

BOOK REVIEW

BHIKKHUNIS AS FEMALE RENOUNCERS

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Women Under The Bo Tree by Tessa Bartholomeusz, (Cambridge University Press 1994) focuses on the tradition of female world renunciation in Sri Lanka, exploring the different roles women play in Theravada Buddhist society in the light of social changes.

Until the 11th century a *Bhikkhuni* order existed in Sri Lanka. *Bhikkhunis* (ordained female nuns) were recognized as part of the clergy and had a political role. *Bhikkhunis* renounced lay life and practiced *Sasana Bramacharya* (the Holy Life). For unrecorded reasons the *Bhikkhuni* order disappeared in the 11th century. It was not until the end of the 19th century that female renouncers once again took center stage in Theravada Buddhist society. The *Sanghamitta Upasikaramaya* (nunnery), opened by Countess Canvarro in 1898, helped to revive the tradition of female renunciation. Later the *Dasa Sil Mata* movement, started by Sister Sudharmachari, helped to consolidate the role of the female renouncer. *Dasa Sil Matas* however do not enjoy the same status as *Bhikkhunis*. Unable to receive senior ordination they are female lay devotees.

Why the *Bhikkhuni* order disappeared and why women renouncers re-emerged in the context of a Buddhist revival are key questions for understanding women's role in Theravada Buddhist society. The author's attempts to deal with the issue of gender and its influence on religious identity are laudable given the fact that Buddhism has been guided predominantly by men.

The author analyses the re-emergence of female renouncers in the context of fundamental political and socio-economic changes inaugurated by British colonialism. The "globalising" forces that accompanied four centuries of colonialism under the Portuguese, the Dutch and finally the British, who brought Sri Lanka under their control in 1815, have altered Sinhala Buddhist identity irrevocably.¹ The establishment of British temporal power over the whole of Sri Lanka in 1815 fractured the traditional relationship of Sangha to State. The patronage of the Kandyan Kings had previously buoyed up the privileges of the Buddhist clergy. Although the British began by taking over the King's supportive role towards Buddhism they later withdrew their patronage. The previously unchallenged power of monks was removed. This effectively "disestablished" Buddhism from its traditional legitimacy.

Distanced from the seat of power, the Buddhist clergy were forced into competition with Western notions of rationality and superiority. It was in this position of cultural defense that Buddhists called upon women to rediscover their vocation as world renouncers. The author notes that this co-incided with

a period of increased activity by the laity in which previous distinctions between the contributions of the Buddhist clergy and the laity were conflated. The laity opened up a space in which a new kind of religious practitioner was freer to manoeuvre. Yet the author notes that their influence was also conservative since the laity absorbed traditional paradigms of gender identity. It is also interesting that female renouncers of this period were predominantly from elite families which may account for the acceptance of their "active" role in a period of Buddhist revivalism.

Against the backdrop of "degenerate" Western colonialism Sri Lankan women were exhorted to uphold their purity and support a Buddhist cultural reassertion. The writings of Angarika Dharmapala were formative in promoting the positive role that women could play in supporting Theravada Buddhism. The "valorization" of women can also be seen as a response to the proselytizing efforts of Christian missionaries. The Sanghamitta School, which opened with the help of Countess Canvarro and Angarika Dharmapala, made Buddhist education a priority for women in the face of an alternative religious ideology. Thus the shift in attitudes towards female renouncers mirrors changing ideological needs of Theravada Buddhism. In the late 19th century women were seen as crucial to the cultural reassertion of Buddhism. Women were to "reproduce" Buddhism "by going from home into homelessness" (Angarika Dharmapala). The influence of structural factors on the representation of women is clear in the contemporary clergy's disapproval of female renouncers. Debates about restoring the order of nuns are met with criticism from the Sangha. There is a shift in emphasis towards women's role as lay devotees. Monks prefer to emphasize the role of the *upasika* (Buddhist lay women) rather than the tradition of female renunciation.

Women's role in Buddhist society seems to oscillate along a continuum, with the *Bhikkhuni* at one end and "nurturing" mother figure at the other. *Bhikkhunis* had political power whilst the *Dasa Sil Matas* are sidelined in a supportive role. Prevailing notions of gender identity are not fixed, they seem to be malleable to the needs of the Buddhist *Sangha*. In certain contexts the female renunciant is valued but in others she destabilises the patriarchal view of the ideal woman.

The author recognizes the importance of external factors in shaping prevailing notions of gender identity. However the global challenge of colonialism needs to be elaborated. The imperial imports: of new ideas, new political structures and money represent the intrusions of modernity. This intrusion radically altered local tradition by shaking local meanings of time and space. This altered religious identity in Sri Lanka

and in turn altered not only gender identities but social identities. A new "chauvinistic" Sinhala Buddhist identity emerged purporting to "defend" Buddhism against the perceived colonial cultural rape. In order to restore Buddhism as the dominant hegemony it was not only women who were re-interpreted as nurturers, history and tradition were also given novel textual claims. The author identifies the new role women play in re-asserting Buddhism; however she does not fully explore the legacy of colonialism and the implications for the future development of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.

One of the most positive aspects of the book is the findings on why women renounce. This is illustrated through a series of vignettes of lay nuns' lives. *Dasa Sil Matas* recognize the personal power they achieve by living separately from the patriarchal family. Nuns are sceptical of the monks' attempts to control their status and do not succumb to the passivity expected of them. Lay nuns view renunciation as a stepping stone leading them out of societal constraints and into a new space where they have more control over their identities. Society's expectations that women should marry and become good mothers is forfeited in favour of a world in which lay nuns can stretch their social space and refuse a subordinate position to a husband.

This does not mean that the experience of female renunciation is heterogeneous. A clear discrepancy exists between Western and Sri Lankan nuns- the former preferring a life of seclusion and meditation whilst the latter focus more on devotional activities. This difference may, in part, be explained by monastic attitudes to women. The impact of stereotyping gender roles means that Sri Lankan lay nuns face greater societal constraints. However, as the author rightly points out, what is important is that female renunciants find fulfillment in their role. Even if most lay nuns are uninterested in restoring the ancient order of nuns, they have not necessarily internalized monks' view of their inferiority.

Challenges to attempts to institutionally subordinate women manifest themselves in "everyday acts of resistance" rather than a political agenda to reclaim the order of nuns. This resistance, whether it is Countess Canvarro's donning of the

ochre robes or Kotmale Sudharma's insistence that lay nuns can renounce, is important. It challenges the relegation of women to a lower capacity for following the spiritual path. The nuns have a moral rather than political agenda and in this respect perceive themselves as superior to monks. Nuns do emerge into the public sphere, on peace marches and to perform pujas, but are not involved in messy realpolitik like the Sangha. In this sense it is difficult to 'fix' the identity of nuns, their fluidity challenges the Sangha's attempts to regulate women.

Perhaps the most important contribution of this book is the author's exploration of the extent to which the Sangha mediates relationships between lay nuns and civil society. Today the Buddhist clergy's attempts to subordinate women through control of their status is challenged by American Theravada Buddhists' more inclusive approach towards women. Nuns have now been ordained in California and it will be interesting to follow the changes (if any) this encourages in the Sangha. The author concludes that the most pressing issue for nuns in Sri Lanka is the goal of nibbana. Nuns' renunciation offers them the privilege of distancing themselves from worldly affairs. Nuns' faith in their vocation frees them from a dialectical relationship with global events and influences. The Buddhist clergy however may need to undergo a period of self-reflexivity in order to deal with another global challenge to Sinhala Buddhist identity. ■

Notes

1. Here "globalizing" refers to the impact of modernity in disembedding local conceptions of time and space which disrupt local social relations and, in turn, lead local contextualities into a dialectical relationship with global events and influences. A theoretical model for this is found in Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp20-22. This point has been noted in a paper by Stephen Berkwitz, "Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism: Violence and the Transformation of Tradition", Aug 6, 1994.

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