Feminist Literary Criticism Meets Feminist Theology: Yashodhara and the Rise of Hagiographical Fiction in Modern Feminist Re-visioning

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Abstract
Feminist re-visioning has led to heterogenous retellings of mythological heroines in fiction. Sita and Draupadi, two of the well-known Indian mythological characters, have been explored in various capacities in mythological fiction. Yashodhara, Buddha’s wife, is a recent addition to this re-visioning project. This article seeks to engage with three retellings of Yashodhara’s story—each of which is radically different from the others. The result is the rise of hagiographical fiction around the character—responsive to the Buddhist ethos of love and spirituality. This article argues that the most intriguing representations of Yashodhara found in this fiction are rooted in the nonoppositional agency given to her character.

Keywords
feminism, esthetics, fiction, re-vision, Yashodhara, Buddhism, Buddha, religion, hagiography, mythology, Sita, Draupadi

Introduction
Ever since Rich (1972) defined the method of feminist re-visioning and inaugurated a new approach in the field of feminist critique, several feminist scholars have focused on the canon, including the mythological canon, to address the silence, the misrepresentation, or the negative representation of the female voice in the texts. Re-visioning, defined by Rich, is a way of looking at women’s writing. It is framed in terms of a call to “re-vision” defined as “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (Rich 2). In this scheme of practising feminism, especially in writing, to re-vision means to look at love differently for “the word ‘love’ is itself in need of re-vision” (Rich 9). It is an important part of self-knowledge which is a “search for identity and refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society” (Rich 18).

In the context of literary criticism or textual interpretations, feminist re-visionings tend to be discussed with a focus on “counteracting,” “challenging,” or “disrupting” patriarchal bias by highlighting the autonomy of women characters, their voice, and other means by which the patriarchal paradigm is challenged. The inspiration for this approach to women’s writing and writing about women comes from sources such as Cixous’s (1976) “The Laugh of the Medusa,” a manifesto of immense importance, which calls for the re-visioning of the idea of writing itself for women: this is the form of writing that is “insurgent” (p. 880), it seeks to “to break up, to destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable, to project” (p. 875). It is a stance that defines writing about women in terms of an essence. Recent studies focusing on mythology such as those focusing on Medusa (Kapoor, 2021), Italian mythology (Mandolini, 2021), or Greek mythology (Sen, 2020) continue the tradition of drawing attention to the methodology of re-visioning.

However, feminist scholarship emerging around theology and religion uncovers another position: it speaks of agency in terms other than anger (Yeng, 2020) or critique and challenge. For instance, as Mahmood (2005) shows, the idea that “human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them” does not do justice to the feminist positions that believe in working with the tradition than against it (p. 5). I argue that Yasodhara of the “hagiographical fiction” (a term I explain below) is a happy occasion for feminist theology and feminist literary theory to engage in conversation, a need expressed by Avishai and Irby (2017) and Braude (2004) who argue that gender and religion have been unfairly kept apart based on

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the assumption that religion and gender are not inherently compatible.

It is against this backdrop of the gap between feminist literary critique and feminist theological position of engagement that I contextualize the story of Yashodhara, the Buddha’s wife, as retold in three novels published in the last two decades. While discovering Yashodhara in these re-visions, I found that she is quite unique in three ways. One, Yashodhara is a figure who cannot be confined only to mythology for she is a part legend, part scripture, part hagiography, and part history too. Two, she cannot be assumed to be a silent figure in these hagiographical traditions for there have been quite a few texts that have drawn attention to her suffering (caused by being abandoned by her husband), and even to her status as a powerful woman in her own right. And three, in the three novels discussed below, she has been imagined in ways radically different from each other, ways that give her agency but do not fit into the discourse of “counteracting” or “challenging” the patriarchal bias in the same way. I propose that thanks to these three differences, the re-visioning around her needs to be seen as “hagiographical fiction”—fiction that continues the work of hagiography but not necessarily in “counteracting” ways generally found in feminist readings of texts. I argue that she is a character who does not have to be depicted or essentialized as oppositional to patriarchy in order to be located in feminism. The diversity in the acts of representing her break away from the conventional tropes of feminist esthetics: anger, challenge, and submission. I suggest that this diversity in representation has got a lot to do with the way Buddhism interacts with feminism.

The rest of this article is organized under six sections: the first establishes some context around re-visions as practised around well-known women characters from the ancient Indian imagination frequently revisited, Sita and Draupadi, so that one is able to understand the differences in the ways in which Yashodhara’s story is told in the novels I have chosen. The second section focuses on Yashodhara in the hagiographical texts. The next three sections focus on the three novels. The final section collects observations from the readings of the novels to argue that Yashodhara’s story re-visioned in the novels has led to a new genre, that of hagiographical fiction, a unique space suited to Yashodhara who has never been completely silenced and who does not have to express herself in terms of anger.

**Hagiographical Fiction as a Global South Project of Feminist Re-visioning**

The idea of “re-vision” has informed a lot of literary retellings as well as analyses of the retellings of the stories of Sita and Draupadi. The acts of husbands wronging their wives have been examined not just in an extensive reading of the epics themselves, but also in literary retellings of the epics (the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*) that these characters are a part of, and theorizations around these retellings. Writers and scholars have been working on Sita from the *Ramayana* and Draupadi from the *Mahabharata* as examples of women abandoned by their husbands; their stories are retold to highlight their suffering and the choices they make. In Sita and Draupadi, feminists have found it feasible to talk about women’s being in terms of dignity, rights and equality theorizing the women’s position in society as that of “minor,” subaltern, and marginalized. Several analyses and interpretations (Chanda-Vaz, 2017; Hess, 1999; Lodhia, 2015, 2021; Luthra, 2014; Moodley, 2020; Spivak, 2006) mine the stories as told in the epics to delve in thematics and character vis-à-vis gender. A lot of the interpretation of women characters continues to be on the lines of looking at women as using their mind and body as “instruments of challenge and of critiquing the patriarchal, hegemonic system of values” (Jain, 2011, p. 46). A feminist vocabulary powered by expressions like critique, hegemony and so on, especially in the context of women characters from Indian mythological texts, overpowers feminist literary criticism engaging with these texts.

All these re-visions are written or theorized with the objective of destabilizing the narratives of the “original” texts and of patriarchy. As Nivedita Menon observes in *Seeing Like a Feminist*, “[w]hen a feminist ‘sees’ from the position of marginality he or she has deliberately chosen to occupy, it is a gesture of subversion toward power; it disorganizes and disorders the settled field; resists homogenization, and opens up multiple possibilities rather than close them off” (p. ix). She writes, “To see like a feminist is not to stabilize, but to destabilize” (p. xii). The overarching perspectives emerging from these re-visions of stories of Sita and Draupadi, as noted by Luthra, “allow us to see the struggle of Indian feminisms to negotiate different modalities and languages of protest” (p. 139). As Urmi Chanda-Vaz puts it, “Traditionally, Indian mythology has tended to serve the purpose of patriarchy, keeping the woman where she belonged—at the bottom of the social ladder with the shudras. But the tables are finally turning. The subaltern is now wielding the very tools which were used to justify their oppression for ages, this time as a means of empowerment” (Chanda-Vaz, 2017).

Fiction that retells stories about Sita or Draupadi follows a different pattern. For example, the Draupadi of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s (2008) *The Palace of Illusions* is caught in the Mahabharata as we know it: she does exactly what the prophecies in the epic and the epic at large have scripted for her. Her rage, her vision, and her point of view are explored but the novel does not give her agency beyond the “original” story.

While each of these literary and critical interventions has proved to be pertinent in understanding women’s perspectives and subjectivities, some scholars have voiced the inappropriateness of the way in which nuances of religion or theology are often left out in the discussions of these as texts alone and not as parts of religious thought. Quite a few
examples stand out to highlight this bias toward critique or destabilization in mainstream feminist narrative of injustice and oppression in the process of separation between feminist thought and feminist theology (especially in the context of ancient Indian imagination), three of which are Sugirtharajah (2002), Kishwar (2004), and Gupta (1994) Sugirtharajah points out three things in her essay “Hinduism and Feminism: Some Concerns” (2002): that texts are not the only resource to understand a religious tradition, that there are other elements like rituals that need attention, and that therefore texts need to be transcended instead of being adhered to. Madhu Kishwar (2004) argues that there is no need for one to place iconic women from the non-Western traditions, such as the bhakti poet Mirabai, in feminism, which is largely a Western construct and a critique of which is found in the works of scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984). Sanjgeta R Gupta (1994) highlights the case of Manusmriti (apart from offering interpretations of the key episodes in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata) to argue that women's position in Hinduism is ambiguous: she draws attention to select passages from the Manusmriti that speak about honoring women and even seemingly projecting as independent selves, apart from talking about Draupadi and Sita as feminist icons. The work of these scholars and of Saba Mahmood in the international context needs to be considered while reflecting on feminist methodologies and feminist ethics that tend to be informed by predetermined conclusions. In such a reading, space for questions other than that of power—such as love and devotion—tend to be ignored. As we shall see below, Yashodhara's story has remained obscure in the contemporary feminist consciousness for long because it is not necessarily or readily understood and framed in terms of power.

Unlike the rewritings of the epics whose status as epics primarily remains unquestioned, fiction about Yashodhara addresses her unique position: she does not belong to one domain or discourse but to many discourses such as hagiography, history, mythology, legend, and scripture. Therefore, she is a character (in a literary sense) but she is also a historical figure in the sense of having really existed, as scholars who have worked on Pali sources suggest (Garling, 2016; Sarao, 2004; Schumann, 2004). She lives in a world and a time when gods and supernatural forces intervene in individuals’ daily life too. Her actions, decisions, choices, while not clearly and consistently available throughout these texts, have different kinds of implications for women's expressions of freedom in contemporary times.

So, what then is Yashodhara’s story like? What is it about it that resists conventional feminist critique? As we shall see below, Yashodhara’s story does not have an “original” text. Because there is no “original” situation for her to be caught in, the three novels about Yashodhara discussed below go beyond invoking anger in Yashodhara as a character and in the readers responding to the situation of her abandonment. The three Yashodharas we come across are not angry in the sense of Sita and Draupadi, for Yashodhara is a very unconventional model for a retelling or “re-visioning” of a story, history, or myth: she is autonomous, attentive, interactive, and nonoppositional, as at least two re-visionings discussed below indicate. These novels also go beyond the typical vocabulary of destabilization too. They give us an opportunity to discuss her as holding agency in a nonoppositional way. She does not necessarily see herself as “oppressed” or “marginalized”. Further, there are no villains involved in the story—nobody coaxes Siddhartha to leave. Her story is not animated by the presence of an antagonist (in the sense of Ravana in Sita's story or Duryodhana in Draupadi’s). That is perhaps the reason why retellings of her story are harder to find: hers is not a story at all in the narratological sense. She is not quite a “character” in the literary sense of the term, and therefore, poses a challenge to literary treatments.

What, then, facilitates this unconventional position and representation in the act of re-visioning? I suggest that in order to understand the aesthetic that informs this diversity in representation, we turn not to the vocabulary of destabilization but to an innovation within the practice of re-visioning. The new “hagiographical fiction,” a term Sasson herself suggests (Sasson, 2021, p. 4) to describe her novel, is where Yashodhara is located. This hagiographical fiction continues the work of hagiographical texts (see Section 3) in terms of focusing on her as an individual but does more than talk about her in terms of lamentation, victimhood, or sympathy by making space for her agency. Yet, it does not define agency in terms of destabilization the way feminist re-visioning is understood to be undertaking it. This hagiographical fiction constitutes a genre in which Yashodhara’s life is captured as that of a saint, with adulation, but put together in the form of a novel shorn of typical narratological elements in terms of quests and ways of fulfilling those quests. I mention the idea of quest here because feminist literary critics tend to use it as a way of discussing the difference that women’s/feminist writing comes to be loaded with (see Greene, 1990, 1991a, 1991b). Similarly, the neatness of “female/feminine/feminist” (Moi, 1989; Showalter, 1977) division that is brought to bear upon readings of women’s writing does not quite fit the Yashodhara we find in the hagiographical fiction about her.

The form of hagiographical fiction becomes a site for different domains to come together to have a dialog. It becomes an example of “beyond feminist aesthetics” (Felski, 1989), the idea contrary to the definition of feminist esthetics as belonging to an essence in terms of use of specific stylistic devices such as metafiction or memory. Yashodhara is “beyond feminist aesthetics” in the sense that neither she nor her story is not defined by destabilization as a motive, not always. As a result, her story does not seek to upend or challenge an existing story as an act of subversion, which is claimed as a feminist strategy. Further, two of the novels (Volga’s and Sasson’s discussed below) resonate with the idea of “we are not women; we are renunciants” (Salgado,
2013) that Buddhist women renunciants claim to live. This makes way for conversations that engage with the Buddhist ideal of the genderless self, an idea not readily understood by feminist literary critique that is uninformed by feminist theology.

Let us now turn to the stories about Yashodhara as narrated in different hagiographical texts.

**Yashodhara in the Hagiographical Texts**

Yashodhara (also Yasodhara) is known to be Gautama Buddha’s wife. The legend (bordering on other forms of narratives such as mythology, history, and hagiography) of the Buddha is well known. The King of Kapilavastu (also Kapilavattu) gets to know that his son, who is named Siddhartha (or Siddhattha) would either become a supreme king or a supreme spiritual leader. The king does not want his son to become the latter; so, he keeps his son protected from the harsh realities of life: suffering, old age, sickness, and death. But Siddhartha discovers these on his own and when he does, he decides to leave in search of a solution to these realities, or causes of suffering, as he sees them. Years and years of wandering bring him to Enlightenment which he reveals to the world as Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path for individuals to follow. Thus originates Buddhism which goes on to spread in Asia and from there to the rest of the world. Yashodhara remains less than a footnote in the popular imagination arising out of this legend. She appears briefly, asleep, when Siddhartha stops to take one last look at her and their new-born son before leaving forever; she is known to be sleeping at that moment. She reappears twice again in the Buddha’s story: once when the Buddha reappears after 7 years to take his son to share his “inheritance,” the Buddha’s legacy, with him, and again when she is mentioned to have been one of the women the Buddha accepted into the Sangha by ordaining them. She is also said to have become an arahat, the female equivalent of the Buddha, through her practice of meditation and following of the Buddha’s path.

We need to rely on several scholars working in the domain of Buddhist Studies to help us understand Yashodhara’s space in the hagiographical texts handed down to us since ancient times. Several texts mention Yashodhara, an overview of which is provided by Obeyesekere (2009) in her translation of two Sinhala folk texts registering Yashodhara’s lament. From the ancient period, there is *Yasodharapadana* (Sacred Biography of Yasodhara—dated around first century CE) which is a part of Khuddaka Nikaya texts of the Theravada tradition. The text is seen as central to the many other versions of her biography narrated in different forms (prose and verse) and in different languages. It is seen as the earliest text giving space to Yashodhara’s lament at being abandoned by her husband. In the Mahayana tradition, there is the monk Ashvaghosa’s *Buddhacarita* (Life of the Buddha) dated between the first and second century CE. Though Yashodhara is not the central character in the text, it does register her lament. The *Mahavagga* section of Vinaya Pitaka dated between sixth and fourth century BCE mentions her as living an ascetic life like Siddhartha from the time he had left. The Buddha meets her when he returns after several years and reminds her of her greatness in their past lives together.

Some texts from the medieval era and modern times too mention Yashodhara. For instance, *Yasodharapadanaya* is a Sinhala folk poem dated to the twelfth or thirteenth century. In this text, Yashodhara, now an arahat, visits the Buddha for the last time just before she is about to die. She recounts their past lives together and the Buddha lauds her devotion. *Pujavaliya* (Garland of Offerings), a thirteenth century Sinhala text, has her talk about her past lives with the Buddha, including the incidents in which she had been cruel to him, which only helped him become nobler. Tatelman (1998) draws attention to *Bhadrakalpavadana* (Extraordinary History of our Auspicious Era) composed in the sixteenth century in Nepal. The text draws a lot from the legends known at that time. Its chapters II-IX delineate the long trials Yashodhara must endure because of her husband’s absence. In order to become the king, Devadatta, Siddhartha’s evil cousin, spreads lies about the boy’s paternity. At the end, Siddhartha returns to affirm his wife’s chastity. “Bimba’s Lament” (Bimba is another name for Yashodhara) from *Chengmai*, a Thai folk text, and the Sinhala folk poem *Yasodharavata* (*The Story of Yasodhara*) both dated between eighteenth and nineteenth centuries too note her suffering at being abandoned by the Buddha.

Several scholars have studied Yashodhara’s presence in the hagiographical texts. For instance, Shaw (2018) shows that Yashodhara emerges as “a sympathetic and central presence” in the Jatakas. In the context of Sinhala folk poetry, Obeyesekere (2013) observes that Yashodhara “emerges as a distinct personality with a viewpoint of her own” (p. 189). In one text, Yashodhara makes the Buddha realize that if she has wronged him in all his Bodhisattva lives, it has been for his good. In another text, she speaks poignantly about having been left behind. Sasson (2020) spots a great love story between the Buddha and Yasodhara in the early South Asian hagiographical texts. She argues that Yasodhara in these accounts is a powerful character who cannot be defined in terms of abandonement. Strong (1997) looks closely at the Sanskrit *Mulasarvastivada Vinaya*, specifically the *Sanghabhedavastu* section, that includes Yashodhara’s story not found in the earlier Pali canonical texts. In his discussions of the text, Strong argues, “the Buddha is not alone in his quest for enlightenment. . . . Both he and Yasodhara, each in their own way, embark on their quest together, and the symbol of that quest is their son Rahula” (p. 116). Rahula is born after 6 years of pregnancy on the day of his enlightenment. The causes of this extended pregnancy are sometimes attributed to the karmas of Yasodhara and Rahula in their
previous lives and sometimes explained as austerities performed by Yashodhara as similar to those performed by her husband on his quest. There is a parallelism at work here: whatever happens to Siddhartha happens to Yashodhara as well. Later, after Rahula’s birth, she has to prove Rahula’s paternity and in the process, undergoes several trials. In one instance, she throws Rahula lying on a stone into a river and declares that the child on the stone will float to prove her chastity. In the end, the Buddha arrives to silence everyone and uphold his wife’s virtue. Yashodhara’s and Rahula’s lives are intertwined with the Buddha’s, reflecting the larger point about sacred biographies as collective biographies transcending the lives of individuals.

Each of these perspectives emerging from the hagiographical texts imagines Yashodhara as a powerful individual in her own right: either as Buddha’s spiritual equal occupied with a spiritual quest of her own or as someone assertive about her point of view as a wronged woman. These traditions have defined her in different ways to counter the silence around her in the larger canon. However, broadly speaking, these texts operate using sympathy and victimhood as points of reference. In my discussion of three novels published in the last two decades below, I seek to demonstrate that contemporary feminist consciousness moves Yashodhara’s story beyond these coordinates of sympathy or victimhood to show her as a character holding agency and making specific choices not imagined of her heretofore. The result is the rise of three Yashodharas radically different from each other.

These contemporary retellings are informed by many questions such as: Did Yashodhara feel she was a “thing” that could be renounced? Did she “get” what her husband’s goal was? How did she perceive the Buddha’s notion of universal love? What did she make of the Buddhist tenet of desire as a cause of suffering, as the Buddha promulgated it to the world? What did she make of the male freedom to simply walk away from everything? These are all poignant questions that require the attention of feminist re-visioning, a project dedicated to discovering women’s stories toward the larger attempt of understanding patriarchy. After a very long silence, these questions have come to be explored in Yashodhara’s story as retold by three novelists in the last two decades: *Buddha’s Wife* by Gabriel Constans, *Yashodhara* by Telgu writer Volga, and *Yasodhara and the Buddha* by Vanessa R Sasson. Each of these novels comes to approach Yashodhara in dramatically different ways that add to her enigma. These novels are works of “hagiographical fiction,” a term Sasson suggests to identify her own experiment. I use it to locate all the three novels as exercises in extending the hagiographical imagination in modernity. I find that these hagiographical retellings are remarkable in that they engage with the nonoppositional agency that Yashodhara possesses. These are not instances of feminist writing or women’s writing to be analyzed in terms of literary criticism. On the contrary, they make space for modes of engagement other than that of dissent or anger. Let us turn to these texts one by one and observe the novelists’ ways of framing the events “original” story and Yashodhara’s responses to these events.

**Yashodhara: A Resentful Wife?**

As indicated by the author in his dedication, *Buddha’s Wife* is written to look at Yashodhara as an individual and not as an appendage to her spouse. Constans writes: “Without you, there is no path, no way, no enlightenment, nor peace. Without you, there is no story.” The novel depicts Yashodhara in her last days. Glimpses of her life emerge in these days as Yashodhara and those around her—Kisa Gotami and Ananda, her brother-in-law and Buddha’s closest disciple—reflect on their lives. Her son, Rahula, is sent for from Sri Lanka so that Yashodhara can see him for the last time. She and Kisa Gotami think about the way they both vied for Siddhartha’s love. The courtesan-turned-nun Ambapali also makes an appearance. The “action” or plot bit is confined to Rahula’s journey from Sri Lanka with his wife and child to see his mother. The rest is reminiscing about things like love, desire, or men leaving their wives behind. The discussions among the characters relate to the limitations of the Buddha’s teachings.

Constans’ Yashodhara is a resentful wife, a fierce woman who calls Buddha a coward when he appears in a vision to her as she is about to die. Through revisiting several episodes of her life in her last days, the novel weaves a back-and-forth narrative in which Yashodhara talks about the relationship she enjoyed with Siddhartha and her understanding of his choices and decisions. The lens of cowardice is evident everywhere. Here, she talks about Ananda but compares him with Siddhartha:

“He, like Siddhartha, is afraid of desire. He believes that desire, attachment, and human love are the cause of suffering. He and Siddhartha didn’t comprehend the shame their teaching and way of life had brought upon the thousands of women who have been left alone to fend for themselves. How could we explain to our relations and elders, let alone ourselves, why our men had left us for some elusive concept of happiness? Were we good enough? Had we done something wrong? Were we offensive in some way?” (One).

Yashodhara speaks not just about herself but about every woman left behind by her husband: she transcends the personal to see the collective. In another moment in the novel, she comes closer to talking about only Siddhartha:

“He thought it was better to have compassion and understanding for all than to love and be involved with one. He could care about thousands, but couldn’t commit to a single individual. That’s why he left Rahula and me. He was afraid of loving and being loved too much. He was afraid of the pain, the agony . . . the grief” (Two).
When she realizes that other wives, in order to stay close to their husbands, live near the monasteries, she is agitated:

The realisation that, unlike most practices of the day, one did not have to leave their family to follow a religious life threw a cold bucket of pain in my face. I stood as frozen as snow on the peak of a Himalayan mountain in water . . . “That idiot!” I exclaimed, so loudly that Pajapati tried to hide inside her sari. “What a liar – a thoughtless, selfish liar!” (Two).

Rahula too thinks his father is a fraud. In her pain, Yashodhara calls him several names like “thief.” She is bitter about what has happened to her but she is also “a calming influence” (Two) on others, as Kisa Gotami calls her. She is more Buddha than Siddhartha for her philosophy for she believes that there is “nothing wrong with love” (Ten). In one conversation with Kisa Gotami, she recalls the day she was wedded to Siddhartha: “I felt like tearing off our clothes and taking him right then and there. . . But, you know how long those stupid priests could drone on and on” (Two). Elsewhere, she says:

“We don’t have to ‘get rid’ of feelings or desires. We need to pay attention, to remain awake, to see clearly what is happening and changing within and without, and let go of our judgments about these states, as much as the changes themselves” (Three).

The other characters too begin to talk about Buddha’s limitations. Ananda says, “He made some mistakes and didn’t have all the answers” (Eleven) and Ambapali says, “. . . he was wrong about the need to leave one’s family and loved ones behind” (Twenty Five).

Yashodhara mocks the way as shown by the Buddha. Readers get to understand that she was earlier a part of the order of the nuns constituted when Mahapajapati, Buddha’s foster-mother, led a group of women to the Buddha to allow women into the order. She has seen the “way” closely for herself and now that she has left it, she says:

“Remember, Kisa, desire is a trap . . . ” I winked, as she finished the sentence, “and desirelessness is liberation.” We laughed again.

“Just think,” I said. “How many years I believed in that rubbish, only to realise I had done it all out of desire anyway”” (Two).

This Yashodhara is defiant, and unabashed about desire. As the first re-visioning of the hagiographical Buddha, she resembles the other well-known heroines like Sita and Draupadi: she challenges the foundational principles of Buddhism. She is the voice of dissent but at the same, she is also the voice of love.

In the second retelling discussed below, dissent and love take on very different dimensions: they lead to a creation of Yashodhara who is radically different from Constans’s.

Yashodhara: A Spiritual Master?

In Volga’s novel Yashodhara (2019), written in a third person narrative, we see Yashodhara as Siddhartha’s spiritual equal, and even his master. She is a tender soul deeply sensitive to injustice caused by the Brahmanical rituals like the yagnas or to the ways in which the Brahmanical religion demeans women. The novel begins with Yashodhara seeing Siddhartha for the first time. In a subsequent meeting, she introduces herself and asks him to introduce himself. They fall in love and decide to get married.

However, Yashodhara’s father knows about Siddhartha’s lack of interest in worldly ways and the Kshatriya dharma. He decides that he will give Yashodhara’s hand to her only if he wins contests of bravery. Both Yashodhara and Siddhartha do not like the condition for they want to marry because they love each other and moreover, because Yashodhara is not a trophy to be won at the end of the competition. In one scene, they discuss approaching Yashodhara’s father to withdraw the condition. Siddhartha is willing to talk to Yashodhara’s father but Yashodhara says:

“Honestly, the responsibility lies on me. I myself have to prove to him that I am not a trophy or territory that can be won at the end of a competition. If you do that on my behalf, I shall remain to be a thing, not a human being. So don’t involve yourself in this. We shall meet again only when the person who has imposed the condition withdraws it” (p. 45).

As Yashodhara utters these words, Siddhartha realizes two things. One, he recognizes Yashodhara’s self-esteem and dignity – things that he had not previously associated with women at all before this conversation. Two, he feels confident that Yashodhara can help him “understand the mysteries of the world better” (p. 45), that is, he begins to see her as a companion in his spiritual endeavors.

Yashodhara does speak to her father about the idea of consent. She makes it clear that she does not respect traditions such as testing of a bridegroom’s valor and that she would not marry anyone else should Siddhartha lose the contest. Her father thinks that she has, literally speaking, gone mad and decides to withdraw the condition: not because he understands Yashodhara’s perspective but because he is worried that if anybody else comes to know about her madness, nobody would marry her.

Yashodhara and Siddhartha are united and continue to explore spirituality and meditation together. Siddhartha’s parents are worried: they had hoped that married life would make Siddhartha take interest in pleasure and day to day life but they are shocked that it becomes increasingly difficult to tell Yashodhara and Siddhartha apart because both of them seem to be drifting farther into their inner lives. Initially, they suspect that Siddhartha has influenced Yashodhara with his ideas but later on they are not so sure for Yashodhara seems to have been influencing Siddhartha on his spiritual path.
Years pass with the young couple continuing to talk and think about truth and love.

One day, they hear that Yashodhara’s father is about to organize a yagna. Yashodhara decides that she must go to her father to stop the ritual that costs the lives of many innocent animals in sacrifice. Her father, though, is astonished that her madness is not cured. He locks her up and sends for her husband and in-laws to come and get her. Alone in her room, we see Yashodhara in a transformative moment worth quoting here at length to receive her thoughts as she articulates them:

“It is only Siddhartha who considers me to be a fellow intellectual being. He values my thoughts, others do not. For most, women have no place in the intellectual world. As long as women shut the windows of their minds and confine themselves to domestic work, they are well honoured. But the moment they open the windows, they are taken to be mad and are forced into silence. How can women win a place in society as intellectual beings? Who will let them in? Perhaps only Siddhartha can offer them refuge. But in this regard, people will not listen even if Siddhartha tries to convince them. In order to convince people, he must have that conviction in himself first . . . . first he must rise to the highest esteem in society . . . . he must win the hearts of all people, kings and paupers alike. That will be possible only when his spiritual quest becomes fruitful. He must find the ultimate truth which no one has discovered till now. Till then, my thoughts will continue to be seen as a madwoman’s prattle. I must take care not to share my ideas with anyone but Siddhartha. Only he can pacify my intellectual unrest . . . . I must set ablaze my passion for knowledge. I must make his compassion for the suffering humanity flow deep enough to submerge the whole world. I can’t become a pathfinder though I have the desire to become one. So, I must make the path of the pathfinder more comfortable for him to tread upon. That shall be my aim and my life’s noblest ambition” (p. 119).

This is a moment that radically changes the way we ought to perceive her. We begin to see her as an individual who is planning to do something to uplift women as a whole; she is not a woman to be pitied. In defining her ambitions for Siddhartha, she becomes an agent of his Buddhahood. She is not a woman to be pitied. In defining her ambitions for the order.

As she gets Siddhartha ready for his journey away from home, she also asks Siddhartha to promise her that he would never utter her name to anyone:

“Don’t ask me why I wish to give this command. If you can understand it, it’s all right. Otherwise, don’t think too seriously to know why I commanded you to do so. You are going to sever all your bonds and leave the house on the fifth day after this. When you have left, Yashodhara should be wiped off completely from your memory. You should never mention my name, my thoughts and my consent for your going away. It should all be confined to us . . . . You know well what kind of importance is given to women in our society. It is impossible for a woman to break away from all bonds and go in search of the truth. But, when you have discovered the way for the deliverance of humankind, leave that path open to women too. Only then it will be possible for women to get liberated” (pp. 153–154).

Thus, Volga’s retelling suggests one possible reason why scriptures are largely silent about her: if Buddha was “ordered” by Yashodhara to never mention her in his discourses, and even to wipe away all thoughts about her, if Yashodhara had consented to Siddhartha’s leaving, Volga’s treatment of Yashodhara gives support and credence to the idea that Yashodhara and the Buddha had been bound to each other since time immemorial for she had been his wife for each of his lives as the Bodhisattva. Her silence is penned by herself so that Siddhartha can become the Buddha and create an opportunity for women to pursue intellectual and spiritual interests.

Before I move on to the third text, let me compare and contrast the two texts discussed so far. In Constans’ re-visioning, Yashodhara is angry and mocking. In Volga’s, she is the one who writes her absence. Both the novels are radical takes on Yashodhara’s abandonment. The former Yashodhara can be easily recognized. It is in line with the vocabulary known to feminist literary criticism—dissent, challenge, disruption, questioning, critique, and so on. The latter is different: in it, Yashodhara gets past the idea that she, like women in general, is a victim. She is more refined than Siddhartha in intellect. She masterminds Buddha’s journey into spirituality so that women can also find ways to enjoy intellectual freedom when Buddha opens the door and the journey to the truth. Her story is not of erasure, but of self-erasure for the collective good. This self-erasure is a means to achieve independence for women in general from the idea that women’s intellectualism is madness. Yashodhara decides to disappear from the scene if it can help women as a collective. Volga’s is an unusual, yet plausible, story: after all, for the two people who chose to marry each other as suggested by the legends and hagiographical accounts, she could not have been abandoned the way she is generally assumed to be. In her rendition of Yashodhara, Volga takes the enigma of a consensual marriage that lasted long but seems to have resulted in abandonment and transforms it into a story about Yashodhara’s determination and ambition for all women without invoking emotions such as self-pity, bitterness, anger, or hysteria identified by scholars in feminist re-visionings.

The third retelling of Yashodhara’s story discussed below is yet another unusual take on gender: it begins in anger at abandonment and similar emotions but ends with the idea of love as liberation and freedom from rancor.

Yashodhara: An Non-oppositional Beloved?

In Constans’ (2009) novel Buddha’s Wife, Yashodhara has left the Sangha, disillusioned with the Buddha’s idea of eschewal of desire. In Volga’s novel, she defines the idea of
love as wiping out of memories of the beloved for a cause. Both the novels end in Yashodhara’s death. However, it is in Sasson’s novel that her life has begun afresh with a new understanding of love.

Yasodhara and the Buddha is a refreshing take on looking at love, a quintessential relationship between the genders. Looking at Sasson’s Yasodhara helps imagine different ways of loving and living love. She (Yasodhara) is a beautiful example of a woman’s refusal to be defined in terms of resistance, challenge, rebellion, subjugation, subversion and similar ways of framing gender vis-à-vis Buddhist theology and feminist literary theory.

Sasson, a scholar of Buddhist Studies, takes brief mentions of Yasodhara in various hagiographical texts and transforms them into Yasodhara’s story in her novel. In the novel, several things stick to what is mentioned in the texts: for instance, Yasodhara is born on the same day as Siddhattha and is her cousin too (a detail Sasson notices in the texts she has read as a scholar of Buddhist Studies). Her story is that of individual expressions of rebellion, anger, and fear women live every day. She discovers puberty, mores about self-care and dressing up, behaving in a feminine way (or restrictions on interactions with boys), and postpartum depression. However, Sasson depicts all these experiences in ways women continue to experience today without the lens of contemporary expressions of feminist consciousness. Yasodhara is angry about the superstitions associated with menstruation and is sympathetic toward Suparnakha, a minor character in the epic Ramayana infamous for making advances toward Rama and his brother Lakshmana and getting her nose chopped as punishment. She has a hero in her mother who, from time to time, articulates sensible ways of looking at gender and society; in one instance, her mother enunciates the difference between being a bad archer and being a woman, cautioning about associating negativity with womanhood.

Yasodhara is Siddhattha’s equal – though both choose each other in marriage, Siddhattha has to win her hand by proving himself in different challenges. When the two are united in marriage, they live in peace. As Yasodhara gets to realize that Siddhattha would indeed leave 1 day, as prophesied, she resists the idea. Siddhattha leaves anyway, just as he is destined to, and she feels angry and miserable in her abandoned state. Initially, she refuses to be a mother to their son, Rahula, but soon develops a bond with him. The Buddha returns after 7 years to devastate her once again by asking for Rahula to be taken away with him for an education, which is his inheritance. At this demand that she give up her son, Yasodhara experiences more anger and bitterness. Unto this point, the novel has the right kind of feminist ingredients of re-vision: for Yasodhara resists a lot of things as she grows up, almost speaking the language of anger in challenging the tradition as various retellings of the Indian epics and the critics theorizing their representations in these retellings note.

However, toward the end, after Siddhattha has taken her son Rahula away, (a point she has settled in the Prolog itself with most of the novel as a look at the whole of her life), she does neither of the choices typically made available to heroines: she does not get hysterical about her being abandoned twice and she does not indulge herself in the idea of forgiving Siddhattha. What she does is rethink her idea of love as attachment, an idea that the Buddha cautions against. Let us return to the scene in which this transformation happens. In this scene, she spots Kisa Gotami, a woman carrying her dead baby around wrapped in a cloth:

“Oh my goodness!” I cried out as my hand flew to my mouth. There he was. Her baby. Dead in her arms.

Quickly she covered him up again and tucked him back in. “I just didn’t know what to do, Your Highness! I didn’t know where to go. I don’t wanna go back home. I don’t wanna go anywhere! I just want my son to be alive. I want him to come back!”

“But he can’t come back . . .”

“But they were going to bury him! I couldn’t let them stick him in the earth all by himself! He’d be so cold! So I grabbed him and ran. What else could I do? . . .” I walked back to the palace in a solemn mood. Kisa Gotami’s state was precisely what Siddhattha had warned me of. Attachment can destroy us. We have no choice but to let go. If we refuse to do it ourselves, death will do it for us. One way or another, we will eventually all have to go . . . Holding on to the people I loved was the only way I knew to survive. How different was that from what I just saw in Kisa Gotami? She was holding onto her son just as I had held onto everyone around me. Was I like a crazed woman with a dead baby in my arms? The thought sent a chill down my spine” (Sasson, 2021, p. 252).

This scene is a moment of transformation for this is where she “gets” what Siddhattha had been saying to her about attachment. As Sasson says in her article written after the novel, Yasodhara cannot be defined by her abandonment (Sasson, 2020, p. 54). She is not a pathetic figure to be pitied; she is a person who finds enlightenment in love without the rhetoric of a doctrine. It is a crucial moment in which the Buddhist ideal of love and goal of enlightenment meet. It puts forth an esthetic of love: love as enlightenment and enlightenment as love. There is no rancor, no hysteria, no self-pity.

In the novel, we do not have the story of how Siddhattha arrives at his insight into suffering and bonds that cause suffering. What we have from him is a piece of doctrine uttered in passive voice, reading almost like the scriptures. Notice Siddhattha’s language in the scene in which he meets Yasodhara after many years to take Rahula back:

“ . . . If I lingered, I would never achieve what I knew needed to be achieved, and so I left, without ever touching my son or
saying goodbye to you. I could not risk the obstacle overtaking me. I had to leave and cut the bonds that caused suffering if answers were ever to be found” (Sasson, 2021, p. 246 emphasis added).

In another moment, he says to her:

“Bonds cause suffering, Yasodhara,” he answered as though I had spoken out loud, “and the answer to suffering needed to be found. Not for myself, but for all beings. For you and for Rahula and for every living being in this world” (Sasson, 2020, p. 246 emphasis added).

Siddhattha’s is a lecture, a doctrine, a straightforward theorization of his enlightenment. It gets a little better when he says to her:

“When you love only those to whom you are bound,” he continued, “your love is limited and small, and it grows claws with which to grip. That kind of love turns into hatred in an instant when you least expect it. The bond a mother has for her son is the kind of bond we should all feel for every living being. But when it is limited to her offspring, it is poison waiting to be spread” (Sasson, 2021, p. 246).

However, it still does not rise above a sermon or a homily or a lecture that the reader might nod her head to but not quite decode or get it. The metaphor of mother’s love is some progress but not quite enough. For Yasodhara, the encounter with Kisa Gotami becomes a moment that brings enlightenment to her and it comes in the form of an esthetic of love: an esthetic of love as enlightenment and enlightenment as love. As she reflects on her life as she has lived it, things begin to fall in a perspective:

Even as a child, I had fought my parents to avoid growing up. I didn’t want to let go of my youth. I didn’t want to let go of my freedom or of the way things were. I fought change whenever it approached me. And I fought the future, hoping that if I tried hard enough, it would not become what it was destined to be. I had always thought that the king was mad for fighting the stars throughout Siddhattha’s childhood, but how different was I from him? How many of us are capable of letting anything go?

Siddhattha had tried for months to tell me that palace life was not his to live. He sat with me, talked to me, held my hand as he struggled with the call he heard inside. He told me in every way he could that he would have to go, and yet I refused. I wanted him to stay. When Rahula had come of age. Mahapajapati had told me the same thing, and I again refused to hear (Sasson, 2021, p. 252).

In these last pages in the novel, Yasodhara looks at her entire life as she has lived it until her encounter with Kisa Gotami and is now beginning to make sense of her life. She has looked at the tradition, the goddess as a source of power, and her sorrow backwards; the narrative cannot get rid of its temporality but it plays the role of Yasodhara taking stock of various stepping stones of meaning she has come across in her life—Suparnakha, menstruation, goddess, the beautiful Chinese woman she encounters in her childhood—and perhaps this moment of understanding love is not the final meaning at all, not in Sasson’s imagination of Yasodhara.

Conclusion

Let us look at all the three retellings together. In Constans’s novel, there is no “tension” to be addressed, no climax to move to. In Volga’s novel, there is a quest but it is not fulfilled in terms of taking certain actions to arrive at a resolution: Siddhattha becomes the Buddha, his mother is nudged to ask him to welcome women into the new faith, and Yasodhara lives her life as a nun serving people she meets wherever she settles briefly along with other monks and nuns. In Sasson’s novel, Yasodhara spends a lot of her time thinking about gender and society and her own situation within these but she ends on a note of letting go of all the notions she earlier had about oppression as experienced by women.

None of the three novels discussed above talk about Yashodhara in terms of sympathy, lament, or victimhood; or, at least, that’s not the narrative that stays at the end. These are re-visionings exploring Yashodhara from the point of view of holding agency, a notion informed by contemporary feminist consciousness and its project of re-visioning. But it is not an agency informed by subversion or challenge. These are novel feminist positions to take for these are unlike “vernacular feminisms” that Draupadi retellings are mined for (Erney, 2019, p. 492) that represent “feisty heroines and plucky underdogs” (Erney, 2019, p. 488). Nor are they limited to the positions of “confirming to and . . . questioning and subverting patriarchal social norms” (Verma, 2015, p. 57). Looking at the Yashodhara texts, one realizes that she is free from such scripting, as a result of which even the framing of the events known about her life is different. For instance, two of these novels (Volga’s and Sasson’s) do not seem to be bothered by framing her “abandonment” as “abandonment” at all—it’s a gesture that forces a reader to rethink conventional understanding of reading as ways of looking for expressions of power and powerlessness. Thus, Yashodhara occupies a new, unusual position in the acts of feminist literary critique: she stands, not in a zone caught up in the gender binary, but as a being who does not have to worry about proving herself by articulating herself in terms of dissent. It is an agency that is attentive to the self, that approaches the self (and the others in Volga’s case) with love rather than opposition. It is an agency that makes space for spiritual experiences and filters one’s position vis-a-vis others not just in terms of patriarchy but in terms of suffering and enlightenment to engage with that idea of suffering.

One more consequence of this freedom from a predetermined story is that hagiographical fiction, as a genre, helps
the novelists way to avoid the extremes in describing her state: Yashodhara is neither a victim nor a power-wielder, two positions that seem to be the only subject positions possible or available as emerging from feminist re-visioning projects. She is not powerful or powerless—the two extremes of power sufficient to contextualize previously ignored characters from the characters do not quite fit Yashodhara’s situation. It is a strange freedom that women and feminists get to experience: an ability to explore women’s experience not vis-à-vis men’s, or their actions. In Constans’s novel, expressions of bitterness and anger toward the Buddha make an appearance but they do not make an appearance in Volga’s and Sasson’s novels in a similar way for Yashodhara of these two stories are not bitter or angry. In Volga’s novel, Yashodhara wills her abandonment and does not feel angry toward the Buddha at all. In Sasson’s novel, she redefines her abandonment in terms of love and letting go. In neither of these two retellings does the oppositional praxis of anger play a role.

The aim of this article was to locate the new texts about Yashodhara in the larger, longer tradition of hagiography and to find ways of “doing” literary criticism outside the vocabulary of consent and “beyond feminist aesthetic”. My objective was also to dwell upon those segments of the texts in which one can see Yashodhara in moments of consciousness that cannot be framed in terms of narratives of subversion. The three novels examined here are presented as examples of hagiographical fiction, a genre that does not follow the script of rewriting as attempted in well-known cases of rewritings of the stories of Sita or Draupadi. Each of these novels deserves further and deeper scrutiny vis-à-vis other rewritings as well as older hagiographical texts to examine this hagiographical turn in feminist re-visioning. This attempt at creating some dialog between feminist theology and feminist literary criticism needs to be probed further to explore Buddhist feminist theology itself and retellings of other mythological figures, real and imagined (such as Ana, Jesus’s wife as imagined by Sue Monk Kidd). These are characters that need a lens different from positions of anger for these are positions located beyond “anger” (Lorde, 1981). These positions, indicative of the growing diversity among feminist voices, are gradually increasing: Volga’s (2016) The Liberation of Sita is an example from the recent years. They affirm the idea that literary representations and ways of reading these representations do not necessarily end up in “certain kinds of repression . . . and amnesia . . . that yield a politics without a politics” (Bargetz & Sanos, 2020, p. 2) but offer brilliant ways to engage in non-oppositional ways especially by letting representations of gender speak to spiritual ways of being.

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