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Some Glimpses of the Gender Debate within the Buddhist Philosophy in the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

Gender issues occupy the central position in every major religious philosophy of the world. Be it Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam, every religion has a unique stand about women. The article traces the origin and progress of the emerging gender debate within Buddhism in the first and second half of twentieth century. By analyzing the works of some crucial feminist scholars of the twentieth century, the article makes an attempt to reveal the changing mindsets of the academicians and social scientists about the subject. Though initial feminist scholars tended to reflect a rather conservative and institutional opinion on the issue of position of women within Buddhism, the later scholars have tended to stray away from them. They have demystified Buddhist philosophical discourse and exposed elements of misogyny within ancient Buddhist religious orders. Their researches have helped us significantly in answering our queries about the position of nuns within Buddhist religious order and have also added a new chapter in the age old gender debate within the issue. The works of these new scholars should be viewed in perspective of the women's movement that started to gather momentum in the second half of the twentieth century.

Key Words: *Gender Debate, Buddhism, Feminist scholars, Philosophy, Twentieth Century.*

Women are at the central point of every major religious ideology of the world. As far as Buddhism is concerned, historians and social scientists over the last few decades have made significant efforts to study and reinterpret it according to the sensibilities of the modern times. Feminist scholars in particular have sought to review and demystify the underlying meanings of the tenets of Buddhism. In this essay I shall try to focus on issues regarding sexuality and gender within the tradition of Buddhism. Gender studies as an academic discipline maintains the view that the concepts of gender and sexuality are crucial variables in properly understanding the human society and its interactions.¹ The feminist scholars have employed the concept of gender as a variable to expound the dynamics of religious symbolisms, philosophical concepts and social groups. The Buddhism and gender debate started to gather momentum from second half of the 20th century especially within the realm of western academic circle. But it has intrigued women thinkers' right from the last century. Within the debate in itself, various approaches to the study of Buddhist literature- Orientalist, Protestant Buddhism, and a doctrinal approach –have led to taxonomy of values being accorded to various texts in such a way that new dimensions and significance have been added to them.²

Probably one of the first works of considerable importance to be produced within the western feminist scholarship was by Caroline Augusta Foley. In her essay titled "Women leaders of Buddhist Reformation" published in 1893, she proceeded to provide explanation to some particular Buddhist texts like the *Therigatha*. The name *Therigatha* is derived from two Pali words – *Theri* which is the feminine form of the word 'elder' and *Gatha* meaning verse. These *gathas* or sets of verse are believed to be the direct utterances of some women who were among the first of their sex to join the Buddhist order. The *Therigatha*, which is considered to be a part of the *Khuddaka Nikaya* is the earliest known collection of women's literature in the world. Foley concentrated on the commentary of *Therigatha* as provided by the famous Buddhist scholar Dhammapala in her efforts to bring forth a socio-economic and cultural analysis of the lives of women who renounced the worldly life to become Buddhist nuns. Her work offers tremendous insight into the compulsions that might have led to their conversions and the circumstances that could have led to such life choices. She notes that one needs to

look at the early life of these women in order to understand why they chose the path of *Dhamma*, which according to her appeared as a viable alternative and more than just a religious path to these women.

Caroline Augusta Foley writes the motives which drove these women from the world to embrace the anagdiya, or homeless life, are as diverse as those revealed in the records of Christian monasticism. Across time and space a common humanity is manifest. Escape, deliverance, freedom from a situation grown intolerable, whether gradually or by a sudden crisis, such is the recurring theme. Emancipation has been won from suffering of some kind, physical, mental, or moral, as well as from the bondage of conditions which are discerned as conducing inevitably to suffering. The bereaved mother and the childless widow are released from grief and contumely, the Magdalen from remorse, the toy-wife of king or Dives from the ennui of an aimless life, the busy matron from the absorbing Lepiuvai toy, the young girl from the humiliation of being sold to the suitor who could bid highest, the thoughtful woman from the ban imposed upon her intellectual development by conventional tradition.³(Caroline Augusta Foley, "The Women Leaders of the Buddhist Reformation as Illustrated by Dharmapala's *Commentary on the Therigatha*)

According to Foley the wider law of *Dhamma* bestowed "gentle liberty" on the lives of these women who didn't enjoy them before. The stage of ardent self-discipline that a *Bhikkhuni* had to go through not only freed her of worldly sorrows and purified her emotions but also gave her a degree of social prestige. She was no longer tied to being identified solely on the basis of her gendered roles- as a mother, wife, daughter, queen or housekeeper but as an asexual rational being who. For the first time in her life she attained equality in terms of recognition of her intellect as much as the wise men in her field.

On entering it, she, like her younger Christian sisters, laid down all social prestige, all domestic success, as a mother, wife, daughter, queen, or housekeeper, and gained the austerer joys of an asexual rational being, walking with wise men in recognised intellectual equality on higher levels of thought, in communion with the mind that was in the Buddhas of all time, and realising in due perspective her relations, actual, past, and potential, to the universe of phenomena, as they in their essential impermanence grew into being and dissolved again.⁴(Caroline Augusta Foley, "The Women Leaders of the Buddhist Reformation as Illustrated by Dharmapala's *Commentary on the Therigatha*)

Another historian of the same period who contributed highly towards the study of Buddhist texts and derivation of their latent meanings was the famous scholar Mabel Bode. In spite of the fact that some modern feminist historians have accused the works of their 19th century counterparts as suffering from "Orientalist Fallacy"⁵ for their traditional approach, the truth that these works reflect great depth and insight cannot be denied. Much like Foley, Bode proceeded to reconstruct 'the working of the great Buddhist reformation in its original strength and freshness.'⁶ It deals with certain contemporary disciples of Buddha whose names appear in a section of first *Nipata* of the collection of *Suttas* called the *Anguttara Nikaya*. She specifically deals with thirteen women disciples of Buddha who after entering the Order exercised great influence on the entire religious organization. She rarely strays from the conventional imagery and belief systems associated with these women, but nevertheless succeeds in describing their rise from domestic societal roles to a broader public one. What strikes our attention in her work is the transition from a common woman to a *Bhikkhuni* and ultimately to a *Theri* has also been depicted as a transition from the 'feminine' to the superior 'masculine'. While their 'femininity' was explained as being the root cause of their sorrows in the worldly life, it was only through losing their 'feminine' traits and attaining 'masculinity' that they achieved the ultimate knowledge. A prime example of this transition is found in the *Gatha* of *Theri Sundarinanda*. According to Bode's version, she suffered from self-doubts even after entering the order as a *Bhikkhuni*. Having heard about the great Master's aversion to beauty, she never went to seek teachings from the teacher on her own but heard them from other *Bhikkhuni* (s) who went in her place. The teacher having heard of this, decided that 'she was intoxicated with her own loveliness'⁷ and ordered her to come herself instead of sending others. Upon arriving at her Master's she attained a remarkable self-realization that revealed to her the superficiality of physical charm and the beauty of knowledge. Bode's representation of this episode marks the victory of knowledge over beauty and also that of the 'masculine' over the 'feminine'.

She writes, 'Then Rûpananda, not seeing any way out of it, went unwillingly to the exhortation. Now, because of this conduct of her's, the Teacher created, by the power of Iddhi, the form of a woman, who, holding a palm-leaf, seemed to be fanning him.

Rûpanandâ seeing this, thought to herself: "For (such) a reason was I neglectful, and did not come! And, behold, women like this go about fearlessly near the Master! My beauty is not worth a sixteenth part of their's! Yet, ignorant of this, I have not come hither all this time!" And she stood utterly spell-bound gazing at the woman. And the Master recited to her, who had reached the climax of causes heaped up in former births, (the stanza in p. 766 the Dhammapada), which begins: "Of bones is the fortress made"; and then uttered the Sutta beginning: "*Whether walking or standing still--whether sitting or lying down.*" And, she gaining (the knowledge of) decay and death, attained to Arahatsip'.⁸, [Mabel Bode. "*Women Leaders of Buddhist Reformation*"]

Another scholar of the early 20th century who deserves a special mention in this regard due to her contribution towards the study of Buddhist Pali texts is Isaline Blew Horner. Born in 1896 in England, she was among the handful of scholars of her generation who were attracted towards the Buddhist philosophy and felt the need of analyzing and evaluating Pali texts in order to reveal the ancient period in its true glory. She visited Sri Lanka for the first time in 1921 and closely observed the practices of the Buddhism and the Pali scholarship of the erudite monks and the lay scholars of the time. They left an indelible impact on her. Her visit to Myanmar the following year to see the ancient capital of Pagan in Myanmar which had its Augustan age of Buddhism during the reign of king *Anawartha* in the 11th century AD. She also mastered the Dravidian languages in India in her effort to study the influence of Buddhism in the south.⁹

Horner's greatest contribution to the study of Buddhist literature as a whole and to the Buddhist philosophy and gender debate in particular is her book 'Women Under Primitive Buddhism' which was published in 1930. Like the previous two scholars, Horner also concentrated on the liberating nature of Buddhist philosophy and how the spiritual path showed by Buddhism appealed greatly to women who had to suffer terribly because of severe limitations and discrimination that were imposed on them by the society. But modern historians like Rosemary Radford Ruether have gone on to point out certain other crucial aspects of Horner's book as well. According to Dr. Ruether, Dr. Horner has evoked a time and society in which one's feminine gender alone prescribed a life of severe limitations. Most importantly, Horner's book according to her gives the enormous gift of acknowledging the multiplicity of conditions and influences on the spiritual lives of these women.¹⁰

These three scholars writing in the late 19th and early 20th century paved the way for historical research on the growth and development of Buddhism. The second half of the 20th century would witness a flourishing in research activities and rising interests in this field. But just because they were responsible for starting the gender debate within Buddhist philosophical discourse, doesn't mean their work have been able to escape criticisms. They have been frequently criticized for their simplistic approach and linear analysis while explaining participation of women in the Buddhist religious order. Dr. Alan Sponberg, in his essay 'Attitudes towards Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism' has argued that in order to understand the role of women within Buddhism, we have to distinguish the different attitudes represented within this 'multivocality' and separate the voices thereby. Each voice according to him arises out of a specific institutional and intellectual context. In other words he stressed on the socio-economic factors that indirectly inspired the rise of a new consciousness among men and women of the period. The rapid urbanization of the Eastern Gangetic valley and the emergence of a new self-awareness or individuality among the marginal population were primarily responsible for the popularity of Buddhism in the first place. These changes brought about a social transformation which not only affected the old social and religious order but also gave birth to a whole new range of religious and philosophical speculation. It is in this background that he explains the participation of women in early Buddhism.

To quote Dr. Sponberg, '...Seen in that light, the prominence of women among Gautam's early followers is less surprising, though no less revolutionary. The newly emerging social order had much less invested in defending prevailing social values, and in such a climate both women and those of lower social standing generally were freer to explore and express their religious vocations.'¹¹ (*Alan Sponberg, "Attitudes towards Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism"*)

The second half of the 20th century witnessed the strengthening of the feminist movement across the globe. Rise of the feminist scholars not only challenged the traditional views of the male

dominated academic world, but also left deep impact on the historical scholarship thereafter. Feminist historians went to great lengths to reveal the state of the ever elusive 'other' who was denied any sort of historical representation before.

The rise of gender history deeply influenced the course of Buddhist philosophical discourse and compelled the historians to look beyond the conventional approach. As feminist movement gathered momentum, feminist scholars started questioning patriarchy and its manifestations in various forms. All religions and their theoretical bindings were subjected to their intense scrutiny. Mary Daly, one of the most famous radical feminist scholars of the 20th century criticized various faiths for having negative impact on women's emancipation. Inspired by Simone De Beauvoir, Daly embraced the modern criticism of religion in the name of feminism. She expressed her opinion that all types of institutionalized religions had detrimental effect on people's autonomy. Her rigorous and tireless critique of patriarchy in all its manifestations was part of the wider gender debate that viewed religion as nothing but a mechanism of female domination. However, her emphatic declaration that patriarchy is "number one religion of the entire planet" was not just a mere sociological observation but part of a much wider feminist analysis of religious orders. In her book *Gyn/Ecology*, Daly expressed her views in the following words.

'Patriarchy is itself the prevailing religion of the entire planet and its' essential message is necrophilia. All so called religions legitimating patriarchy are mere sects subsumed under its' vast umbrella/canopy. They are essentially similar despite the variations. All from Buddhism and Hinduism to Islam, Judaism, and Christianity to secular derivatives such as Freudianism, Jungianism, Marxism, and Maoism – are infrastructures of the edifice of patriarchy.'¹² (*Mary Daly. Gyn/Ecology*)

Daly was not alone in the feminist critique of religion. Following her footsteps and inspired by emerging feminist scholarship, several other historians contributed towards expanding the horizons of the Gender debate within Buddhism. In 1979, almost half a century after Horner's famous book, Dr Diana Paul, a brilliant scholar and Assistant Professor of Religious Studies published her famous book 'Women in Buddhism : Image of the feminine in Mahayana Buddhism' where she analyzed the various texts of Mahayana Buddhism other than exalted verses of Therigatha. She proceeded to show examples of misogyny within Buddhist religious traditions. Through a study of an impressive range of Buddhist texts, Paul tried to bring out the real picture of treatment of Buddhism in Mahayana tradition. She specifically spoke against two widely accepted beliefs about the Buddhist religion- firstly that women were of secondary importance in Theravadin and other primitive Buddhist societies due to inferiority accorded to the nuns in monastic institutions and secondly that women were elevated to equal status in Mahayana societies due to less importance placed on Monastic institutions. She stressed her point in her essay 'Buddhist Attitudes towards Women's Bodies in Mahayana Literature' where she examined the ambiguities found within Mahayana literature about women's nature in general. She also argued that the Sutras of Mahayana literature are of amorphous sexual nature. They reflect the ideology that one is neither male nor female, or in other words one is both male and female. This sexual transformation referred to in the Sutras has been portrayed as having the capacity of transcending sexual and gender based distinctions. But Paul suggests that this transformation referred to in the Sutras mean that to attain full enlightenment, a woman has to be reborn as a man. She goes on to say that although the term *Bodhisattva* refers to the ideal Buddhist practitioner, women's capabilities as Bodhisattvas have been ignored. If a woman of extra-ordinary merit and virtue becomes a Bodhisattva, she achieves enlightenment only by eradicating her sexual identity. Past Karma in Mahayana philosophy dictated rebirth as a female and hence women are portrayed as inferior beings.¹³

The late 20th century especially after Paul has indulged further in the formidable task of reconstructing an accurate past of women in Buddhism. It's practically impossible to describe the massive work done by modern feminists in uncovering new meaning of Buddhist philosophy in the recent decades. But what appeals to modern readers is the incessant quest for 'accuracy' within Buddhist feminist discourse. Historian Rita. M .Gross points out that this quest for accurate history stems from the firm conviction that andro-centric history can never be accurate and will always be riddled with horrible omissions which tends to whitewash the negativities of the patriarchal past.¹⁴ What is truly required at this particular time is to formulate a historical approach that deals "with the past on its own terms"¹⁵ and resist the temptation of projecting one's own values on the past events to fulfill the narrow aims of any particular agenda.

Footnote:

- ¹For a brief summary and bibliography of the impact of Women's Studies on Religious Studies, see "Women's Studies" in the *Encyclopedia of Religions* edited by M. Eliade (New York:Macmillan,1983)
- ² Collett, Alice. "Buddhism and Gender: Reframing and Refocusing the Debate" . *Journal for Feminist Studies in Religion* 22.2 (Fall, 2006): 55-8. Print.
- ³ Foley, Caroline Augusta. "The Women Leaders of the Buddhist Reformation as Illustrated by Dharmapala's *Commentary on the Therigatha* ," in Transactions of the Ninth International Congress of Orientalists, Vol.1 of *Indians and Aryans Sections*, ed. Ed Morgan (1893), 344-61.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ "Buddhism and Gender: Reframing and Refocusing the Debate" Op. *cit.*
- ⁶Bode, Mabel. "Women Leaders of Buddhist Reformation (from *Manoratha Purani*, Buddhaghosa's *Commentary on the Anguttara Nikaya*." in *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society* [London, The Royal Asiatic Society] 1893 (The full text available on <http://www.sacred-texts.com/journals/jras/1893-19.htm> Retrieved on 24.01.14)
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Jayetilleke, Rohan L. "The Pioneer Pali Scholar of the West" in *Associated Newspapers of Ceylon* (2007). Retrieved from www.lakehouse.lk/budusarana/2007/03/25/Budu15.pdf on 27.01.13.
- ¹⁰ Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Feminist Theologie: Legacy and Prospect*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008. Print. Pg-122
- ¹¹ Sponberg, Alan. "Attitudes towards Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism" in Jose Ignacio Cabezon ed. *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender : First Edition*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985. Print. Pg-5
- ¹² Daly, Mary. *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1978. Print.Pg-39
- ¹³ Paul, Diana. "Buddhist Attitudes Towards Women's Bodies". *Buddhist-Christian Studies*. Vol 1(1981):63-71. Print.
- ¹⁴ Gross, Rita M. *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. Albany, Ny: State University of New York Press. 1993. Page-19.
- ¹⁵ Mc Laughlin, Eleanor. "The Christian Past: Does it Hold Future for Women?" in *Womanspirit Rising: Feminist Reader in Religion* ed. by Carol. P. Christ and Judith Plaskow. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979. Pg 94-95.
