

# Therigatha: A Feminist Account of Women's Spiritual Experience in Buddhism

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## Abstract

*Feminist writing is seen as a body of work that highlights the tremendous impact on women's attempts at social or political gains due to years of victimization in traditional patriarchal societies. It centres on their subsequent attempts at political liberty by changing the social conditions in which they exist. Thus it only had a political undertone to their attempts at emancipation.*

*However, in India, Buddhism as a religion is known to have aligned with women's concerns in ancient times when feminism was a remote vision. This paper aims to present an account of women's attempts at liberation as appeared in Therigatha, a short collection of verses by women themselves. It is a phenomenological account of women's life experiences as they attempted to liberate themselves from it. These attempts at liberation were of a different nature than as seen in the west as it was spiritual liberation. This paper will highlight instances of such women's attempts at freeing themselves from domestic and reproductive responsibilities, leaving their past identities behind only to attain spiritual enlightenment and emancipation from it all.*

**Keywords:** Therigatha, gender, Buddhism, feminism, liberation

## Introduction

There may have been various writings by women even before the surge of feminism in the west. These texts were usually seen as limited by their scope of women's concerns. Unlike other readings, these texts were specifically labelled as 'women's writings' implicating that they cover a fixed range of problems that women face like political issues, social stigmas, exclusions from religions etc. However, there have been records in one such religion that is a testimony of one of the first among many recognised writings by women from their own experiences. Keeping their personal and lived experiences as the centre, the Buddhist nuns at the time of Buddha have written elaborate texts of their journey of spiritual experience as they left behind their families and old identities behind. This text is called as Therigatha or 'verses of elder nuns' or bhikkunis which can be categorically regarded as avoiding 'female orientedness' or 'gender specificity' in writing.

Therigatha, noted to have been written by the 'theris' or elder nuns, is one such body of women's writing which is free of any undertones or repetitions about women's inferior status in the society. It speaks of women's triumph in the area of spiritual knowledge. Therigatha is the ninth

book of the Khuddaka Nikaya<sup>1</sup> in which these elder nuns narrate their personal struggles and attainment of emancipation in pace with the guidance of the Buddha. It is thus one of the earliest texts recounting women's spiritual experience which is unlikely in any other works on gender. It was composed orally in Magadhi language and were orally passed down until 80 BCE when they came to be written in Pali language.<sup>2</sup>

It is seen as a companion text to Theragatha-the verses of elder monks thus making it among the first women's writings at par with men's writings. Therigatha has 524 verses credited to 73 nuns.<sup>3</sup> Though Therigatha is small in size, it still counts as a notable works in the early Buddhism and among the earliest known and recognised women's writings in India.

<sup>1</sup>Mahendra, A., 2017. *Therigathapali Book of Verses of Elder Bhikkunis*. 1st ed. Roslindale, MA, USA: Dhamma Publishers, Introduction.

<sup>2</sup>George-Thérèse Dickenson, 1992. "The First Buddhist Women: Translations and Commentary on the Therigatha"

<sup>3</sup>Mahendra, A., 2017. *Therigathapali Book of Verses of Elder Bhikkunis*. 1st ed. Roslindale, MA, USA: Dhamma Publishers, Introduction.

## Mahapajapati Gotami - A Woman Spiritual Revolutionary

It may be appropriate to take a look at the position of women in the time of Buddha. At the time of Buddha and before that in ancient India the position of women was that of the shudras, and they were excluded from any social, religious or political matters because of their lower status.

Amidst such hostility towards women, Mahapajapati Gotami desired for emancipation. She was the maternal aunt and step mother of the Buddha. She is believed to be the first Bhikkuni in the Buddhist tradition<sup>4</sup>. She was a revolutionary thinker who demanded ordination for women and also sought it directly from the Buddha. Facing personal loss of her husband the king Suddhodhana, Gotami desired to take the path of Buddha. Initially refused by Buddha, she followed him to Vaishali on foot with other Sakyan ladies. She repeated her desire to Ananda to be ordained in the sangha. Ananda meets Buddha on her behalf. In response to Ananda's query that if women are capable of attaining sainthood as nuns Buddha clearly states that they were as capable of gaining enlightenment as men.<sup>5</sup>

Mahapajapati Gotami thus become a leader of women(nuns) at par with Buddha as the leader of the monks. Even though she did not preach but she practiced Buddhism. Despite rejection from Buddha initially, she stood determined to be included in the public sphere (Buddha's Sangha) alongside men (monks).

Nevertheless, Buddha is also believed to have stated-"If, (Ananda), Maha Pajapati Gotami would accept the eight conditions it would be regarded that she has been ordained already as a nun."These eight conditions or Garudhammas are additional precepts for women which are beyond and above the monastic rules that apply to monks.<sup>6</sup> They were added later to the Vinaya for greater acceptance of women in the monastic order during

Buddha's time. However the validity of these conditions is questionable. They are stated to be inaccurate<sup>7</sup> and non-historical<sup>8</sup>.

It can be contended that Buddha was a feminist in this sense who neglected gender constructs for spiritual attainment. He acknowledged women's right for emancipation despite their sex and capability for higher achievements. Therigatha thus becomes the proof for women's phenomenological descriptions of their lived experiences.

We shall now recount some evidences to establish Therigatha as a phenomenological text of women's spiritual experiences.

### Therigatha – the First Feminist Work

Therigathas are impressive records of women's experience in times when feminism as a movement was a remote vision. It admits the authority and equality of women in spiritual practice. With Mahapajati Gotami stepping out of private sphere into the public sphere is notably the first of its kind account of a woman demanding political right of liberation.

They embraced an exceptional life of renunciants away from the stereotypical norms of a patriarchal society. These women desired the path of emancipation, motivated by personal loss, frustrations from family life or simply out of spiritual curiosity. These theris' teachings were based on their lived experiences of women in the society unlike Thera Gathas that were abstract verses by elder monks based on Buddha's teachings alone.

*The most notable account of attack on gender inequalities is narrated in a conversation between Mara- an evil equivalent and theri Soma*

*Mara: "Whatever was reached by the sages, a state hard to originate;*

*Women with two-fingered wisdom, cannot reach it"*

<sup>4</sup>Life Of Buddha: Maha Pajapati Gotami - Order Of Nuns (Part 2)". *Buddhanet.Net*, 2022, [http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/lifebuddha/2\\_23bud.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/lifebuddha/2_23bud.htm).

<sup>5</sup>Life Of Buddha: Maha Pajapati Gotami - Order Of Nuns (Part 2)". *Buddhanet. Net*, 2022, [http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/lifebuddha/2\\_23bud.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/lifebuddha/2_23bud.htm).

<sup>6</sup>Kusuma, Bhikuni (2000). "Inaccuracies in Buddhist Women's History". In Karma Lekshe Tsomo (ed.). *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming Against the Stream*. Routledge. pp. 5–13.

<sup>7</sup>Kusuma, Bhikuni (2000). "Inaccuracies in Buddhist Women's History". In Karma Lekshe Tsomo (ed.). *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming Against the Stream*. Routledge. pp. 5–13.

<sup>8</sup>Tathaaloka Bhikkhuni. "On the Apparent Non-historicity of the Eight Garudhammas Story As It Stands in the Pali-text Culavagga and Contemporary Vinaya Scholarship"

Soma: *"What matters womanhood, when mind is well-restrained;*

*With presence of knowledge, seeing phenomena rightly with insight*<sup>9</sup>

Here, Mara's words indicate social stigma attached to women that they are incapable of coming out of the realm of desires to attain wisdom or that attainment of wisdom is an impossibility for women. The verse narrates that the path of enlightenment can be pursued by anyone without worrying about the differences one has to suffer on account of their sex. Only self-purification should be the goal for all.

Mara is seen as a representation of all sorts of distractions and appears in the most inopportune time to check whether the aspirant is still holding onto the goal of liberation. In case of women aspirants he appears speaking from conventional stigmas attached to women like women being weak minded and emotional who can be easily distracted by greed of sensual pleasure.

In another instance Mara appears to Khematheri and attempts to distract her by showing greed of sensual pleasure.

Mara: *"You are young and beautiful and I am a young man too; with five kinds of musical orchestra, come Khema, let's indulge."*

To which Khema their replies: *"Pleasure is fully destroyed everywhere, the aggregate of darkness shattered; Know thus O Evil One, I have destroyed you, O End-maker."*<sup>10</sup>

The monastic order did not just accept women from privileged backgrounds but also included courtesans or daughters of sex workers. There are various instances which resonate Buddha's neglect of social class and his acceptance of women from all working backgrounds in his refuge.

Ambapali a state courtesan or Nagarvadhu was a beautiful and talented woman who became a renunciant. She writes:

*"Like a well-polished golden plank, resplendent was my body in past;*

*Now it is covered by fine wrinkles,*

*not otherwise is the word of the speaker of truths"*<sup>11</sup>

Ambapaliac knowledges and narrate the passage of the bodily (beauty) with old age, thus learning from the Buddha the wisdom of momentariness. This Buddhist account in The rigatha also resonates overcoming the social attachment to the idea of beauty.

The experience of Vimala theri is an account of overcoming the tainted life of ganika or sex worker and entering the Order. Vimala narrates-

*"Having adorned this body nicely, a topic of prattling for fools;*

*I stood at the doors of the courtesan house, like a hunter trying to noose."*

*"All fetters are fully cut-off, whether divine or human; All taints are eradicated, cooled down I am, liberated."*<sup>12</sup>

A brief account of Addhakasitheri is also intriguing as she aims to attain freedom from the cycle of shameful births where the society determined her worth as being too little.

*"In the republic of Kasi, my toll was that much; Having town rated me like that, established me as half rate (of the country's daily income).*

*Thus disgusted with form, disgusted I was dispassionate; don't have birthagain in the roundof existences, running thru, again and again; Three knowledges are realised, Buddha's teaching is done."*<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Mahendra, A., 2017. *Therigathapali Book of Verses of Elder Bhikkunis*. 1st ed. Roslindale, MA, USA: Dhamma Publishers, p.18.

<sup>10</sup>Mahendra, A., 2017. *Therigathapali Book of Verses of Elder Bhikkunis*. 1st ed. Roslindale, MA, USA: Dhamma Publishers, p.35-36.

<sup>11</sup>Mahendra, A., 2017. *Therigathapali Book of Verses of Elder Bhikkunis*. 1st ed. Roslindale, MA, USA: Dhamma Publishers, p. 64.

<sup>12</sup>Mahendra, A., 2017. *Therigathapali Book of Verses of Elder Bhikkunis*. 1st ed. Roslindale, MA, USA: Dhamma Publishers, p. 21

<sup>13</sup>Mahendra, A., 2017. *Therigathapali Book of Verses of Elder Bhikkunis*. 1st ed. Roslindale, MA, USA: Dhamma Publishers, p. 9.

These accounts of Ambapali, Vimala, Addhakasi as mentioned or even other courtesans like Abhayamatu<sup>14</sup> and Uppalavanna<sup>15</sup> prove that Buddhist monastic order was a refuge of the neglected and downtrodden community of women who were placed on equal footing in the Order with the men (monks).

The Therigatha is also an account of women of the women who challenged and gave up all the familial ties only to seek enlightenment.

The theri Mutta narrates:

*"Freed, good to be freed, freed from three crooked things;*

*From mortar, from pestle, from crooked husband too;*

*Freed from birth-death too, lead to becoming is fully destroyed"*<sup>16</sup>

The verse by Sanghatherigatha :

*"Having abandoned home I ordained, having abandoned son, animal, dear one;*

*Having abandoned lust and hate, having fully removed, ignorance too;*

*Having pulled-out craving with root, calmed down I am, liberated"*<sup>17</sup>

During the time when the only role of women was a reproductive or domestic one, to opt out of the household, give up relationships and form a community to seek spiritual knowledge asserting self-autonomy within the patriarchal society was definitely one of the first of its kind, a crucial political act.

Many a times these nuns were initiated into the order by women who were their mothers or sisters while other times it is seen that these nuns also motivated their husbands and sons too to join the path of liberation. Some examples include vaddhamatutheri who initiated her son

addhathera (verses 204-212), Rohini helped her father become an arahant (verses 271-291) and Capatheri brought her husband into this path (292-312).<sup>18</sup> This explains how these women projected themselves as teachers of wisdom to the men in their lives in the times when women were solely seen as care takers.

There is also a specific instance where Punnatheri, who was born into a family of domestic slave. Given the background of caste hierarchy in Indian society, where only Brahmins are entitled to teaching and learning, Punna, who came from a marginalised class community, enlightened a Brahmin called Soththiya about karmas and influenced him to take refuge in Dhamma and Sangha.<sup>19</sup>

An excerpt from the lengthy conversation between the Brahman and Punnatheri is truly evident of her unique perspective on karma, rituals and practices.

Brahman: *"Verily knowing, O good lady Punna, why do you question me; I am doing a wholesome kamma, blocking evil done.....by sprinkling water he too, is completely freed from evil deeds."*

Punna: *"If these rivers had carried(away)evil done in the past; Even this merit was carried (away), therefore you are a clean slate."*<sup>20</sup>

Given the socio-cultural view that women are unequal to men in terms of knowledge and understanding and therefore incapable of attaining nirvana is challenged in many other verses too of Therigatha. There is a mention of three true knowledges- remembering the past abodes, divine eye and knowledge of end of taints- which relate to the higher kind of knowledge and not one limited to the material realm.<sup>21</sup>

Addhakasi a prostitute in Rajagaha, is noted of saying-

*"Thus disgusted with form, disgusted I was dispassionate;*

<sup>14</sup>Mahendra, A., 2017. *Therigathapali Book of Verses of Elder Bhikkunis*. 1st ed. Roslindale, MA, USA: Dhamma Publishers, Endnotes, p. 125.

<sup>15</sup>Mahendra, A., 2017. *Therigathapali Book of Verses of Elder Bhikkunis*. 1st ed. Roslindale, MA, USA: Dhamma Publishers, Endnotes, p. 54.

<sup>16</sup>Mahendra, A., 2017. *Therigathapali Book of Verses of Elder Bhikkunis*. 1st ed. Roslindale, MA, USA: Dhamma Publishers, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup>Mahendra, A., 2017. *Therigathapali Book of Verses of Elder Bhikkunis*. 1st ed. Roslindale, MA, USA: Dhamma Publishers, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup>Mahendra, A., 2017. *Therigathapali Book of Verses of Elder Bhikkunis*. 1st ed. Roslindale, MA, USA: Dhamma Publishers, Introduction.

<sup>19</sup>Mahendra, A., 2017. *Therigathapali Book of Verses of Elder Bhikkunis*. 1st ed. Roslindale, MA, USA: Dhamma Publishers, Endnotes, p. 136-137.

<sup>20</sup>Mahendra, A., 2017. *Therigathapali Book of Verses of Elder Bhikkunis*. 1st ed. Roslindale, MA, USA: Dhamma Publishers, p.57-60

<sup>21</sup>Mahendra, A., 2017. *Therigathapali Book of Verses of Elder Bhikkunis*. 1st ed. Roslindale, MA, USA: Dhamma Publishers, Endnotes.

*Don't have birth again in the round existences,  
running thru, again and again;  
Three knowledges are realised, Buddha's teachings  
are done.*<sup>22</sup>

Besides her Bhaddhakapilanitheri, Mettikatheri, Sujatatheri, Calatheri and many more speak about reaching or knowing the three ultimate knowledge required on the path of nibbana.<sup>23</sup>

### Conclusion

The most noteworthy point about Therigatha is that it is a text about gendered experiences that transcends gendered epistemology. The women speakers do not alter final knowledge gaining or spiritual attainment acts as per their understanding. They retain the objectivity of the teachings of the Buddha while showing that even they are capable of understanding as all men do. Thus it transcends all elements of gender studies or women's studies that focus on feminist ways of knowing.

Secondly Buddhism itself does not approve of differentiated ways of being. So how can even the sexed body be seen as a paradigm of one's personal identity? This resonates in the words of some in conversation with Mara.

Thus we see that Therigatha being an ancient text was way ahead of its times. Its scope can be seen as aligned with the later feminist movements in the West. The focus of both was emancipation, motivated by personal experiences. Emancipation, as both see is possible by bringing about internal change which is over and above the aim of 'the political' to cause external changes for liberation.

Therisasserted and showed that gender does not matter. What matters is determination in the face of distractions (Mara), desire for knowledge and aim for higher goals to attain emancipation. The Buddhist order may be regarded as the first that prompted women's political rights to have a separate community in the public

sphere away from the domestic responsibilities. In this sense Buddhism becomes the propagator of gender equality while Therigatha may be regarded as the testament of the first attempt at feminist philosophy.

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<sup>22</sup>Mahendra, A., 2017. *Therigathapali Book of Verses of Elder Bhikkunis*. 1st ed. Roslindale, MA, USA: Dhamma Publishers, p. 9

<sup>23</sup>Mahendra, A., 2017. *Therigathapali Book of Verses of Elder Bhikkunis*. 1st ed. Roslindale, MA, USA: Dhamma Publishers.