
Re-viewing Jātakas: Adultery, Punishments and Gender

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***Abstract:** Buddhism attaches a great significance towards the notion of morality. Adultery thus was seen as a serious transgression and sin, the fallout of which not only harms oneself but everyone around. Despite this, the instances of adultery are extensive in the early Buddhist texts like the Jātakas or the birth stories of Buddha. The text speaks largely regarding the infidelity of women. Here, it is interesting to see how Gender defines the nature of characters. Women have been recurrently represented as adulterous, wicked and seductive causing trouble to men and letting them astray of the right path. In majority of the cases the initiative for such relations are taken mainly by the married women. Also, gender had its role to play even in the degree and intensity of punishments given to men and women for the same crime like Adultery. The paper thus attempts to review the representation and notion of adultery and Gender in the text. Even in today's society the idea of women being frail to urges and desires are still prevalent. This work aspires to trace the roots of such ideas and bring into light how they have been weaved into and preserved since very ancient times.*

Keywords: Adultery, Gender, Jātakas, Literature, Punishment, Stereotype, Women

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Introduction

The concept of 'Adultery' in Indian society has been there since ages, there are references to this even in the earliest literatures of India. Jātaka stories are rampant with such examples of

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adultery. The text frequently represents women as being adulterous and wicked and how they affect the lives of the males that are related to her. It has been observed “A number of the Jātaka stories have been woven around the unsatisfied sexual desire of the Queens who have been presented as adulterous women perennially hungry of extra-marital liaison”¹. Because the “Buddhist Indian texts generally believe that a women’s sexual drive is stronger than a man’s”². It is in this context, we see the association or interlinking of a particular gender that are more susceptible to commit adultery. For a clear understanding of how these notion played its role in validating their character; the discussion is divided into two section as follows:

Adultery in the Royal Household

It has been said that, “...question of adultery and its implications are brought into sharper focus in the context of royalty...”³. The most glaring evidence of adultery can be seen in the story of *Cullapaduma Jātaka*⁴, where a dutiful husband aids a handicapped dacoit and in response his wife begins an illicit relation with the dacoit. A proper study of story gives a serious impression where a wife becomes a source of trouble with no wit, attracted by anonymous person. Also, the story doesn’t even care to mention why the princess was attracted to a robber that too who was devoid of his limbs. Instead, it seems to be concentrated more in prescribing the faulty character of women and building the noble attributes of men.

In *Bandhanamokkha Jātaka* a wicked Queen seeks sole devotion from her husband but she makes love with the sixty-four messengers that the King sent. The nature of women’s folk has been explained as: “The passions of women are insatiate and she does but act according to her inborn nature”⁵. Similarly in *Parantapa Jātaka*⁶, the King on account of being attacked by the enemy flee from his Kingdom with the Queen, main priest and his servant Parantapa. The Queen develops a love relationship with the servant. To escape from King’s rage on being caught the Queen conspires with the servant and kills him. The text shows how deceitful a woman can be towards her husband that she can do anything to cover

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up her sin without fearing for the consequences. *Padakusalamāṇava Jātaka*⁷, also gives us an instance where the Queen consort of Brhamadatta after committing sin was questioned. She refuses to accept her wrong doings and instead takes an oath that - if she has done anything of that sort she would be turned into a Yakkha with horse face. After her death, she became so. Yet after becoming a Yakkha, she still captures a Brahmin and makes him her husband. The story tends to show how the desire of woman for a man cannot be satisfied and to the extent a women can go to fulfil her desires.

The text recurrently talks about women as someone who cannot be kept safe by her husband; as she will always finds a way to deceive him and fall in the arms of her paramour at any given chance. In this context, we can see *Samugga Jātaka*⁸, where a demon falls in love with a noble woman of Kāsi. He carries her off to his cave and makes her his wife. To keep her safe he would swallow her. Still, he fails to keep her protected, she commits sin with the son of Vāyu. Also similar theme appears in the *Andabhuta Jātaka*⁹, here a pregnant lady is brought, and she then gives birth to a daughter. The girl then is kept by Chaplain under confinement in the highest tower with several women guards in order to ensure that the girl won't see any men but the Chaplain himself. Eventually, it is interesting to note how the girl defies all the security apparatus and develops a relationship with another man. She cannot remain loyal to the Chaplain. Thus the stories show that women are so passionate that no guard is able to keep them right. Also *Ghata Jātaka*¹⁰ runs on the parallel theme, here the King Mahakaṃsa of Uttarāpatha had two sons and one daughter named Devagabbhā. On her birth the fortune teller says the sons born from her womb will lead to the decline of their power and lineage. The King could not kill her as he loved her very much. When the King died her brothers built a tall tower and kept her there so that she won't be able to marry. And was under the constant surveillance. But as the story progresses, she falls in love with Upasāgarā who was the companion of one of her siblings. Thus she intrigues with him and conceives a baby. On being known about the matter the two brothers gave her as a wife to Upasāgarā on the condition that they will spare the baby if it was a daughter. The condition was reversed making her mother of ten sons. She fulfils the prophecy in a very intriguing way. It is a different story of how she saves all of them, what needs to be paid attention is

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how the girl inspite of being locked in the tower was able to develop a relationship with the man. These confinement of women are instances where her procreative right was denied by the male members by imposing on her coercive confinement. An interesting instance of how women cannot be watched over can be found in *Mudupāni Jataka*; here the King decides to keep her daughter in check so that he could marry her to some other Prince. One day she decided to elope with the lover and tricked the King that she wanted to bathe. While she was bathing cunningly she replaced her hand with one of the page boy's and eloped with her lover without the knowledge of the king inspite of the fact that he was holding her hand. The King in rage exclaimed "Can anyone guard a woman. Thus women it is impossible to guard"¹¹. Women, therefore, earned the title of trickster who are weak at heart and vulnerable to temptation. *Pabbatūpathana Jātaka*¹² throws light on how helpless a man can be when he has a wife who shows no consideration for his love. In the story, the King had to turn a blind eye on the intrigues of his Queen with his minister because of the fact that she was really dear to him and the minister was useful. Here it can be understood how King has been shown as an ideal ruler that forgave both of them. It must here be noted that he did not take any recourse of their actions as the minister was regarded useful to him. One can get sense of the hidden political motives of the King to keep his ministers in support of him given the fact that he was an ideal King. *Jātaka* stories are flooded with such instances of intrigues and vices especially among the royals. In words of Benoychandra Sen "the royal household is frequently a den of vices, corruption and intrigues, which not only disturbed the peace of mind of Kings...sometimes caused political turmoil and unrest..."¹³

The vivid picture regarding the intrigues of the royal women can be found in the *Kuṇāla Jātaka*¹⁴; here Princess Kaṇhā in her swayamvara expresses the view to marry all the five sons of the King Pāṇḍu. The King gave his daughter to five of them. Now, she has a hump-backed attendant. Kaṇhā by her passion won the hearts of all the five, but as soon as they went out she sinned with the hump-backed. She cunningly tricked all of them. To the hump-backed she would say "I will slay these Princes and have your feet smeared in the blood from their throats" when she was with the eldest she said "You are dearer to me than those of the four..." In the company of other she would say the same to each one of them.

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Finally, in the end, she was exposed. The five brothers then went to the Himalayas and renounced the princely life. This again shows her carnal desire cannot be satiated. On the contrary the five princess whose heart remains pure and follows virtue, seeing her such action and generalizing the women's character with that their wife's tries to find happiness not in marital but in *sanyās*.

Stereotyping of women as adulterous and full of vices has been also extended to the character of a mother. Altekar holds a high view regarding apotheosis of motherhood in ancient India¹⁵. However this apotheosis does not mean that they had a high perception of women as mothers. They were treated as a medium to procreate the child for their husbands. The *Jātaka* text attached the adulterous and vile nature to mothers irrespective of their age. A glaring instance of this is shown in the story of *Astamanta Jātaka*¹⁶— where the mother falling in love with her son's disciple decides and attempts to kill her own son. In *Māhapaduma Jātaka*¹⁷, the Queen consort falls in love with her step son who was the Bodhisatta and in the absence of her husband (King) she tries to seduce the prince. On the refusal from him, the Queen plans a conspiracy against the prince and to have him beheaded. It was with great difficulty he was able to prove his innocence. *Susīma Jataka*¹ runs on the same line- the Queen consort falls in love with Bodhisatta, the friend of her son. They both had grown up together and yet when they came of age the Queen on seeing the Bodhisatta says “If I cannot win him, I shall die”. This reflects how women's will not abstain from desiring what is out of place.

Adultery in the Common Household

The illustration of women as adulterous is not confined only among the royals but is widespread among the common women as well. The *Radha Jātaka*¹⁸ records the story of a wife of a Brahmin, who in absence of her husband commits sin with endless number of men. The text throws an insight into how female sexuality was dangerous to men and can cause distress to them if they were guided by passion for women¹⁹. It has been said “Passion makes them completely blind. No woman is ever faithful to one man alone... Jātakas leave no stone

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untuned to prove this”²⁰. The *Gahapati Jātaka* talks in the same direction, the story revolves around a wicked wife who intrigues with the Village headman and deceives her husband. It says “Woman can never be kept right, somehow or other they will sin and trick their husbands”²¹. *Ucchiṭṭha-Bhatta Jātaka*²² gives a story where a wife used to call her paramour when her husband was out for work. *Kosiya Jātaka*²³ tells us about a wicked wife who spends her nights in gadding about, and during the day faked illness. She did not work while her husband slaved the entire day with her demands of luxuries. No sooner the back of her husband was turned, she fell in the arms of her paramours. *Sattubhastha Jātaka*²⁴ talks about a Brahman who gives his daughter to an old Brahman when he cannot return his thousand gold pieces. The young girl was not satisfied with the old husband and sinned with another Brahman. Now here, it is told that there are sixteen things that are never satisfied. Among them one is said to be that ‘women are never satisfied with three things- intercourse, adornment and child bearing’. Here father fulfill his virtue not just marrying her to creditor but ensuring her good life. But her carnal desire overwhelms her and clouds her judgement that unable her to distinguish between unnecessary pleasure as happiness or being virtuous is happiness.

*Takkāriya Jātaka*²⁵ holds the story of a Chaplain whose wife has another man as her paramour. The Chaplain decides to have the man killed. But his wife being aware of it succeeds to flee him away. The treachery of a woman towards her husband is also confirmed in the story²⁶ where a girl is married to one of the most proficient archer. On the way to Benares they encounter fifty robbers, the husband killed forty nine but as he was out of arrow the chief of the robbers was left, thus he asked his wife to pass the sword. The wife falling in love with the chief gave the hilt of the sword to the robber and sheath to her husband, the robber then killed the man. However, it is a different story that the robber fearing her wickedness tricked her and fled with all her jewelry. Again the notion of karma and fate revolved. Her such vice ultimately gave her misery and sorrow as her desire remained unfulfilled.

However, the need for the representation of women as adulterous and the troubles associated with them can be understood in this way, Buddhism is a religion that focuses

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mostly on achieving salvation; for which renouncing the worldly life and following asceticism was fundamental. So the reason for the theme of adultery getting more attention in the text might be because of the fact that, sexuality of women has been always considered as a disruptive and serious problem that pose obstacle in the way of attaining salvation. Thus these stories have a propensity of being critical towards such things which hinder the approach towards living a good and happy life. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that women has been stereotyped and perceived as such because the society then was dominated by the conventional patriarchal outlook. The text bears an attitude of antipathy towards woman kind. They have been presented as black snakes, traitors, seducing traitresses and so on.

Gender Identity , Bias and Punishments

Accepting the fact that Jātakas are stories concerning ethics, morals, values, and behavior one must remember that along with these, Justice forms a central aspect to Buddhism. The idea of justice in Jataka has been taken to be interlinked with five Virtues or Pañcasīla which include restrain from taking life, taking what is not given, misconduct, lying and consuming intoxicants.²⁷ In Jātakas justice has been taken in two level one as a way of maintaining relation between the rulers and ruled on the other hand amongst the ruled²⁸. The notion of justice is not an imperative element only in the Buddhist texts but also in the Brahmanical texts. Both these texts seems to work with a consideration that the “administration of Justice is typical attribute or even prerequisite for kingship”²⁹. It is for this reason the notion of ‘just king’ is centralized in this text. However, it can be witnessed that though the King is said to be the righteous and just ruler; differentiations are made between the good and the evil one. For instance, there are references to wicked king suffering the grave consequences of their wrong doings. There are varied treatment a wicked King would receive, he could be executed and the other person put in his place³⁰. In *Cetiya Jataka*³¹, a King who commits the sin of lying is said to have sank under the earth to Hell. There are references to evil King being punished by his own subjects. The King was thus required to have the ability and insight in

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imparting justice. It has been seen that a King was looked upon as a authority to guard against the adultery, in this context and interesting story is presented in Gāmaṇi-Caṇḍa Jātaka³², here a women is not happy with her husband and his family as she has another lover. She used to say that she was going to her father's house but on the way she spends time with her lover and again when coming back from her paternal house she stays with him for few days. Thus this woman says to Caṇḍa who was being taken to the king that she could not stay with her husband and desires to leave him. The king on knowing this says "Go tell her there are Kings in the land; say, she must dwell with her husband, and if she will not, let her have a care, the King will cause her to be seized, and shall die.

On the light of this it becomes important to analyze and draw a parameter of the punishment that was approved for the men and women guilty of adultery. It is of no doubt that adultery was in those days a heinous crime and a punishable offence. Hence, what is of interest here is to see how gender identities had a major role to play in the severity of punishment given for such sin. An idea of gender bias or disparities can be gained when relating to the concepts of justice and punishments. It is attested by a story³³, where the wife fearing about her evil deed when asked by her husband lies and deceives him. It is noteworthy that the gender bias when it comes to justice and chastisement. We can see a sharp contrast in the treatment of an adulterous Kings and Queens. The Queen indicted of adultery in the end of the story and at the intervention of Bodhisatta is usually humiliated and pardoned. She is not subjected to other form of punishments, this can be related to the fact that it was considered as 'women's inborn nature'. This can be seen in every story like the Queen making love with number of messengers is also pardoned at the end. Also in the previously mentioned story of Parantapa, it is interesting to see that the Queen is humiliated to have her husband killed in the company of her paramour but nothing much was done to punish her rather she was taken to Kingdom by the prince, in contrast to this the paramour who just followed or executed her plan was killed by the Prince. Similar is the story of the other *Jātakas*. Rare are the instances where the Queen was severely punished for adultery.

In the case of *Cullapaduma Jātaka*, the Queen who eloped with the handicapped paramour was ordered to be put to death by cutting her nose, ears individually but however

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she was not killed. Also in the above mentioned kuṇāla story, the wife indulged in affair with hump-backed who already had five husbands. But when she was exposed there is no description of her being punished rather her five husband being depressed over the deed of their wife renounced the world and went to the Himalayas. On the other hand, when we looked and compare it in case of the Kings, the penalty ascribed for them appears to be more severe and strict as compared to that of Queen. These divergences between the two can be analyzed and understood from the point that the *Jātaka* stories portray the King as righteous and just, who in this sense was responsible for the prevention of adultery. On the other level the Queen has been taken as a disruptive who threatens the social and political norms.³⁴

Talking about the King indulging in such cases, we tend to find few references where the King falls in love with the beauty of woman or wife of another man. The infatuation of king towards the wife of another and later realization of his doings and then change of heart forms the theme when it comes to the King being adulterous. As it has been seen that “the king who refrain from the taking another wife and overcomes his infatuation is considered as exemplary”³⁵. The first recourse the King would take was finding out whether the girl is married or not. This can be seen in *Ummandanti*³⁶ story, the King is enamored by the beauty of the wife of his commander-in-chief, where the latter knowing this makes the King to give up his infatuation for her.

Also the King sometimes gets attracted to the wife who had turned into ascetics. The *Cullabodhi Jātaka*³⁷ tends to show the same theme – Bodhisatta and his wife after the death of his parents renounced the world. One day they happen to come to the royal park and were sitting there. The King falls in love with the beauty of the wife of Bodhisatta. Now the King abducted the wife and brought her to the palace to marry her. Finally on hearing the discourses of the Bodhisatta, he realized his folly and let the women return to her ascetic life. Such cases would not lead to any kind of punishments for the King as well. But in case where the King does not realizes and acts evil punishments were often severe. The brilliant illustration of this is found in *Manicora*³⁸ story, the King tries to snatch the wife of Bodhisatta, Sakka on seeing the dismounted the King from the elephant he was riding and put

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down his head in the place of execution and had him beheaded. Sakka then installed the Bodhisatta to the throne.

In case of ascetics developing an illicit relationship with the women, especially the Queens as in *Samakappa*³⁹ and *Hārīta Jātaka*⁴⁰ it is remarkable to note that in such state of affairs no one is punished. The ascetic in the end realizes his folly and retreats to the Himalayas. The cause for this difference in the punishment of the ascetic who has violated the moral ethics according to Kumkum Roy has been seen as “a means of attaining higher state of realization”⁴¹. Even in case of rape we do not find any punishment prescribed for the hermits.

However, coming to the common householder there is similarity in the penalty the adulterous person had to accept. These include beating up of wife and her lover as in case of *Gahapati Jātaka*, where the man seized the headman who intrigued with his wife and dragged him to the courtyard and beat him till he fainted. Also he held his wife by her hair and threatened her “If you ever do this kind of thing again, I’ll make you remember it”⁴². Also he demanded the damages from the headman “Damages, please, for injury done to the chattels under another man’s watch and ward”. It is said that the wife from that day did not dare to transgress even in thought. In *Ucchiṭṭha Jātaka*, the man dragged the lover of his wife out of the store room and had both him and the wife beaten up and rebuked. He taught them a lesson not to repeat this mistake again.

Sometimes the decision to punish the adulterous wife was handed over to the husband himself as in *Sattubhastā* story. The Bodhisatta as a judge with a clever device helps a Brahman to identify the lover of his wife. However, at the end when the lover was exposed, the Brahman was asked if he wanted to keep his wife or leave him where the former replied in affirmative. Thus the wife was given to him and the lover punished. In another story on knowing the wife is having relationship with other man, the Bodhisatta advised the husband to assert his control over her. He devised a plan to give her pickled cow dung to eat to get rid of her illness and robe or a stick in case if she denies or to honestly work for her food. She on being terrified repent and became good. Often it can be seen that the adulterous wife is scolded and humiliated but pardoned. As it is no doubt that women were regarded as a

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property of her husband, in some instances the husband were asked that if he wanted to leave the wife or else he will forgive and live with her. In one story⁴³ a pupil finding his wife unfaithful tells his master who was Bodhisatta. The latter says that women are common to all and cannot be regarded as a private property. When she heard that the master knows about her doings, she stopped doing such deeds. It is only in the story of *Takka Jātaka*⁴⁴ that it is mentioned the robber on finding the truth regarding the treachery of the woman towards the Bodhisatta 'clove the woman in twain'. But usually when it comes to punishments for women for committing adultery, humiliating her in front of everyone was taken to be the measure for her doings. However in the text, with regard to men we see theft and adultery was considered as one of the most heinous crimes that would lead to the severe punishments like cutting of limbs and sometimes the man was also awarded the death sentence.

Although even if no severe punishments were prescribed for women, but the text shows a tendency of prescribing men to stay away from them as an insubstantial sex towards urges. This required them to be controlled by the stronger sex which was palpable to be the males. Thus it becomes clear of how women's sexuality and body came to be under the control of men. However, there are various ways by which they tried to restrict the movement of women be it building a huge storied buildings⁴⁵, beating and threatening⁴⁶ humiliating etc.

Conclusion

It is interesting to note in every story the person to start an illicit relationship is mainly women. This can be seen on the light of the stereotyped notion that being deceitful and evil was the 'inborn nature' of women which cannot be taken out of her. The story often represents prejudice against women and the misogyny has been a dominant feature of the stories. They have been shown as weak and frail to urges and sexual drives. It can here be agreed to the view advocated by Vijay Laxmi Singh that "Women were believed to be the recipient of a portion of Brahmanic God Indra's excess energy or sexuality, Buddhist literature frequently incorporated this belief in some of the misogynist literature"⁴⁷.

These representations of women in the text can be perceived as an indication towards the attempts made by the patriarchal society to confine women within the so called concept or category of an 'Ideal women' those being obedient meek to their lords. Also it must be

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remembered that even in that condition of subordination, the procreative power was the power that women still had. It was something that men had to depend upon the women⁴⁸. Also, the need to control and punish women has been seen in the context of the emergence of private property.⁴⁹ The surfacing of private property meant the transmission of property from father to son. Thus the restrictions were necessary in order to guarantee wife's chastity for legitimate succession of the wealth. Thus, one can understand the projection of women's sexuality as dangerous and the fear attached to it.

It was the recognition of this fact that effective attempts were made to guard and control women's sexuality by amplifying it as being horribly dangerous. Again, the need to be in command of women's sexuality by the paternal power became essential in the new era of urbanism which led to the emergence of different social classes. This would ensure the new political and social planning which was again completely dominated by male.⁵⁰ Also moving little beyond the resentment of women as depicted in the text, the main cause for this disapproval against them can be identified within the teaching of Buddha himself. His main teaching can be seen as "...the end of all suffering can only be reached by overcoming the illusion of the self and the illusion of the material work".⁵¹ Now women or female body has been taken as one of the things that tempt men and lead them astray causing obstruction in the way of salvation.

It has been appropriately said "Early Buddhist Literature reflects an understanding of the female body as being more closely related to material world and the cycle of reincarnation, due to its biological qualities".⁵² Thus we find certain resentment towards the so called female body and sexuality is said to have traces of its roots even in the 'cosmogonic myths' that was innate in the older cultural tradition of India.⁵³ Therefore, it would not be inappropriate to say that it was these notions and perception towards women's nature and sexuality of causing hindrance that could not be simply wiped away from the minds of people. It is against this background that women have been frequently labeled as insatiable and adulterous suggesting men to keep away with this frail sex who cause destruction. But these depiction of female character cannot be taken literally as they represent rather a stereotyped idea that ignored the bright side of one's nature and only highlighted its dark

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side. It however is a common belief that these stereotypes to some extent holds some amount of truth in it but such argument is hard to entertain as these gender stereotypes are dynamic and everchanging. It has been said that “ If gender is a social construction... then gender stereotypes are social constructions too”⁵⁴. Moreover, understanding the depiction of women being adulterous as stereotyped and prejudiced doesnot mean that these kinds of activities did not existed in the then society. But if these notions of female characters are literally to be taken as true then it becomes doubtful also in the character of male, which finds no mention in the stories. As it is not possible for women alone to indulge in such activity alone. But the stories are more focused in painting dark the attributes of a female character while totally remaining silent on the part of the other.

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- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, No. 65, p.156.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, No. 63, pp. 155-158
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol.II, No. 62, 151-155; Vol. IV, No. 454, pp.50-58.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, No. 212, 117; Vol. I, No. 199, pp.94-95.
- ⁴⁷ Singh, Vijay Laxmi, *op.cit.*, p.50.
- ⁴⁸ Uma Chakravarti, *Everyday Lives Everyday Histories: Beyond the King and Brahmanas of 'Ancient India'*, New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2006, pp.146.
- ⁴⁹ Uma Chakravarti, The Rise of Buddhism as Experienced by Women, *Manushi*, 1981, p.6.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 147.
- ⁵¹ Céline Grühagen, The Female Body in Early Buddhist Literature, *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis*, Vol. 23, Jan, 2011, p. 102.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, p.107.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.
- ⁵⁴ Lips, Hilary. M., *Gender: The Basics*. Oxon: Routledge, 2014, p.27.