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## *Portraits of Buddhist Women*

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# A Review of *Portraits of Buddhist Women*

Justin McDaniel

*Portraits of Buddhist Women*. Ranjini Obeyesekere. Albany: SUNY Press, 2001. ISBN: 0791451127.90.

Ranjini Obeyesekere's *Portraits of Buddhist Women* is not about women or feminist theory. In fact, this work, the second installment in her ongoing project to translate the entire Sri Lankan *Saddharmaratnāvaliya* (*Jewels of the Doctrine*), is important for the very fact that it defies efforts to categorize the role of women in Buddhist social ethics, soteriology, ecclesia, exegetical practice, and asceticism. Obeyesekere writes in her well-crafted introduction that the stories she chose and translated "are not about women, their social roles, or issues of gender. They are about larger ethical and moral issues. The women are merely characters in the stories" (p. 3). Obeyesekere's first series of translations from this large Sinhala collection, published under the title *Jewels of the Doctrine: Stories of the Saddharma Ratnāvaliya*, exposed the importance of the vernacular narratives in creating discursive fields of ethics. These stories, because they dramatize the panoply of difficult ethical choices inherent in everyday life, assist the readers/audience in observing, identifying with, and vicariously co-mingling with the personages of the Buddhist past as well as participating in the same ethical struggles. In this second series of translations she chose fifteen stories in which women are prominently figured, but neither condescendingly vilified nor particularly edified. In this way, the dynamic lives of Buddhist women are seen as intricately part of Buddhist life in general. Therefore, the greatest strength of Obeyesekere-

kere's introduction to and translation of these narratives may be also its greatest weakness: even though her translation allows the reader to witness the multiple roles of women in Buddhist society, these fifteen stories were never circulated, in Sri Lanka or elsewhere, as a separate anthology either by women or for women. Although she tried to choose stories that illuminated the lives of Buddhist women, she asserts that a "complete or rounded portrait of what it meant to be a 'Buddhist Woman'" is not to be gleaned from her translation (p. 20).

The *Saddharmaratnāvaliya* is a thirteenth-century Sinhala collection of 360 stories drawn from the fifth-century Pali *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*. Obeyesekere notes that the thirteenth-century work was not merely a close literal translation of the Pali *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*; instead, it was an anthology of stories drawn from the Pali collection which expanded certain stories, reduced or ignored others, and emphasized particular themes and characters according to the contemporary needs of the thirteenth-century author, Dharmasena, and his audience. Just as Bakhtin saw the novel as struggling between the controlling force of the plot and the fluctuating desires of the author, the differences between the fifth-century Pali source and the thirteenth-century Sinhala translation reflect a tension between the centripetal forces of the source text and the centrifugal forces of the changing needs of the teacher/writer over time. The Pali source text guides and controls the order, progression, terminology and subject matter of the stories, but Dharmasena adapted/manipulated these source stories to be more palpable to his audience, more in step with the ethical norms of his society, or more supportive of his particular polemic. For example, perhaps inspired by Chatsumarn Kabilsingh's study of the history of the Buddhist attitude towards courtesanship/prostitution, Obeyesekere notes that by observing the changes in the same stories from the *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* and the *Saddharmaratnāvaliya*, the attentive reader and philologist can detect the shift in attitudes towards this profession in South Asia in this 800

year period (pp. 15-17). Furthermore, when comparing the Pali and Sinhala version of the story of Māgandi (a beautiful young woman offered by her father to the Buddha in marriage), one can perceive a rise in misogynistic attitudes which represents "a significant shift from the original doctrinal position" (p. 13). In the Pali version the Buddha rejects Māgandi's hand in marriage and emphasizes the Buddhist teaching of *anicca* (impermanence). However, in the Sinhala, we read a Śāntideva-like castigation of the female body of Māgandi, in which she is compared to a "container with its nine orifices filled with feces and urine" on which the Buddha "would be disgusted even to wipe... [his] feet" (pp. 12-13).

The continuities seen between these stories are as significant as the changes. For example, both the fifth and thirteenth-century versions generally depict women as educated -- often as outwitting their male interlocutors. For example, Māgandi's mother knows the Vedic science of omens better than her husband and "the female ascetic Kuṇḍalakeśī studies the thousand discourses and becomes so expert that she travels all over the land and none can defeat her in debate [sic]" (p. 12). Obeyesekere even places herself in this lineage of translators/interpreters/teachers by pointing out that she has participated in this adaptation. She admits: "my decision to select and translate these particular stories reflect both my own, and current feminist interests. Such selectivity must necessarily produce its own distortions, often unwittingly, sometimes consciously, as in the case of the parenthetical comments and additional sermons of the author of the SR [*Saddharmaratnāvaliya*]" (p. 20).

Like the work of Natalie Gummer, Lewis Lancaster and Jan Nattier that trace the interpolations of Buddhist translators over time in Tibet and East Asia, Obeyesekere's work is as important to the social and intellectual historian as it is to the philologist. However, her work is of little

value to those interested in the growing field of Buddhist pedagogy. She gives no description of how these stories, particularly the stories which figure women, are taught, preserved, anthologized, sermonized, or expanded upon by teachers, readers and students in aural/oral homiletic or classroom settings in contemporary Sri Lanka or how they may have been in the thirteenth century. Were their *sannayas* based on these stories? Were stories of women depicted on temple murals or are they featured as examples in monastic textbooks or sermons? What was and is their pedagogical context? Furthermore, we learn little about how these stories were and are used in contemporary feminist debate or Buddhist ethical discussions in Sri Lanka or the Theravada world in general. One wonders if the selection and interpretation of these particular stories would be only relevant to Buddhist studies and modern feminist scholars. Many scholars have mined Buddhist texts or observed the lives of women in Buddhist societies in order to place the experiences of Buddhist women under general rubrics. The works of Diana Paul, Peter Harvey, A. Thomas Kirsch and Alan Sponberg, which are comprehensive, well-researched and grounded with texts and field work, are good examples of this approach. However, Obeyesekere, like Sid Brown's *Journey of One Buddhist Nun*, is attempting something different. She is letting these stories stand on their own as coherent dramas that depict the dynamic lives of Buddhist women and men exploring difficult ethical questions. She avoids reductive categories. However, while Obeyesekere emphasizes that her efforts are to maintain the integrity and the cacophony of the voices in these stories, without a description of the role these stories play pedagogically and their relevance to ethical, political and social conversations between Buddhist women (as well as between men and women) in Sri Lanka, there is a danger that these stories will be (mis)used subsequently by scholars as evidence in Buddhist apologetics or feminist polemics. Just as the bodies of women are often isolated and dissected by pornographers and advertisers, there is a danger that without a greater attention to pedagogy and context these stories could be

divided and passages haphazardly cited by scholars unaware of the social dynamism that these women constituted. As much as Obeyesekere warns against this, she may unwillingly be playing a role in the glorification of or condescension towards Buddhist women.

Despite these overly dramatic cautions and overly bold suggestions, especially since Obeyesekere offers a brief commentary on the role of narrative in Buddhist education in Sri Lanka in *Jewels of the Doctrine*, this book is highly recommended for advanced courses in Buddhist ethics, history and doctrine or for readers interested in learning more about the diverse lives of Buddhist women. The translation is clear and the stories flow together well. She provides a good introduction to the *Udēnī Cycle* [sic], but the reader should not rest after this lengthy story. They certainly should pay attention to shorter stories near the end of the collection, like the *Three Daughters of Māra* and *Soreyya*. The former demonstrates the diverse and over-lapping roles of women — caring mother, dutiful daughter, erotic lover, beautiful temptress, savvy family leader. The latter depicts a man who has a spontaneous sex change (a good counter-example to the famous story of the female-male sex change in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka/Lotus Sūtra*). Besides these thought-provoking episodes and scenes, Obeyesekere rightly points out the importance of paying attention to the way translators creatively engage with their source texts in order to subtly comment on present concerns. Her work also emphasizes the need for more research and translation of vernacular texts, even when they supposedly are translations or commentaries on classical works. Despite some editing concerns — the missing quotation mark on page 181, the two different spellings of Dharmasena on page two, and no explanatory note for the reason she chose to use the Sinhala phonetic spelling of words like *Dhammapada-attakata*, instead of the more common Pali title *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* (occasionally: *Dhammapada-atthakathā*) — Obeyesekere's latest work is a welcome addition to the growing availability of post-canonical vernacular Therava-

da Buddhist literature by scholars such as Anne Hansen, Louis Gabaude, Boosāenggām Wongtālā, Peter Skilling, Suchitra Chongstitavana, Anne Blackburn, Francois LaGirarde, Lamūn Canhoom, Charles Hallisey, and Michel Lorrillard.