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Motherhood and Renunciation in the Therīgāthā

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Abstract

The Therīgāthā, the 'Verses of the Elder Nuns' composed by women that remain in the Pali Khuddaka Nikāya, is one of the earliest Buddhist texts, the only one that has been preserved to date and is attributed to female authorship. Returning time and time again is its seventy-three poems about the mother who loses a child, the wife who bends over the household mortar and pestle, and the daughter who steps away from an arranged marriage. This article explores the nature of motherhood as it is both the strongest form of saṃsāric attachment and the ultimate basis for liberation, or arahantship, to be finally achieved in the Therīgāthā. The article compares and contrasts the "de-mothering" of maternal loss described in Reiko Ohnuma's work with the study of the rhetoric of liberation by Kathryn Blackstone, along with readings provided by Alice Collett, Kate Crosby and Vanessa R. Sasson, and close readings of verses attributed to Muttā, Sumangalamātā, Ubbirī, Kisāgotamī, Vāsiṭṭhī, and Paṭācārā, and proposes that the Therīgāthā talks about the transvaluation of motherhood, rather than an eradication of it, converting maternal loss into insight and maternal bondage into freedom.

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Introduction

The Therīgāthā is a unique composition in the Pali texts. It consists of seventy-three poems, each of which is grouped into five hundred and twenty-two verses in sixteen chapters, like much else in the canon, ordered according to the number of stanzas in each poem (Norman, 1971). It is the companion to the Theragatha, the words of the monks, but from almost all other literature of the ancient world, it stands alone, as it is easy to say and difficult to imagine: It is, as Blackstone concludes, "the earliest extant collection of female writing in India, if not in the world" (1998). Of the many works in the canon, the Therīgāthā alone with which the modern reader can at present come into contact, in the same depth as the Buddha, gives any idea of the picture of the experience of women as they lived their lives as householders, as they lived as wives, as they experienced childbirth, as they experienced bereavement, and, above all, as they exercised their choice to depart from the life of the householder to that of the homeless Buddhist renunciant of ancient North India that is presented in the Therīgāthā.

Motherhood is one of the motifs that is used over and over in this series, as if it's the strongest one, the richest one. Poem after poem recalls the death of a child, the burden of

pregnancy and nursing, the tyranny of the pestle and cooking-pot; the ambivalent, sometimes explosive relief of a woman who has finally laid down these burdens, the poem after poem brings back the death of a child. This is a relatively confined but nonetheless significant question and one which is asked by the Therīgāthā, namely: how does the Therīgāthā portray the relationship between motherhood and renunciation? Or does the experience of the mother simply disappear once one enters the sangha (fraternity) and is transcended and forgotten, or does it shape the language and imagery of about liberation? This article argues with the scholarship of Reiko Ohnuma, Kathryn Blackstone, Alice Collett, Kate Crosby and Vanessa Sasson, to name but a few, that the Therīgāthā is not dismissive nor is it celebratory of motherhood. Instead, it is a change in which something is not being discarded but rather grief, mainly, is not being discarded but rather reworked into the very substance of insight.

The Therīgāthā as Text and Context

The Therīgāthā is a number of the nuns' sayings, many of which are given a short prose biography by Dhammapāla (the Paramatthadīpanī, fifth century) who is the commentator of the fifth-century Sūtrapāla. The Therīgāthā is a book in the

Khuddaka Nikāya, the "Minor Collection" of the Sutta Pitaka, and is believed to be a collection of the sayings of individual nuns, many of which are also given a short prose biography by Dhammapāla, the Paramatthadīpanī (Norman, 1971) who is the commentator of the Sūtrapāla, fifth century. But modern philology uses the collection judiciously: the poems were written at different times from the Buddha's life until the late sangha era, some of the verses were inserted very later, with some headings, and the commentarial "biographies" were written later to fill in the gaps that surrounded the verses without a context in which they were originally placed (Norman, 1971). Despite the fact that the Therīgāthā is very similar to the Theragāthā in language (and perhaps even in meter), there is significant internal evidence that the material had been composed not only by a female author, but perhaps by a female voice and redaction, as well: the Therīgāthā shows a preference for a vocabulary of the body and the household, spends considerably more time discussing family relationships and personal suffering, and is significantly less extolled of the Buddha than its companion text (Blackstone, 1998).

The social landscape that is portrayed in the verses is one of arranged marriages, joint (or extended) families, internal labor for the household, and a radical dichotomy between settled people who live in the house and people who live on the road, those who renounce the world. Before being consecrated, many of the speakers define themselves as wives, widows, mothers of sons and daughters, or (in a surprisingly large number of instances) as courtesans. This should be seen in the context of the motherhood which is a recurring theme throughout the collection, and the loss of children in particular. Many theris are led to ordination by the biographical frame, not by eradicating a pre-existing domestic and maternal identity, but by remodelling it as Kate Crosby explains in her survey of women in Theravada literature and society (2014).

Maternal Grief and the Rhetoric of De-Mothering

Reiko Ohnuma has been more than any other scholar to elucidate the dual nature of the position of mother in Indian Buddhist texts. Oft-cited as a model for the compassion that a Buddhist practitioner is supposed to cultivate towards all beings, Ohnuma states that motherhood was also a double edged sword used to illustrate the very attachment that the practice sought to avoid (2012). In a chapter dedicated to the de-mothering of the Therīgāthā, Ohnuma employs the poems of loss of motherhood to describe what she calls the "process of de-mothering" that takes place in these poems: the concept of motherhood within the mother's identity is methodically erased from her context, through discursive and psychological estrangement from her lost child, such that liberation is possible only after the status of motherhood itself has been erased (Ohnuma, 2012, p. 42).

The best example of this rhetorical device is perhaps found in the Ubbir poem. Queen Ubbir is weeping at the cremation ground because her daughter Jīvā has passed away. Ubbir's response to this, in the next few verses, is that this suffering is like an arrow withdrawn from the heart; then she tells herself that she is "free of hunger" and "quite" (literally in the poem, "hungry no longer" and "quite") (cf. Norman, 1971). So the cure for the loss of the mother is not to forget her, but to force the individual child to enter into a certain radical renaming of himself, to make him turn back into the impersonal repetition of his own sam-sāra.

Another similar, though different, way is represented in the verses of Kisāgotamī, the story of which is also widely used in Buddhist literature, and even more so in the parallel story in the Dhammapada commentary. When Kisāgotamī brings the Buddha a mustard seed from any house which she has visited because her house had lost its baby, the Buddha tells her that no house has never felt death, and she understands that death manifests in every house. (trans.). Compare the Digha Nikaya commentary on verse 287 (Hecker & Khema 1998). Both movements are intended to dissolve the attachment to the object of their grief, both do so—Ubbir's by multiplication of the number of her lives, Kisāgotamī's by horizontal scanning of the homes of one town; both movements make the impermanence of the grief its own, its vastness its own. The Therīgāthā verses after her realization are referring to anguish on the other side of the realization: She has seen "the Mirror of the Dhamma" and removed the burden (Hecker & Khema, trans., 1998).

Another form of this is Vāsītthī or "the madwoman. Her husband and her parents and her children die in succession; she loses her mind and mindlessness, and wanders from town to town, naked and unkempt; she meets with the Buddha at Mithilā, regains her mind and mindlessness, her own verses recalling the shameful state of her former condition and the completeness of her transformation. Paṭācārā's tale is tragic enough. He is reported in the accompanying commentaries to have been killed by a snake bite, her infant son by crossing a river, and her second son, who was born at the same time, by being killed by a hawk; and when she finally returned home there she learned that her parents and her second son, who was born at the same time, had all died at the same time. The poem by Ubbirī is addressed to the Buddha who came to heal the suffering woman, and the poem by Kisāgotamī is addressed to the group of young men pounding grain with a pestle; and the same image used in the Ubbirī and Kisāgotamī is used in the Paṭācārā poem in a different context, to meditate about impermanence, to encourage the listener to meditate on the Buddha's teaching before it is too late. Incredibly, note Paṭācārā, she ends up being one of the most desirable teachers of other grieving women: several of the verses elsewhere in the Therīgāthā, by nuns who also claim to be her students, explicitly attribute to her the ability to help direct them away from the very same agony that she experienced, making her not only a woman free from maternal loss, but one whose loss gives her a special pedagogical and pastoral authority within the early sangha. However, the poems in this collection always portray the mother's pain as therapeutic, not punitive, intervention; that is, it is accepted as a necessary evil, channeled, and eventually transformed into the very experience of impermanence which is being awakened.

From Domestic Bondage to Freedom: Muttā and Sumangalamātā

One strand of the Therīgāthā's involvement with motherhood is about the loss of children, while another is closely related to them, about escape from the unpaid work of the married mother which had organized her woman's everyday life. The verses assigned to Muttā and to Sumangalamātā, from the first and last chapters, are among the most graphic statements of this theme and the language is highly physical and specific. In Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translation, Muttā declares herself, so thoroughly freed... from three crooked things set free: from mortar, pestle, & crooked old husband, with the craving that leads to further becoming uprooted, she is set free equally from aging and death (n.d.). Sumangalamātā's verse is very

similar to Muttā's both in form and content, exclaiming her freedom from her pestle, her shameless husband & his sun-shade making, her moldy old pot with water-snake smell, before immediately shifting to a description of how she is now absorbed in meditation under a tree (Thanissaro, trans., n.d.).

What makes these two such common quotations, and most useful for the argument advanced here, is the way that they combine two registers that a modern reader might imagine to be distinct: the clearly concrete and even almost comic catalogue of household drudgery, and the soteriological vocabulary of craving, becoming, and release. The pestle is not incidental colour; it is mentioned in the same celebratory tone as the other two: it is the same liberation from the tedium of household labour that is the same liberation from the saṃsāra itself. Alice Collett tells us that the biographical frames provided by the commentarial tradition to such figures as these were already written considerably later than the verses; but at the same time, she notes that the Therīgāthā's unflagging focus on the details of women's domestic work makes it a special case among the early Buddhist texts (Collett 2016). The verse retains, at least, a literary voice that is recognisable and evidently valued, ready to refer to the mortar and the pestle, whether they are a particular historical woman or not, in the same register as nibbāna.

It is interesting also to note that this lexicon of slavery is closely connected with the larger socio-economic changes of the period from which the Therīgāthā arose. These verses describe the households engaged in the work of grinding grain, drawing water, tending the cooking fire; these households were just as enmeshed in the monetised, urban-based economy of middle Gangetic plains, in which women's unpaid domestic work was a prerequisite to the trade, craft and administrative activity required for urban life. In the context of this, the theris' naming of the pestle and the pot at the very moment of their spiritual liberation seems more like a statement of refusal than an eccentric detail or simply a personal preference, a refusal to let the particularity of the urban housewife's work fade away in the language of suffering.

Māyā and Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī: The Buddha's Two Mothers

As one talks about motherhood in the earliest Indian Buddhist texts, one cannot help but also mention the two women who were called 'mothers' of the Buddha himself: his birth mother, Māyā, and his mother's sister, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, who raised him after his birth mother's death seven days later and who became the first nuns. It is significant to note that Ohnuma compares these two figures to gain insight into the reasoning behind the lesser-known mothers of the Therīgāthā as well. It is precisely because of her early death that there is no burden of filial debt or obligation for the Buddha in the tradition: in the tradition, Ohnuma argues, Māyā is constructed as the "good" mother because she fulfills only one biological function—that of birth—and then leaves the narrative without bringing anything else with her, leaving behind an idealised but ultimately unattainable image of motherhood reduced to its purest, most disembodied form (Ohnuma, 2012; Scheible, 2014). Mahāpajāpatī, in contrast, lives on to nurse, raise, and love the child, and it is this survival-and the debt of nurturance that it entails—that will cause the emotional and narrative complications (Ohnuma, 2012) which later chapters of the tradition will be required to solve, including her eventual request to be ordained, which was initially rejected.

The Therīgāthā's verses written by Mahapajāpatī herself after she has reached arahantship are explicitly called "a mother's blessing" to the Buddha and to the nuns community that she has created for him (see the Therīgāthā's summary of Thig 6.6: Māha Pajāpatī Gotamī Therī in the standard chapter listings of the collection). Her story—from the gates of the sangha, initially rejected by petitioner, to arahant, and matriarch of an entire lineage of ordained women — is a template which resonates with, yet surpasses, the less dramatic stories of the other women in the collection: Non-biological motherhood is not eradicated by ordination of the women, but rather redirected and extended, becoming the foundation for a new kind of motherhood, one that extends to a community of spiritual daughters.

Scholarly Perspectives: Convergence and Disagreement

Opinions on the nature of these changes in the Therīgāthā vary in the scholarly literature. Ohnuma's "de-mothering" thesis has received some response and is not without its critics, however; directly responding to Ohnuma's work, the Buddhist Studies scholar Karen Derris has argued that an interpretive approach that is primarily based on the Buddhist discourses of the women the verses are said to represent will be shaped more by the anxieties of monks about their own maternal debts than by the concerns of the women themselves, and has proposed a "feminist-ethical hermeneutic" that would focus on the interpretive consequences such readings have for living communities of Buddhist women (Derris, 2014). Kathryn Blackstone's essay provides an alternative, but related focus. Blackstone does not focus on the bereaved mother as such, but instead locates the Therīgāthā's discussion of motherhood in a wider "rhetoric of liberation" that is repeated throughout the collection; a unique vocabulary of embodiment, environment and personal relationship that the theris use to express a specifically female trajectory to nibbāna, one that Blackstone suggests is linguistically and thematically different from the parallel path within the Theragatha where the monks speak of motherhood (Blackstone, 1998). The imagery of the house-bound, concrete, bodily, and familial world, which the Buddhist women, and, to a large extent, only the Buddhist women were compelled to live in, is a rhetorical move that is repeated, recapitulatively, in both the household imagery of Muttā and Sumangalamātā-and in the bereavement imagery of Ubbirī and Kisāgotamī.

Both readings are complemented by an important methodological caution from the part of Alice Collett. In *Women in Early Indian Buddhism*, Collett concludes that it is important for the scholar to carefully consider the distinction between the verses themselves, which she claims date slightly earlier than, and, in a qualified sense, are closer to the women's voices, and the later commentarial biographies that surround them, which often provide a dramatic and sometimes formulaic account of the woman's life in order to explain what the word means after the fact (Collett, 2016). In the case of the maternal poems, this implies a degree of sensitivity to the very evocative narrative details of the mustard-seed quest, say of Kisāgotamī, as in some sense a commentarial elaboration; and a level of seriousness towards the more laconic and allusive expression of the grief and its remedy in the canonical verses proper. The Therīgāthā's poems for mothers place them in the longer history of Theravada attitudes to women that Kate Crosby surveys, which in some respects is far more open to full liberation for women than many of its contemporaries, but which also

reflects a historical subordination of the bhikkhunī sangha to the order of monks that is not fully resolved by the ascribed spiritual status of such mothers as Mahāpajāpatī in the poems (Crosby, 2014). Vanessa Sasson's edited volume *Little Buddhas*, which is more directly focused on childhood than on motherhood, complements these readings by highlighting the extent to which Buddhist narrative literature is filled with images of children, birth and family, thus pointing to the constant tension between the Buddhist narrative imagination and a desire to abandon the household, a desire that is so often touted as a hallmark of the tradition. (Sasson, 2013).

Renunciation as Reconfigured, not Negated, Motherhood

When read together, the verses themselves, and the context of the scholarship around them, provide no easy reading in which motherhood is just an obstacle to be overcome on the way to renouncing. There are a number of patterns that are repeated in the maternal poems of the Therīgāthā, which rather suggest a reconfiguration process. Firstly, grief is never dismissed as frivolous or non-existent: The Buddha does not say that grief is foolish, or that it's not real, but rather refocuses it, expands its scope to make the single grief perceptible as part of a universal condition. Secondly, the specifically maternal and domestic language of the verses, the pestle, the cremation ground, the death of the newborn is not discarded when the liberation occurs, but saved and continued; the theris do not speak abstractly, in ungendered language, but speak in language that had structured them before their renunciation, and in language they spoke throughout their existence. Third, the maternal relation is not ended, it is extended: Paṭācārā is the mother of dozens of other women who have lost their children; Mahāpajāpatī is the mother of a flock of nuns. On this reading the verses are not about severing ties with the mother, but about the object of this tie—the child versus the larger community of beings – and its emotional attachment—from distressed clinging to compassionate, detached care.

This reading also contributes to the understanding of why the Therīgāthā still has a resonance today that goes beyond the historical circumstances and religious context in which it was composed. The maternal poems, and especially the Ubbirī poem, offer a remarkably honest and honest description of loss, bereavement, not trivializing the loss or making grief the last word, a description that any reader, regardless of their own religious orientation, will find of interest to them. Not by chance, but by nature, this question of the effect raised by the scholarship surveyed above does not skip over the act of the grace, as in a more triumphalist religious writing, but stands before it, with it, and takes it away.

Conclusion

Reflections on motherhood in Therīgāthā are not easily summarized in a few words. The verses become evidence of the fullness of the domestic and maternal space that supplied the language of liberation, when read in the light of Reiko Ohnuma's account of "de-mothering", or in the light of Kathryn Blackstone's account of a specifically female rhetoric of liberation. In methodological caution, Alice Collett alerts readers to the difference between the verses and the ensuing commentarial frames, and in situating the mothers' imagery in a broader institutional and narrative context, Kate Crosby and Vanessa Sasson remind the reader of the difference between the two traditions. The series of scholarships in combination with the verses on Muttā, Sumangalamātā, Ubbirī, Kisāgotamī, Vāsīthī, Paṭācārā and Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī is

not a simple rejection of motherhood or a simple celebration of it, but a complex, agonistic, and ultimately transformative account of the maternal experience as one of the most important means by which women of the early Buddhist world in India achieved liberation. An institutional place had been created in the written history of the Gangetic plains for such an engagement, in the wider ferment of the Second Urbanization from which the sangha of the Buddhas emerged, for the first time.

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