

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165

The Criterion



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

16 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

Vol. 16 Issue-5 october 2025

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor: Dr. Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

A Voice from the Silence: (Re)visioning Buddha's Wife Yashodhara

Sonali Kumari

Research Scholar,
Department of English, BHU.

Article History: Submitted-01/10/2025, Revised-15/10/2025, Accepted-28/10/2025, Published-31/10/2025.

Abstract:

Adrienne Rich defines (Re) Visioning as ‘the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction’. With the due course of time, Feminist (Re) Visioning leads to heterogeneous retellings of a myriad of mythological characters from Ramayana and Mahabharata. The present paper seeks to revision the almost forgotten wife of Buddha named Yashodhara while shifting the focus from mainstream female characters like Sita, Draupadi, Surpanakha, etc. In this paper I'll critically analyze Vanessa R. Sasson's text entitled ‘Yashodhara and the Buddha.’ Sasson's re(vision) of Yashodhara offers a fresh perspective on the Buddha's biography, shifting the focus from the enlightened master to his unsung remained wife, Yashodhara, thereby subverting traditional patriarchal paradigms. It is well-known that Prince Siddhartha abandoned his wife and newly born child; to pursue his inner calling i.e, a quest to end the causes of suffering, but ironically his *mahabhinishkraman* itself became the reasons for Yashodhara's suffering. The present paper attempts to reconstruct and restore the ‘lapse memory” of unsung Yashodahra by theoretically examining and unveiling the untold stories that's have long been silenced by (His)story. This paper aims to provide a nuanced

understanding of Yashodhara's multifaceted identity, exploring her roles as the Buddha's wife, mother of Rahula, and potentially, an enlightened being, thereby reclaiming her narrative within the dominant Buddhist discourse.

Keywords: Buddha, History, re(visioning), suffering, yashodhara.

“Women often get dropped from memory, and then history”. (Doris Lessing, 'Under My Skin')

Narratives on Buddha's strength, his triumph, his greatness has undergone through various re(interpretation) by various writers and scholars in Buddhist as well as Non Buddhist narratives across time, culture and place. One could easily locate a myriad of texts from his journey as a king to his *Mahabhinishkramana* to his *arhatship* to his *Bodhisattva* to his becoming of the *Tathāgata* to his *Nirvana* and many more major significant incidences. Consequently, a plethora of writing has delineated on how Siddhartha embraced *Buddhahood* and his reasons behind the establishment of a new religion called Buddhism. This remarkable endeavour was not the result of a single individual but the collective efforts of many dedicated men and women, whose contributions often lost from history. It's rightly said 'Behind every man's success a woman always remains' but when one tries to look Buddha from this standpoint; shroud of invisibility could easily be felt; invisibility of Buddha's family in general and his often forgotten wife Yashodhara in particular. Pali Canonical texts preserve only fragment of her life while limiting and delimiting her to Siddhartha's wife and Rahula mata, even little or next to nothing has been penned down on her life after Siddhartha's *Mahabhinishkramana* as a single mother or as an abandoned wife. Consequently, while tracing her(story) from His(story) a long silence could be

perceived easily over her heroic deeds. The poignant tale of Yashodhara and Gautama's love and separation has often been overshadowed by history, leaving their story largely untold. Even their tragic love story surpasses classic tales like Romeo and Juliet because their bond transcends not a single lifetime, but stretching across countless incarnations as depicted in the Jataka Tales.

Yashodhara in Canonical Texts

The Buddha's wife is a mysterious figure that remains untold in Buddhist as well as Non-Buddhist canonical texts. Most sources vividly preserve fragment of her(story) and leads her name in variations. In Pali sources, she is named as Yashodhara, Buddha's first cousin, the daughter of Suddhodana's sister Amita, and her husband Suprabuddha. In another tradition, she is the daughter of Mahanaman, Suddhodana's loyal chief minister. Elsewhere, she is the daughter of Dandapini, a wealthy merchant in Kapilavastu. The literal meaning of Yashodhara is Bearer of Glory (yaso), but in 'Lalitvistara', she is addressed as Gopa; in Theravada tradition Yashodhara is variously called as Bhadda Kaccana, Rahulamata and Bimba. The lack of a single or 'authentic' version prompts multifarious accounts of Yashodhara in myth, literature, folk tales and popular culture across time and place. Each retellings unveil multi dimensional tapestries of Yashodhara as per author's socio/historic and unique imagination. Yashodhara's repeatedly occurrence accords her a considerable significant in Buddha's story- only difference is Buddha's achievement get recorded but Yashodhara's achievements relegated to the margins of history. The Buddhist as well as the non- Buddhist canonical text recounts Buddha's *Mahabhinishkraman* (The Great Departure), there is hardly any reference at all to the Buddha's wife or child after Buddha's

the Great Departure, i.e, cutting off from all bonds; from the Pati/pitri dharma most particularly; “If he wishes to practice a religious life after abandoning me his lawful wife widowed, - where is his religion, who wishes to follow penance without his lawful wife to share it with him”? (Buddha-Carita, 104). Through this line, Yashodhara speculates over Buddha's amnesia over his *kartavya*/dharma as a *pati/pita* because if he would have really adhered to his *pati/pitri* dharma, abandonment would never have been her destiny; this abandonment later on resulted in her unbearable anguish and suffering. “You wanted the answer to suffering, but you caused suffering to all of us in order to find it.” In present paper, I will illustrate this unbridled dichotomy by re-examining the story of the *Bodhistava's Mahabhinishkraman* and the aftermath life of Yashodhara as an abandoned wife and Rahula as a fatherless child. As Hindi poet Mathilisharan Gupta has beautifully captured in his poem entitled “Yashodhara” ‘नयन उन्हें हैं निष्ठुर कहते, पर इनसे जो आँसू बहते, सदय हृदय वे कैसे सहते? गये तरस ही खाते! सखि, वे मुझसे कहकर जाते!’ (my eyes call him a stone hearted, still my tears from my eyes isn't ready to accept it, how I convince my tears, mind and heart? He might have some mercy on me. Ohh sakhi, perhaps he might have told me about his secret mission). She expresses her anguish and palpable distress due to Buddha's unfair treatment to her because their conjugal relationship was not tie up for a single lifetime but for many lifetimes as recorded in Jataka Tales. As Klaus Klostermier, a researcher notes: “The frequency with which Yashodhara is mentioned, and the very positive role which she plays in the successive births of the Bodhisattva, indicates a loving relationship’(klostermier 1999, 26). His secret mission not only devastated her but also- Kanthaka, Channa, Gotami, the king, the harem ladies; their plight was captured in “Buddha-Carita”,

“The women were fainting in their sorrow for their lord...
raised no cry, shed no tear, and breathed not, standing senseless...
their faces pouring tears from their eyes...
the noble women beat their breasts with their lotus like hands...
their artries hidden and bore no ornaments...
having their eyes red and dimmed with continuous tears, who are as it were desolatd
widows”.

Thus, it could be said that the *Boddhisatta's* renunciation forces the harem women to embrace widowhood without their consent; they'd to lead their remaining lives as a mourning wife although their husband is alive ironically. “This is the price wives pay when their husbands abandon them” (Sasson, 64). Buddha's silent mission not only impacted human beings but also his horse named Kanthak, “he neighed repeatedly with a mournful sound; and though pressed with hunger, he welcomed not nor tasted any grass or water on the road(Buddha-Carita, 95), for him grief became too much to bear and ultimately resulted in a heartbreaking outcome. Gotami's excessive grief led to her loss of sight. Everyone is distraught by his *mahabhinishkraman-* in pursuit of enlightenment, every character suffered more or less but Yashodhara suffered at its extreme, as they had been together for countless lifetimes and the unexpected separation inflicted profound emotional and psychological scar on her, she could not see any fruitful existence of her life in the absence of her husband and thinks to end her life saying, “I do not want to live any longer” (Lewis and Tuladhar 2010,153). She burst into tears,

'Do you know where my revered Lord has gone, leaving me alone?... We've been separated from each other! How am I to live with?... After saying this, she bursts into sobs...' (Lewis and Tuladhar 2010,152).

The poem poignantly captures the anguish and suffering of an abandoned wife. As John Strong argues, "the Buddha's renunciation is not at all a solo affair, 'it is not an act not only for the abandoner, but for those who are abandoned, those who are left behind in the householder's state'" (Strong 1997,122).

Yashodhara in Revisionist literature

Although much is not written or talked about Yashodhara but one can not forget her. She remained not only unnoticed but also erased her(stories) from history, which really forces one to look into whether it was unintentionally omitted or deliberately shrouded? When revisionist writers attempted to read between lines of Buddha's narratives; they found gaps, shattered voices and silence over Yashodhara; which really struck a chord to feminist revisionists and inspired diverse reinterpretations on her. In contemporary times, revisionist writers present a compelling reimagining of Buddha's story from the perspective of his often forgotten and long-suffering childhood friend, wife and mother of his only child : Yashodhara, not only unveiling the untold stories but also filling the gaps between the lines in history which seem missing in popular narratives and perceptions. Besides Yashodhara, these revisionist writers also unveil the lives of remarkable women who played a pivotal role in the journey of Buddha as: Mayadevi(Siddhartha's mother), Mahaprajapati (Siddhartha's foster mother), Pamita (Mother of Yashodhara), Kisa Gotami (acquaintance to Yashodhara) , Neelina(Handmaiden and friend to Yashodhara) and many

more. Feminist re-visioning has spawned a diverse array of reinterpretations of mythological figures, including Sita, Draupadi, Urmila, Shrutakirti, Mandodari, Ahalya, and Surpanakha. In contrast to it, revisioning of Yashodhara is a recent addition to this approach. As Adrienne Rich asserts: 'Re-vision is the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction'. Thus, revisits challenge the dominant ideology while resisting the authoritative agency, its hegemonic ideologies, subduing social structures, thereby shifting the authorial voice from voiceless to the voiced and vice versa, and telling her(story) cutting off from his (story). As Adrienne Rich rightly points out, "We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it, not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us".(Rich). Revisioning of Yashodhara leads towards diverse interpretation and representation across culture, language and nation. Hence, revisioning urges a need to relook at the subdued or silenced void. Here, my paper attempts to give a clarion voice to the silenced and lapsed memory of Yashodhara while critically analysing Vanessa R. Sasson's revisioning of Yashodhara entitled "Yashodhara and Buddha"; which has been relegated to the margins of our consciousness.

Unlike traditional portrayal of Yashodhara as passive and submissive or an exalted figure, Vanessa R. Sasson has presented Yashodhara as an empowered figure - beginning her narration from her birth to youth; her first menstruation to her choosing Siddhartha as her soulmate to her grand wedding to her giving birth to Rahula after the long wait of 12 years, to Buddha's abandonment to an enlightened being and later on joining in *Bhikshuni Sangha*. In this hagiographical fiction, Yashodhara has not only broken free from the

constraints of traditional fixity but has also entered a realm where multiple mutations and transmutations become possible.

Birth of yashodhara

Yashodhara and Siddhartha was born on the same day, but “the entire kingdom is asked to refrain from celebration... the kingdom is hereby declared to be in a state of mourning”.(Sasson, 7)

“The day I was born, the day that was supposed to be filled with celebration and congratulations, was now darkened'. (Sasson, 8)

Yashodhara's parents wanted to celebrate the birth of their daughter but they were restrained from doing it because of the sudden death of Maya, Sudhodana's wife. As Maya's husband says, “I ordered the community to mourn! These celebrations are an insult to the queen and her memory!”(Sassoon, 18). Yashodhara's first menstruation has also penned down by revisionist writer as “festival Day”,

‘My life changed the day womanhood announced itself on my body... not long after my first Bleeding... but after I would become a woman, everything changed. I was not allowed to be so impatient anymore. I'd to take my time and dedicately prepare the face that I would present to the outside world...your time for womanhood has arrived’(Sasson, 56,59, 62).

While revisioning as well as challenging the existing biases and prejudices, the writer has painstakingly reconstructed Yashodhara as a more nuanced and multifaceted figure, that had been lost in the mainstream narratives.

The writer also documents Yashodhara's and Siddhartha's mutual choice as life partners in the book, under the section 'The Choosing'. Their *swyambhar* was even more grand than

Rama's *swyambhar*. Sudhodana, Siddhartha 's father invited all the high-birth maiden from the Sakya clan to gather and out of them one would be chosen as Siddhartha's better half and Siddhartha would also provide gifts to the ladies. Yashodhara also took a part in it, "I have to stand in line to present my face to the prince"! (Sasson, 84) However, his casket get empty at Yashodhara's turn, "it seems the casket is empty", he said with his familiar smile. And gave his own necklace to her that's how they had chosen each other. "Siddhartha and me after we married, we are free to spend our days enjoying the luxuries our station provided" (119). After twelve years of their marriage, yashodhara conceived Rahula, as Mahaprajapati Gautami, her mother-in-law problematize the delay in pregnancy, "Poor Maya only became pregnant at the very end of her life. Women in our family seem to be cursed with this difficulty. We were never like other women who can produce half a dozen males in as many years. I have only had one child and Maya did too. And it took each one of us a long time"(Sassoon, 125)

Meantime, Siddhartha witnessed four sights: an older man, a sick man, then a corpse, followed by an ascetic. Following these sights of suffering, his heart was at regarding the great questions of birth, suffering, old age, and death and determined to leave all the amenities, all the bonds in search for the end of suffering.

"Yashodhara, I can't live this life anymore. I need to find answers to the questions I've. I don't know how or where I'll go, but..."

Yashodhara could not understand and totally shocked from Siddhartha's this decision,

"Tears began to run down my face. My world was coming to an end..."

"But I can not stay here anymore, he finally said."

"But you have no right! Not now! Not when I'm pregnant..."

"You're pregnant, he repeated. How long have we waited for this?"

"... Are you really going to leave me, husband? ". I whispered with a cracked voice "

He didn't answer. (164,5)

Although Siddhartha didn't answer in yes or no but Yashodhara was pretty sure, she's going to be abandoned by her husband, this thought always reinforce her to think about her life in the absence of her husband, or living a life without soul.

"I was afraid of life without my husband. I was afraid of where he might go and I was afraid that he was going to leave me behind. I was afraid of living in the palace without him. I was afraid of loneliness and I was afraid of disappearance... if he was going to leave me, I was no better than a widow. Who would love me after he left? What would become of me without him"? (179)

Yashodhara could not even imagine her life without Siddhartha because she had always been his companion in all of his previous lifetimes, as recorded in Jataka Tales. Yashodhara while following a harrowing delivery that teetered between life and death; came to the realization that her husband had finally abandoned her, without even saying good bye, that really stuck a chord to revisionist writers. Her lamentation on being abandoned was poignantly depicted by Maithilisharan Gupta in his poetry entitled "Yashodhara":

"सखि, वे मुझसे कहकर जाते,
कह, तो क्या मुझको वे अपनी पथ-बाधा ही पाते? मुझको बहुत उन्होंने माना, फिर भी क्या पूरा पहचाना? मैंने मुख्य उसी को जाना जो वे मन में लाते। सखि, वे मुझसे कहकर जाते।"

"Where's my husband?"

"He's gone, your highness. Prince Siddhatha is gone.

“I couldn’t understand why he walked away, so I stared at the door, day after day, wondering if it would ever open again. I lay on my bed, my baby beside me, utterly oblivious to his little cries.”(sasson, 193)

“He left me mother! I’m a disgrace now! Everyone in the kingdom knows! He made me a widow!... How could he do that to me?” I screamed.

The above mentioned quotes show how much yashodhara was devastated by Siddhartha’s *mahabhiniskraman*, which only gave her “A... tapestry of scars”, that will never be healed.

“He caused suffering to me to find the end of suffering... “Siddhartha and I I’d been together for such a long time. Our togetherness had always seemed timeless to me, as though it had been threaded from past lives into this one. We were not just husband and wife. We were everything to each other”. (Sassoon)

Conclusion

To sum up, Revisionist writers give voice to the long remained silenced Buddha's wife Yashodhara while re-constructing her stories from her points of view, rather than his(story). This novel has re- scripted her as an empowered cultural memory for Indian womanhood. As Adrienne Rich in her poem entitled “Diving into the Wreck” ‘explore the wreck’ and ‘see the damage that was done/ and the treasure that prevail’ (1973, p. 23); likewise revisionist have countered the damage caused by the phallocentricism and patriarchal prejudice as such “book of myths/in which/ our names don’t appear”(2973, p. 24) ; that’s the reason of Yashodhara living in memories but her disappearance in history. Vanessa R. Sasson's re-vision of Yashodhara as “female knowledge of female experience” could gradually replace the old ones that “stands as foundations of collective male fantasy”

(Ostriker, 1982, p. 73). Adriene Rich has defined Re- vision as “ entering an old text from a new critical directions” and more importantly as “an act of survival”; hence, Yashodhara's revisioning not only give clarion voice to the subdued character but also revitalized her with profound significance. The poem 'Still I Rise' profoundly fit to Yashodhara's silence in His(story) but an assertive and bold figure in Her(story) particularly in Re(visioning) texts:

“You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.
You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.”

Works Cited:

- Aśvaghōṣa. *Aśvaghōṣa's Buddhacarita : the Life of Buddha : Sanskrit Text with Word-by-Word Translation, Melodies for Chanting and Verses in English Grammatical Explanation*. Saranath, Varanasi :Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1995.
- Gupt, Maithilishran. *Yashodhara*. Sahitya Sadan, 2014.
- Ostriker, A. “The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking”. *Signs*'(1), (1982), pp. 68-90.
- Rich, A. *Diving into the wreck: Poems 1971-1972*. New York: Norton, 1973.

Rich, A. "When We Dead Awaken : Writing as Re- vision." National Council of Teachers of English, Oct. 1972, pp. 18;30.

Sasson, Vanessa R. *Yashodhara and the Buddha*. Speaking Tiger publication, 2018.