban culture of the *Jātaka* tales. They were categorized in *vesī, nāriyo, gamaviyo, gaṇikā, nagara-sobhānī, vanadāsī* and *kumbhādāsī*. Those women, the most beautiful in the cities, were appointed as the *nagara-sobhānī*. These women used to be known as the "ornament of the city." These *nagara-shobhanis,* as *Atthana Jātaka* shows, were highly paid for rendering their services, and their client were mostly prosperous and wealthy individuals like kings and merchants.[16] *Vanadasi* and *kumbhādāsī* were the lower class of *Gaṇikās* in the household of the *nagaraśobhanī*. The reference from *Sulasā-Jātaka, Athhana Jātaka, Takkariya Jātaka,* and *Kanavera Jātaka* shows that these chief courtesans or *nagaraśobhanī* were followed by a train of hundreds of slaves and dances of *nataka-itthis*.[17] It might be that these were from some lower section of the society. However, they might also function independently in urban spaces. In between these two groups, there was "prostitution" different from *Gaṇikās*, who were working with the high-class *Gaṇikās*. Prostitutes, *Vanadas*, and *kumbhādāsī* were low-paid women. Thus, these amounts, their beauty, and their social background determine their social positioning in this profession and its institutional structure. These amounts and professions used to permit them not to render the socio-sexual morality of households formed through the categories of social stratification like varna and caste. The *Kanavera Jātaka* narrates a tale in which *Gaṇikā Soma* was romantically inclined to a robber who brought the execution. She bribes a thousand pieces to the governor to save and secure his life from the execution by releasing him. This story shows that these professional women used to enjoy certain freedom to choose or decide certain aspects of their lives, as this tale does not show any role of the family of *Gaṇikā* in her personal life, which, as *Takkariya Jātaka* shows, used to reside in *Gaṇikāgrha* along with the courtesan. They also had a social power status in the household of *Gaṇikāgrha*, in which she could deprive their family member of their wealth. This structurization of *Gaṇikāgrha*, unlike traditional patriarchal households, was only because of power and social liberty generated through their profession and wealth, as the story of *Takkariya Jātaka* shows that the brother of Kali, a famous courtesan who received a thousand pieces of a day, had a brother *Tundila*, who was a debauchee, a drunker and a gambler. He used to take money from the *Kali*, the *Gaṇikā*, and waste it, but when he returned to Kali, she ordered her maidens to throw him out.[18] Later periods, references show that girls in the household used to inherit this profession from the chief courtesan of the house. But it is noteworthy that, unlike other literary compositions of ancient India, *Jātaka* tales nowhere show the mother of *Gaṇikā* playing the role of supreme authority, who used to determine the smooth functioning of the *gaṇikāgrah.* However, *Gamani canda Jātaka* shows that the king or state usually them in their declining trade rather than mother or *kuttani.*[19] It might be that it was the king's responsibility or duty to maintain the smooth functioning of the institution of the *Gaṇikā* or Courtesan in the urban spaces. But it might also be possible that the mother of *Gaṇikā* used to reside in her household and functioned as the counsellor and manager.

These *Gaṇikās* were also associated with public festivals and gatherings and were a matter of attraction in such gatherings. *Vaṭṭaka Jātaka* narrates a story linked with the *Kattika* festival, in which *Gaṇikā* renders their services to urban elites in return for payment. Even *jātaka* tales present unclear evidence that these *gaṇikās* also used to be child-bearers for the social elites.[20] These references from the *Jātakas* also contain details of low-class *gaṇikās vanadāsī* and *kumbhādāsī*. These were slave women who were acquired as gifts or predatory raids; even Sulasā Jātaka also pointed out that debt, purchase of free will, and fear are causes of slavery[21] or, as Devaraj Chanana pointed out, born as slave women employed by a family[22] and often seen in *Jātaka* tales along with *gaṇikās*. They were brought and sold in one hundred *kahāpānas* / *kaśārpaṇas*.[23] However, it might vary according to the class and beauty of the slaves. For example, *Vessantara Jātaka* presents that a princely slave was brought in the sum of one thousand *Kaśārpaṇa.*[24] These female slaves were also given as dowry during the wedding of the wealthy.

These slave women were employed in agrarian production and domestic work. The frequency of the number of references to these slave women and the context in which they are presented show that many of these women were employed in domestic work. That's why they were of high value, as *Vessantara Jātaka* shows. The agrarian work might have been largely carried out

with the labour of the paid workers, of which *Suntao Jātaka* informs that they were paid between 1-5 *maśakas* in a day for their labour. In certain cases, they were paid in the form of kind.[25] Thus, cheaper slave labor was hired for the agrarian work, and slave females carried out domestic work. These domestic works include fetching water, pounding roses, and fulfilling the physical needs of the master.[26] They also used to work as going on errands, helping the master and his mistress during baths, bathing their feet, entertaining them with music and dance, spreading the rise out in the sun, handing the plates and dishes, bringing the spittoon and fetching their fan during their meals, for sweeping yards and stables, etc.[27] In the narrative universe of the Jātakas, women operated within and beyond the household structure. Patriarchal structures and ideologies upheld and regulated their roles and positions, which shaped their participation in economic transactions. This is evident in institutions like the *gaṇikās* (courtesans) as well as in their contributions to the domestic spaces of others. Beyond this household setup and institutionalization in patriarchal male constructs, they were often involved in productive activities in stories of *Jātakas*. But such space's role in public spaces was granted by the poorer classes of the society and urban society, which had no alternative but to allow their female to work with them. That's' why they could be seen working with their male counterpart in the agrarian field. Even *Jātaka* tales indicate that they used to keep their own paddy field. They used to grow cotton and spin fine thread as well as work as weavers *pasakārā/ peśakāra,*[28] to manufacture the clothes[29] that were sold and brought to urban markets. These women in textile work might have an association with the lower caste—these lower castes. Women are frequently present in *Jātaka*'s narrative universe as wage workers[30]. But there is no reference to upper caste women working in public space economic activities, except the profession of *gaṇikās*. R.S. Sharma pointed out that the economic necessity of subsistence for their family pushed them out of the household and to work in the economic activities of the public spaces.[31]

In addition to this, the public urban space of the *Jātakas* was utilized by women through another diverse profession as well they could be seen while performing the duties of the *pracārikā*[32] or attendant, *atthacharikaitthi*[33] or personal attendant, *Peranan Darika* or women doorkeepers[34] and *dhātī* or wet nurse, etc. But there is no clarity about whether they were paid, laborers or salve women.

In the Jātakas, women are occasionally portrayed as queens or figures of importance within the narrative. However, these depictions do not present women as holding significant positions of power or authority within societal or political structures. Even when women are shown exercising a degree of influence or dominance, it is often portrayed negatively or with disapproval. This is evident in the *Kandina-Jātaka*, where their actions or roles are condemned, reflecting the broader patriarchal ideology embedded in these narratives. Such representations underscore the limitations imposed on women's roles, reinforcing traditional norms that marginalized their prominence in power and governance:

> "Cursed be the dart of love that work men pain,
> Cursed be the land where women rule supreme,
> And cursed the fool that bows to woman's sway.

Thus, their institutional subordination was a core theme in the text, wherever they were presented as working in household spaces with proper guarding.[35] Therefore, they are often called "false-hearted" along with adjectives like "ingrates and treacherous" in their nature.[36] Such portrayal also concentrates on sexuality and lust simultaneously. For example, the words of *Boddhisatta* in *Durajana Jātaka* (Wives a bar to the higher life) are as follows:

> "Think's thou a woman love thee? Be not glad.
> Thinkest thou she loves thee not? forbear to grieve.
> Of fishes in the water, women prove.[37]

The *Radha Jātaka* also presents a similar view of the intersection of lust and sexuality in its narrative, which spoke of a Brahmin who asks two parrots to keep an eye on his wife during his absence, and these parrots observe his wife, misconduct, and report the brahmin.[38] But these stories, as John Garrett Jones argued, are quite silent on homosexual attachments. Rather, they will present the ideal notion of warm male friendship, which, as Garrett Johns believes, is a, are quite silent on homosexual attachments. Rather, they will present the ideal notion of warm male friendship, which, as Garrett Johns believes, is a humanly attractive quality.[39]

Jātakas Perspective on Womanhood, Sexuality, and Gender within the Spiritual Tapestry

The *Mudulakkhaṇa-jātaka* narrates a story of the previous birth of Buddha, in which he was an ascetic with great power and usually came to the palace of the king to have food. Once, the king was far away from his place. Therefore, he handed over the charge of feeding to his queen. When the ascetic awoke from meditation, he entered the palace through a window and saw the queen undressed. Overcome with desire, he transformed into a crow and spent seven days consumed by lust. When the king returned and discovered what had happened, he offered his wife to the ascetic to help him regain

his composure. Regaining his sense of control, the ascetic returned the queen to the king, left the city, and ascended to the heavenly realms for rebirth.[40] This story portrayed women as objects and obstacles in the path of men's spirituality and destruction. Again, *Vaṭṭaka-jātaka* presents a story in which friends of the son of an over-treasurer decided to send a courtesan to divert him from the path of righteousness. They selected a charming girl, asked her to do this, and sent her to his chamber. But she failed to divert him and generate any response from him. These tales place women as objects who often assist *Bodhisatta* to achieve his path, but we? do not go through about her own. Thus, this story also provides an inner insight into the question of the place of women in Buddhist philosophy, which is often profound to have soteriological inclusive in its narratives.

The narratives of the *Mudulakkhaṇa-jātaka,* like other narratives of the exact text, present women as the potential hindrance to the Buddhist path of liberation. However, they identified the women's behavior as the cause. But they did not generalize whole womanhood as faulty for the same. Thus, the attitude and approach of these tales towards women varies in the philosophical context of the stories of the *jātakas*. Alan Sponberg, in her work, has identified four kinds of attitudes of Early Buddhism towards women: 1) Ascetic Misogyny, 2) Institutional Androcentrism, 3) Soteriological Inclusiveness, 4) Soteriological androgyny, these attitudes were the outcome of social contingencies in which Buddhist community grew and shaped.[41]

Ascetic Misogyny: Alan Sponberg pointed out that the *jātakas* are the most blatantly misogynous texts of the Pali Literature[42], which perceive women as signifying desire and posing a consistent threat to the male monastics, who aim to preserve their celibacy.[43] Such threats have been exploited in the Telapatta jātaka, in which a female is said to have seduced the five companions of *Boddhisatta* through her beauty and charm.[44] But the most misogynous of this collection of tales was the *Kuṇāla-jātaka*, which is the collection of the nature of the women. It explains the nature of women in the following words:

> "Women are ungrateful, treacherous they,
> No man, if not possessed, would deign to credit aught, they say,
> Little reck they of duty's call or pleas of gratitude,
> Insensible to parent's love and ties of brotherhood,
> Transgressing every law of right, they play a shameless part,
> In all their acts obedient to the wishes of their own heart.
> However long they dwell with him, though kind and loving he,
> Tender of heart and dear to them as life itself may be,
> In times of trouble and distress, leave him they will and must,
> I for my part in womenfolk can never put my trust.
> How often is a woman's mind like a shifty monkey's found,
> Or like the shade cast by a tree on height or depth around,
> How changeful to the purpose lodged within a woman's breast,
> Like a tire of a wheel revolving swiftly without a pause or rest.
> Like a fierce devouring flame, they hold him fast in their embrace,
> Or sweep him off like stream in a flood that hurries on apace,
> They court the man they hate as much as one that they adore,
> Even as a ship that hugs alike the near and farther shores.
> They not to one or two belong, like open stall are they,
> One might as soon catch with a net as women hold sway."[45]

Thus, these narratives portray or characterize women as untrustable, dishonest, selfish, immoral, lustful as well as vicious.[46] These expressions are often expressed in discussions or narrations of male religious practices, particularly ascetic purity, and problems associated with following the ascetic celibate path. Thus, they perceive masculine celibacy as pure, which could be impure by female fecundity.[47] John Garrett Jones also pointed out that *jātaka* tales no. 30,63, 85, 106, 147, 191, 207, 212,262, 310, 327, 360, 383, 386, 401, 423, 425, 436, 443, 477, 523, 526, 531, and 536 are only told to a monk, who begun to hanker against for the worldly life, particularly distracted by women, who have been termed as fourth dangers in list of "four perils" for the celibacy of monk.[48] Even in tales of *Inriya jātaka*, Gotam spoke that ascetic *Narada*, who met several beautiful courtesans, lost his spiritual gains and power of meditation and indulged in its passion.[49] Similarly, *Kimpakka-Jātaka* frames women as " the lust for the women and sensual desire is like a fruit of what fruit tree, which seems to be very sweet, shining and very fragrant, but when it is eaten, it racks inwards and leads towards the death."[50] This vulnerability of monks is core to the stories of *Bodhisatta* towards sensual pleasures. Thus, they are often depicted at the expense of Buddhist morals, which had little concern with the "socio-religious morality" or "ethnicization"[51] of Buddhism.

Naomi Appleton suggests that the misogyny evident in the *Jātaka* tales, which often show little alignment with core Buddhist principles, may have originated from non-folkloric traditions, particularly Brahmanical sources or, as Alan Sponberg argues, Gnostic traditions. However, Appleton acknowledges that certain *Jātaka* stories were likely original Buddhist compositions designed to convey Buddhist morals more explicitly. She also highlights that some tales, non-Buddhist in origin, were adapted by Buddhists to frame the teachings and life of the Buddha. Building on this, W.B. Bollee, as cited by John Garrett Jones, argues that the Jātakas are distinctive within their collection due to their pronounced misogyny

compared to other tales. At the same time, these stories are also characterized by their androcentric perspective and psychological depth.[52] Such misogyny was shaped typically in the Buddhist framework as well. Therefore, the women in public shaped, particularly *Gaṇikā,* whose work is termed "*nicakamma*," connected with the outcome of her previous life deeds or *karma*. Similarly, the story of the previous birth of *Uppalavaṇṇā* is connected with narrative and misogynous aspects of *Mudulakkhaṇa-jātaka.* Thus, these misogynous attitudes are also expressions of the notion of a "purification soteriology of ascetic" in place of psychological soteriology, which has been termed as cultural and elite asceticism by Patrick Olivelle.[53]

Institutional Androcentrism: apart from the ascetic misogyny, women are also portrayed as playing a positive role and acting as faithful wives and mothers, which is also a crucial aspect of Gautam Buddha's life itself. But the tales of the *Jātakas*. The role of the mother of *Bodhisatta* was not present. Rather, as Naom Appleton defines, "Institutional androcentrism, they narrate about their wife, who provided support and companionship to *Boddhisatta*.[54] For example, in *Maṇicora-jātaka,* female virtues save the life of the *Bodhisatta*[55] and *Vessantara-jātaka*, in which the wife allows her husband to leave her and their children to achieve a spiritual path.[56] There is another positive portrayal of women in the story of Queen Mallika, who is said to be the wife of King *Pasenadi*. She was accused of being dishonest. Therefore, she conducts an "act of truth" or "declaration of supreme virtue followed by a request for miraculous result" under the framework story of King Brahmadatta and his wife, *Sambula*. The power of this cures her husband's leprosy.[57] Even in *Ucchaṇga-jātaka,* a woman's husband, son, and brother were condemned for death, and she saved the life of her brother. *Kanavera Jātaka* also presents such tales of saving the life of a robber, and, most importantly, *Mudulakkhaṇa-jātaka*, a queen, is depicted restoring the sense of Boddhisatta and putting him on the right path again. Thus, the role of women in these *jātaka* tales is often presented as supporting a man for his spiritual path by providing gifts and gaining merits.[58] Most importantly, this construction of "institutional androcentrism" by Noam Appleton defers from the framework of Alan Sponberg, who defines it in the framework of "established coenobitic monastic residence", in which women could be a Bhikkhuni and follow the spiritual path only under the regulated guidance of institutional structure of male authority and female subordination[59] of which we have only reference in *Chaddanta jātaka*.

Soteriological Inclusiveness: it offers women the opportunity to become the *arahats* in the early Buddhist traditions, which is also clear from the evidence from the early Paili canon. These early canons pointed out that one's sex, caste, or class (varṇa) is no barrier to attaining the goal of liberation from suffering. Thus, women can also pursue the path of liberation and become *arahats,* which Alan Sponberg defines as "an attempt from the side of Buddha to locate the virtue and spiritual potential beyond conventional social gender distinction."[60] It was later framed under "biological differences in spirituality. Thus, this inclusiveness neither signifies sameness nor less hierarchical differences. Later on, it was framed within the limitations. But in Jātaka tales, they are often presented as a major distraction from the spiritual path[61]. For example, *Kimpakka jātaka* presents it in the following words:

> As they who ate the What fruit died, so Lusts,
> When ripe, slay him, who knowing not the woe,
> They breed hereafter, and stoops to lustful deeds.

Such narrations might be due to the *Jātaka* tale's later composition with social contingencies, which entered and shaped the monastic tradition of Buddhism. But this early cenobitic monasticism also acknowledged that sexuality is one of the important biological differentiations that shape one's ability and capacity. Thus, it was assumed that this differentiation relegates women to a lower capacity to pursue the spiritual path.[62] For example, nun *Uppalavaṇṇā* as queen Mallika in *Sambula jātaka.*

Soteriological Androgyny: The *jātaka* tales often present spirituality and soteriology in the masculine framework. Therefore, throughout the tales, they present the notion that a person should be a male to become a *Bodhisatta* or the Buddha, as there is no reference to a female *Bodhisatta*. Even these stories present the *Bodhisattva's* animal. Thus, they also put the female sex in devaluation in its narrative universe. The *jātaka* stories depict women performing good deeds, becoming laywomen and playing a crucial role in the life of *Bodhisatta*. But they are supposed to be male to attain Buddhahood or become *Bodhisatta*. But, as Noami Appleton argued, they were not presumed to be unable to be awakened. Rather, they were perceived as unable to lead the Buddhist community by becoming Buddha and pursuing the spiritual path. Therefore, they are continuously included in the scheme of the *arahatship* in place of Buddha or *Bodhisatta*.[63] This position is further emphasized in the introduction to the Jātaka tales. Arvind Sharma also argues that a woman must become male to achieve Buddhahood. Even in Mahayana texts like the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*, there are references to magical sex changes. In this context, the philosophical framework of the Jātaka tales suggests that female birth results from past misdeeds (*nicakamma)*. As a result, women are expected

to aspire for rebirth as males to become a Bodhisatta. This idea is reinforced in the commentary on the Jātakas, *Nidānakathā*, which describes the *Sumedha Bodhisatta*. In this commentary, eight qualities of the Buddha are highlighted, one of which emphasizes "maleness."

Conclusion

The representation of women in the Buddhist Jātaka narratives is far from egalitarian regarding gender relationships. Women are depicted as having roles in various urban cultural and economic spaces, such as pracārikās (workers), *peranadarika vesīs* (courtesans), *nāriyo* (women), *gamaviyo* (village women), *gaṇikās* (prostitutes), *nagarasobhānī* (city adornments), *vanadāsīs* (forest women), weavers, slave women, and those working in agrarian fields, their roles are still framed within a patriarchal context. These women, though granted more social liberty and prosperity than "domestic women," who were often restricted and surveilled due to social and moral expectations, are still bound by male dominance and societal norms. The *Jātaka* tales also emphasize how women are portrayed in terms of certain negative stereotypes—untrustworthy, dishonest, selfish, immoral, lustful, and vicious. These representations reflect the intersection of gender, culture, and social structures, highlighting how prevailing patriarchal norms constantly shaped women's roles and behaviours. Ultimately, the depiction of women in the *Jātakas* cannot be separated from the time's broader cultural, economic, and spiritual framework. While these stories address complex social contingencies, they are consistently framed within a patriarchal lens, presenting women's roles as subservient and often morally questionable about Buddhist principles. The negotiation between these gendered depictions and Buddhist moral teachings presents a clear contradiction, suggesting that, while women are given visibility in these narratives, they remain largely defined by negative, socially constructed traits and are not presented as truly equal participants in the spiritual or social realms.

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