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## ***Therigatha: Voices of Our Foremothers***

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### **Abstract:**

*Therigatha*, the poems by the *theris* (senior nuns) were composed by Buddhist *bhikkhunis* or nuns during the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Initially, the poems were composed in the *Magdhi* language and later they were written down in *Pali*. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, *Therigatha* has been translated into various languages. At present, it is world-widely acclaimed as a one of the earliest extant texts and also as one of the first women's literature in the world. Poems of *Therigatha* speak of women's experience, especially of their intense spiritual experience, but they also portray the contemporary society at large. Through the poems, the readers can have a look at the society, which was utterly materialistic and engrossed in enjoying all sorts of physical pleasures prioritizing wealth and youth. Women, along with *sudras* (who belonged to the poorest section of the society) were the most disempowered people who had to go through endless social sufferings. During that time of deep distress, Buddhism offered them the shelter of a *sangha* and an alternative religion which was all-embracing. In the verses of the *Therigatha*, the women of the monastery expressed their feelings of being awakened and enlightened after the complete surrender to Buddha and about taking a religious refuge which helped them to forget and forgive the discrimination, injustice, oppression and other wrongs done to them by the system and the people. It can be addressed and explored as a womanist, a proletariat, and a polyphonic text at the same time as well as a gender-neutral one, as it is basically a text concerned with spiritual practices for detachment and primarily helps the readers to understand the spiritual journey made by our wise foremothers. This research paper is an attempt to perceive life in general and a society during a historically significant time period when Lord Buddha himself was playing a pivotal role.

**Keywords:** *Therigatha*, first women's literature, life and society, sufferings, spiritual journey.

*Therigatha*, the poems by the *theris* (senior nuns) were composed by Buddhist *bhikkhunis* in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Initially the poems were composed in the Magdhi language and passed on orally. Around 80BCE, they were written down in Pali and during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, they were first translated. Since then, they have been translated into various languages like German, Bengali and English. At present, *Therigatha* as an anthology of poems got a world-wide recognition as a literary work of remarkable quality which has travelled beyond its culture of origin and through translation it has achieved its unique place in modern day literature.

*Therigatha*, containing 73 poems is indeed outstanding because it is considered as one of the earliest extant texts, as well as one of the first women's literatures in the world. It has been termed by many as a womanist text as it is about women's experience of life, especially that of their spiritual life, the enlightenment they achieved and the ultimate freedom they enjoyed by discarding conventional domestic life. Nevertheless, in a broader context it is a gender-neutral text as it speaks of a kind of freedom which can be achieved by both men and women or by anyone who has discarded all worldly attachments and been enlightened through the realization of the absolute truth. The enlightenment and the freedom depicted by our foremothers are not at all gender-specific, instead, they can be attained only by going beyond all physical boundaries of the earthen world.

From the songs of *Therigatha*, the reader can understand the intensity of the spiritual experiences of the earliest Buddhist nuns and their deep insight to look beyond the trivialities of the material world and bodily pleasures as they considered the body only as a means for attaining *nibban* (Sanskrit *nirban*) that is liberation. They depicted the happiness received through attaining enlightenment in their poems. They were happy that they had decided to leave their homes and their past behind and for choosing the blissfulness and peace of monastic life in the *sangha* (monastery). *Therigatha* contains stories in verse form of a community of women who were bound together by a monastic order and their shared experience of it. Under the roof of the *sangha*, these ladies developed a relationship of solidarity and sisterhood among themselves. Their relationship was built up through intimacy and mutual respect. The younger ones entered into the nunnery (*sangha*) under the guidance of the senior nuns and they were thoroughly taken

care of by the senior. The bonding between the female teachers and their students was so warm that the disciples felt properly protected and abundantly peaceful under the teachers' wise supervision. Though they came from various sections of society, from different family backgrounds and economic strata, they stayed together in the *sangha* without any type of discrimination or inhibition. The *sangha* was a place of equality, even class and sexual equality which was otherwise impossible in the outside world, behind the four walls of the *sangha*.

Apart from the monastic life of the nuns it portrays the contemporary society at large. Through the poems, the readers can take a look at the society which was utterly materialistic and engrossed in enjoying all sorts of physical pleasures, prioritizing wealth and youth:

“Young men find wealth

Taking sticks and threshing grain,

Taking care of wives and children.” (verse no. 175)

In another poem, Anopama, who was the daughter of a wealthy merchant, recalls in her verse:

“I was born in a good family with great wealth and many possessions;

I was sought after by princes, coveted by sons of millionaires,

Until one sent my father a message: “Give me Anopama.

I will give eight times what your daughter Anopama

Weights in gold and silver as bride price.” (verse no. 151)

Vimala's verse reveals this ugly truth about society more explicitly:

“Intoxicated by my good looks, by my body, by beauty and my reputation, haughty because of my youth, I looked down on other women.” (verse no. 72)

“I flashed my ornaments as if I were showing my hidden parts,

I created an illusion for people.” (verse no.74)

*Therigatha* is quite appealing to the contemporary world of literature because we find the voice of subalterns in it and it is a polyphonic text in the true sense of the term as there are songs of a beggar woman, destitute and prostitutes in *Therigatha* besides the voices of queens, princesses and women from royal, wealthy and aristocratic families. It is a revelation of their internal world and their personal lives before taking *pabajja* (which means entering into the community of nuns). In the poems, they described their distress and sufferings and the resultant bitterness and disgust, they experienced in their previous life as a mother or a wife. Often women were considered only as “wretched baby makers” by their families and giving male heir to the family was the most significant task allotted to them. Under the Brahmanical tradition of religion, women across the class and creed were placed under men and were treated same as the *sudras* (who belonged to the poorest section of the society). Both of them were most disempowered people who had to go through endless social sufferings and a poor single woman used to be the worst victim in that societal structure. She had to earn her livelihood either as an enslaved person or a prostitute and finally as a beggar:

“In the past, I was poor, a widow, without children,

Without friends or relatives, I did not get food or clothing.

Taking a bowl or stick, I went begging from family to family...” (verse no. 122, no. 123)

Intense suffering made them think about suicide too. They said that they did not know what happiness was and felt like crushed and ground by the mills of material life. Sumangala’s mother says that she is so happy that she is free now:

“I too am well-freed from the pestle.” (verse no. 23)

Addhakasi admitted that she had been sick and tired of being a public woman for a long time. She exposed the reality of flesh trade, where a woman is only valued as a commodity as long as she is young and attractive:

“While that was once my value,

After too many customers

My worth was cut by half

And wearied I turned away.” (verse no. 25)

Isidasi’s poem is the most intriguing and poignant one to expose the fact that women’s place in society was not much better than the slaves ---

“I waited on my mother-in-law and my father- in- law,

Morning and night, I placed my head on their feet, I honored them just as I had been taught.

Even if I saw my husband himself,

And I would give up my seat.

I tried to please them with all sorts of foods and drink

And I groomed my own husband well.

As a servant would.

My husband only did me wrong

While I was virtuous, not lazy and submissive,

He only humiliated me when I waited in him lovingly....

But he treated me more like a slave than a wife”. (verse no.416)

She lived with her second husband just for a month and also served her like a slave, but he, too abandoned Isidasi without any valid reason.

From Isidasi’s verse, it seems that separation among couples and remarriage of both men and women were accepted by society. The separated woman was free to marry again but of course her value as a marriage material used to decrease.

“Then father gave me to a rich man from a second family.

The eminent man of wealth got me but with only half the dowry.”(verse no. 423)

During that time of deep distress, Buddhism offered them the shelter of the *sangha* and an alternative religion which was all-embracing. In the *sangha*, women gained equal status of

monks as nuns. These enlightened women rejected the Brahmanical assumption that no woman can attain “tevijja”, the three knowledge. The *theris* through their *gathas* (poems) declared that they had attained the three knowledge by knowing their past lives as well as past karmas and the cause of their rebirths and entrapment in the cycle of birth and death and finally they learned the ways of eliminating the corrupting agents that were residing inside them, all that were holding them back from achieving spiritual progress through meditation and visualization. It is so engaging to read about their realization of the meaninglessness of various social criteria fixed by the patriarchy and their subsequent disassociation from the social norms by defying the darkness and dogmas of the later Vedic period through gaining knowledge. They raised questions in their poems like who said that it is necessary for a woman to always look good and attractive like a commodity. Buddha taught them that there is ultimately no difference between being young and beautiful and being old or ugly. The body is only a vehicle for holding consciousness. So, they no more wanted any bodily existence however beautiful that might had been. It is surprising to know that these wise women of ancient age could learn to give importance on intellect and wisdom over the body and found delight in diligence.

“My heart’s fear and its sorrow are gone:

I don’t want a god’s body either.” (verse no. 31)

In *Therigatha*, the women of the monastery expressed their feelings of being awakened and enlightened after the complete surrender to Buddha and taking a religious refuge which helped them to forget and forgive the discrimination, injustice, oppression and other wrongs done to them by the system and its people. But the path of enlightenment was not at all easy. It is not easy to discard the enjoyment of the physical world and get triumphant over anger, desire, and ignorance by self-control and mindfulness. But once the desire is curbed down through constant effort, then one becomes free forever from all sufferings.

“Four times, five times, I went out from the monastery,

With no peace in my heart, no control over my mind.

But this is the eighth night since I rooted out craving.” (verse no. 37)

During this enduring period of restlessness and hopelessness, their teachers were their only source of hope and support for the young nuns.

“Four times, five times I went out from the monastery,

Heart without peace, heart out of control. (verse no.42)

I approached the nun,

She seemed like someone I could trust.

She taught me the dhamma....(verse no.43)

I listened to what she taught,

did exactly as she said.” (verse no. 42)

These lines beautifully capture the ancient Indian tradition of maintaining master-disciple’s connection which had been still continuing in India in the time of Buddha. Yet society was neither ready to accept the women as enlightened and wise nor as the teachers. They were commonly regarded as the objects of sexual pleasure. Housewives and public women, both had to succumb to the demands of men. Moreover, according to conventional religion, it was never possible for women to reach a holy or pure state like sages by attaining wisdom. On the other hand, women who had been previously ignorant due to the worldly illusion and had looked down upon other women learned to treat other women as equals in the monastic life. Patriarchy had taught them to see themselves as mere entertainers and decorated showpieces. Some nuns like Siha were unapologetically candid and vocal in their verses about their previous physical desires:

“Pained by distracted attention and by desire for sex

I was always disturbed, without any control over my thoughts.” (verse no 77)

“Acting on thoughts of happiness,

Overcome by defiling compulsions,

I had no peace of mind,

Controlled by a mind bent on excitement.” (verse no. 78)

In another verse, Nanduttara has laid her heart bare while providing the details of deriving worldly pleasures in various ways:

“Vexed as I was by the urge for sex,

I would do this body a favour

With baths and massages,

And delight in jewelry and finery.” (verse no 89)

Whenever the *theris* reached the point of gender neutrality, their view about the body was changed. Then they neither disapproved nor praised the bodily existence. They became completely disinterested regarding it or any other worldly aspiration:

“I saw the body as it was

All existences are cut off, wants and aspirations too,

Every tie untied, I have attained peace of mind.” (verse no. 90 and verse no. 91)

“I wandered about, looking for gain and recognition....

I stood up, my mind freed,

The Buddha’s teaching done.” (verse no. 92 and verse no. 96)

“I then left behind son and daughter, wealth and grain,

After cutting off my hair, I went forth to homelessness.” (verse no. 98)

It can be addressed and explored as a womanist, a proletariat and a polyphonic text at the same time as a gender-neutral one as it is basically a text concerned with spiritual practices for detachment and primarily helps the readers to understand the spiritual journey made by our wise foremothers. Furthermore, their journey as recorded by themselves, can be treated as a vital historical document of a time period when Lord Buddha himself was playing a pivotal role and Buddhism reached the pinnacle of its bloom. *Therigatha* can be significantly helpful to

understand the religious, intellectual and linguistic shifting which was taking place at the time of Buddha. It is a pioneering text in the sense that almost 2500 years before, the brahmanical orthodoxy was questioned here by some of the very courageous women. Their extraordinary stories of combating the darkness of the age and their personal weakness would always be an inspiration for us and all the generations to come.

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