

## 'Radical Grace': Hymning of 'Womanhood' in *Therigatha*

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I used to believe in human potential  
In the right to choose their path  
In the power of their intellect  
In the undefeatable abilities!

(Chomchand, "A Revelation", *Dawn in the Night*)

The quest for formulating a concept of the divine along with addressing the feminal concerns must have kindled the Buddhist 1 nuns to unite the immanent body with the transcendental divinity by their prescient certitude "that the divine is not situated in an inaccessible transcendence. It is what I become, what I create. I become and I create (the) god(s) between immanence and transcendence" (*Between East and West*, 43). Steven Katz, while insisting on the essential feature of immediacy so far as the spiritual experience is to be considered as mystical, has stressed that "the experience itself as well as the form in which it is reported is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to, and which shape, his experiences" (Katz, 26). Choosing not just to passively provide testimony to the glorified men which could have "forced [women] to comply with models that do not match them", the Bhikkhuni-mystics, through their experiential journey have asserted their "female subjectivity" by firmly deciding to "move forward into love, art, thought, toward their ideal and divine fulfillment" ("Divine Women", 64) of a 'radical grace' in the form of envisaging a gyno-spirituality (I am using this term in order to relate the women body and spirituality in terms of generativity) emerging out of the feminine realization, which ultimately seems to have provided a long-pondered clue to the dissident womanhood: "Why do we assume that God must always remain an inaccessible transcendence rather than a realization—here and now—in and through the body?" (*An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 148). A close analysis of the verses shows how the deployment of the domesticity as a space for expressionistic monologues about the female body and desire, makes *Therigatha*, seen from the perspective of Nicola Slee, a radical discourse of counter-culture of feminist mysticism: "To discover the presence

of God within the confines of the mundane and domestic is radically and explosively to transform these realities" ("Parables and Women's Experience", 42) so that "the spiritual corresponds to an evolved, transmuted, transfigured corporeal" (*Between East and West*, 63).

If the historical importance of these inspired utterances lies in the fact that this is perhaps the oldest writing by the Indian women and the first anthology of the women in the world, then the radical element of *Therigatha* that attracts contemporary reader is the obvious emergence of a feminine spirituality, oozing out of the ambidextrous narrativizing of the female body, desire and feminine spaces in most of the *gathas*. The ambidexterity lies in the antithetical outlook regarding the carnal drives of womanhood, conveyed through the metaphors of female body and desire, in a parallel way of drawing inspirations from two separate coequal perspectives of ownership and renunciation. As a feminist revolt against the traditional derogation of the female body and the domestic space, which often become the premise of denigrating womanhood in terms of spirituality, the hymns, by their humming of the body with grace and portraying domesticity as vocation, become a 'counter-strategic-reinscription' of the otherized femininity. Once the tabooed notion of profaneness associated with women's domesticity as well as that of impurity/inferiority attached with their body have been combated, the women mystics, almost overturned, have started focusing on seeking detachment from the materiality of the corporeal obsession towards a conscious nurturing of the inner self, guided by the "subsistence perspective" of their innate 'prakriti'. Hence, the ambidextrous assertion and restriction of the female eroticity in the same poem, proclaiming the women 'shakti' of choice and preference, makes *Therigatha* poems the hub of an endogenous spiritual feminism. Reconsidering the feminine as the positive principle (*Shakti*) that by its innate nature (*Prakriti*) is capable of a bodied-participation as well as a transcendental reconnection of the human with the natural, the *Therigatha* manifests the 'ethico-

epistemological attitude-changes implicit in the Prakriti-idea' of Indian womanhood which 'debunk development as "maldevelopment" and replace it by what is called the "subsistence perspective", which emphasizes satisfaction of common human needs of life rather than maximization of commodity production and gross consumerism.' (Jagger and Young, 120).

The very first poem with a single verse where Therika writes about what Buddha, the omniscient, has spoken to her, shows how the consciousness of sex has remained as a passion that is still 'green' (psychologically associated to love and growth) in her like a herb which has to be encrusted and shriveled: "So sleep well, covered with cloth you have made, /your passion for sex shriveled away/ like a herb dried up in a pot." ('Therika', 3). Unlike the trivializing or infantilizing of the demands of the body in usual transcendental terms, the body has been seen to be exercising immense power and therefore, the resistance has to be fortified with the repetitive alarm of flux, decomposition, death: "Take care of the body, it's your last, / Just make sure it doesn't become a vehicle for death after this." ('Vira', 7; 'Upasama', 11). The euphemistic expressions like 'depravity' often fails to conceal the essential sensual connotation of the term: "without the depravities that ooze out from within." ('Tissa', 5). Further the expression shows how deep is the counter-hold of the said 'depravity' that is not just a stimulus from without. Despite the patriarchal prescription of repressing the female sexuality by stigmatizing it as "sick, it's dirty, it's foul" (Buddha's instruction to 'Abhirupananda', 19) Sumangala's Mother in a poem of addressing her son, grants woman with the agency of an active "anger and the passion for sex" ('Sumangala's Mother', 21) while Nanduttara vividly portrays her initiatives for sensual gratification in a retrospective mode: "Vexed as I was by the urge for sex,/ I would do this body a favor/ with baths and messages,/ and delight in jewelry and finery" ('Nanduttara', 57). The bhakti icon Meerabai in many of her *bhajans* have got engaged with carnal aesthetics as the objective correlative for her peremptory love of the divine: "The sweetness of his lips is a pot of nectar, / That's the only curd for which I crave" (Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, 92). The fragmented female body parts in the poem by Ambapali--her hair being "scented/ like a perfumed box filled with flowers", eyebrows like "the contour lines drawn first by a good artist", earlobes like "well-crafted bracelets", teeth like "plantain buds", neck as beautiful as "polished and smooth conchshell", breasts "full, round, close together, high", thighs "beautiful/ like the trunk of an elephant" ('Ambapali', 129-139)--reveals the feminist counter-attempt of sexualizing the innocent body parts herself, against the conventional notion of the objectification of woman-body into sexual compartments

by an active male gaze (Frigga Haug et al., 1987), as a resistance against the stereotyping of woman as a passive subjugated being sans participatory subjecthood. Similar consciousness of the corporeal femininity finds an echo in the *vachana* of Akka Mahadevi: "Brother, you've come/ drawn by the beauty/ of these billowing breasts, / this brimming youth." (Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, 79). Annihilating the pollution-complex imposed on the female body, projected as impure and imperfect, the songs of recollection by the enlightened sisters convey their cherishing of womanliness in their decoration of the female bodies while celebrating the charismatic look of being "well dressed and dressed up, / covered with garlands and sandalwood paste" ('Sujata', 81) to the heights of being seductive: "I flashed my ornaments as if I was showing my hidden parts" ('Vimala', 51). Similar violation of the norms, propagated to defend the patriarchal version of ideal woman, is found in Janabai's poetry: "The pallav of my sari/ falls away (A scandal!); / yet will I enter/ the crowded marketplace/ without a thought. / Jani says, My Lord/ I have become a slut/ to reach your home." (Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, 83). Transgression also gets highlighted by the non-normative intimacy: "We were mother and daughter, / but we shared one husband" ('Uppalavanna', 117). The bhikkhunis, in general, have projected their familial roles as daughters, wives and mothers as a stepping stone towards transcendence. The conjugal space has sometimes been dominated by the "shameless husband" ('Sumangala's Mother', 21) yet in Chapa's address to her forsaking husband one can discover an asserting woman, vocal of the marital proviso: "If you go, leaving me behind, / who will physically enjoy this body of mine" ('Chapa', 153). The ecstasy of motherhood has also been relished by the nuns who, while recollecting of the abandoned domesticity, has emphatically stated: "I gave birth to ten sons with this body" ('Sona', 63). The recurrent retrospection of the domestic space shows the female monks' intersecting of the road to divinity with that of "unsociable sociability" which implies "negotiation of the contrary forces of belonging and separation between the woman lifewriter and the social institutions surrounding her" (Anne Collett and Louise D'Arcens, 5). The reminiscence of the former yearnings associated with domesticity and the desired womanhood illustrate the recurring conjunction of the boundaries, by the *Therigatha* composers, between the isolated self and the surrounding communities cum institutions. This, in consequence, fortifies the counter-culture of feminist mysticism that is aimed at discovering transcendence even by retaining the conscious deploying of the components, often viewed as mundane.

*Therigatha* can be seen as the "songs of triumph" (Rita M. Gross, 17) on the basis of the bhikkhunis' victory in

liberating the conventional image of womanhood from the notion of incapability of procuring both venereal as well as discarnate attainments. These expressionistic poems, as the embodied metaphysics of the Buddhist-feminist's voice 2 of mystically sounding "in the presence of the Buddha" their empowered soul, however, only through the bodied images: "I will roar like a lion" ('Sundari', 169), have effectively established on the basis of the vocalized-voice a connection between body and soul 3: "The voice is the flesh of the soul" (Mladen Dolar, 71). Spiritual transcendence, according to Amy Hollywood, can be experienced "only through the body" (Hollywood, 278). In Indian tradition the mystics like the Bauls and Nath Yogis have perceived human body as an esoteric reserve of secret powers, "an epitome of the Cosmic Body", which need to be mastered so that the ascetic can "realise the whole universe within him[her] self and identify him[her]self with the whole universe" (Banerjea, 137). Once the taboo against the female body, sexuality and domesticity has been radically challenged as a motivated denunciation and "equity feminism" (Sommers, 1994) has been rendered through the proposition of an active womanliness that prefers to be an initiator rather than the conventional victim, the Elder Buddhist nuns have volunteered to rise above the worldly bonds for the evolution of the self through the psychic illumination. The remarkable retraction is the outcome of quenching an unexpansive sensual propensity: "By then I had enough/ of what my body brought/and wearied I turned away" ('Addhakasi', 23). The composition with one verse by Mutta about Buddha's utterance, seems to hint at overcoming of the sensual urges by dissociating mind from the body: "be freed from what holds you back". "When nothing is owned" by the mind except the realization that eroticity is only a fleeting physiological appetite of the fading bodily frame, then the mind alone, by overcoming the bondage of the bonding through the passage from "home to homelessness" ('Uppalavanna', 117), can become "completely free" and treat the sexual as an ephemeral gratification like the sporadic relishing of "food collected as alms" ('Mutta', 3). Reconnecting their innate *Prakriti* with the transient natural surroundings, the aged wise women have realized that the ruling of impermanence is the ultimate reality: "The hair on my head was once curly, / black, like the colour of bees,/ now because of old age/ they are like jute./ It's just as the Buddha, speaker of truth, said,/ nothing different than that." ('Ambapalli', 129). Internalizing the essence of Buddha's dharma, the female sages have finally become "a true daughter of the Buddha,/ always delighting in nibbana" ('Another Uttama', 35) by cultivating "all seven wings of awakening" 4 ('Jenta', 19) and internalizing "the three things that most don't know" 5 ('Addhakasi',

23) which have ultimately resulted in "the end of craving" ('Sama', 29) since "all passion for sex is pulled out" ('Abhaya's Mother', 27) along with the enlightening of the soul--"the mass of mental darkness is split open." ('Sela', 43). Geoffrey Samuel has rightly observed that "in practice there is a strong strain of thought that implies that ascetic celibacy is essentially a male business" (Samuel, 182-183). *Therigatha* successfully unmasks the essential flaw in this biased notion of womanhood by the firm declaration: "All existences are cut off, wants and aspirations too, / every tie untied, I have attained peace of mind" ('Nanduttara', 57). Muktabai has similarly pleaded for achieving a state of utter emptiness in order to be loaded with celestial bliss: "knowledge and madness are one. / That one is threaded through the universe, / Easily Vitthal sets it free. / The unexpressed, without form, is revealed in/ Vaikunth,/ Mukiai says, yet people seek wrong ways." (Vanita, 52). As a critique of unrestrained production of sensuality and pleasure that has become the mantra of this consumerized world, *Therigatha* with its counter-discourse of subsistence gives warning against the havoc of materialism through the images of violence and ruin, thereby, becoming the pioneer of what is called, a sustainable development: "The pleasures of the senses are like a slaughterhouse,/ they are like a snake's head, they burn like a torch,/ they give as much pleasure as a skeleton" ('The Great Chapter', 227). The nuns finally discover themselves as spiritually empowered, liberated women, enlightened by an elevated inwardness crossing the limits of worldly livelihood: "Self-controlled with the body, / with speech, and with the mind, / having pulled out the craving down to the root, / I have become cool, free." ('Uttara', 15). Similar celebration of experiencing of an eternal exaltation by the female mystic, by crossing the limitations of the body and blending the disembodied soul with the abiding nature, can be found in the *vakhs* of Lal Ded: "The soul, like the moon, / is now, and always new again. / And I have seen the ocean/ continuously creating. / Since I scoured my mind/ and my body, I too, Lalla, / am new, each moment new." (Naked Song. Translated by Coleman Barks).

Seen from a broader philosophical perspective, both Hinduism and Buddhism have occasionally depicted woman as an empowered equal of man. But, in practice, Hinduism as well as the early Buddhism around which *Therigatha* has been composed, exhibited major domination of the women by the biased patriarchal agencies. It is true that unlike some of the dictates of the Hindu *shatras* that consider women as incapable of attaining salvation, but only through the assistance of some male medium, Buddhism considers women as being independently capable of attaining nirvana. Yet, the initial objection in ordaining Prajapati Gotami



6 and accommodating her only after she had agreed to follow the 8 special impositions (*garudhammas*) 7 that can be found in *Bhikkhuni Vinaya* reveals the subjection of women despite Buddha's attempts of liberating most of the brahminical shackles. The social status of the women during Buddha's time, in reality, was that "They were helpmates at best and burdens at worst, but always they were viewed as being inferior, second class citizens" (Willis, 61). Sumedha clearly depicts this exclusion by her bewilderment: "The attainment of nibbana for that king's daughter/ was marvellous and unusual" ('The Great Chapter', 237). This leads to the important question: how could the women mystics assert their authority as the conveyers of divine message in a society which was essentially patriarchal and suspicious about the credibility of feminine utterances? The answer lies in the intersubjective quest of the bhikkhunis to gain realization through self-experience rather than merely chanting the subjective maxims of Buddha. Mysticism in Indic religious tradition is authenticated by "that attitude of mind which involves a direct, immediate, first-hand intuitive apprehension of God" (Ranade, xiii). The subjective, epiphanic illumination of divinity that "teaches a full-fledged morality in the individual, and a life of absolute good to the society" (Ranade, xl), attained through an unmediated mode of propinquity is the hallmark of a recognized Indian mystic. Accordingly, we find in one of the gathas that the composer begins as a follower who needs to be guided with a spiritual path but unlike the commoners she does not hymn about the path revealed to her; rather she risks to experience by treading on it and having experienced directly of "the place without death" she asserts the validity of Buddha's guidance: "what the Buddha taught is not useless" ('Sujata', 81). The indication of subjective experience by most of the nuns make their utterances convincingly divine. In a similar tone of comprehending the truth through self-experience, Lal Ded has exclaimed: "What the books taught me, I've practised. / What they didn't teach me, I've taught myself. / I've gone into the forest and wrestled with the lion. / I didn't get this far by teaching one thing and doing another." (*Vakh* 111, translated by Ranjit Hoskote). Many of the *Therigatha* verses have been delivered as monologues, which further reveal the mindscape of the conflicted self in search of progression, thereby, generating an additional sense of authenticity. "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 have achieved the end of craving", utters 'Sama' ('Sama', 29) in a mode of soliloquy while 'Another Sama' in her monologue has confessed of her similar personal struggle for liberation: "I was not aware of ever having had any peace of mind,/

even though it has been twenty-five years since I went forth./...Today is the seventh night since craving was destroyed for me." ('Another Sama', 31). The specification of time along with the exact account of the evolutionary elevation where the female monk depicts her trajectory of moving from a tentative awareness, "I am quite free, well-free from three crooked things" to an affirmed conviction, "I am freed from birth and death." ('Mutta', 11), furthermore enhance the authenticity of the gathas as contemplative expression of the mystics. Akka Mahadevi has given similar accounts of suffering in her quest to join the omnipresent: "O mother I burned/ in a flameless fire/ O mother I suffered/ a bloodless wound/ O Mother I tossed/ without a pleasure:/ loving my lord white as jasmine/ I wandered through unlikely worlds." (Vachana 69, Ramanujan, 121). The endurance of extreme austerity finds expression in the poem where the nun describes how "for seven days" she "sat in one position, legs crossed" ('Uttama', 33) in contemplation. The mysterious mode of salvation finds its best elucidation in the following sermon by Sakula: "I saw my experiences as if they were not my own, / born from a cause, destined to disappear. / I got rid of all..." ('Sakula', 61). The witness, who is crucial as an agent for providing testimony of the speaker's potency, has also been furnished in a poem where the son provides evidence of her mother's attaining of nibbana by practising "the path those rishis did": "Mother, it's clear to me/ that you know what you are talking about, / you are the one who gave me birth, / but I am the one who is sure/ that desire does not exist in you." ('Vadha's mother Spoken to her son', 107). Hence, the credibility of *Therigatha* as the divine revelation by the mystics has been ensured by illustrating the subjective conflict of the nuns in attaining unmediated grace, radically conveyed in a confessional feminine mode, along with the testimony of the witness to grant reverence and glory to the holy sisters: While endorsing 'Punna' as a divine visionary, the Brahman acknowledges, "you led me who was on the wrong path/ to the path of those who are noble" ('Punna', 125).

The metaphors of cleansing, e.g. "head shaved" ('Vimala', 51), "wash the feet" ('Visakha', 13) etc., do not necessarily denigrate the female body as low. Rather, as observes June MacDaniel 8, the perception of a sudden, unknown presence--"just fallen from a dark cloud" ('Sukka', 41)--or a new encounter through the physical body--"I experience stilling of my mind" ('The verses of a certain nun', 49)--reveal the feminine mystical sensuality of asserting the physical senses and, thereafter, manifest the germination of spiritual senses from the physical desiring of the divine, which ultimately "emphasize a continuity linking physical and spiritual dimensions" (MacDaniel, 14). Proving themselves as capable of

engaging with the Buddha, sangha and dhamma, the 'First Buddhist Women' "stands as a challenge to all Buddhists of all times who would prefer women to do less." (Gross, 54). The nuns in *Therigatha*, posing themselves to be as contemporary as the Christian feminist sisters of the 2015 documentary film 'Radical Grace' directed by Rebecca Parrish, have celebrated their womanhood as capable of attaining Buddhahood by treating their female body as the focus of an ambidextrous self and feminine space as inscribed surface of events 9, which, as sites of 'knowledge-power' provide resistance to the traditional taboos imposed upon women. By hymning of the possibility of a 'counter-strategic-reinscription' 10, inspired from the divine awakening of gyno-spirituality, these mystical articulations, with the assertion of the feminine self by their conscious, recurrent use of 'I' that foregrounds the female voice, narrate the possibility of an illuminated self-marking and self-representing of liberated womanhood as an alternative means of feminist transgressive potential, against the patriarchal codified modes of regulation. As an epitome of emancipated womanhood, *Therigatha* celebrates the exalted status achieved by the Buddhist bhikkhunis. From being mere followers they become enlightened teachers by the attainment of Buddhahood which provide them with the insight of performing the Buddha: "I heard her words, / instruction by the one who gave me birth", testifies the son, "and I felt a profound urgency to reach the state of freedom." ('Vaddha's Mother', 109). For the modern reader, there are two major feminist concerns related to the contemporary scenario about which one can take inspiration from these feminist teachers. First, their alternative ascetic-aesthetics of fashioning themselves in "rags as a robe" ('Sundari', 167), "shaved head" ('Chala', 95) on account of the realization that "Silver and gold don't lead/ to awakening and peace" ('Subha, the metalworker's daughter', 173), acts as a warning against the lavish image of a consumer-ascetic-femininity that the women magazines often try to sell and thereby "push women into the modes of consumption required to sustain New Age Capitalism" (Lau, 45). And finally, by portraying the solidarity of the sisterhood, despite the differences of class, caste and region, the *Therigatha* teaches us how to aspire for an harmonized world of togetherness like that of ordained women, "living together in mutual care and intimacy" with "sexual equality, in stark contrast to the social inequalities" (Hallisey, xxix) of the surrounding societal reality: "Those who have gone forth/ are from various families and from various regions/ and still they are friendly with each other--/ that is the reason why/ ascetics are so dear to me." ('Rohini', 147).

## Notes

1. By 'Buddhism' and 'Buddhist', reference has been made specifically to the perspectives related to the Theravada cult of the early Buddhist tradition.
2. Aristotle has defined 'Voice' in *De Anima* as "a sound made by something with a soul" (Eugene T. Gendlin, 11)
3. "[The voice] is like a bodily missile which separates itself from the body and spreads around, but on the other hand it points to a bodily interior, an intimate partition of the body which cannot be disclosed – as if the voice were the very principle of division into interior and exterior. The voice, by being so ephemeral, transient, incorporeal, ethereal, presents for that very reason the body at its quintessential, the hidden bodily treasure beyond the visible envelope, the interior "real" body, unique and intimate, and at the same time it seems to present more than the mere body – in many languages there is an etymological connection between spirit and breath ...[T]he voice carried by breath points to the soul irreducible to the body ....The voice is the flesh of the soul, its ineradicable materiality, by which the soul can never be rid of the body; it depends on this inner object which is but the ineffable trace of externality and heterogeneity, but by virtue of which the body can also never quite simply be the body, it is a truncated body, a body cloven by the impossible rift between an interior and an exterior. The voice embodies the very impossibility of this division and acts as its operator." (Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 70-71).
4. According to Charles Hallisey, this refers to the "constituent factors of enlightenment". (*Therigatha*, 252)
5. The three things or 'Tevijja' which include the capacity of knowing about one's former births, the capacity to know why and where others need to reborn, and the capacity to realize one's own moral flaws signify that one has attained enlightenment due to which there will be no further rebirth. By asserting that these Buddhist nuns have accomplished the knowledge of the three things, they seem to have invalidated the Brahminical/Vedic preconception which holds that women are incapable of attaining 'trayi vidya'.
6. In Kathryn Blackstone's words, "Despite the Buddha's initial rejection of her request, Mahaprajapati, and her followers shave, don the yellow robes and follow the Buddha and his sangha. In defying the Buddha, Mahaprajapati, overturns the hierarchical scheme maintained throughout the Vinaya. She poses a direct challenge to the Buddha's authority." For details see Kathryn R. Blackstone (1998).
7. The 8 *garudhammas* which are clearly patriarchal in the authoritarian prescriptive tone, are as follows: 1. Even a nun, ordained for hundred years, must salute to and bow down before a monk who is just initiated. 2. A nun must not stay in a residence during the rains, where there is no monk. 3. Every fortnight a nun should ask the monks about the date of *Uposatha* and that of day monks' address (*Ovada*) to nuns. 4. A nun has to perform *Pavarana* in the Bhikkhu Sangha first and thereafter in the Bhikkhuni Sangha. 5. A nun who has transgressed an important rule

- should undergo *manatta* discipline before both the Orders for half a month. 6. A nun trained in six *Pachittiya* rule of Bhikkhuni *Patimokkha* should seek *Upasampada* from both the Sanghas. 7. Under no circumstances a nun can abuse a Bhikkhu. 8. A nun can never admonish a monk, though the opposite is permissible. See H. Oldenburg, p 326.
8. "For those mystical traditions that emphasize a continuity linking physical and spiritual dimensions of the person, we tend to see a single sense, or a focus on the presence or encounter with a divine source." (Introduction to *Desiring the Divine Through the Human Body*, "Spiritual Body, Spiritual Senses, Past and Present", 14)
  9. Michel Foucault has observed that, "The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity) and a volume of disintegration" ('Nietzsche, genealogy, history', 148).
  10. Commenting on body as a site of cultural dynamics of power, Elizabeth Grosz has stated: "If the body is the strategic target of systems of codification, supervision and constraint, it is also because the body and its energies and capacities exert an uncontrollable, unpredictable threat to a regular, systematic mode of social organisation. As well as being the site of knowledge-power, the body is thus a site of resistance, for it exerts recalcitrance, and always entails the possibility of a counter-strategic reinscription, for it is capable of being self-marked, self-represented in alternative ways" (*Feminine/Masculine and Representation*, 204).

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