Women in the Jātakas: Categories of Representation and the Subject of Sexuality

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Abstract

In the stories of *Jātakas,* one encounters plethora of evidences concerning womanhood. Most stereotype women as immoral creatures, while some valorise them for their caregiving and selfless nature. Yet another set of stories depict women in a neutral light, associating no explicit imagery with their existence. The variety in representation of women in the *Jātakas* has to be studied in view of the stories' unique position in the Ancient Indian literature. As folktales, *Jātakas* reflected the multifaceted social reality. While on account of their Buddhist linkages, they had to strike a balance between the canonical insistence on celibacy and Buddhism's popular call for egalitarianism.

Keywords: Jātakas, Boddhisatta, Woman, Buddhism, Folktales.

Buddhism came up with an alternative vision of society. More often than not, it is thought to have embodied, in history, a philosophy that was more accommodating to the needs and the rights of those who were on the margins, socially or spiritually, of the prevailing Brahmanical culture. However, this popular perception is not backed by an assessment of Buddhist social thought in its entirety. No doubt, Buddhism, when it arose in the sixth century B.C., conceded the existence of vast inequalities present in contemporary society. With particular reference to women, it showed an awareness of the disadvantageous position in which they were placed. In the *Samyutta Nikāya*, it is recognised that besides the biological woes of menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth, a woman is subject to the disadvantage of having to leave her home at a tender age" to become a part of the husband‘s family, and the fact that she has to devote her entire life to the service of a man. But, did the awareness of discrimination experienced by women lead to its rejection? The answer remains no— not truly. The inequality and discrimination that women suffered appear to be already well-entrenched in the society and the Buddhist texts reflected it in more than one way. The *Aguttara Nikāya* denied to women the right to sit in court or practice business. And despite the socially radical ’exception ‘made by Buddhism in laying open the path to salvation for womenfolk, women‘s ordination was conditional upon their acceptance of eight extra rules besides the

normal monastic rules, all of which essentially mandated them to live in subordination to the authority of the monks (*bhikkhus*).

In this paper, I would attempt to look at the way/ways women are represented in the *Jātakas*, a significant component of the Buddhist textual tradition. A preliminary step to such an exercise is to outline the political, economic and social milieu in which Buddhism emerged and went on to operate. Politically, Buddhism was situated in the context of intensive state formation and territorial expansion and consolidation in the Gangetic valley and in it, dominated the monarchical form, more so than any other form of government. In addition, the economy was expanding tremendously. The growth and development witnessed in agriculture made possible the rise of prosperous cities. This is also basically, what is known as the process of the second urbanisation, dated to 6th century B.C.E.- 2nd century B.C.E.— its major concomitants being vibrant trade, diverse craft production, a monetised system of exchange, and a specialised labour force.

What was the place of women in all these changes and developments? To be able to gain an insight on this, it is important to acquaint oneself with the various modes in which patriarchy has appeared historically. Gerda Lerner has shown through her work how in the emergence and functioning of archaic states" everywhere in history, patriarchy played a central role. Veritably, the *janapadas* and *mahājanapadas* of the Age of the Buddha were the typical archaic states" bringing forth a shift in the patterns and relations of production and ownership- a shift from clan dominance to patriarchal systems as the core organising principle. The exigencies of the new society in which property was to be acquired privately and transmitted through a patrilineal descent system led to an overriding preoccupation with the need to control women's sexuality. Whereas women may have held some form of power, influence and resources, they remained subjected to the sweeping male dominance— a social reality which the Buddhist texts reiterate sharply. The case of the *Nikāyas*, the core of the Pāli Canon, has been outlined above, indicating the accommodation, through them, by Buddhism of the grim reality of female subordination within its otherwise radically critical social doctrine. Significantly, the *Jātakas* are no different-although their canonicity is debated.

The *Jātakas*: Structure, Context and Nature

The *Jātakas* are a collection of approximately 550 tales about the previous births of the Buddha. Structurally, one may identify four distinct elements in each of the *Jātakas*, the *paccupannavatthu* or the story of the present, set in the current life of the Buddha, the *atītavatthu*, or the story of the past, describing an incident from the past, the *gāthā* or verse, and the *samodhana* or conclusion where the Buddha establishes certain identificatory linkages between the two narratives, both of the past and the present, and their respective characters. Notably, it is the *gāthā* alone which actually form a part of the

canon— they exist as one of the fifteen fragmentary sections of the *Khuddaka Nikāya* of the *Sutta Piaka*. Additionally, they form the very basis for the classification of the *Jātaka* stories. The stories are divided into *nipātas* or sections as per the number of verses attached to them. Therefore, all the *Jātakas* containing a single verse are grouped together in the *ekanipāta*, stories with two verses in the *dukanipāta*, ones with three verses in the *tikanipāta* and so on.

Before dealing with a source such as the *Jātakas*, it is imperative to define its boundaries in terms of chronology and a genre. However, doing so remains a difficult enterprise. And what one has to be content with are some broad lineations rather than specific contours. Following Cowell, there is a general agreement among scholars about one point, i.e. the *Jātakas* were known by the 3rd century B.C.E., owing to the fact that several *Jātaka* scenes are to found sculpted in the reliefs of Sanchi, Amravati, and Bharhut. Yet, the way the *Jātakas* relate to the Buddha's own time stays undiscerned, and as John Garret Jones comments, it is an almost impossible affair to determine if the stories, or at least some of them originated with the Buddha himself. Nonetheless, the *Jātakas* employ their own notions of time. The story opens with the *paccupannavatthu*, located generally in Jetavana, in the time of the Buddha. Then follows the *atītavatthu,*, located in past, which underneath a seemingly precise description of time and space, invokes a sense of fluidity. Often, the story of the past begins with Once upon a time in such and such city, there was a king named so and so". Thus, the time envisaged is distant and unknown and the space mythical. This may have served two significant functions, one, of lending antiquity and hence legitimacy to the point being emphasised in the narrative, and two, of allowing the story to flow uninhibitedly in multiple contexts, making use of the varied meanings and uses embedded in them.

Indeed, the *Jātakas* are open-ended and offer a range of possibilities. Their themes are varied. Often, the same story is retold over and again, sometimes with alternative endings. For example-JA 15 and JA 16[1], in the *attavatthu* of both of which, there is a deer caught in the snare of a hunter, in JA 15, he is killed because he fails to take lessons from the *Bodhisatta*, while in JA 16, he escapes unharmed as he had taken lessons diligently. The key to understanding this variety lies in the very nature of the *Jātakas*. As individual stories, they can grow and take new associations to suit different contexts, they are not unchanging", as Naomi Appleton has argued.

Whether the *Jātakas* can be considered as canonical or not is indeed a moot point. Generally, it is the *Tipiaka*, particularly the *nikāyas* of the *Sutta Piaka*, which is thought

[1] In this paper, references of Jatakas have been taken from E.B. Cowell's English translation and each Jataka story referred to using the abbreviation JA.

to contain the crux of Pāli Buddhist teachings. However, as K.R. Norman shows, the Pāli canon has not always been structured in the form of the *piakas*. In fact, except for two references to the *nikāyas* in the *Vinaya Piaka*, the usual classification of the canon found in the canonical texts is nine-fold, with the *Jātakas* being one of them. Yet, there occurs no direct reference to the central tenets of Buddhist philosophy in the *Jātakas*.

A crucial interest in the *Jātakas* has been in their capacity as folktales. One cannot fail to notice the common elements of a folk narrative that many of the *Jātaka* stories carry. And it is the same which endows the *Jātakas* with a rather unique position as a source for historical reconstruction. Like folklore, representations of lay life constitute a regular theme in them, with the characters being derived from various walks of life. Concomitant with this is the question of production and circulation. The Pāli *Jātaka* collection is based on what essentially are oral traditions. And oral traditions, as is known, make possible the participation, in the production of creative literature or knowledge, of those who are otherwise outside the arena of it, i.e. the unlettered. However, in no situation, are the stories to be regarded as the special monopoly of one group, the illiterate or any other. In fact, they constitute the common property of the entire society, as against the texts of the 'high 'tradition, in the case of which, intellectual production is heavily dominated by an exclusive circle of elites versed in the written language. Indeed, the latter holds true for the texts of the brahminical tradition as well as the Buddhist canonical texts. Just as oral traditions interact amongst themselves and with the 'written', the *Jātaka* stories appear to have existed in a constant dialogue whereby the creative energies of both the 'learned ' and the common folk pooled together in, what Uma Chakravarti rightly calls, a common authorship".

A.K. Ramanujan's categorisation of the reflexivity", that abounds the Indian literary traditions, has a special value here. Some *Jātaka* tales have parallels in other story-telling traditions; they seem general tales with no Buddhist virtue at stake, at least visibly. As for the stories, which take up Buddhist ethics, they do not always conform to them. In fact, in many of the *Jātakas*, one comes across the chief character, the *Bodhisatta* himself violating the canonical teachings. Nonetheless, for all these 'differences 'which, quite likely, can engender doubts about the Buddhist context of the *Jātakas*, the fact remains that the *Jātaka* stories, in their present form, have come down to us mediated through Buddhism.

Buddhists in making use of the story-telling mode, were aware of the wide potentialities that the same offers. Stories make for an extremely popular, persuasive and influential way of communication. Their oral narration ensures that they are disseminated extensively-told and retold across time and space. What this implies for the *Jātaka* stories

is that they were accessible to a large and diverse audience. Would the nature of the authorship and the audience have had a bearing on shaping the representational categories of the *Jātakas*? One may not gloss over this possibility in the context of the present point of inquiry.

The Notions of Women: As Represented in the *Jātaka*

As I intend to study the representations of women in the ancient Indian textual tradition, my choice of the *Jātakas* as the source is a conscious decision, primarily in view of the considerations outlined above. Narratives relating to women in the *Jātakas* strike a balance between the 'high 'and the 'popular', indeed because they connect not only with the kings, the nobles, the brāhmaas and the elders in the Buddhist order but also with the common people whose concerns appear to have coloured the content of the stories. Inevitably, there is a marked diversity in the portrayal of women in the *Jātakas*. This paper examines, in particular, the *Jātakas* with one verse (*gāthā*), as contained in the *ekanipāta.* And in these stories, one can possibly distinguish between at least three broad types of representational categories employed for women. They may, for lack of better terminology, be called as 'Positive', 'Negative 'and 'Indifferent'. On the one hand, there are stories where women are shown as 'virtuous 'in the ideal sense; they are giving and grateful. On the other hand, there can be found tales, relatively greater in number, in which women are represented in a bad light; they are wicked, lustful and a potential source of distraction, destruction and even death. And in yet another set of stories where women occur, the representation is somewhat neutral; there is no direct criticism or lauding, whatsoever, of their character. I would like to clarify that these categories are in, no way, water-tight and in fact are interrelated. Further, in each of these individual categories, there exists a fair degree of heterogeneity —as it would become clear in the discussion that follows, wherein I shall be using the said three categories as a framework for analysing the women in the *Jātakas*.

The Ever Lustful: Women in a Negative Light

The proposed category of the negative representation of women, is perhaps, the most easily found in the *Jātakas.* The stories, which one may cite as exemplifying the same, often are told in the context of a passion-tossed" brother. As the Buddha takes to resolving this indeed 'problematic 'scenario, he narrates a tale from the past (*atītavatthu,*), where the alleged 'object 'of passion –the woman-is herself problematised. In JA 62, one comes across a woman who has been kept away, on purpose, by her husband, from possibly any male contact other than his own. Yet, somehow, she gets a man to sneak inside her heavily guarded quarters and commits

adultery with him. It is interesting to note how across the temporal distance between the present and the past, alternatives get posited-to resolve the present as well as to influence the future. In other words, one may see the burden of passion itself being shifted; from a lustful brother, we come to 'the ever lustful 'woman.

In any case, adultery is shown, very often, as being 'natural 'to the women in the *Jātakas.* In JA 120, there is shown a queen with a voracious appetite for sex as she seduces as many as 64 messengers who are sent to her by the king to enquire about her welfare while he is away. The verse at the end of the story proclaims:

"…the passions of women are insatiate,

and she does but act

according to her inborn nature"

Similarly, in JA 65, one finds a wife who is unfaithful to her husband. Here, it is asserted that:

"…there is no private property in women; they are common to all"

Statements of the above kind convey a sense of a general anxiety to have control over female sexuality. The imperative of the same, for a male-dominated order, has already been pointed out at the beginning of this paper. Turning to Lerner once again, it is worth mentioning here her understanding of widespread concern with women's sexuality, at a given point in history, being representative of the very social realities. Does it mean that in stories like the ones just talked about above, we are witnessing an allusion being made to the contemporary social practices where women had more control over their sexuality than the normative literature suggests? This is a possibility that ought to be taken into account as we study the representation of women in the *Jātakas.*

The woman as lustful is not, however, the only negative motif present in the *Jātakas*. One can see the female sex being problematised in other ways as well. The bleakest of all is where women are associated with death. In JA 30, a brother hankering after his wife in the present, is told a story from the past, where he was a pig who had to give his life to be served at the wedding feast of the squire's daughter. The daughter, at the end, is identified with the brother's wife in the present life. In JA 96, we come across an ogress who tries to captivate men with her beauty only, to eat them up eventually. Later, she can be seen desirous of having authority over the kingdom. Interestingly, this is the only instance in the *ekanipāta* where the woman and state power are placed together in

proximity. Nonetheless, it is the final turn of events which seems crucial. Although she does succeed in achieving authority, it is rather restricted, i.e. only within the confines of the palace. And even there, she is shown as causing massive destruction by devouring the king and his retinue. What may be construed out this narrative is that while there may not have been many women wielding power outside the domestic arena, the same cannot be treated as an impossible scenario. Yet, the legitimacy of it remains questionable as the *Jātakas* suggest by demonising the sole example of a female laying direct claim to power.

It is largely agreed in academia that representations of this kind are interwoven with the *pañcasīla*, the five essential virtues of monastic life in Buddhism, celibacy being one of them. Be it Alan Sponberg, John Garret Jones, Kumkum Roy or Uma Chakravarti, the explanation is unanimous. To portray women in a negative light-replete with all the distasteful qualities-could possibly have meant adding weight to the monastic insistence on renouncing desire as part of the higher goal of attaining salvation (*Nibbāna*).

At the same time, if conformation to monastic norms was so significant a concern of the *Jātakas*, then how does one understand the stories in which the actions of the *Bodhisatta* himself- the central character in most of the cases-seem transgressive within the Buddhist framework as well as in the general sense? In JA 66, we see the *Bodhisatta* being smitten by lust. Whereas, a resolution is offered in this instance as the problematic nature of the same is acknowledged and eventually eliminated, with the *Bodhisatta* giving up on lust in the end, elsewhere it is not the case. In JA 93, the *Bodhisatta*, a merchant, takes a lion‘s life, who had grown attachment for a doe. Similarly, in JA 62, not only the *Bodhisatta* king is shown in the habit of gambling but seems to harbour a dubious morality as he pays a man to seduce another man‘s wife only to continue his winning streak in gambling. In both these examples, the violation of ethics-monastic or worldly—- gets overshadowed in favour of the central message that the story appears to be conveying, the same being sinful” nature of love in JA 93 and the inherent adulterous nature of women in JA 62 respectively.

In regard to the above, one may distinguish between two different, nonetheless interrelated lines of action, found more often than not, in the *Jātakas*- on the one hand, of action being negotiable, and on the other hand, as exemplifying what are usually identified as the defining values of Buddhism. In the latter, action, be it of the *Bodhisatta* or other characters— women included— is subject to no negotiation and a resolution is offered at the end of story as per established Buddhist ethics. The former, in contrast, has connotations of action/s being something which has/have to be taken and resolved as per the requirements of the context in question. Consequently, the *Jātaka* stories embodying this understanding, open up possibilities for a range of alternatives implicit in a given situation. Precisely, this is where the strength of the *Jātakas* lies, allowing them to tell a variety of truths.

As to illustrate this further, I would like to point out there are instances in the *Jātakas* where women seem to take to an action or exhibit a quality which elsewhere in the collection is shown as problematic. But in the said instances, they go unidentified, let alone inviting any criticism of sort. For example, JA 126, wherein the fact that the princess elopes with her paramour despite the elaborate arrangements made by her father to guard her, is not posed as a problem. Instead, the story ends with the king happily accepting their union. In a different set of stories, one senses a tone of condemnation. However, the same appears to be relatively non-gendered. For instance, JA 45 shows a foolish woman who tries to drive away the flies pestering her mother, with an axe, and costs her mother's life. In this case, the lack of sense is not portrayed as a 'woman-only ' trait, of the kind that is inborn in her.

At another level, themes of morbidity, death in particular, which the *Jātakas,* rather insistently, show as a potent danger that the womenfolk carry, can be found to have other associations too in the collection. In JA 42 and JA 43, death follows from excessive greed and not listening to elders respectively. Significantly, greed and disobedient conduct are both common tropes of story-telling. They are perceived as issues capable of generating interest. Can one see the 'misbehaving 'women figures of the *Jātakas* in the same vein? Indeed, this forms an important likelihood which one may not overlook.

The 'Good Goddess': Women shown in a Positive Light

If the *Jātaka* tales project prejudices against women, depicting them as fickle, untrustworthy and adulterous, then, at the same time, there exists stories within the collection which appear to be relatively positive in their representation of the feminine". The latter set of stories often characterises women as loving mothers, and faithful and obedient wives. In JA 12, the story of the present (*paccupannavatthu*) depicts a married woman who joins the *sagha*. However, it is the news of her pregnancy which problematises her future prospects within the order. Upon thoughtful calculations, it is revealed that the pregnancy antedates her entering the *sagha*. This establishes her innocence and she bears a son who grows up to become an *arhat*. Interestingly, this story constitutes one of the three rare instances from the *ekanipāta* where a nun is featured- although, the occurrences of the monks in the *Jātakas* are numerous. The other two instances i.e. JA 115 and JA 136 respectively, are explicitly negative in their portrayal of the sister, each showing her as greedy, much against JA 12 which represents her rather positively, as rooted in goodness". Yet for all the apparent 'positivity', one cannot help but notice an underlying sense of tension, indeed sexual. As the woman in question wishes to be a renouncer, she seeks the permission of her parents who refuse, so she turns to her husband. In contrast, no such hurdle is generally encountered in case of male

renouncers shown in the stories. What attracts even more attention is the differential treatment meted out to the issue of a possible monastic violation by a nun, contrary to the same concerning monks. With the woman's pregnancy anticipating a potential transgression of the *pañcasīla*, the matter is settled in the court in the presence of the king, lay disciples and other well-known personages. On the contrary, in scenarios involving passion-tossed" and back-sliding brothers", nowhere, at least in the *ekanipāta*, one sees the matter moving out of the monastic complex, to involve the wordly networks of the state and the lay followers.

At another level, the *Jātakas* contain stories where women seem to exercise a somewhat active agency or play active roles. JA 67 revolves around a woman who independently saves her brother, husband and son from prison. Although, the representation is seemingly positive and her action is lauded within the story, it is significant to note that she remains a 'means 'to save the three men from peril. Similarly, in JA 66, we see a queen whose crucial intervention helps save the *Bodhisatta* from giving in to lust. However, her imitation of a nagging wife to make the *Bodhisatta* realise the fatality" of craving conveys a sense of a prejudiced representation, of certain behaviours being stereotypically expected of women.

One may find several *Jātaka* stories like the above where women are showcased as unusually good and full of positive virtues. In effect, this balances the impression that the whole of womankind is at fault, which the other stories existing within the collection and insisting heavily on the dangers of women might create. However, it would be interesting to give some thought to how this goodness is conceived. JA 78 (in the story of the present) shows an obedient" wife who unquestioningly follows her miserly husband's eccentric instructions, climbs up all the way to the seventh storey of the house with all the necessary things to make stuffed cakes just for him. Not only does this representation of the wife mark a reversal of the recurrent motif in the *Jātakas* of women prone to lazing but it conveys an understanding of a certain degree of idealisation. Whether or not the same had a social reality is a different story but what is important is that once again we get a sense of stereotyping whereby the ideals of 'virtuous 'women almost disregard their individuality and continually define their virtue in terms of their degree of subservience to an androcentric value-system.

As if to reiterate this notion, more often than not, the outcomes of her 'goodness 'are markedly unique and different. For example- JA 31 depicts a woman who earns merit" by following the Five Commandments and is rewarded for it with her marriage to the King.

In an associated instance, in JA 108, we come across a woman who on account of her modesty and decency" gets married to the King. Incidentally, she is a fat country woman" and consequent upon her marriage turns to be exceptionally good, even bearing a son. At the end, the *Bodhisatta* can be found commenting upon it, in a conversation with the King that, "…this excellent woman by her modesty and decency …won your majesty's favour and rose to such fortunes." This story forms one of the very few occasions in the *Jātakas* where upward social mobility is envisioned as a possibility for women-although similar narratives woven around men are many in the *Jātakas*. But, perhaps more striking is the extent of this mobility and the manner in which it is shown to be achieved. While low" women may transcend their social status, the same primarily happens by attracting the king's attention only to become his queen-consort. In a different context, that this particular story lays stress on the queen's bodily appearance, more precisely her fatness, leads to an interesting connection being made between woman's desirability and her beauty. As a matter of fact, the present *Jātaka* tale suggests that not all women are despicable. Further, what may be the general standard of 'pleasing to look at 'in a woman is a precipitating factor in judging her worth-the same elsewhere being portrayed as a signature of the many 'dangers 'that women folk usually carry within.

The 'Faceless 'Lot: Indifferent Depictions of Women

In this section, we will be looking at a few of the stories in the *Jātakas* which embody a third category of representation with regard to women. These stories resort neither to an outright condemnation nor appreciation of the female characters that they feature. The portrayals are rather neutral, devoid of any blatant negativity or unusual positivity. And yet, there may be meanings, tacit in the same.

In JA 125, one finds a merchant's daughter who gets an imposter, a man originally of slave origin, as her husband. In this case, the woman is represented somewhat indifferently. However, with the husband being criticised openly for fraud there does follow a relative uplifting of her character-even if indirectly.

Another story, where a similar effect gets produced is JA 7. Its uncanny resemblance with the Śakuntalā narrative of the *Mahābhārata* aside, it shows a woman who bears a son out of wedlock with the king of Benaras. As the son comes of age, she takes him to the court to make him meet his father. But the king knowingly refuses to accept the child as his own. Subsequently, the woman throws the child up in the air, who hangs in mid-air and utters words of wisdom, proving the truth of his parentage to the entire court. The king accepts the woman and her son as his own and makes the woman his queen-consort.

Therefore, despite the story remaining verbally indifferent in its characterisation of the woman, the fact that the king is brought to shame, and eventually accepts the legitimacy of her claim, places her on a higher pedestal.

I would now like to discuss those stories of the *Jātaka* collection where the representations of women are seemingly neutral by the same token. However, the meanings implied are different from above. JA 39 portrays a young wife of a merchant who after her husband‘s death informs her son of the family‘s hidden treasure. The woman‘s character is not endowed with any visible quality, good or bad. Nonetheless, that the husband before his death had a fear of his wife marrying somebody else and spending away all his fortune, makes matters complex. On the one hand, it speaks of an anxiety to have continued control over woman‘s sexuality, even in the aftermath of one‘s death. On the other hand, with the merchant‘s anticipations turning out to be false, the wife is put in a position of what may have been commonly perceived to be the moral high ground.

The issue of the sexuality of women looms large in another *Jātaka* tale, ostensibly indifferent in its representation of the women. JA 92 features the king‘s wives desirous of listening to the Buddha. The story doesn‘t dwell on their characterisation. And yet the fact that they cannot go at will to the monastery” to hear the Buddha‘s teachings, says much about womenfolk in general. It conveys an understanding of a possible contact between women and the Buddha as being fraught with tension. Further, it indicates a largely restricted female mobility-at least in respect of the high” women-which may have been linked to their sexuality.

In a related context, one may mention JA 97, in which can be seen a slave girl being beaten by her master for not bringing her wages to him. The representation yet again is fuzzy. However, the treatment that the girl receives seems interesting to note. In contrast to the wives of kings, *brāhmaas* and merchants, the present girl is depicted as engaged in labouring for wages. As the story portrays her as being subjected to violence without any show of protest from her side, it avoids the possibility of an open confrontation between the high” and low”, the powerful” and the powerless”. Rather, the story develops along the lines of a certain presumed understanding in representing social relations. It is this disjunction between imposed identities and real experiences that the *Jātakas* manage to represent by the simultaneous incorporation of a variety of voices into the text.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I endeavoured to study the representations of women in the *Jātakas*, with a particular focus on the stories contained in the *ekanipāta*. As we have noted, the *Jtakas* offer no fixed portrayal of women. In fact, what is encountered in these stories is a rich multivocality of representations. These representations can further be divided into three broad categories. These categories, I call Positive, representations showing women somewhat positively; Negative, representations depicting them in a negative light and Indifferent, representations which seem relatively indifferent in their portrayal of women. Out of these, the second is to be most commonly found in the *Jātakas*, showing women as a source of danger, both to the ascetic‘s practice and to the laity in general. This perceived threat that women possess finds opposition in the stories which typify the first category wherein the virtues of women are celebrated. In addition, there is a third category of stories, where the women being featured are shown as neither good nor bad.

What is more, each of these categories brings forth visible distinction in its representations of women belonging to different social groups. The stories discussed above portray woman in a variety of roles— as daughter/wife of the householder; as an impoverished or relatively ’low ‘status woman; as a *bhikkhunī*; as a demoness etc. The difference amongst them is unmistakable and operates at many levels. The relatively well to do women, occur mostly as wives and daughters, and remain confined to the domestic spaces. Any attempt by them at transcending its limits is problematised; there is a general mood of anxiety in the *Jātakas* about the inborn” nature of the wife as temptress and that of the daughter as difficult to be guarded”. On the contrary, low” rank women seem to be somewhat mobile, and independent. Incidentally, there is an intrinsic connection between non-domestic work and impoverishment, at least in the stories of the *ekanipāta*. The economic roles envisaged for women are invariably anchored in contexts of poverty. At another level, difference exists between lay women and the nuns. Interestingly, there are only a handful of narratives in the *ekanipāta* that deal with the experiences of women occurring outside the domestic sphere — whether as renouncers or women in the workforce. Besides, such women are usually not stereotyped as having an insatiable sexual appetite; instead they are dragged through the mud in quite unique ways, as fat, greedy and foolish.

That the *Jtakas* actualise the juxtaposition of attitudes as divergent as these has led scholars to characterise the overall representation of women in the text as ambivalent. To this I choose to add for consideration the possibility that the representations may have been a product of the complex historical contexts of the *Jtakas*. This naturally raises the question of production and circulation. As discussed at the beginning of this paper, the *Jtakas* have visible moorings of folklores. However, one ought not to lose sight of the fact that in the written, compiled form as we have them, they form a part of the Buddhist

textual tradition. Further, their narrative style and lucid content suggest that they may have enjoyed a wider currency, beyond the somewhat restricted sphere of circulation of the high" written texts.

The multifarious presence of the woman in the *Jātakas* is a constant reminder of this duality of the position of the text under scrutiny. On the one hand, in their capacity as folktales the *Jātakas* enlarge the range through their diverse portrayals of the female. On the other hand, by the virtue of their appropriation within a Buddhist framework, there are certain inevitable overlaps with the doctrinal essentials of Buddhism itself, and therefore a near constant prejudice in representing the feminine.

In the stories that have been looked at above, a subterranean sense of tension is a running theme. Whether as unseemly, or ideal or indifferent in their conduct, women, for the most part of the *Jātakas*, have fraught experiences. As evil and adulterous, they are generally at the receiving end of severe censure. As virtuous, they are represented in a manner which subordinates them to the male. Even as outwardly indifferent figures, they have experiences flowing in similar directions. Does this point to a scenario where female sexuality is thought to be particularly problematical? The *Jātakas*, explicitly or implicitly, confirm the same as plausible. Yet, in view of the variations among women characters — that the present paper takes note of beyond the thematic categories of The Negative, The Positive and The Indifferent — the *Jātakas* also present seminal possibilities for contestations on what may have been the dominant notions of gender.

One of the primary objectives of this paper was to recover" the popular consciousness of women, as it occurs in the ancient Indian past. That the *Jātakas* being constitutive of the oral tradition, can be regarded as the closest approximation to this popular" is largely agreed in academia. And yet, historians have been wary of using it in studying the past. The scepticism in using the text is not unwarranted. As narratives the *Jātakas* present a major problem, in that it is difficult to distinguish when it is history" or story".[42] Certainly, to construct a history of anything through representations which seem to hint at notions, is difficult, however not entirely impossible. In any case, it is not the factual accuracy of such stories as discussed above that is of interest. What is significant, from the present perspective, is the range of social scenarios that are depicted as possible. On a final note, the idea was not much to rescue" the oral" and the narrative", but to explore the scope of visualising the reality of women in the stories, beyond the apparent portrayal. The strategy of the *Jātakas* in representing the woman has to be comprehended with a sharper focus, in a manner which is sensitive to their known historical contexts.

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