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Affect, Memory, Fame: Gendered Spaces of Liberation in the *Therīgāthā* and *Yashodharāvata*

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the entanglements of affect, memory, and fame in early Buddhist literature through a comparative study of the *Therīgāthā* and the *Yashodharāvata*, read through Henri Lefebvre's theorisation of space. It argues that these texts not only register women's affective and mnemonic lives but also produce distinct spatialities, monastic and domestic, as sites where liberation is felt, remembered, and reputationally secured. The *Therīgāthā*, a canonical collection of verses by enlightened women, inscribes the monastery as a lived space in which austerity, intimacy, fatigue, and joy coalesce; cells, cloisters, forest paths, and assembly halls become charged environments where bodies remember prior suffering and re-script it as grounds for awakening. The *Yashodharāvata*, by contrast, reanimates Yasodhara's palace as a dense affective architecture of absence and recollection, where corridors, chambers, and thresholds materialise the tensions between worldly opulence and interior renunciation. Mobilising Lefebvre's triad of perceived, conceived, and lived space, alongside affect theory and phenomenology, the study shows how both texts transform spatial settings into affective archives. Monastic space in the *Therīgāthā* is not a neutral backdrop but a produced environment that mediates the circulation of memory, hunger, grief, fear, and serenity, thereby shaping the mode in which liberation is narrated and experienced. The palace as a space in the *Yashodharāvata* functions similarly as a mnemonic apparatus: Yasodhara's movements through the palace stage the persistence of attachment and the labour of re-reading absence as ethical insight. Within this spatialized framework, fame emerges as the afterlife of affect in space: an enduring resonance generated when emotions, embodied in specific locales, are repeatedly remembered, recited, and inhabited by later communities. The paper thus reframes early Buddhist renown, not as abstract hagiography, but as a spatial and affective continuity in which women's voices remain audible because their feelings are mapped onto, and replayed within, the monasteries and palaces they once traversed. In doing so, it proposes that liberation in these texts is best understood as a sensorial and spatial continuity: the body remembers, the place reverberates, and the echo of affect becomes the very medium of fame.

Keywords: Spatial and Affective Continuity, Interior Renunciation, Affective Archives, Mnemonic Apparatus.

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Affect deals with the evident expression of mental health in the form of emotion that may be observed. Silvan Tomkins' affect theory assumes importance as one tries to understand what affects feel like in shared experience specifically in the context of literary works from South Asia. Works such as the *Therigatha* and the *Yashodharavata* are available to us in translation today. The original text of the *theris* was written in Pali and the poem *Yashodharavata* was written in Sinhalese by an anonymous author. The unique nature of the cultural, religious and socio-economic fabric of the Global South begs to be appreciated as World Literature that has its own unique resonances.

This paper attempts to stage an encounter between the *Therigatha* and the *Yashodharavata* as texts that portray sentient emotions in the characters of the nuns or *theris* who give voice to their trials and tribulations that led them to the Buddhist monasteries and in the lament of Yashodhara, Buddha's young wife, who finds herself and her newborn baby abandoned by Prince Siddhartha as he sets out on his journey of finding answers to existential problems. The staging uses affect theory and a spatial reading of the monasteries in both the texts. The monastic spaces are seen as liberational grounds that witness emotions, create memories, provide release and/or freedom for the *theris* and thrust fame on the unsuspecting young wife and mother, Yashodhara, when she is made into an *arahat*.

Tomkins' affective theory presents a framework that showcases the different affective states in relation to the other social, biological and psychic events. Frank evokes Tomkins when he states that this specific nature or "particularity of drives is what limits their significance for psychological action" (Qtd. Frank 16). In contrast to Freud's original drive-objects relation, Tomkins' realignment to an affect-object freedom posits "that there is no object that has not been linked to one or another affect" (Qtd. Frank 17).

Despite making clear distinctions between drives and affects, Tomkins also admits that a constant state of interdependency leading to myriad combinations exists between them. An

affect to Tomkins "is not a singular event, but a systemic occurrence calling into play neural firing, facial musculature, glandular messages, motor responses, memory, images, sensory and perceptual feedback" (Qtd. Frank 18). Tomkins' emphasis is on the drive affect combinations as the prime motivator, rather than the predominance of one over the other.

Tomkins' model of the affect theory is based on the reality that people are constantly changing and as humans are such complex creatures, it is impossible to predict when or how the next change may occur and alter the situation, which in turn may lead to systemic shifts in the concept of freedom. He contends that there is constant interplay between this freedom, affect and human responses, leading to a variety of affects. He delves further to elaborate specific affects and their connection within the dynamic interplay of experience in a person. Contentious questions notwithstanding, his juxtaposition of "fine grained phenomenology and bold theoretical generalization lead to the unusual sense of loosely integrated, systemic understanding of subjectivity" (Qtd. Frank 51).

The positive affect of interest-excitement, is explained as being the "interruption of ongoing activity" (Qtd. Frank 53). This is a gender socialized privilege afforded to Siddhartha in Yashodharavata as he decides to interrupt the pleasures derived from conjugal bliss experienced with Yashodhara after she has birthed their child. The explanation is taken one step further by stating that absence of this affective support of interest could hinder the development of the intellect and perhaps even the brain tissues; this surmise though, is not backed by empirical evidence, yet it is thought provoking and prods researchers to scrutinize this aspect. The second affect according to Tomkins is the enjoyment-joy, which denotes recognition of others and highlights the bond shared by humans amongst each other. This affect as well as the third positive one, is evidenced in the sisterhood experienced and expressed by the *theris* in the *Therigatha*. The third affect which is also positive in nature is the action of smiling which he explains as being the outcome of a sudden reduction of other affects like fear or anger. He

further propounds that humans thrive on being with each other and enjoy the company of others which in turn plays a major role in activating the affects.

The gamut of the negative affects on the other hand, has "the power to trouble humans deeply whilst they amplify and deepen suffering" (Qtd. Frank 61). Managing negative affects continues to pose immense problems and they have the power to spread their toxicity to the environment within which the human operates; be it the home, office, roads, hospital, apartment, online communities like social media amongst others. Six negative affects are enumerated; first of which is distress-anguish, which is assigned as being a general negative affect. Fear-terror is that affect, which in Tomkins' views can generate more toxicity than distress. Anger-rage he says, needs continuous stimulation and appears as "the most urgent of all affects" (Qtd. Frank 65). The difficulty in managing this affect stems from the fact that it is abstract i.e. one does not know what exactly has caused it and why one is angry, and it is general, in that it possesses immense freedom in relation to objects, duration and intensity. Shame-humiliation, contempt and disgust-dissmell are the three other negative affects which seem to be interconnected in some ways. These three affects arise from a sense of societal rejection and highlight the boundaries between individuals and groups, while being triggered by the need to survive. These affects are experienced by some of the *theris* such as the nun Mutta in the intimate spheres of the household, as well as by Yashodhara after she is deserted by Siddhartha. Illustrative examples have been cited further ahead in the paper.

This paper proposes to examine the interplay of emotion, recollection, and lasting recognition in early Buddhist writings. It juxtaposes the *Therigatha* with the *Yashodharavata*, interpreting both using Henri Lefebvre's framework of spatial production as a lens and enabling a South-South dialogue. These texts do not just document the emotional and memorial experiences of women; they actively forge contrasting spatial realms such as the monastery and

the household. Four important axes are anchored in a conceptual quadrilateral in this paper: Lefebvre's perceived/conceived/lived space, conjoined with Tomkins' affect.

Geocriticism, as theorized by scholars such as Bertrand Westphal and Robert T. Tally Jr., examines how space and place function within literature to shape identities, relationships, and cultural imaginaries. Applying geocritical theory to ancient South Asian texts like the *Therigatha* and *Yashodharavata* opens new pathways to understanding how geographical and symbolic spaces mediate the lived experiences of women. These texts, deeply rooted in the spatial and spiritual landscapes of early Buddhist India, offer more than just spiritual testimonies; they are archives of gendered spatiality and resistance, portraying women who negotiate the physical, social, and metaphysical terrains of their lives. When read through a geocritical lens, these texts reveal how geographical displacement, domestic enclosures, forests, and monastic spaces become crucial coordinates for articulating feminine agency and subjectivity. According to Bertrand Westphal, "space is not a neutral container but a culturally charged construct, continually reshaped through representation" (Westphal 2011, 27).

The *Yashodharavata* similarly explores the symbolic geography of loss and endurance. Yashodhara's palace is described not merely as a place of royalty, but as a site of abandonment and existential questioning. Her grief at Siddhartha's departure is compounded by the silence of the inner chambers, echoing the pain of spatial isolation. However, this enclosed space becomes the setting of her transformation. Unlike the itinerant nuns of the *Therigatha*, Yashodhara remains in the palace, yet she too attains insight. This challenges the traditional geocritical dichotomy between mobility and transcendence. As Robert Tally asserts, geocriticism invites us to consider "multiple viewpoints on the same space" (Tally 2013, 12), and Yashodhara's experience adds nuance to the forest/dwelling binary of spiritual liberation.

One cannot help subjecting the lines quoted below to a gendered reading as Yashodhara is objectified by the male gaze even as she is being introduced. The beholder is none other than Siddhartha:

"She sleeps on a bed heaped with lots of flowers

Milk flows from her swan-breasts for the baby prince

Yasodhara, full of Virtue, who has never done wrong,

Except perhaps, unwittingly, being a threat to Buddhahood.

Her hair falls loose, long, blue-black

Curls frame her face, like twirling tops.

The baby in her arms suckles content.

How can he leave once he's seen those golden breasts?" (Obeyesekere 2009, 43)

These lines expose a distinctly gendered mode of remembrance in which Yashodhara's body, especially her "golden breasts", is rendered as an eroticized obstacle to renunciation, fixing her fame within a male gaze that converts maternity and virtue into seductive threat. Yet it is precisely through Yashodhara's sustained affective labour that involves nursing, waiting, grieving, recalling shared lifetimes, that this space is re-claimed from erotic spectacle and re-scripted as a site of ethical endurance, producing an alternative renown grounded not in bodily allure but in emotional discipline and mnemonic fidelity.

Geocritical analysis allows us to understand the monastic community as a heterotopic space in Michel Foucault's terms - an "other space" where normative social roles are redefined (Foucault 1986, 24). In *Therigatha*, the forest hermitage is not a marginal space but a central locus of meaning, where women re-author their narratives. The nun Soma, when confronted by Mara who suggests that women lack the intellect for enlightenment, responds, "What does

womanhood matter at all, when the mind is still and firm?" (*Therigatha* 5.2). Mara thus raises the mind and its resilience above gender socialization. Another poem attributed to the nun Mutta highlights the significance of physical separation from worldly life:

> "So freed! So thoroughly freed am I!
> from my pestle, my shameless husband,
>
> and my moldy old pot" (Hallisey 1:11).

Yasodhara's Tangible World

Perceived space refers to the physical and material aspects of space as directly experienced by individuals (Lefebvre 38). In the *Yasodharavata*, the palace serves as the primary setting, symbolizing both luxury and confinement. Yashodhara's surroundings are described with rich imagery, highlighting the opulence of her environment:

> "On a bed strewn over with *saman* jasmine flowers
>
> The queen rests relaxed nestling her infant child.
>
> Like a garland made of golden *kinihiri* flowers
>
> Her blessed arm cradles her baby child." (Obeyesekere 45).

This depiction emphasizes the grandeur of the palace, with its golden bed and the serene ambience created by the moonlight. However, this same space becomes a site of rage followed by sorrow and longing after Siddhartha's departure. The once comforting environment transforms into a reminder of her loss:

> When the minister Canna returned to the city that day
>
> The queen turned on him—a lioness leaping to the kill.
>
> "Canna, friend, where is my lord, my beloved?
>
> Go bring him to me now. I must see him, I will." (Obeyesekere 47).

Canna's re-entry into the palace turns the threshold itself into a charged archive, where anger condenses around the messenger's body, and Yashodhara's attack registers not as impulsive rage but as a reanimation of the affect stored at the moment of abandonment. Rage gives way to protest and lamentation as evidenced in the following lines:

"In countless animal lives we perfected the Virtues

I have always been true to you, my love,

Why then do you do this to me now?

Am I not your Bimba, your nectar-like Yasodhara?"

She tore off her precious pearl and gemstone jewels,

Took off her golden silks and the rings on her toes,

Pulled off the golden ornaments in her ears,

The queen sat lifeless as if turned to stone.

"I shall wait weeping and wailing, lamenting my woes,

Boundless tears will flow as I sob unceasingly,

Confused and troubled I now weep endlessly.

Why did you do this to me, depart as never before?

"When you were born as an elephant in the forest,

Did not a *vadda* hurl his arrow and make you fall?

Did I not sit there beside you weeping and pleading?

O my husband why have you now abandoned our son? (Obeyesekere 51)

The jewels operate as portable affective archives encoding fidelity and royal intimacy, and Yashodhara's stripping of them is a kinetic act of recollection in which she replays shared

lifetimes through the body, converting adornment into evidence of betrayal. The physical space of the palace, once a place of shared happiness, now amplifies Yashodhara's sense of abandonment and grief. Her weeping saturates the palace interior with affective residue, so that sound and tears function as temporal layering, turning continued dwelling into a repeated activation of memory rather than a static condition of suffering. By recalling prior forest lives, Yashodhara collapses spatial divisions between palace and wilderness, using remembered movement through another landscape to re-inscribe abandonment as a recurring affective pattern rather than a singular present loss.

"Our flower-decked bed where we lay as our hearts desired,

I cannot look on it now - it burns my breast." (Obeyesekere 52)

The Ideological Constructs of the Palace

Conceived space pertains to the mental and ideological representations of space, often shaped by societal norms and cultural narratives (Lefebvre 42). The palace in the *Yashodharavata* is not merely a physical structure but also a symbol of royal duty, marital roles, and societal expectations. Yashodhara's position within this space is defined by her roles as a wife and mother, and the palace embodies these expectations. The poem reflects on how there is a valourization of Yashodhara's journey from a queen to an *arahat* albeit without any desire or volition of her own, showing clearly how patriarchy manipulates such a situation:

"…Yasodhara gives up past comforts, becomes a nun,

With purity and wisdom keeps her vows.

She lived in this way, thereafter thought,

"I'll perform a miracle, rid men and gods of doubt.

The blessed queen pursued the life of a nun

Sat long hours in meditative trance." (Obeyesekere 55)

These visions intertwine personal aspirations with cosmic symbolism, reflecting the ideological constructs of her world. The palace, in this context, becomes a microcosm of the larger universe, with Yashodhara's experiences mirroring broader spiritual and cultural narratives.

Yashodhara's Palace as a Lived Space after Siddhartha's Desertion

Yashodhara's personal experiences reshape the meaning of the palace as a space, as seen in her laments:

"When you were Mahausada what didn't I do for you?

I rubbed a rice and curry paste on my head and limbs.

All those ordeals, however hard, were sweet to me

I was your Amaravati then, now, your Yashodhara.

"I went with you on your countless ascetic journeys,

Joined in many forms of worship and offering.

I can't remember a wrong done even unthinkingly.

Why did you leave me so alone and solitary?" (Obeyesekere 52)

In these lines, Yashodhara's memories of shared moments within the palace walls intensify her sense of loss. The palace, once a setting for intimate interactions, now stands as a testament to her solitude and enduring love. Through Lefebvre's spatial triad, the *Yasodharavata* reveals the multifaceted nature of the spaces Yasodhara inhabits. The perceived space of the palace reflects both luxury and confinement; the conceived space embodies societal and ideological constructs; and the lived space captures Yashodhara's personal and emotional journey. This geocritical analysis underscores how physical spaces in literature can

serve as mirrors to characters' internal landscapes, enriching our understanding of their experiences.

The *Therigatha* and *Yashodharavata* thus represent distinct yet overlapping Buddhist literary traditions that articulate female subjectivity, suffering, and transformation. While the *Therigatha* encapsulates the spiritual realizations of early Buddhist nuns, *Yashodharavata*, in Ranjini Obeyesekere's translation, gives voice to Yashodhara, Siddhartha's wife, whose suffering is rooted in abandonment and loss. This attempt at facilitating a South-South dialogue within the literatures of the Global South that truly deserve to be called World Literature has not even scratched the tip of another huge iceberg; one that leads to a huge corpus of contrapuntal hermeneutics waiting to be applied to these and other representative texts available to us today in the original and in translation.

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