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STORIES OF REMARKABLE EMPOWERING: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE THERĪGĀTHĀ

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ABSTRACT

The role and place of women within the earliest form of Buddhism have been questioned and analyzed by scholars frequently. In this paper, this subject will be revisited in the light of the *Therīgāthā* (a part of the Pali Canon), a text attributed to women who had chosen the path of Buddhist renunciation. Women are mentioned occasionally in the Pali Canon in texts other than the *Therīgāthā*, but comprehending their exact status remains challenging. The *Therīgāthā*, with its 522 verses set within 73 poems, sets a different mood and opens new paths of understanding. This paper will attempt to comprehend the experiences of the women themselves based on their reflections and attitudes as personified within this text. It will particularly demonstrate that these women were self-empowered: they were aware of their circumstances and equipped to deal with the challenges that confronted them. The different ways through which the strength and confidence of the women in directing their lives and initiating change can be envisioned in the *Therīgāthā* will be exemplified through three key themes that are embodied in the poems. The paper will also compare and contrast briefly the idea of 'power' drawn from other texts of the Canon with similar ideas in the *Therīgāthā*. Finally, some challenges will be assessed and conclusions will be drawn on why the conjecture of 'remarkable empowering' may indeed be a truism.

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INTRODUCTION

The question of the status of women in early Buddhism has been studied with much interest. Though scholarly descriptions are not monolithic, it is generally believed that there existed a difference in status between men and women, with more limitations on the latter. In comparison to other religions and sects that existed at the time (c. 600 BCE onwards), however, Buddhism's approach to the issue was quite unique. We know that a *Sanghā* for women was present, but the *Therīgāthā*, a collection of poems attributed to Buddhist women practitioners, is a testament to the fact that this inclusion was not lip service alone.

The Pali Canon, of which the *Therīgāthā* is a part, is generally considered to represent early Buddhism.[1] On the whole, the Canon and its texts contain occasional references to women in different contexts, but it is difficult to determine a consistent view of their status since the portrayal ranges from positive to quite problematic.[2] Lay Buddhist followers include women (examples are Ambapālī and Visākhā),[3] and they are assumed to be capable of deeper knowledge concerning the *dhamma* or teachings of the Buddha. Additionally, the presence of a *Sanghā* for women meant that women were recognized as having the capacity to follow the spiritual path fully.[4] In the *Bhikkhunīsaṃyutta*, women renunciants display their depth of understanding.[5] At the same time, there are passages that adversely limit the abilities of women. Spiritually perfected women cannot become a Buddha or a Sakka (leader of gods), positions open only to men.[6] In many places, women's capacities, limited to household and vanity items, are dangerously generalized. [7] Disturbingly, derogatory references to women dot the text. The Buddha himself calls women unrestrained, jealous, and of low wisdom.[8] He also states that *Sanghā* life would be halved due to the entry of women.[9] This mood is further set in the *Vinaya* where, for instance, the company of women is considered worse for monks than being with a black snake.[10] These instances are oft quoted by scholars and have led many to say that Buddhism contains strands of misogynist attitudes toward women.[11]

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[1]The Pali Canon, first oral and then written, has three divisions (*Piṭakas*) namely *Sutta, Vinaya* (Vin), and *Abhidhamma*. The *Sutta Piṭaka* has the five *Nikāyas*: *Dīgha* (DN), *Majjhima* (MN), *Saṃyutta* (SN), *Aṅguttara* (AN) and *Khuddaka* (the latter containing several texts, including *Therīgāthā*). References to AN, DN, MN, SN and Vin will include the volume and page number of the original Pali Text Society (PTS) edition. References to the *Therīgāthā* and the *Theragāthā* will allude to verse numbers. PTS translations have been largely consulted.

[2] The word 'ambivalence' has been used by many scholars to describe the overall picture. Alan Sponberg identifies on the contrary multiple views towards women and clarifies that there is instead a 'multivocality" in which 'discordant views' have found a place. Alan Sponberg, "Attitudes towards Women and the Feminine in Buddhism", *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*, ed. Jose Ignatio Cabezon (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 4.

[3] See DN II 95-99 and AN IV 255f, 269 respectively.

[4] This is admitted by the Buddha himself. AN IV 271-279 and MN I 490f.

[5] SN I 128f.

[6] MN III 65f.

[7] AN III 362.

[8] AN II 80f.

[9] AN IV 271-279.

[10] Vin III 19f.

[11] Some scholars believe such passages were later additions and not a part of the more encouraging early views. For example, Sponberg speaks of ascetic misogyny as most likely being a later addition. Sponberg, "Attitudes Towards Women", 18. The downgrading of women's abilities as a later addition is supported by Ven. Anālayo in 'The *Bahudhātuka-sutta* and its Parallels on Women's Inabilities,' *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 16, (2009): 32. http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/2010/05/analayo.pdf

The ambiguity and complications these two views present often preoccupy women's studies in this sphere. Amidst this debate, the study of the *Therīgāthā* and its role is not a new undertaking.[12] Scholarly works on the *Therīgāthā* have brought out varying perceptions about the women featured within that continue to contribute to clarity on their status within the Canon in general. Within this body of work, however, it has been noted that "As a general trend, there have been more weight given over to *attitudes towards women* (and this most likely being male attitudes to women) than to *women's own experience* (or the recounting of women's own apparent experience)".[13] In a way this work intends to be a contribution to the latter in the belief that understanding further the experience of women in the *Therīgāthā* may reveal valuable insights that advance the debate. The proposal that women played a pivotal role in the achievement of their own spiritual upliftment in this text and that in doing so they displayed 'remarkable empowering,'[14] in more ways than one, will be the central thesis taken up and defended here.

This paper contains three sections: the first section will begin by introducing the *Therīgāthā* and will deliberate on the question of its authorship. Some brief notes on methodology will follow. The section will then introduce 'empowerment' and what it means. A preliminary discussion on the very first women disciples of the Buddha as empowered will be undertaken. The second section will lay the ground for empowerment by discussing some poems. The different ways through which the strength and confidence of the women in directing their lives and initiating change can be envisioned in the *Therīgāthā* will be exemplified through three themes that are embodied in the poems. The final section will further the thesis, starting with a discussion on the nature of 'power' in the *Nikāyas* and how it compares and contrasts with similar ideas in the *Therīgāthā*. Reasons will then be given as to why the idea of empowerment makes sense here. The work will consider some challenges the thesis may encounter and then offer some concluding remarks.

THERĪGĀTHĀ AND EMPOWERMENT

The *Therīgāthā,* an anthology composed of *gāthas* or poems attributed to various *therīs* (female renunciants), makes an appearance at a historical time when literary works involving women were an exception and not the norm. The cultural framework should have actually had the opposite effect. The *Therīgāthā* consists of 522 verses set within 73 *gāthas* that are arranged in *nipātas* or Cantos.[15] (The poems exist alongside another similar collection of poems called the *Theragāthā*. The latter is a longer text that contains the musings of male renunciants.) The quest for liberation from suffering or *dukkha* remains its central motif in common with all other Buddhist literature. In common further with the latter, the ideas of impermanence (*aniccā*), non-substantiality (*anattā*), and repeated rebirths that assail existence are also mentioned often. However, *Therīgāthā* differs in its approach to suffering: here it is personal and goes beyond the pedagogical. Some experience it first-hand and others see its spreading tentacles as a very real

[12] Scholars have engaged with the text since 1883 with the release of its first edited volume in Pali and over the years it has garnered many translations.

[13] Collett makes this comment about studies based on Buddhism, not just the *Therīgāthā*. Alice Collett, "Historio-Critical Hermeneutics in the Study of Women in Early Indian Buddhism," *Numen* 56, (2009): 107.

[14] My title uses the verb 'empowering' rather than the noun 'empowerment' to bring out a sense of empowerment as process, more representative of this work as will be demonstrated in due course.

[15] Kenneth R. Norman, *Pali Literature*, (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983), 75.

threat. The poets often dwell on the evil of short-lived sensual desires; the idea of impermanence is revisited in different ways.

However, before a discussion of empowerment, some attention must be paid to the authorship of the *Therīgāthā*. The question of authorship is a complicated one and this is agreed to by many historians and linguists. Norman, in a very thorough study, points out that the text evolved over 300 years (c. 600-300 BCE), and its redactors added material along the way as clarificatory links.[16] The question of attribution appears to be a challenging one. Some poems contain the names of their authors within them, and some have other markers (such as the authors being admitted into the order by the Buddha himself) that confirm that the *therīs* did indeed exist.[17] However, adds Norman, some other *therīs* are 'shadowy figures'.[18] Moreover, linking some verses with specific *therīs* is perplexing as many poems have common verses and phrases that seem to be borrowed from something like a "storehouse of floating *pādas*."[19] Here, ascription is based not on original composition but on the fact that the *therī* "recited the verse on some occasion…"[20] Moreover, it is of note that some verses were recited by the *therīs,* but very many were recited to her.[21] Adding to this are problems of coordination with other works of the Pali Canon. Rhys Davids finds that verses of *Bhikkhunīsaṃyutta* are found in the *Therīgāthā* in a different form or are ascribed to different *therīs*. [22] Some answers can be sought in works that followed, viz., the *Apadāna* (which is also canonical and provides "formulaic" details of the *bhikkhunīs*[23]) and the non-canonical commentary, attributed to Dhammapāla. The commentary provides rich explanation for the verses and supplies information on previous lives or circumstances of the *therīs* but comes much later (c. 600 CE). And so though considered extremely helpful, it is even further removed from the life of the *therīs*.

There also remain some questions about whether the *Therīgāthā* is written by men and though this cannot certainly be proved, many scholars conclude rather that there are specificities that point rather to female authorship or involvement.[24] Lang finds that women practitioners used "stock phrases" in subtly distinct ways than monks despite similar writings on religious experience.[25] Murcott believes that the poems have female composers as "…monks never had so much sympathy with the female members of the community, as to warrant our crediting them with having composed these songs sung from the very heart of women."[26] Norman also agrees that "…many [verses] are indubitably by women"[27] In the end this work in agreement with Rhys Davids accepts that though exact historic details and origins are all but lost "the sentiments and the aspirations, that are expressed in this work…so long preserved, cherished,

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[16] *Elders' Verses II: Therīgāthā,* trans. Kenneth R. Norman, (London: PTS, 1971), xxi. (henceforth *EVII*)
[17] Ibid., xxi; xxvii.
[18] Ibid., xxi.
[19] Norman, *Pali literature*, 74.
[20] Norman, *EVII*, xxvi.
[21] Ibid., xxiv.
[22] *Psalms of the Sisters,* trans. Mrs Rhys Davids, (London: PTS, 1909), xvii. (henceforth *Psalms*)
[23] Whereas the *gāthās* are more individualistic. Kumkum Roy, "Beyond Gargi and Maitreyi: Exploring the *Theri* and *Thera Apadanas,*" *Social Scientist* 49, No. 11/12 (582-583) (2021): 32-33.
[24] Rhys Davids raises concern about there not being sufficient evidence for male authorship. Ibid. xxiii.
[25] Karen Christina Lang, "Lord Death's Snare: Gender-Related Imagery in the Theragāthā and the Therīgāthā" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2 (1986): 66.
[26] Susan Murcott, *First Buddhist Women: Poems and Stories of Awakening* (California: Parallax Press, 2006) 21.
[27] Norman, *Pali Literature*, 76.

and revered" are prized truths.[28] The presupposition of this work will thus be that women, in one way or another, are deeply associated with these compositions at their very source and the poems can be taken as their word.

The linking of the experience of these ancient *therīs* with the more contemporary idea of empowerment may also be problematic. The risk of anachronism remains. The effort would then be to show that the presence of empowerment is not impossible in spirit and that this way of understanding may bring "a quite different image into view."[29] Furthermore, though there is no doubt that "the *Therīgāthā* is feminist in the sense of foregrounding women's voices and experiences, and on occasion pointing to the specific ways that the suffering of women is due to gendered discrimination"[30], this work would be traversing the soteriological path as well in the belief that the willpower and resolve to practice *dhamma* in all life situations lies at the base of any claim to empowerment here, spiritual or otherwise. Additionally, considering that 'the canon is more favorable towards women than the commentaries' and that taking both together is tantamount to dilution of the "evidence of the canon itself,"[31] this work will remain largely confined to the canonical *Therīgāthā*. The *Apadāna*, as a formulaic and later work, will also not be included, and references to it and the commentary will be limited to the translators' discretion.[32] Though many translations of the *Therīgāthā* have been consulted, this work will be largely drawing on Norman's 1971 literal translation called *Elders' Verses II*.

The question of what empowerment in the *Therīgāthā* would entail can now be taken up. It has been said that the *Therīgāthā* is not a model for "feminist rebellion against sex discrimination' but rather is a witness to women's 'independent thought and action'.[33] Taking this further can it be said that women that feature in this text are empowered. Is such a claim justifiable? A standard dictionary meaning of empowerment is "the authority or power given to someone to do something" or "the process of becoming stronger and more confident especially in controlling one's life and claiming one's rights."[34]

The *first* empowerment as described in the above definition can be identified through recognizing that a female *Saṅghā* was validated by the Buddha (albeit with trepidation). A request was made to the Buddha to allow Mahāpajāpatī Gotami and other women to be ordained.[35] Mahāpajāpatī Gotami became the first woman to be ordained thus. However, this story as it is told has some interesting details. Historically Gotami is identified as the Buddha's mother's sister as well as the one who had raised him. The request

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[28] Rhys Davids, *Psalms*, xiii.

[29] *Poems of the First Buddhist Women: A Translation of the Therigatha*, trans. Charles Hallisey (India and US: Murty Classical Library of India, Harvard University Press, 2021), xi.

I have not delved here into modern-day complexities of the empowerment of women. I use empowerment in its most elementary sense.

[30] Bhikkhu Sujato, "Verses of the Senior Nuns: A Reflective Life," 2022. https://suttacentral.net/edition/thig/en/sujato/introduction?lang=en

[31] Alice Collett, *Lives of Early Buddhist Nuns: Biographies as History* 2016, xxv. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199459070.001.0001

[32] I use the terms 'poems' and 'stories' interchangeably as I focus on the underlying narrative. The reference is not to the stories of the *Apadāna* or commentary.

[33] Kathryn Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therīgāthā*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000), 11.

[34] Lexico.com, s.v. "empowerment", https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/empowerment

[35] AN IV 274-279.

for inclusion of women was first a direct one made by her and then an indirect one made through Ānanda, who was the Buddha's faithful disciple and constant companion. And all initial requests for inclusion were refused. We can only speculate that the Buddha eventually gave in because the request had his aunt cum foster-mother in the background and things may have turned out differently had she not expressed her desire and initiated the process. However, in whatever way we may wish to see this, that he agreed has great significance for the position of women as it guaranteed their entry into *Sanghā* life. Furthermore, the role of Ānanda, in backing the request and taking it forward, implies that at least some of those around the Buddha did not find the idea absurd. All these factors thus were probably supportive, if the story be taken as historically accurate, in leading up to the permission for and formation of a *Sanghā* for women.[36]

Thus, women were 'given' the 'authority' or 'power' to become *Sanghā* members. What also becomes clear is that this type of empowerment was not a simple thing, first because of the general position of women in society of the time, secondly, due to the initial absence of a *Sanghā* for women and the Buddha's own unease in establishing one and thirdly, due to a strand within Buddhism that questioned the abilities of women. What is made known however is that these women were attracted to what the Buddha said and sought the opportunity to practice his teachings to the fullest, and not as lay followers alone. In their own seeking and initiative is embedded the *second* sense of empowerment: that is the confidence in at least some women to ask for such inclusion, foremost among them Mahāpajāpatī Gotami. These women, rooted in their deep conviction in the *dhamma*, showed the courage and the strength to ask for what they desired and did not give up on this aspiration despite being refused. This idea of how the *Sanghā* came about is not further mentioned in the *Therīgāthā* wherein it is taken as a given that there is a *Sanghā* women can turn to, that there are other women renunciants that can be looked up to and that the liberation of women is a possibility.[37] It may be said that both empowerments, of being given the power and of being internally strong and confident, are thus intrinsically related in that though women were empowered through inclusion in the *Sanghā*, their own role in the process must be acknowledged. The *Therīgāthā* is then a narration of how this fledgling power became established and immensely transformative for those that wielded it. It is furthering of the latter sense of empowerment that this paper will be largely focusing on.

[36] Though not without conditions. Eight conditions were laid down by the Buddha and Gotami agreed to them. The authenticity of the story to do with the eight conditions has been convincingly questioned. See Ven. Anālayo "Mahāpajāpatī's Going Forth in the *Madhyama-āgama*", *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Volume 18 (2011): 268-317. http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/2011/07/Anaalayo-Mahaprajapati2.pdf Bhikkhu Sujato on the other hand, acknowledging the controversy, takes the rules to be rules of respect: "The Vinaya does not allow for any power-based relationship between the monks and nuns…no monk…[may] order a bhikkhuni to do anything…There is a rule, however, that requires that the bhikkhunis bow to the monks. This is a matter of etiquette, not power."; Bhikkhu Sujato, "A Conversation with a Sceptic-Bhikkhuni FAQ", *Tibetan Buddhist Encyclopedia*, 2016. http://www.tibetanbuddhistencyclopedia.com/en/index.php?title=A_conversation_with_a_sceptic_%E2%80%93_Bhikkhuni_FAQ&oldid=249424

[37] In fact, the Buddha himself is seen in dialogue with many *therīs*, thus supporting the idea that this issue was indeed resolved.

THERĪGĀTHĀ AND ITS POETS: GLIMPSES OF EMPOWERMENT

The *Therīgāthā* relates how the ideals of renunciation and freedom from craving got manifested in the women poets. What these women experienced in the process can be gathered not only through their struggle for liberation, but also from their approach to the circumstances their life was passing through. This section will introduce some of the poets and their verses, highlighting both these aspects, in order to identify the *therīs* insight, confidence and willpower to initiate change.[38] Three themes have been enumerated to exemplify these: the recognition of a weakness and its addressal, overcoming of sense pleasures and overcoming of disillusionment. The section after this will present a different set of arguments and assess some problematic verses.

Recognition of a Weakness and its Addressal

Many *therīs* admit to weaknesses. They then speak about how they conquered these. Mittā (31-32) exposes her feeling of fearfulness (*dara*) by speaking of its removal.[39] She says her longing for rebirth in the *deva* realm is gone since the fear that held her back has disappeared. Sāmā (37-38) and Uttamā (42-44) pace up and down, in and out of their residence, since they are not able to find peace of mind in their life as renunciates. In other similar verses i.e., of another Sāmā (39-41) and a certain unnamed Bhikkhunī (67-71), the period of wait for calm as 25 years compounds their anguish. And yet none of them give up until they reach the goal. On the mastery of her mind, another Sāmā says it was due to 'my' watchfulness and vigilance (*appamāda)*, in which "I" delighted. Uttamā says, 'I went up to a *bhikkhunī*…".[40] She is taking action in order to find a way out, and this shows her sheer effort and determination.

Similar to Uttamā is the case of Vijayā (169-174). She too approaches a *bhikkhunī* in search of peace of mind. But unlike Uttamā, whose approach is more passive, Vijayā questions the *bhikkhunī*, albeit with great respect. This suggests her more active role in getting to self-mastery. However, it does not seem that her questions were about doubting the teachings.[41] The verses go on to say that Vijayā took the *bhikkhunī's* advice. (We can conjecture that Vijayā was pacing up and down, hassled, and not sure about how to go about the teachings, she needed to clear her mind and understand why she was not able to attain the final goal).

Mittākāḷī (92-96) is also distracted, but her weakness is greed for gain and honour as a renunciant. Assailed by defilements, she is unable to attain the goal. She comprehends that she is on the wrong path and then suddenly there is a revelation "My life is short. Old age and sickness are destroying it. There is

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[38] It was not possible to include all poems. The poems chosen here bring out the thesis more vividly. Some other broad guidelines have been adhered to: the verses uttered to the *therīs* have been left out, except in cases where they are part of a dialogue; verses not associated with the *therī's* own liberation have not been included; verses that were added much later have also not been considered and this includes the last two poems. Of them Rhys Davids points out "there are features pointing to different and possibly later conditions attending their compilation." Rhys Davids, *Psalms*, xxii. However, it is interesting to note that Sumedha (of the last poem) herself may have been around at the time of the Buddha. See *Therīgāthāpāli*: *Book of Verses of Elder Bhikkhunis*, trans. Anāgārika Mahendra (USA: Dhamma Publishers, 2017), xii.

[39] All verse numbers allude to Norman, *EVII*.

[40] Norman, *EVII*, 7.

[41] Questioning is generally not encouraged, the *dhamma* speaks for itself. The Buddha appears to have encouraged questions in case of the Kālāmas (A I 188f) but later sources have a different take. See *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya*, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 73-74.

no time for me to be careless before this body is broken."[42] This simple but very powerful thought gets her back on the path. In keeping with her insight, she focuses on the impermanent *khandhas* and attains liberation soon after.

Paṭācārā (112-116) also hits a dead end in her aspiration to enlightenment. However, unlike the other *therīs* in this section, Paṭācārā cannot find a reason for not having a breakthrough. She reflects on her accomplishments in ethics, on not being indolent or conceited (*akusītā* and *anuddhatā*), and complying with the teachings. Therefore, her disposition is one of puzzlement. As she is questioning her own failure, she concentrates her mind on water flowing under her feet. In the very next instant, she feels peace and this is followed by a very poetic description of her attaining liberation in the mundanity of her life.

Weakness could also embody physical frailty: some *therīs* portray themselves as infirm, pained or weak, in some cases very old. Their struggle is equally remarkable if not more as they too are pushing off forces that make the practice of *dhamma* difficult. The use of a walking stick by all these *therīs* furthers the picture of misery and helplessness. Cittā (27-28) is obviously worse off as she describes herself as leaning on a rock, maybe unable to sit on one, as did Mettikā (29-30). Soṇā (102-106) has borne ten sons that has weakened her considerably (notably in A I 25, Soṇā is the disciple who is foremost among women in applying effort). Dhammā (17) describes her fall. The physical state that is unable to support them is then used as a tool for liberation, "having seen peril in the body'.[43] Not giving up despite their bodies, overcoming physical liabilities, the verses display the intent and resolve of the *therīs* despite physical hardship. Preoccupation with weakness or lack of physical strength is pushed back with *vimucci* (release) and by shattering the mass of darkness.

Overcoming of Sense Pleasures

The craving for sense pleasures, according to Buddhism, is something that binds one to *saṃsāra*. The practitioners of the *Therīgāthā* are seen in many *gāthās* as trying to exorcize these cravings. In the *gāthā* of Subhā, the Smiths' daughter (338-361) the narrative steers towards convincing relatives of her choice to move away from sense pleasures. She seems to have, when young, grasped their frailty. She sees in their luring and burning nature many dangers, leading to greed, defilement, quarrels, and misfortunes. She appears to be convincing her relatives to leave her be: the gold will not lessen the defilements but rather will bind one to the world. She says rather strongly that her "battle" (*raṇa)* is with sense pleasures and that she will not be returning to them again. She stands firm by her choice.

Conversation with the Evil One (Pāpima or Māra) is also endemic to the *Therīgāthā* and figures in many poems.[44] He taunts Selā (57-59) by telling her that she would repent not enjoying the pleasures of the senses. Selā retorts that she sees in these pleasures no joy or attraction but rather sword-like stealth that slices through one's existence, and dramatically she says to this Evil One. "…you are defeated, death" (*Nihato tvamasi antakā*).[45] Soma's (60-62) very next verse also ends with the same words and by declaring her victory over the enticement of pleasures. (However, her verses are addressing another matter which

[42] Norman, *EVII*, 13.
[43] Ibid., 3.
[44] The identity of Pāpima with Māra can be seen in M I 332.
[45] Norman, *EVII*, 9. This phrase is repeated in seven different *gāthās* and appears to be like a declaration of victory.

is about the competence of women to achieve liberation. The jibe, that women are inept (powerless), also comes from the same Pāpima and in a sense both her retort "what (harm) could the woman's state do to us when the mind is well-concentrated…" and her declaration "you are defeated, death" overthrows this allegation as well.[46])

Uppalavaṇṇā (224-251) is shown to have already overcome the temptation to sense pleasures through seeing what damage they can do: she has gone through the horrific experience of sharing a husband with her daughter. So here, the Evil One's tact is different: he expresses concern at her companionless state in homelessness which could expose her to unsafety. She responds that even 100,000 rogues will not be able to move her a 'hair's breadth'. This is telling of how she stands strong and unshaken in her resolve.

Overcoming of Disillusionment

For many women disillusionment primarily is seen to come in two ways: from old age and through the loss of a child. Ambapālī's (252-290) verses are on aging.[47] She proceeds to compare her youthful body to her old and aged body. She focuses on each body part, starting with her hair and ending with her feet, where she compares what that part looked like in her youth and what has become of it now: her lustrous hair is brittle and broken, her soft hands are bony and wrinkled, and her firm body is sagging. In her verses, the repetition of body part after body part deepens the emphasis. Ambapālī's struggle is personal and is directed toward her own body and is representative of the theme of bodily vulnerability that runs through several poems.[48] There is an implication that her beauty filled her with pride.[49] Vimalā, a former courtesan (72-76), writes with more abandon and speaks particularly of how vain she was "intoxicated by…good looks' revealing further what these women felt about their bodies.[50] The verses of Ambapālī tell of the angst of a woman who seems to realize that her beauty is fading.[51] In this she is exposing her vulnerability without shame and without apology. Her verses imply that her meditations are not about hating her body, an easy outcome of such deliberation, but are rather an education or a self-study about not getting caught up with the body or disliking it.

In contrast to Ambapālī, Nandā (82-86), more in the style of the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, goads herself to think of the body as impure, stinking and rotten in keeping with the Buddha's teachings. She applies herself scrupulously and fully, through day and night to the meditation of the unpleasant. She sees the body for what it is with her own wisdom and says "and then I was disgusted with the body, and I was disinterested internally."[52] Being disillusioned with the body made her detached in her mind, which is the whole point of the meditation. She had mastered it. Her mastery of meditation is acknowledged by the Buddha himself.[53]

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[46] Ibid.

[47] She appears in the Pali Canon's *Dīgha Nikāya* as a famed courtesan and a lay follower of the Buddha.

[48] Rhys Davids finds Ambapālī's verses a type-lyric, not a personal document. Rhys Davids, *Psalms*, xxi.

[49] Hallisey's translation draws attention to the falling of pride like plaster in an old house. See Hallisey, *Poems of the First Buddhist Women,* 65.

[50] Ibid., 23.

[51] It could be speculated that she is also contemplating the loss of power.

[52] Norman, *EVII*, 12

[53] In A I 25

The verses of disillusioned women who have lost children are particularly poignant. Vāseṭṭhī (133-138) lost her mind when her son died. She roamed about in madness, hair disheveled, naked, and hungry for three years until she had an encounter with the Buddha. She says she saw him, the fearless one; she listened to and applied his teachings, and her grief or *sokā* was cut off as she now understood its origin. The term that is used by her for grief is not *dukkha* but *sokā*; *sokā* is a type of grief that is often associated with mourning,[54] and this is what she has overcome. Kisāgotamī's (213-235) verses tell of the death of her children and how she faced many other personal tragedies, such as losing her husband, parents, and brother. The verses graphically depict what may have been the rotting corpses of her sons in a cemetery. Society also seems to have rejected her (I was despised by all, she says), and she rises through all this. In facing death after death (*mata*) she attains the 'undying". (*amata*, a permanent state free of rebirth and therefore death).

FURTHERING THE DISCUSSION

The stories of the women described above emerge from different circumstances – waning beauty, old age, sickness, social conventions, or just simply inability to attain liberation. In exploring themselves and the world around them most of these women are united in acknowledging their limitations and their vulnerabilities, both societal and bodily. Such exposés are not for the powerless or weak-hearted! The women, united also in their determinedness to achieve *dhamma* and in the "proud and joyous proclamations of their spiritual attainments"[55], can be seen as acting with power.

The mention of *bala* (translated as power or strength) is not unusual in the Canon.[56] The Buddha is referred as having ten powers through which he claims authority as "chief bull, [and] roars his lion's roar in assemblies." [57] Largely, however, *bala* is alluded to in connection with Buddha's exhortations connected to the attainment of *nibbāna*. Of these, there are the powers that are to be accomplished and those that are viewed as side effects of practice.[58] Powers to be accomplished include five powers (*pañca balāni*, of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom[59]) and the four bases of power.[60] Even though these powers are mentioned only occasionally by these women practitioners, their groupings

[54] Though not always.

[55] *Therīgāthā: Verses of the Senior Nuns*, trans. Sujato Bhikkhu and Jessica Walton, (Sutta Central, 2019), introductory page.

[56] I prefer to translate *bala* as power. This is simply because the word strength appears to have a physical connotation. As far as I understand, physicality, though not unimportant, is not what is being referred to in the various examples that follow. However, this is not a rule and there are contrary instances. (e.g., SN I 222) To be noted also is that physical weakness is referred to in the *Therīgāthā* as *dubbalā* in the stories of Cittā etc. mentioned above. *Viriya*, another word that may be taken to convey power, is more reminiscent of energy or exertion.

[57] This claim and the ten powers are described in AN V 33 f. The ten are acknowledged in the *Therīgāthā,* though later, in Sumedhā's poem.

[58] *Pañca balāni* and *iddhi* powers respectively.

[59] An example is SN III 96. Though five powers are the standard norm, their numbers and types may vary through the texts. (See for instance, DN III 229, DN III 253 and AN IV 363)

[60] SN V 254f. The *Iddhipādasaṃyutta* explains how to attain the four bases of powers and their importance. The four are power based on 'desire' (*chanda*,), 'energy', 'thought' and 'investigation', each with the 'co-factors of concentration and struggle''. (*The Book of the Kindred Sayings: Saṃyutta Nikāya*, Part V, trans. F. L. Woodard (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2005), 225-26.)

are not unfamiliar.[61] However, another power, *iddhi*, considered a 'by-product' of the practice, often translated as supranormal power or accomplishment, is specifically spoken of. It refers to powers such as walking on water, flying, vanishing, knowing the minds of others, knowing past lives, etc.: it has been said that *iddhi,* in fact is reflective of a good amount of spiritual advancement rather than of an intent to impress others.[62] An example is Uppalavaṇṇā and her mastery of her own mind. She developed the bases of supernormal powers (*iddhipādā*) along with the six kinds of superhuman knowledge.[63] These women thus can be seen as wielding spiritual and meditative power. They have the "power to attain" these thus empowering them to become accomplished practitioners. [64]

Often times there is also a social and lay context within which power is mentioned (that is not directly related to spiritual pursuit). [65] In the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* there is a discussion of five powers (*bala*) of a woman: these are the powers of beauty, wealth, relatives, sons and virtue. Through the possession of these 'powers,' the text adds, a woman dwells confidently at home, she wins over her husband, and has 'control' over her husband. To not have these powers may lead to a rejection by her family. However, all her powers may come to naught if a man exercises one power: that of authority. [66] The powers described here are traditional, in that they are aligned with societal expectations and are also patriarchal, in that all can be drowned by one power exercised by a man.[67] This is not a model that the women in the *Therīgāthā* conform to: beauty, wealth, relatives, sons and virtues all find a mention but in a different way. Husbands

[61] Verse 171.

[62] DN I 78f and SN V 263f. From the *Kevaddha Sutta* of the DN we can assess that the Buddha was not in favour of displaying these powers. They do not however lose their importance because "*Iddhi* powers are not the results of some suspension of the processes of mind or nature, but are rather the by-products of the mastery of these processes. In this sense *iddhi* could be translated simply as "success," meaning that attainment of it is indicative of progress along the path…These supernormal powers are therefore more important for what they signify…." Bradley S. Clough, "The Higher Knowleges in the Pāli Nikāyas and Vinaya" *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Volume 33, Number 1–2, (2010 (2011): 415

[63] According to MN III 11f, these six are psychic powers, divine ear, divine eye, knowing the mind of others, recollecting past lives and the ability to destroy the taints. These six are referred to as *chaḷabhinna* or superhuman knowledges. (Nyanaponika Thera and Hellmuth Hecker, *Great Disciples of the Buddha*, (Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society: 2007), 371. The *therī* has accomplished these.

[64] Eight powers ascribed to monks who claim that their taints (*āsava*) have been destroyed (e.g., powers of recognizing the danger of sensual pleasures, knowing impermanence, accomplishing seclusion and renunciation, establishing spiritual faculties…AN IV 224) can be compared to similar qualities (though not called powers here) in female composers such as acknowledging the danger of sensual pleasures, impermanence and choosing to renounce. Often repeated is the statement that the taints have been destroyed, as in the case of the *therīs* Sakulā, Candā, Uttarā and others.

[65] An example is AN IV 223 where the power of women is revealed as anger or *kodha*. (This power is not mentioned in the list of five discussed in the main text.) Though anger may have positive qualities (say, in fighting oppression), this interpretation is not supported in the Canon which regards anger negatively, as a counter force. It is said in warning in DN II 243 that anger gives off a loathsome stench and in SN I 237 that anger has a poisoned root and honeyed tip. Reasons for controlling anger are given (SN I 161f). Thus, it could be said that making anger the power of women is another example that belittles women and supports the misogyny thesis. In other places anger is seen as gender neutral. The *Kodhana Sutta* speaks of the anger of both men and women, implying that it needs to be strongly addressed in both. (AN IV 94f) In the *Therīgāthā* we see that women practitioners have overcome anger (here referred to as *dosa*, e.g., verses18 and 24. The same is reflected in the *Theragāthā* (e.g., Brahmadatta (441-446)).

[66] SN IV 246f. It is also said however that it is through the power of virtue alone that a woman will get a good rebirth. (*The Book of the Kindred Sayings: Saṃyutta Nikāya*, Part IV, trans. F. L. Woodard (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2005), 165f.)

[67] The critique here is not of women wanting wealth, or marriage or children, all perfectly legitimate goals, and through these feeling empowered, but about how frail and limited this power is, and how easily it can be taken away. The description also does not recognize that women may want to take another course.

make an appearance, but hardly as authoritarians. Muttā (11) calls her husband 'crooked.' Bhaddā Kāpilānī (63-66) speaks of the pursuit of liberation by her husband Kassapa, a prominent disciple of the Buddha, and herself as running alongside. She says that they both saw danger in the world, they both became renunciants, and both left death behind the "same way" (*tatheva bhaddā kāpilānī*). These are not musings born of obeisance. But why call the position the *therīs* find themselves in empowerment? This is a model of empowerment because not only have these women conquered hardships and initiated changes, they are now not constrained by limitations the above and similar descriptions of power impose. They possess, in a sense, a redefined power or *bala* that sets them free as encompassed in the words of Muttā "So thoroughly freed am I!" Similarly, Soma, as mentioned previously, in her encounter with the Evil One, asks him why being a woman should be a hindrance to achievement when her mind is firmly disciplined.[68] She brings the focus back to her power of mental discipline, of which 'women' are perfectly capable, challenging him for setting up limits to her competence based on a femininity she does not see as a restrain. Moreover, this power, the stories testify, is a largely personal and internal one. The right to pursue the path of *dhamma* had been attained: these women were bent on exercising this right and in that they are empowering themselves. Kisāgotamī (223) 'extracts' the dart that is piercing her heart after the death of her children and family, Sīsūpacālā (201-202) 'delights' in utterances that common people do not partake of, Mittākāḷī (94) suddenly 'realizes' her earlier goals as lowly, Nandā (84-85) 'sees' with her own discernment. The stories are about the "process" of being empowered. The poets are indeed trying to 'change their world' and their reality as active agents. Herein lies the *third* empowerment, which is a sort of meta-empowerment. Women are able to reach the final goal of overcoming suffering through their own strife: many verses attest to this.

At this point it would not be amiss to mention that the remarkable empowering of women may be challenged with the charge that some *gāthās* stand apart. Candā (122-126) describes herself as a childless widow. Extremely impoverished, she begs for a living. *Bhikkhunis* get food as alms, she observes and thus wishes to join the order. Paṭācārā ordains her and Candā attains deliverance. The conclusion thus that Candā's aim is food and not transformation may be suggested. However, understanding this poem in a different way, it may be said that Candā was empowered not because she approached the order for sustenance, but because she chose to strive. This alternative understanding comes through her words that the teachings of Paṭācārā were not in vain, and that she has overcome defilements. The poem is testimony that her life changed because she not only adopted but also internalized the teachings. Sujātā (145-150) on the other end of the spectrum, describes her life before renunciation as an indulgent one. She is adorned with jewels, surrounded by food, drink and entertainment and served by maid-servants. Given in to sense pleasure, she does not seem overtly affected by their impermanence. She transforms when she encounters a *vihāra* and 'sees' the Buddha. On hearing him she attains *amataṁ padaṁ* or the deathless state.[69] And just like that she walks away from it all. Interestingly she takes up homelessness after her transformation. The poem thus appears to challenge the idea of transformation through much effort. However, Sujata could be seen as having inherited another type of power. Thānissaro Bhikkhu explains

[68] A similar verse occurs in SN I 129. Soma has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Olendzki finds Soma's retort "the definitive statement in the Buddhist tradition regarding the equality of the sexes." See "Soma Sutta: Mara Meets His Match" (SN I 129), trans. Andrew Olendzki, *(Access to Insight (BCBS)*, 2013, http://accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn05/sn05.002.olen.html

[69] This kind of insight is not frequent. The path to liberation is generally stated as gradual (M I 479-80).

that this comes from the ancient Indian belief that looking into the eyes of persons who wield power because of their deep insight into truth could "transmit some of that power to others" just by gazing at them. "Sujātā's reference to the Buddha as "the One with Eyes…"" conveys this meaning, he believes.[70] The story of Sihā (77-81) however is more troubling. This is a story of a *therī*, emotionally told, who is afflicted by passions and sense desires. Her portrait is of one who is troubled and distressed by her inability. Agitated, she wanders for 7 years, without eating (thin and pale is her description of herself), finding no recourse. She resorts to suicide as she cannot bear her life anymore. But as she ties the suicidal noose around her neck, she gains liberation. Though there is success at the end of this story, the fact that her search and her inability led her to suicidal thoughts are not supportive of the process of empowering. However, the fact that this life story was shared in honesty itself suggests empowerment. In a slightly different context, an activist working on women's empowerment in recent times has said that **"**it is the process of story telling itself that has given power back to… [the women]."[71] As also "By naming the event, by telling the story, women empower themselves."[72]

The model of empowerment framed in the *Therīgāthā* does not culminate in systematic questioning of tradition, or turning against authority, say, through a protest, or through leading a social or political movement exhibiting collective agitation. The reader instead encounters, in the words of Thānissaro Bhikkhu, the 'savour' or '*rasa'* of calm, of "coolness and peace" as in Vimalā's verses "Today, wrapped in a double cloak, my head shaven, I sit at the foot of a tree and attain the state of no-thought. All ties have been cut…cooled am I. Unbound."[73] However, this should not be taken as a setback and nor can it be equated with silence. The calmness is the natural outcome of their choice, for which much effort and strength was expended, and its reverberation rings loud. Furthermore, the presence of a collective in the shape of the *Sanghā* can be identified through the poems of some *therīs* who moved around with large followings; but the collective here also organizes no demonstration; neither does it undertake conversion tactics. Rather it is the women seekers, in large part, that approach it. Thus, collective action does appear but in this more subtle form: in the support the *Sanghā* and individual *therīs* lend to some of these women. [74]

In conclusion it can be said that the women in *Therīgāthā* display willpower, resolve and determination and these culminate in an empowering experience. They had a vision for the future, a future of spiritual success; they had a desire, and this desire encouraged them in their quest, which was to conquer *dukkha*. They believed in themselves and embraced their new role authoritatively. These women found the 'power to' make changes.[75] Such issues provide much food for thought and could have been drawn

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[70] *Poems of the Elders: An Anthology from the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā,* trans. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (2015), 132. https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/Writings/Ebooks/TheragathaTherigatha210221.pdf

[71] Jade Keller, "The Wisdom is in the Room." *The Freedom Story*, 2018. https://thefreedomstory.org/storytelling-as-empowerment/

[72] Lolly Ockerstrom, "Narration, Knowing, and Female Empowerment: Telling Stories, Authorizing Experience," *Forum on Public Policy: A Journal of the Oxford Round Table*, 2007, Abstract. https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA192639879&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=1556763X&p=AONE&sw=w&userGroupName=anon%7E2c009fee&aty=open-web-entry

[73] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Poems of the Elders,* 7.

[74] For instance, Candā 124

[75] Contrasted with 'power over'. The contrast is often spoken of in feminist literature. See https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-power/

on to challenge the instances of misogyny that show up in other texts of the Canon. The worry is that, in reaction to the threat to tradition these empowered women posed, the misogyny that the scholar Alan Sponberg speaks of, itself may have become even more deeply entrenched. [76] But however this be taken, it is disappointing that this extraordinary expression of power that can be recognized in the *Therīgāthā* did not become a wider and more permanent feature of the existing landscape. Finally, in conclusion it is hoped that the paper has at least demonstrated that the *Therīgāthā* and its framework of empowerment is worth further consideration by future scholarship, both in itself and as an inspiration to contemporary models of women empowerment.

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[76] Perhaps, in agreement with Sponberg, it may be said here that the more rigid institutionalization that followed historically encouraged male superiority. This would have weakened the bid to take the idea of female empowerment any further. See Sponberg, "Attitudes towards Women and the Feminine in Buddhism", 13.

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