

From *Yakṣīs* to *Tārā*: Ecofeminist Insights into Feminine Agency of Buddhism

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Abstract

This study traces how Buddhist feminine imagery evolved, representing feminine agency in iconography. It explores this evolution from the early depictions of *Yakṣīs* in stūpa reliefs to the later iconography of the Boddhisattva *Tārā*. The visual remains and literary pieces of evidence show that people in the ancient past were conscious of ecology. Buddhism has vast philosophical and iconographical dimensions that unmask the underpinnings of Ecofeminism when scrutinised through an ecofeminist lens. The *Yakṣī*, prominently portrayed in an intimate relation with trees, uncovers the idea that trees, rivers, and mountains were considered important entities. *Yakṣī* and *Tārā* figures embody ecofeminist doctrines through their symbolic and spiritual roles. *Tārā* comforted Avalokiteśvara to assist in the mission of liberating beings from suffering, thus embodying the feminine aspect of compassion in action. In this narrative, liberation is represented as a collaborative spiritual undertaking, in which compassionate agency is shared rather than confined to a single, masculine figure. It gives the recognition that the work of liberation is shared, not monopolised. This paper will explore multiple dimensions of these eco-feminine threads.

Keywords

Yakṣī, Ecofeminism, *Tārā*, Buddhist traditions, Women, Iconography

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Introduction

Ecofeminism highlights the interconnected relationship between women and nature. It examines how both have historically been positioned within systems shaped by anthropocentric thought. Over time, this anthropocentric worldview reinforced human dominance over nature. Within patriarchal structures, both women and nature were consequently relegated and placed in marginalized structures. Ecofeminism is not only about the subjugation that has been, by and large, celebrated by thinkers and scholars such as Janet Biehl,¹ but also a multifaceted and multifocal dimension that needs to be explored from all possible perspectives. Although Janet Biehl critiques ‘*psychobiologistic*’ (Biehl 1991, 12-13) ecofeminism for reinforcing patriarchal stereotypes, her argument tends to oversimplify the wide range of symbolic and cultural approaches within ecofeminism. Thus, her argument becomes less persuasive when applied to traditions in which female nature associations serve liberatory, not restrictive, purposes. Thus far, there has been no systematic attempt to historicize the connection between images of women and nature in Indian literature thus far (Datar 2011, 109).

Building on this observation, this paper proposes that the ethos of ecofeminism has always been prevalent in ancient Indian tradition, and there is an urgent need for exploration through the ecofeminist lens to understand those theories and evidence. Lynn White Jr. opined on the idea of how core doctrines of Christian view on ecological resources as “means” that need to be exploited without any guilt, and these resources are meant solely for human use. He explains how humans were inculcated in God’s image and were consecrated to exploit the natural creation. In this light, Lynn White Jr.’s work helps examine how religious beliefs, ancient scriptures and traditions shape environmental ethics and utility (White Jr. 1967, 1203-07). There is an urgency to remove the aloofness from scriptural traditions to unmask those factors that will help to understand how women and the environment have never been indifferent to each other. Religious iconographical evidence will play a crucial role in understanding ecofeminism in ancient Indian traditions.

Rita Gross says patriarchal religions smack anthropocentrism and androcentrism simultaneously secluding the position of both women and the environment (Gross 1996, 106). She opines that Buddhism, with its doctrines of interdependence (*Pratītyasamutpāda*)² and non-self (*anātman*), offers a powerful counter to anthropocentrism. Echoing Buddhism’s rejection of isolated selfhood, Eco-Womanism deepens this critique by centring communities whose humanity and ecological belonging have historically been denied. Eco-Womanism is an approach in religion and ecology that embraces the environmental justice paradigm: a theoretical lens through which one can examine the intersections among racial, economic, gender, and sexual injustice

¹ Biehl uses the term “*psychologistic*” to critique ecofeminist claims of women’s innate connection to nature. She argues that much of ecofeminism, especially its cultural or spiritual strand, rests on an essentialist idea that women are naturally closer to nature because of biological or reproductive functions. She believes this romanticisation reinforces patriarchal stereotypes rather than liberating women.

² *Pratītyasamutpada*, means dependent origination. It explains how phenomena arise in interdependence, meaning that nothing exists independently; everything arises due to causes and conditions.

and how these forms of oppression converge with climate justice. Eco-Womanism unapologetically points out that for too many religious environmental lenses it is easy to see species, but ignore the species-ness, beingness (Harris 2020, 123). Buddhism does not merely recognize species as categories of life; it foregrounds species-ness and beingness through its emphasis on relational conditions of sentient life.

It is no wonder that early writers of the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries characterised Esoteric Buddhist iconography and Indian Esoteric Buddhism in general as corrupt, decadent manifestations of the Buddhist religion (Kim 2014, 34). Nevertheless, the esoteric Buddhist iconography refers to the visual and symbolic representations of deities, *mandalas*, rituals, and mystical concepts in Vajrayāna Buddhism. These images are not purely decorative, but also tools for meditation, spiritual transformation, and ritual practices. Tāntric Buddhism is considered a legitimate, sophisticated spiritual system aimed at the attainment of enlightenment, especially by Vajrayāna followers. It uses visuals, rituals, and meditative techniques to transform one's minds. Instead, it is an effective visual technique for evoking and emulating the great tradition's doctrinal ideals, such as the Mahāyāna doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*).³ The Buddhist doctrines and ideas smack of interconnectedness, where all forms are interdependent on each other. Therefore, it is easy to elucidate that the latent ethos of ecofeminism has always existed in the ancient regime, and it is not an offshoot of the modern epistemological gradient. Anand Singh meticulously explains how the establishment of Buddhist environmental ethics provides a philosophical and ethical model that transcends binary thinking, promotes compassion for all beings, and envisions liberation as a collective, ecological process rather than an individual spirit as follows:

“Analysis of the early Buddhist doctrines for the formation of environmental ethics leads to an adaptation of a new methodological approach to reinterpret the discourses. Doctrines like Patīccasamuppāda, Majjhīmaṃagga, Brahma-vihāras, etc., are used to re-orient Buddhist teachings showing concerns for modern environmental problems and to provide solutions. By determining what constitutes Buddhist Environmental ethics and keeping in mind the various circumstances that led to the rise of environmental concerns, a careful ethical tradition could be drafted to trace the petals of environmental ethics embedded in Buddhist thought. (Singh 2019, 128)

Ecofeminism includes broader ecological concerns that somehow concretely intersect with Buddhist propositions, and the paper decodes this thread through the religious assimilation of *Yakṣīs* traditions into the cult of Tārā. *Yakṣīs* and Tārā are far more than ornate elements; they

³ *Śūnyatā*, meaning “emptiness and voidness”, is a central concept in Mahāyāna Buddhism and has profound implications for Buddhist metaphysics, psychology, and ethics.

serve a functional purpose that invokes the continuum and vocal of regenerative forces beyond the decorative and ornamental elements they are assumed to be. The iconographical models of both *yakṣīs* and Tārā resonate strongly with the idea that women and nature are inseparable. The idea enriches this perspective by linking ancient Buddhist feminine iconography to contemporary ecological and feminist thought. Mallar Ghosh has discussed many forms and symbols of Tārā, manifesting the feminine energy and attributes of the nature symbolising well-being of saṃsāra (Ghosh 1980, 32-42).

The polyvalence of motifs in Buddhist iconography, such as the tree and lotus, demonstrates how these symbols were never bound to a fixed narrative. The ambiguous nature of motifs resists a single proposition; rather, they can embody both life-giving and destructive, both sacred and sensual, human and cosmic. Buddhism outshines these binaries as they represent the idea of sacralised ambiguity; the same deity could embody benevolence and terror (Kālī, Hārītī). The ambiguity and polyvalence of Buddhist motifs resist the rigid dichotomous, and Buddhist motifs show women, nature as active, sacred, and ambiguous. In patriarchal structures, women are often pushed into marginal roles seen as “supporters” rather than “centre of meaning”. Buddhist eco-feminism deals with a more pragmatic approach to women and nature.

***Yakṣīs* in Flux: Exploring Gender and Ecology through Ecofeminism**

The images of *yakṣas*/*yakṣīs* represent one of the earliest anthropomorphic depictions of deities carved in stone, displaying a consistent iconographic style despite their wide geographical distributions. The representation of *yakṣas*/*yakṣīs* thus forms part of a broader and much older visual tradition, one traces the institutionalization of sacred imagery back to the Harappan Civilisation. The *yakṣa* sculptures are the oldest known historical sculptures since the decline of the Harappan Civilisation. It is heartening that intermingling and reciprocation of worship of the divinities is not merely spontaneous; it might be symptomatic of a pattern, flowing from each other. The *yakṣa* cult was a relic of non-Aryan worship (Misra 1981, 6). Image worship was a pre-Aryan tradition, revering deities in tangible forms such as stones, trees, and figures. The Vedic Aryans were generally aniconic; they worshipped through fire sacrifices, rather than anthropomorphic images. After the decline of the Harappan Civilisation, the images of *yakṣas* and *yakṣīs* from the 3rd-2nd century BCE are the earliest anthropomorphic sculptures in India. The rise of *yakṣī* iconography is not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a continuum of indigenous religious practice that predated Aryan influence. The tradition of making and worshipping images likely evolved from animistic and fertility cults, and these *yakṣī* images form a bridge between early indigenous worship and later mainstream Buddhist iconography (Figure 1).



Figure 1: *Yakṣīs* from Bharhut, Indian Museum, Kolkata (Image by Shrikant Ganvir)

There has been a vivid occurrence of the etymology *yakṣa* in the *Rigveda*, and in its different passages, it beholds the different contexts (*Rigveda*, I.190.4; IV.3.13). Ramnath Misra argues that the *Rigveda* describes the *yakṣas* in complex ways. It does not present them in a single, fixed manner. At times, the text expresses reverence towards them. At other times, it questions their nature and treats them with suspicion or even criticism. This ambivalence became strikingly marked in the twin aspects of the nature of *yakṣas* as benevolent and malevolent. The whole concept of *yakṣa* worship passed through several stages of sublimation, transformation, and suppression (Misra 1981,8). At the earliest level, *yakṣīs* were pre-Vedic nature spirits. People venerated them through the worship of trees, rivers, and fertility. The *yakṣī* here was not a goddess in the theological sense but rather a personified force of nature -wild, fertile, fecund, and local expressing a powerful female force that evoked both reverence and apprehension. As human societies moved toward an organised religion, the raw natural potency of the *yakṣī* began to be idealised rather than directly worshipped. Here, sublimation transforms the *yakṣī*'s erotic and vital energy into a spiritual and aesthetic ideal beauty as a path to the sacred. Understanding the evolution and establishment of the *yakṣa* cult is essential in the context of ecofeminism because it traces the transformation of early nature worship into later patriarchal religious systems. Ramnath Misra writes:

The *yakṣa* cult was a relic of non-Aryan worship. And the non-Aryan popular tradition, coupled with the concept of primitive religion, would have worked in evolving this deity (Misra 1981, 6).

Ecofeminism, therefore, can interpret non-Aryan worship as early ecological spirituality, in contrast to Aryan sacrificial domination over nature. From an ecofeminist perspective, examining how spiritual traditions once honoured the interdependence of women and nature offers valuable insights for re-establishing ecological balance and gender harmony in modern discourse (Shiva 1988, 38-40). Similarly, Ananda Coomaraswamy argued that *yakṣas* and *yakṣīs* were primitive deities of fertility and water, representing an ancient stratum of popular religion that predated or existed outside the Vedic pantheon (Coomaraswamy 1928, 23-5).

Slowly, this cult was embraced in folklore and religious traditions. Jainism and Buddhism both inculcated *yakṣa* worship in their fold. It is interesting to find how the *Mahāvamsa* (XXXVII.40) refers to a stūpa to be erected at *yakṣasthāna*.⁴ This pattern reverberates the Buddhist sanctification of pre-Buddhist or animistic spaces. The *yakṣas* and *yakṣīs* were nature spirits, guardians of water, trees, fertility, and earth. Their '*sthānas*' were sacred natural sites -groves, springs, or crossroads. Therefore, when stūpas were erected there, it marked a religious transformation: from local nature cults to institutionalised Buddhist sacred geography. Buddhist traditions did not ignore earlier feminine nature cults; instead, they consciously incorporated and sublimated these nature cults into Buddhist iconography. The stūpa itself is a cosmic axis, representing the body of the Buddha- the Śārīrakāyā, linked to the earth and its elements. Thus, the *yakṣa* site becomes the Buddha's body, sacralising the landscape through compassion rather than conquest. The *Mahāvamsa*'s reference to the erection of stūpas at *yakṣa* (Misra 1981, 88) sites may be interpreted as an early instance of ecological assimilation of locales rather than conquest. The *yakṣa-sthāna*, once the dwelling of nature spirits embodying fertility and the feminine principle, becomes the seat of the Buddha's compassion through the stūpa structure symbolising both the body of enlightenment and the cosmos. From an ecofeminist perspective, this act reveals a sacred dialogue between the feminine ecology of nature and the moral ecology of Buddhism. This suggests that Buddhist sacred geography evolved through the transformation, not suppression, of the feminine earth principle – an ecofeminist continuity within Buddhist iconography and ritual space.

The Buddhist concepts of Śārīrakāyā and Dhammakāyā can be interpreted as metaphors for the ecofeminist integration of body and spirit. It can be said that the former corresponds to the material ecology of nature as embodied in figures like *yakṣīs*, while the latter reflects the spiritual ecology of compassion as seen in Tārā. The evolution from the corporeal fertility of *yakṣīs* to the spiritual enlightenment of Tārā symbolises the reclamation of feminine agency. The disposition of *yakṣi* is shown largely through their terrestrial abodes, which establish them pre-eminently as the spirits of the nature (Misra 1981, 89). Terrestrial *yakṣas* express the embodied sacredness of the earth -the fertile, self-renewing dimensions of nature that patriarchal structures later subdued. Their continued veneration in Buddhist spaces signals a lingering reverence in

⁴ Many *yakṣa* statues and inscriptions have been found at *Yakṣasthānas*. Sometimes integrated into village and regional worship, making them important religious centres.

the feminine ecology of the soil, trees, and waters. The dichotomy between celestial and terrestrial *yakṣas* encapsulates the ecofeminist synthesis of matter and spirit in Buddhist cosmology. The terrestrial *yakṣas*, grounded in the earth's fertility and natural abundance, represent the embodied feminine energy of nature, while celestial *yakṣas* embody spiritual refinement and ethical guardianship. Rather than a hierarchy, this duality reflects an ecological continuum—the transformation of primal energy into moral ecology. In ecofeminist terms, the *yakṣas* personify the sacred interplay between the earth's body and spirit, affirming that nature's feminine power persists both as fertile ground and as compassionate protection. Thus, *yakṣī* habitats become ecofeminist counter-sites that challenge anthropocentric and patriarchal models of domination over both women and nature. In Buddhist tradition, the use of *yakṣas* and *yakṣīs* as tutelary deities and devotional objects is prevalent and among the earliest examples of the enshrinement and employment of demigods as instruments of power. Anne Sutherland Harris proposes that *yakṣīs* became assimilated to the burgeoning pantheon of Śaktis (female energies, power aspects, or individual manifestation of the goddess. The “Bourgeois pantheon”⁵ refers to the formalised institutionalised elite structure of Hindu goddess worship. While Śakti traditions used appropriate female imagery, it is inaccurate to argue that *yakṣī* was associated with the bourgeois pantheon of Śaktis. Chronologically and iconographically, *yakṣīs* belong to an earlier eco-fertility context, tied to agrarian and liminal symbolism. To subsume them into a bourgeois Śakti framework projects patriarchal class-based values onto earlier, localised female deities, thereby obscuring their independent significance.

Unlike gods who are fixed in their iconography or demons who are rigidly cast as enemies, the *yakṣīs* occupy an ambiguous zone. Gail Hinich Sutherland explores the “amorphous presence” of *yakṣas* and *yakṣīs*. Their presence has been considered as an “amorphous female presence” (Sutherland 1991, 138), a kind of cultural mirror that defines that *yakṣīs* were not tamed, and had autonomous power. Their ambiguity and autonomy reflect women and nature as active agency, resonating with the ecofeminist principle that challenges hierarchical binaries and celebrates generative powers. Both ecofeminist philosophy and the figure of *yakṣīs* share a central quality: they are not static, stagnant, or fixed. *Yakṣīs* often transgress social, moral and spatial boundaries. Both use mobility and unpredictability as symbolic tools to question dominant hierarchies. In both cases, the feminine is a living metaphor, not a static object. *Yakṣī* is considered to be a passive nurturer; she is a lunar cosmic force. She is not morally constrained to be “gentle”; her powers can be destructive if disrespected. From this, a very clear inference comes out that women's role is beyond being just a nurturer. Catriona Sandilands argues that gendered relations with nature are socially and discursively constructed categories rather than fixed essences. (Sandilands 1999, 4). In this respect, Buddhist iconography offers a third path beyond essentialism versus social construction: a dialectical, interdependent view. The classic example of Kurukullā, which highlights

⁵ *Bourgeois pantheon*, a symbolic hierarchy or group of admired figures, ideals, or cultural icons created and celebrated by the middle-class society.

how her power is not “essential” but arises from *Pratītyasamutpāda*, her compassionate activity emerges because beings are interdependent. The final goal to be won through the practise of Kurukullā is enlightenment itself. At this most spiritual end of the spectrum, Kurukullā accomplishes the ultimate form of magic, the transformation of conventional awareness into the transcendent bliss and nondual wisdom of a fully enlightened Buddha (Shaw 2006, 435). Her path to enlightenment can thus be seen as an archetypal expression of ecofeminist liberation.

The Bharhut railings depict several *yakṣī* images. The relief carvings of *Yakṣas* have been reported from several places, and they emulate the Bharhut tradition of the subdued corpulence of these deities (Misra 1981, 108). Reducing *Yakṣa* reliefs across early India to mere emulations of the Bharhut style overlooks their deeper ecological and gendered significance. From an ecofeminist perspective, these figures emerged not as stylistic copies but as embodiments of region-specific relationships with land, fertility. Their corpulent bodies articulate an indigenous aesthetic in which feminine beauty is linked to fertility and ecological abundance. They remind us that ecological equilibrium and women were celebrated, and were not just the object of exploitation. *Yakṣīs* are not only sensuous figures but also protectors of sacred spaces (*Dvārapālas*). Our Buddhist tradition identifies seven Bodhi trees, six of which are associated with the Buddhas of preceding millennia. These tresses are depicted in a range of friezes found on the surviving railings and toranas of the stūpa of Bharhut (Sutherland 1991, 27). The confusion about her identity stems in part from the strangeness of seeing an “undomesticated” woman, that is, a woman apparently detached from a man (Sutherland 1991, 138). A woman who stands outside these structures- like untamed nature disturbs patriarchal norms because she represents autonomy, unpredictability and regenerative power. The potential essentialist trope that describes their role as nature protectors has been defied. Female-nature imagery is powerful and authoritative, not reductive. The sacred places have been guarded by women intertwined with nature. With the passage of time, the depiction of *yakṣīs* changed. From the 5th to the 6th century CE onwards, their roles were transformed. Over a period of time, there was demonisation of female-nature power. Patriarchal systems often cannot tolerate untamed feminine power. *Yakṣī* may be examined as a local manifestation of the monstrous feminine that embodies patriarchal anxieties surrounding female sexuality, fertility, and agency. The concept of “monstrous Feminine” (Creed 1993, 7-10) reflects the idea that patriarchy feared of untamed power of *yakṣī* and therefore felt the need to control women’s autonomy. But even as “monsters”, *Yakṣīs* retain agency; they impart fear and revenge. This aligns with ecofeminists’ view that suppressed feminine nature power resurfaced in uncontrollable, disruptive forms, and the monstrous *yakṣī* is a sign of resistance.

Sacred Motherhood in Buddhism: Genesis of Tārā

Religious cultures rarely discard earlier divine forms; instead, they absorb, reinterpret, and transform them within new theological frameworks. In this light, Tārā’s representation draws upon earlier female archetypes, including the proto-Lakṣmī figures visible at Sanchi Stūpa and Bharhut Stūpa, as well as numismatic motifs and terracotta figurines. The lotus-bearing form

later associated with Tārā had already circulated in pre-Buddhist iconography, providing a visual and symbolic foundation for the emergence of Buddhist goddesses. India forms no exception to the general rule that in all religious development, it is the natural human tendency to continue the worship of the ancient forms, and even in the ancient manner, accepting at first tacitly and then as a matter of course, the newer interpretations and terminology (Coomaraswamy 1927, 305). Therefore, introducing Tārā requires recognising her as part of a long visual and symbolic continuum that predates her textual appearance in Buddhist sources. The *Tārā Mūla Kalpa* is a foundational text that consolidates her mantras, iconography, colours, epithets, and ritual procedures. The *Tārā Mūla Kalpa* is also treated as a literary work, throwing light on the formative phase of the Tārā cult (Singh 2024, 359).

The origin of Tārā in Buddhism can be better understood by examining the nativity sculpture of the Buddha, where Māyādevī stands beneath the ‘śāla’ tree during the time of delivery. The baby is shown below, standing on a lotus pedestal. The sculpture is made of red sandstone and dates to approximately fourth century CE. The Nativity cult became a source of inspiration for the development of the cult goddess in Buddhism (Singh 2024, 372). Such imagery preserves sacred female archetypes in early Indian art and reveals how Buddhist communities consciously incorporated older maternal symbols into their own sacred narratives. When Mahāyāna Buddhism later developed the figure of Tārā, she inherited this visual and symbolic lineage: the auspicious maternity of Māyādevī, and the protective energies associated with the mother Goddess. In this way, the nativity sculpture acts as a crucial visual bridge linking pre-Buddhist feminine divinity with Tārā’s emergence as the Buddhist Mother of compassion.

The *Lalitavistara* (chapter VI) informs that Mahāmāyā had divine healing power and that she helped people afflicted by suffering since childhood. When she became pregnant, with the divine healing power of *mahābhisaja* (the Buddha), she used to cure people afflicted by bad spirits, illness caused by wind, bile, phlegm, and diseases of the eyes or ears. She gathered herbs from the ground and gave them to the sick, which helped them to get cured (Singh 2024, 365). It demonstrates a culturally acquired ecological knowledge rather than a biologically essential role. This natural affinity is further reinforced by the tradition that Mahāmāyā was born near a Great Lake Cholana at Devdaha, a sacred landscape associated with fertility, purity, and life-giving power. Vajrayāna sources later place the birth of Tārā in the vicinity of the Cholana Lake, a parallel that suggests a deliberate inheritance of Mahāmāyā’s ecological and maternal symbolism. Tārā’s inheriting these traits shows how Buddhism culturally constructs the feminine as compassionate, protective, and ecologically rooted, not biologically fixed. K.K. Dasgupta says that the etymological meaning of Tārā suggests her as a great saviour who lead her devotees to cross the ocean of saṃsāra (of existence). She is symbol of primordial male energy and the person who meditate on the Bhagvatī, get rid of eight great perils (*aṣṭamahābhaya*). In the Tibetan traditions she is considered to be mother of all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (Dasgupta 1960, 115-16).

Tārā's Many Faces: Nurture and Wrath in the Ecofeminist Lenses

The Buddha's fundamental teachings identify the cause and cure of human suffering, placing them within human attitudes toward life. Buddhism is not concerned with the presence of a supreme entity, because the Buddha's way of relieving human suffering does not need a divine agency. Instead, it emphasises interdependence, where all entities of the environment exist in a mutual relationship. The most distinctive innovation of Buddhism in modern era is to explain interdependence in *samsāric* terms, that suggest a kind of mundane awakening with moral, cultural, economic, and political dimensions (Singh 2019, 38). It emphasises that freedom from suffering and ecological destruction comes not from a transcendent god, but from human attitudes and cultivating care for all life. This idea aligns with the divinity of Tārā in Buddhism (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Tārā, Nālandā Mahāvihāra (Image by Anand Singh)

From an ecofeminist perspective, the idea of ramification in Buddhism highlights how the feminine and ecological energies of the early Earth goddesses branched and transformed into the spiritual compassion of figures like Tārā, reflecting a continuous, organic evolution of sacred feminine power. Tārā is ineffable, unknowable, the deepest mystery, yet when called out to her for assistance, she appears. Rachael Wooten describes how Tārā manifests as an inner state of calm and repose, of clarity and purpose, of wisdom and compassion. (Wooten 2020, 16). She manifests in outer events through every form of material existence. Succinctly, Tārā is not a creature, God or an all-powerful being who grants salvation. She is a Bodhisattva. Devotion to Tārā is not about dependence on an external god, but about awakening the same qualities within oneself. Rooted in the Mahāyāna principles of *karuṇā* (compassion) and *prajñā* (wisdom), Bodhicitta represents the ethical and motivational foundation of the bodhisattva path. The next step of

the sadhana generates a particular motivation within you, the “precious bodhicitta,” or awakened heart-mind. Pray with great intention and repeat, “Through the practice of giving, and the other Perfections, may I reach full enlightenment in order to be of benefit to all living beings.”

Following her cultivation of bodhicitta, the bodhisattva’s motivation, she looked upon those who attained Buddhahood in female form. In response, Tārā made a resolute vow to cultivate awakening as a woman in all her lives, to be reborn as a woman throughout the bodhisattva path, and even in her final life, upon attaining Buddhahood, to remain in a female body. Tārā’s bodhicitta – driven vow reflects an ethic of care rooted in compassion for other’s exclusion. It promotes liberation, cultivates relational solidarity, and stands as a symbolic resistance to all forms of spiritual and social devaluation.

Venerable Tenzin Palmo (2002) provides a remarkable ground for ecofeminist perspective on Tārā, as a Buddhist representation of compassionate engaged action in the world by linking individual and social liberation, and its implications for gender equity and environmental justice. Venerable Tenzin Palmo is the example for whom the symbol of Tārā inspires her work. She says:

Well, something inside me says, “Does it matter whether the Buddha was male or female?” He was an enlightened being, and his mind was beyond male and female. Obviously, throughout the times, there have been incredible females whose mind was also one with the Buddha, and of course in the tantric tradition there are many female figures, such as Tārā and Vajrayoginī. Vajrayoginī, for example, is considered to be the mother of all Buddhas. She is the symbol of this female energy. And in many ways the Buddha was sort of androgynous. Many great lamas have both male and female qualities. They are both a mother and a father. In fact, the word “lama” means “high mother”. “Ma” is feminine. It’s not “lapa”.

It acknowledges that many women throughout history have had minds equal to the Buddha’s, even if they are less visible in historical narratives. This means that Buddhahood is not limited by biological sex. An enlightened being’s mind transcends gender distinctions. Enlightenment is non-dual.

Tārā, as a divine figure, represents the very quality, compassion, fearlessness and care that laities must awaken within themselves. This work examines and reconstructs the canonical development from *Yakṣī* to proto-Tārā and finally to Tārā. Tārā represents both a continuation of earlier feminine nature deities and a sophisticated spiritual in Mahāyāna Buddhist praxis, integrating ethics, meditation and symbolic empowerment. She has been depicted as the liberating power of the female Buddha. Here, she is given a rank in the pantheon that no other female had achieved. She becomes a Bodhisattva of the first degree.⁶ Miranda Shaw gives the astonishing and quintessential description of Tārā; she is green in colour. Her right hand makes the gesture

⁶ A *Bodhisattva* of the first degree means a being who has attained the first of ten spiritual stages on the Mahāyāna path-characterized by joy, wisdom, and firm commitment to liberate all sentient beings.

of supreme giving. Her right-hand rests on her knee with the palm outward in the gesture of blessing. Her left hand bears the stem of a blue lotus (Utpala) that blossoms after her left shoulder (Shaw 2006, 325). The right hand expresses the mudra of charity, while the left shows ‘argument’ whilst holding the blue lotus. She is youthful in appearance and is dressed in multi-coloured silks. An aura of light is emerging from her body. Her right leg is extended, and her left leg is bent. In her crown is a white seed syllable “Om”, in her throat is a red “Ah” and in her heart blue “Hm”. Her green colour is highly symbolic, evoking renewal and vitality. Similarly, her posture reinforces this dynamic symbolism: she sits with one leg folded in meditation while extending the other, poised to rise and act in response to suffering. It rejects passivity and embraces women as active agents of change. Tārā appears in multiple forms, peaceful, protective and wrathful. Tārā, many forms show fluidity and diversity. Tārā’s many forms show fluidity and diversity of feminine power-gentle, fierce, protective, and creative. This entire discourse honours women’s nature as transformative and central to spiritual and ecological renewal. For example, the flowing contours of Green Tara’s body visually express fluidity and alert responsiveness. Her posture-one leg folded in meditation and the other extended concretely represents the balance between contemplative insight and compassionate action. These iconographic features embody dynamic compassion and feminine spiritual power.

Beate Littig opines that Ecofeminism is not monolithic and encompasses multiple feminist interpretations of the key feminine nature and spirituality found in Buddhist symbols and deities as follows:

The term ‘feminist perspective’ is deliberately used in the plural form in order to indicate that there is not one but a range of different feminist perspectives. Feminism is a specific worldview that is intersected in the analysis of social discrimination against women and ways of changing it. (Littig 2001, 17-8).

The term “*feminist perspectives*” refer to diverse approaches that analyse gender, power, and sexuality from multiple theoretical and political positions. In the context of ecofeminism, this diversity becomes particularly visible when examined through Buddhist female pantheons, which reflect varied interpretations of feminine power and ecological ethics. For this reason, the term feminist perspectives are deliberately used in the plural form to underscore that feminism does not constitute a single unified ideology but encompasses a spectrum of viewpoints. Val Plumwood critiqued the “Standpoint of Mastery” theory, in which she elaborated that this idea emerged after the scientific revolution, that nature needs to be exploited and tortured to know its secrets within the Western strand of ecofeminism. Western framework smacks of Dualistic theory, where one side of dualism belongs to reason, culture, and the male is elevated, and on the other side, emotion, nature, the female, and the animal are disparaged (Plumwood 1993, 41-5). It highlights detachment, control and superiority. One of the manifestations of the Tārā, Simhamukhā’s representation, challenges this view. As a lion-faced goddess, she’s fierce, terrifying and

destructive, embodying the raw power of nature rather than gentle harmony. The iconography of Simhamukhā offers a counterexample. Simhamukhā, also known as the Lion-faced Dākinī, is a wrathful wisdom deity portrayed with a striking blend of powerful and fearsome attributes. Her body is deep azure or dark blue-black, reminiscent of storm clouds or pure space, which represents wisdom. She has wildly abundant, black, ironlike hair, often shown flowing upward or billowing out like a storm, with miniature daggers. Simhamukhā is a half-animal and half-feminine deity, representing the fusion of both human and non-human. It is a hybrid identity that directly challenges the proposition of “Standpoint of Mastery,” which doesn’t advocate for interconnectedness. Tsultrim Allione suggests that the *Dākinī* is essentially an energy form. (Child 2003, 63). She is fundamentally conceived as an embodiment of transformative energy. This dynamic force manifests itself in multiple guises, transmuting everything it encounters, including human consciousness. She also symbolises the esoteric mode of communication known as twilight language (*sandhyābhāṣā*),⁷ which parallels other mystical traditions in its use of symbols and letters devoid of direct translation. This language operates as a highly condensed symbolic cipher—so densely packed with meaning that a few syllables can unfold into extensive doctrinal expositions spanning several volumes. Thus, the Dākinī represents both the transformative power of enlightenment and secret wisdom encoded in Tāntric semiotics. Nairātmya, whose name may be translated as “Lady of emptiness” or “She who has realised selflessness”. Like the element of space, she flows through the universe without impediment, for she has transcended ego-centred existence (Shaw 2006, 387). She is often shown in a dancing or dynamic posture; she stands atop a corpse or seat, signifying the triumph over ego and ignorance. Nairātmya reveals the idea that no identity is fixed, women and nature cannot be permanently mastered, because all categories are empty of essence. Nairātmya’s bodily hue is central to her symbolic significance. Blue is the colour of space, conveying the fathomless depth and infinite expanse of her being and awareness (Shaw 2006, 389-91).

Buddhist theory of emptiness provides a philosophical foundation for deconstructing essentialism even more radically. Their ornaments are made of human bone: a diadem and garland of dried skulls and earrings, armlets, bracelets, anklets, gorget, and filigree skirt fashioned from carved bone beads. These sepulchral adornments convey the radically non-dualistic outlook of those who make and wear them. In the mainstream value system of Indian culture, the by-products of death are ritually polluting. Contact with them is found and avoided, and when it occurs, must be remedied by purification rites. In this setting, ornaments made of human bone proclaim freedom from the conventional dualisms of purity and impurity, of life and death. Human bones, like ivory, can retain its lustre for centuries. Viewed without bias, these gleaming adornments epitomize the sacredness and beauty of all things that may be discovered when the veil of duality is lifted (Shaw 2006, 391).

⁷ *Sandhyābhāṣā* refers to a coded or symbolic language used to convey esoteric teachings that cannot be understood literally.

This recurring image of bones and skulls in some of the representations directly relate to the Buddha's teaching on impermanence, that is, the changing, unreliable nature of experience and the inevitability of death as a catalyst for realizing the preciousness of human life, and the need to practice diligently without time for the benefit of oneself and others. Therefore, every moment is precious and should be used wisely in the cultivation of wisdom, compassion, and liberation for oneself and others. This statement conveys a contemplative message, not a morbid or decorative one. If all categories are empty of essence, then "woman" and "man" are not fixed essences, "humans" and "nature" are not fixed essences. Even "self" and "other" dissolve into interdependence. Seen in this light, women's connection to nature cannot be explained through some inherent essence; instead, every being shares equal interdependence with the natural world and is equally marked by emptiness. Nairātmya aligns with ecofeminism by dissolving binaries on which patriarchy relies. Instead of saying women are closer to nature (essentialism), Nairātmya shows all beings are interdependent. This enables us to move past essentialist models and to articulate a more expansive ecological ethic founded on rationality.

Aparājītā can be a manifestation of Tārā. Her power comes from an elephant. Aparājītā is victorious, active and sovereign, showing female divinity as powerful. The elephant as her ally reinforces the partnership of feminine and ecological forces. The goddess Aparājītā, whose name means "the unconquerable Lady" (Shaw 2006, 289) in Buddhist iconography, embodies the ecofeminist ideal of invincible feminine wisdom. The lotus, vajra and abhaya mudrā symbolise nature's purity, resilience, and empowerment against fear. Aparājītā is not merely a protector deity but an emblem of ecological consciousness, asserting that the feminine, like nature, cannot be subjugated but continually renews and resists domination. In the ecofeminist dominion, women and animals, culture and nature are allies in resilience and abundance. An ecofeminist metaphor for grounding feminine sovereignty in the strength of animals. It does not depict the concept of conquest. Ecofeminism deconstructs sectarian triumphalism⁸ but establishes them as partnership models. It transforms triumphalist motifs into ecofeminist metaphor for mutual flourishing. Aparājītā's iconography depicts a parasol canopy held by other deities. It validates the idea of interdependence. Its sovereignty is co-created by others, not solitary domination. The bow and arrow are not her weapons of conquest, but a metaphor of directional force and egoism. The animals, elephant and goat, embody a multispecies alliance and signs of biodiversity. In the continuum from *Yakṣī*'s earthiness to Tārā's transcendence, Aparājītā's represents the integration of the physical and spiritual ecologies- a harmony of Śāṅkayā and Dhammakāya within the ecofeminist vision. The transcendent *dharma-kāya* is one with ultimate reality and hence formless, imperceptible, and indescribable. The *sambhoga-kāya* refers to her manifestation in the divine body of a goddess. This level of embodiment encompasses her many epiphanies and the works of art that represent them. The *nirmāṇa-kāya* is that in which she appears in the human

⁸ *Sectarian Triumphalism*, is used to describe how religious traditions sometimes, appropriated or redefined the symbols, deities, and myths of rival traditions to assert their own superiority or legitimacy.

realm (Willson 1986, 226- 229). Thus, the *tri-kāya* model becomes an eco-spiritual paradigm where nature, body, and spirit are interconnected rather than hierarchically ordered. She permeates both the ultimate and worldly realms. Her presence bridges the divides between transcendence and bodily existence. This challenges the patriarchal logic that marginalizes women as “earth-bound”.

The various forms of Tārā that exist could have originally been individual regional deities in India (Kim 2003, 63). While Buddhist tradition recognizes multiple forms of Tara, some of these manifestations likely originated as distinct regional deities in India and later became incorporated into a broader Buddhist framework. However, these forms were originally regional deities in India, oversimplifying their complex theological evolutions. While Buddhism often integrated local goddess traditions, Tārā’s multiplicity cannot be reduced to mere regional absorption. Each form—Green, White, Red or Yellow embodies a distinct aspect of enlightened activity and compassion within the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna frameworks, illustrating spiritual differentiation rather than geographical derivation. Her diverse iconographies reflect the symbolic expansion of the feminine principle, rather than the syncretic merging of village deities. From an ecofeminist perspective, these manifestations represent the organic branching of the feminine sacred, adapting to different cultural and ecological contexts while maintaining a unified essence of nurturing wisdom and interdependence. Thus, many forms of Tārā signify the spiritual and ecological inclusivity of universal goddesses. Tārā’s many forms show that compassion must adapt to diverse kinds of suffering and address both human and non-human vulnerability. This is why her compassion is ecological and not anthropocentric. Her manifestations arise according to the needs of suffering beings. Her form is not opposed to emptiness but is an expression of it. As reality is empty, compassion can take limitless embodied forms.

Tārā’s Healing Power and her Golden Womb (*Hiraṇyagarbha*) in Ecofeminist Context

Representations of Tārā alongside deities such as Śītalā and Praṇasabarī associated with curing diseases and regulating natural forces, acting as agents of balance between humanity and the environment. Her divine compassion mirrors nature’s regenerative capacity, where decay and healing coexist as integral aspects of life’s continuum. The Ārya-Tārā-sragdharā stotra by Sarvajñamitra praises her as saviouress from different troubles including eight great perils (Ghosh 1980, 80). In the Paṭa-Vidhāna chapter of Ārya-Maṇjuśrīmūlakalpa, Tārā is represented as the *karuṇā* of Avalokiteśvara (Devīm-Āryavelokiteśvara-karuṇām Ārya-Tārām). She is the only goddess found place among the pantheons of *Śākyamuni*, a host of the Bodhisattvas, Pacceka Buddhas, Vairocana, Yamāntaka, Mahāsrāvākas, and others. She is goddess of compassion – holding a blue Utpala, wearing all ornaments and showing *vardamudrā* (Ārya-Maṇjuśrikalpa, 45). The Nālandā inscription of Vipulaśrīmitra (12th century CE) calls her Jagat-Tāriṇī and saviouress

from great eight perils including wild elephant, lion, serpent, demon, fire, shipwreck, bandits and prison (Majumdar 1931-32, 97-101). She is a manifestation of param-karuṇika, who with her compassionate energy is ever-watchful for the well-being of people. And this manifestation is a true form of ecofeminism. Tārā's boon-giving nature symbolically situates the goddess within the cycle of disease, healing, and ecological balance. The association with Śītalā, the goddess of smallpox, and Parnasabarī, the forest goddess linked with vegetation and epidemics, reveals how feminine deities mediate the relationship between humans and natural forces-disease, vegetation, and the body's vulnerability. This reflects an ecofeminist worldview, where the female divine embodies not only nurturing but also transformative and regulatory powers within an ecological order. Tārā's cultic efficacy in curing epidemics suggests a fusion of ecological awareness and feminine energy, emphasising that health, environment, and the sacred feminine are interwoven. Thus, ecofeminism here recognises Tārā as a symbol of nature's agency and resilience, expressing the healing and regulating aspect of the natural world through feminine power. By embodying curative powers against epidemics and symbolising harmony with natural forces, Tārā represents the ecofeminist idea that the feminine is both ecological and cosmic, serving as a bridge between human suffering and nature's restorative power.

In the *Kali Tantra*, Tārā is the second object of *mahāvidyā*. She represents the Power of Hunger and the Night of Anger. She is referred to as the *Hiraṇya-garbha*, the Golden Embryo that manifests the omnipresent hunger of *saṃsāra* (Klieger 1982, 48). Tārā as *Hiraṇyagarbha*-the "golden womb" or cosmic embryo-symbolises the source of all creation and the generative force of the universe. Bosch says that the creation of the "*Hiraṇyagarbha*" is the result of the commingling of the deities, Agni, the masculine golden god of fire, and the Soma, the *rasa*-essence of the waters, providing, in this case, the feminine component of the creation odyssey (G. Sutherland 1991, 24). So, the creation arises not from domination but from synergy and balance between male (Agni) and female (*Rasā*) energies- a cosmological act of harmony. This designation aligns with ecofeminist philosophy, which emphasises the interconnectedness of feminine energy, nature, and life cycles. As *Hiraṇyagarbha* Tārā is not only a personal deity but a cosmic principle, representing the creative and regenerative powers inherent in the natural world. By linking the divine feminine to the cosmic womb, the concept of *Hiraṇyagarbha* underscores the inseparability of life, nature, and the feminine agency, making Tārā a symbolic bridge between human existence, environmental harmony, and spiritual regeneration.

The association between body, nature and feminine imagery is central to ecofeminism. In the Buddha's teachings, mindfulness of the body includes contemplations on the body parts (Paṭikkūla-manasikāra) and cemetery contemplations as ways of cultivating insight into the impermanent, no-self, conditions nature of the physical body male or female, and our unskillful relationship to it as being permanent and as mine to control even as it ages, is vulnerable to illness and eventually dies, and decomposes like all organic material. Through these methods,

practitioners come to understand the body's true nature- whether male or female- as subject to aging, illness, death, and decomposition, rather than as permanent or fully governed by the mind. In the context of the Buddha's teachings, mindfulness of the body is cultivated in relation to feelings, mental states and phenomena. This practice involves mentally analysing the body into its constituent parts to counter attachment, pride, and desire. This is the practice of how the Buddha realized enlightenment and his instructions are recorded in MN X Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta.

Conclusion

The Buddhist teachings and their bearings upon art outshine the essentialist associations of women with nature. The rich and multifaceted iconographies give a new gradient to the whole perspective of Ecofeminism. The intricate details of deities reveal in depth how Buddhist deities are not merely an ornamentation, but rather vocal of ecofeminist principles. Women and deities are not restricted to ornamental roles; they are the active agents and representations of environmental consciousness. The study integrates Buddhist teachings with feminist doctrinal approaches help readers better understand the rich pantheons and motifs within Buddhism. It asserts that deities and women have substance, power, and roles beyond mere decoration. The Buddhist iconography makes the divinities "speak" through their form, gestures, and symbols rather than remaining silent or decorative. This paper elucidates the fact that how Buddhist visual culture was shaped by local traditions. Ecofeminism has been used as an analytical lens to interpret patterns, symbols, and practices that show linkages between women, nature, and the sacred.

The trajectory from *yakṣī* to Tārā reflects a transformation that smashes the essentialist idea that women have an innate, fixed connection to nature. In the context of Buddhism, the deities have surmounted the role of transcendental wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā) as well as wrathful and fierce roles. The shifting contours of the Buddhist pantheon, from *yakṣī* to Tārā, not only illuminate the evolving role of women in religious imagination but also, when read through an ecofeminist lens, reveal how Buddhist iconography reconfigures the relationship between gender and nature.

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