

Concept of Beauty of Early Indian Buddhist Monastic Women in Therīgāthā

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Abstract: In Therīgāthā the concept of beauty means not only the physical beauty but it throws light on the inner most beauty of therīs. Therīs like Sundāri Nānda is so named because of her beauty, Uppalavaṇṇā for her lotus like complexion, so her fame spread throughout Jambudīpa; Cāpā for her slim graceful figure like a bow and fair complexion was usually admired by the people. It is said that Khemā, the queen of Bimbisārā, had a golden complexion. During the Buddhist era, beauty was revered, admired and elevated. Though Therīgāthā mainly consists of monastic life, but they do not conceal a taste for artistic appreciation of therīs. Artistic instinct and appreciation of beauty was possessed in therīgāthā. Appreciation of beauty is found in the Buddhist sculptures and paintings. The general concept of woman's beauty lies in five things, namely: hair, complexion, bone, youth and skin. It is said that Āmbāpālī used to allow her hair to fall its full length and then place on it a golden comb cum pin. Therīgāthā, the Pāli text gives the idea about the spiritual achievements of women from princess to general. The paper would discuss the therīs sufferings and hindrances in their personal and social life. But they overcome all these obstacles to achieve the ultimate goal through their inner beauty which will help modern people.

Key words: Āmbāpālī, Inner beauty, Monastic life, Pāli, Therīgāthā, Therīs etc.

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Introduction

In Buddhism the most comprehensive explanations is available in to express beauty. Advent of Buddhism accentuated paradigm shifts, as well as transformations in the field of art, aesthetic, culture, and ethos. It helped development of cultures around the world, influenced

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the ethnic virtues and stimulated the passion for embracing new ideas. Over time, Buddhism became a universal religion, driving the emergence of Buddhist art, aesthetics, and iconography. Buddhist literatures contain within them textuality, intertextuality, and extratextuality, which permeate the cultures of the world and people with aesthetic significance. In Buddhism many contemporary writers also emphasize the importance of “Inner Beauty”. According to Bhikkhu Bodhi¹ he never uses the word beauty as physical beauty rather he refers the word ‘beauty’ inner beauty or the beauty of mind. Buddhism recognizes that all beings are part of a whole and the whole is beautiful. The Buddha taught that finding joy in beauty around us without attachment is more significant. In the *Therīgāthā*² there are many *bhikkhunīs*³ who expounded fruitlessness of physical beauty and showed the path to attain real sense of inner beauty. They sought blessings of the Buddha with only one thought to attain inner peace and tranquillity by renounce the material world. They left all the worldly bondings and lust. They continued to adopt the teaching of Lord Buddha in their heart (*Sāsane uraṃ datvā pabbajjinisu*). Buddhism teaches about spirituality beyond physical beauty. The *Therīgāthā* is a remarkable record of female spirituality and beauty in early Buddhist traditions. Buddhist values teach a way of understanding real life as life suffering, compassion and inner peace so on. The word “Beauty” emphasizes an inner state of mind or beauty of the inner reality.

Inner Beauty of Therīs

The cherry blossom falls after its short beautiful bloom. It floats gently down to earth. Its life is over but the limitedness of its existence is one of the biggest reasons the blossom is so gorgeous. The blossom is impermanence. The Lord Buddha said the body is built up with bones which are covered with flesh and blood. Within the beauty dwell decay and death, pride and jealousy. The *Therīgāthā* shows the *Therīs* belong to the different strata of the society but they were eager to reach their ultimate goal. Courtesans, dancers, musicians, commoner, and princess joined the *saṅgha* in same fashion. The *Therīgāthā* admire inner beauty, spiritual aesthetics, and perfection. In Buddhism the people named beauty with some poetic term sometimes by adding prefix or suffix to the name of a woman i.e., Nandā because of her beauty was known as Sundari Nandā, Uppalavaṇṇā was admired for her lotus like complexion, Cāpā was praised for her slim and graceful physique and compared with a bow. It is said that Khemā⁴ the queen of Bimbisāra had a golden complexion but it seems that fair colour was not considered as the essential criterion of beauty. Uppalavaṇṇā⁵ was very beautiful and her fame spread throughout the Jambudvīpa. Her complexion was like blue lotus. In the *Therīgāthā* the beauty was admired with aesthetic sense. This reflects the artistic sense of the people who appreciated even a dark complexioned beauty. In the Buddha’s time face ointment, eye ointment (*añjana*) *kajal* were used. Sundari Nandā used face ointment on her cheek the surface of which was wet from the *tamāla* leaf. They also used sandalwood paste⁶, turmeric powder so it can be said that women were conscious about their beauty. Sundari Nandā was so beautiful that though she donned herself in *bhikkhunī*’s robe still she

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was unable to conceal her beauty. The *Saṅghāsisesa*⁷ rules states that while she was on begging rounds people seeing her beauty gave her the best of the meal. She was intelligent too and held a responsible position in the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*.

Aṃbapālī⁸ would use reddish powder (*hiṅgula*) for beautifying her body. So, it proves that face powder, *Kājal* (*añjana*), perfumes were used that time. The *Therīgāthā* contains poem in which *therīs* refer to old age and illness, that are undeniable the impermanence of beauty. The most vivid description in the *Therīgāthā* is verses of Aṃbapālī who was earlier completely devoted to beauty of herself but later on chose to seek inner beauty. The poem starts with her hair that moves down her body through her face, arms, body, feet. The colour of the hair was black and was similar to the colour of bees. Her hands were beautiful possessing delicate golden signet rings. The use of these cosmetics was actually *Pacittiya* offence when she became *bhikkhunī*. The *Chabbaggiya bhikkhunīs* were rebuked for using perfumes. One of the *Pācittiyas*⁹ forbids a *bhikkhunī* for using the perfume. Thus, in Buddhism recommends that the art of adorning the face and body with paint, powder and paste flourished on those days but these were the cause of impermanence and *dukkha*.

In the *Therīgāthā* the Buddhist women had a great fancy for ornaments to decorate their body. They used to adorn their body with gold, silver, pearls, diamonds, rubies and other costly diadems. Good embroidery on jewellery was appreciated by people. Visākhā's father gave her in marriage an ornament that resembles like a peacock. So, women adorned themselves by ornaments from head to toe. There were women who worked as dancers and musicians in a troupe they used to wear beautiful clothes, jewellery and adorned their hair with flowers. These women were also called 'Rupupajivikā-itthi'¹⁰ meaning women whose livelihood is on their physical beauty. The beauty must be magnetic and attractive through exerting an energy or radiance that draws people to it. The human body is best picture of beautiful soul. The beauty of 'Hair' is the most important part of the beauty. Women in the *Therīgāthā* depicted as preferring to adorn their hair with flowers or garlands when they were lay women. They adorned with champaka flower. Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesa's¹¹ thick curls referred her name as Kuṇḍalakesa or curly hair. Sumanā and Mallikā are mentioned for decoration of their hair.¹² The jewellery of hair and ear-rings made of beads and gems or different shapes of combs and pins. Aṃbapālī's thighs were decorated with golden strings of small golden balls. Woollen and silk clothes were in vogue. *Savanā* and *Nivāsanā* tunic of fine counts indicate the superfine quality of the cloth. *Savanā* is cloth which used in menstruation period and *Nivāsanā* means an undergarment. Anopamā (Peerless) was named because of her beauty as she was so beautiful that she was called Anopamā. In the *Therīgāthā* we have seen that there are many beautiful women who were not happy in household life so they joined *Saṅgha*. Khemā, the beautiful woman she left all her wealth and worldly bandings to join the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*. The truth of beauty is impermanence that *bhikkhunī* Abhirupānandā realised as she was obsessed of her beauty but later by the supernatural power she transformed to a beautiful woman from youth to middle age to old age. In this way she realized the truth of impermanence of beauty. The *Therīgāthā* as the

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divine revelation by the mystics has been ensured by illustrating the subjective conflict of the *therīs* in attaining unmediated grace, radically conveyed in a confessional feminine mode, along with the testimony of the witness to grant reverence and glory of the holy sisters. The physical desiring of the divine so which ultimately emphasizes a continuity linking physical and spiritual dimension. The *Therīgāthā* considers women as being independent capable of attaining *nirvāna* which is ultimate beauty of every *therī*.

Conclusion

The beauty of woman was given so much negative importance in Buddhism and women identified so strongly with their own bodies to its eventual decay due to old age or renounce by joining the order becomes a theme of importance in the verses of the *therīs*. Āmbapālī describes in great detail every aspect of her youthful beauty and put next to it with what has become of that beauty due to old age to emphasize the impermanence of beauty. In early Buddhism women from all spheres used to enhance their beauty to hide the signs of advancing age. But it can be said that instead of creams and lotions wisdom has been applied to the aging process that ultimately eloquent behind the story of every *therī*. The *Therīgāthā* texts are uniformly hostile of physical beauty. A few discourses as well as several Elder nuns' verses testify to an appreciation of natural beauty by the Buddha. The *therīs* repeatedly celebrate their emancipation from a desire to cultivate physical beauty, there is an interesting reference to one *therī* Subhā who went forth full of faith, beautiful by reason of the true doctrine (*sadhamma-sobhaṇā*). *Therī* Cāpā, the wife of Ājivaka pleaded to her husband to make her last attempt to retain him in household life so she desired to wear *Kāsikuttama Vārāṇasayyaka* or *Kāsika Vattha*¹³ to look beautiful.¹⁴ Every verse of the female nuns they uttered ultimate beauty that refers to physical beauty but instead of spiritual beauty. Thus each and every *therī* was spiritually beautiful, that is loving, compassionate, gentle and wise. By practicing of kindness and self awareness they conquered Māra the evil one. The impermanence of beauty that will gradually deteriorate and decay. In the *Therīgāthā*, *therīs* like Sundarī Nandā, Rupanandā, Khemā, Abhirupanandā, Āmbapālī all were beautiful *therīs* who ultimately realized the true nature of beauty. This body is built up with bones which are covered with flesh and blood therefore within it dwell decay, death, pride and jealousy. They all became nun under the guidance of the Buddha eventually attained arahatship. The rest of life they propagated Dhamma and became role model even for monks. In the *Therīgāthā nibbānic* way of beauty for women is more preferred. The very existence of a text that makes no apologies for its focus on women's religion experience shows us that all these *therīs* were sufferings with some issues and facing hindrances in their personal and social life. They overcame all these obstacles to achieve the ultimate goal through their inner beauty. The *therīs* concentrate on women's bodies as evil smelling, impure, containing corpses and oozing. The *Therīgāthā* has a powerful message for today to all modern people as well as woman. This text is also focused on the dedication, sacrifice, liberation of those women who played vital role to reform the society and gave more independence to women.

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Notes & References

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- ¹ Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Good, the Beautiful and the True*, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2001.p.28.
² Therīgāthā is verses of Elder nuns a collection of short poems of early Buddhist enlightened women.
³ Bhikkhunī or therī: Female Buddhist women
⁴ *Therīgāthā*, p. 212-9
⁵ *Therīgāthā*, pp. 14-15.
⁶ E, H. Johnstone, *The Sundarī Nandā or Nandā the Fair*, p. 23.
⁷ *Book of the Discipline*, Part 3, p.232-233. p. 234.
⁸ *Par. Dip.*, Vol. V, p. 212, P.T.S.
⁹ *Pācittiya*s LXXXVII
¹⁰ *Therīgāthā*, V.R.I. Publ. Igt. p. 107.
¹¹ *Therīgāthā*, p.14-15.
¹² *Jātaka*, Vol. III, p. 374.
¹³ . *Therīgatha Aṭṭhakatha*, . p.248.
¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.248.