Renouncing the World: An Exploration of the Verses of Buddhist Nuns, Baul Women, and Women Mystics

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Abstract

The paper attempts to explore the concept of renunciation and highlight its diverse meanings through selected verses of Buddhist nuns, Baul women, and women mystics. The theme of renunciation serves as a connecting thread across these narratives, linking them meaningfully across time and place without blurring their distinctiveness. An examination of the verses reveals many layers of the experience of renunciation, highlighting that the practice of renunciation can take unique forms and meanings for different women in diverse spiritual traditions. In societies where women's religious roles are traditionally performed within the domain of the household, and women are socialized as primary caregivers within family settings, renunciants tread a tightrope between individual spiritual practice and renouncing family ties. The paper attempts to bring to the fore creative ways in which women renunciants carve their spiritual journeys, which illuminate some of the ways in which diverse spiritual and philosophical Asian traditions are in dialogue with each other.

Keywords: Bauls; Buddhist Nuns; Gender; Mystics; Renunciation; Women's Narratives

In popular imagination, the term "renunciation" tends to be understood as giving up the "normal" course of life for one of abstention, austerity, detachment, and discipline. This alternative way of life is often marked by embodied signs of renunciation such as distinct

sartorial practice – robes symbolising detachment, mendicancy, or frugality; a nun's shaved head; a Baul's dreadlocks; and so forth. A renouncer is often imagined as someone who has severed her ties from domestic, worldly roles and discarded her former identity in the pursuit of liberation or self-actualisation, while living at the fringes of society or in dedicated monastic spaces. However, conventionally, women in Asian societies are idealised in the normative roles of a wife or a mother, with these relational roles often defining their identities. Vocations resisting these roles are often perceived and portrayed as deviant. Through an analysis of selected verses of (*a*) the earliest Buddhist nuns, (*b*) Rabia Basri, a female mystic from eighth-century Basra in Iraq, and (*c*) Baul women from Bengal in India, this paper attempts to explore how women navigate these (often) contradictory roles and aspirations and reimagine their spiritual journeys in unique ways.

Although diverse in their spiritual paths and times they live/lived in, it is interesting to see how there's a unifying thread connecting them all – seeking liberation from the roles prescribed to them by the society. However, renunciation does not necessarily mean severing all worldly ties and living at the margins of the society. Often perceived as "wanderers," "detached" or "carefree," the renunciants do not demonstrate indifference towards the society, but ingenious ways of engaging with it.

The verses of the first Buddhist women are compiled in the *Therigatha* ("songs of nuns," sixth century BCE), which is included in the Buddhist Pali canon. *Theri* means elder/senior woman and "gatha" their songs/poems. Some of these *theri*s lived at the same time as the Buddha, and they came from different walks of life: they were teachers, wives, mothers, and courtesans. They were the Buddha's contemporaries who had the potential to realise their spiritual goals, like the Buddha himself. In this sense these women could be described as his "spiritual equals" (Murcott, 2006). Their verses allow us an insight into their lives and spiritual paths.

The wife and the courtesan reflect a recognizable binary within the cultural imagination. As expressed in their verses, Buddhism gave them a space to renounce their prescriptive roles within patriarchal structures. Their verses also offer us a glimpse into the social realities of women's lives in those times. For instance, Ambapali, who was the chief courtesan of Vesali, was renowned for her beauty. Her patrons comprised numerous princes, including King Bimbisara. Ambapali, however, eventually renounced her fame and prosperity to become a *theri*. In the verses attributed to her, she describes how her body is now withering away; it's an "old house" with "plaster falling off" (Murcott, 2006). The verses describe how each part of her body, once youthful, beautiful, and attractive is now old, wrinkled, and weak. Invoking images of decay, Ambapali describes how her body is now "dilapidated" and "the place of pain" (Murcott, 2006). The contrasting images of what was once "valued" and is now decaying foregrounds an idealized and objectified notion of a courtesan's body, compounding patriarchal and social biases. In addition, Ambapali's reflection underscores the transience of all phenomena, of all existence. The fact that everything is impermanent and bound to change with time betrays the futility of attachment to any person, thing, emotion, need, or desire.

The verses of the women who were wives recognise the constricting patriarchal roles when they express how liberated they feel from the drudgery of their domestic lives. Mutta exults that she is free from "mortar, pestle," her "crooked husband"; she says she's free from birth and death, and everything that dragged her back (Murcott, 2006). Verses by the wife of a basket maker, who is known as "Sumanagala's mother," also expresses her joy, relief, and peace at being free from her "pestle," "cooking pot," and her husband, as she now meditates with happiness under a tree (Murcott, 2006). Sakula leaves behind her son and daughter, wealth and grain, and "goes forth to homelessness" (Hallisey, 2015). Sona, when she has

become weak from giving birth to ten sons, approaches a nun who teaches her the *dhamma* that helps Sona go forth and attain enlightenment (Hallisey, 2015).

As expressed in the verses of these *theri*s, embracing Buddhism opened a space for them to rescript their identities. While expressing the sense of liberation and peace these women feel as they leave behind their former, prescribed roles, the verses also offer us glimpses into the gendered social realities of their times. On the one hand, their verses voice stereotypical concerns: the courtesan reflects on how her beauty has withered away, whereas the wives complain about household chores and their husbands. On the other hand, the verses appropriate the stereotypical images to highlight the conventional and critique the status quo. They problematise the view that unequivocally privileges the household as a space for women to formulate their identities, vis-à-vis their relational status with men. Ambapali's verses brings forth the contemplation on the transitory nature of all phenomena as a facet of the Buddhist renunciatory path. It also underscores the limits of attachment to an "ideal" form. The verses portray women contemplating on the peace and stillness that the greater realisation of the true nature of all phenomena has summoned up in their lives.

While the verses of the *theri*s articulate how they resist and renounce prescriptive and normative roles, the poetry of mystic Rabia al-Basri frames the experience of renunciation in the surrender of one's self, in meeting with the beloved/god. Exploring her poetry uncovers layers of this paradoxical equation where we "find" ourselves only when we completely "lose" who we are. Rabia is believed to have lived in the eighth century in Basra, Iraq. Although she was a renowned Sufi poet and saint, not much is known about her life and her writings. Her history is mostly derived from her hagiography drawn from her status as a legend (Ford 1). Her poems offer us insights into the nature of love, devotion, and seeking her beloved, which are equally revealing of the journey or experience of attaining self-

realisation. The realisation to renounce and the sense of liberation contained therein can only be experienced and not enunciated. For instance, she says in her poem “Reality”:

In love, nothing exists between heart and heart.

Speech is born out of longing,

True description from the real taste.

The one who tastes, knows;

the one who explains, lies. (Emphasis added.)

Through the metaphor of love, Rabia says that the paradoxical state of being where you renounce your identity and experience liberation can only be experienced and not described. Rabia emphasizes the significance of unmediated relation with the beloved or the divine, beyond the confines of institutions or systems. Her experience of renunciation is a radical surrender.

In her poem “Love,” Rabia says:

I have loved Thee with two loves –

a selfish love and a love that is worthy of Thee.

As for the love which is selfish,

Therein I occupy myself with Thee,

to the exclusion of all others.

But in the love which is worthy of Thee,

Thou dost raise the veil that I may see Thee. (Emphasis added.)

Rabia describes two loves – a selfish love that engages with the beloved as an object, and the other that transcends the attachment to discover the other as a subject – a veil that needs to be pierced for a deeper revelation, and once that veil is renounced, the seeker can *meet* the beloved/divine. The implication that our perceptions can be unrecognised barriers

that need to be challenged and transcended is illustrated in another poem "Die before You Die." Rabia says:

Ironic, but one of the most intimate acts

of our body is

Death.

So beautiful appeared my death - knowing who then I would kiss,

I died a thousand times before I died.

"Die before you die," said the Prophet

Muhammad.

Have wings that feared ever

touched the Sun?

I was born when all I once

feared - I could

love. (Emphasis added.)

Meeting the beloved calls for annihilation of the self – to relinquish all that we consider as self – our perceptions, ego, attachments, fears, and desires, because ultimate knowledge can only be gained through the experience that comes from unlearning what we already know. Shattering our ego and dissolving our rigid perceptions and judgements can enable us to be humble and perceive others as subjects, in all their complexity. Looking deeply, we can see through the countless veils that we all have donned and adopt alternative ways of perceiving the other. We, therefore, can recognise that we are all part of the same boundless whole – streams of the same river that nourishes us alike. For Rabia, the only absolute is the god; everything else is ephemeral. Farid al-Din Attar narrates an anecdote in *Episodes from the Memorial of the Saints* that demonstrates Rabia's insight into the pursuit of love and devotion: Once Rabia sent Hasan of Basra a piece of wax, a needle, and a hair. She

told Hasan to be like the wax which burns itself to illumine the world; to be like the needle, always working naked; and that when he has done those two things, a thousand years will be like a hair for him (Attar, 2000, p. 39). Hasan asked Rabia whether she wanted the two of them to get married. Rabia replied:

> "The tie of marriage applies to those who have being. Here being has disappeared, for I have become naughted [sic] to self and exist only through Him. I belong wholly to Him. I live in the shadow of His control. You must ask my hand of Him, not of me."
>
> Hasan then asked her, "How did you find this secret, Rabe'a?"
>
> *She replied, "I lost all 'found' things in Him."*
>
> *Hasan asked, "How do you know Him?"*
>
> *Rabia answered, "You know the 'how'; I know the 'howless.'"* (p. 37; Emphasis added.)

Subverting patriarchal expectations, Rabia emphasizes that her being has dissolved and merged into the god/beloved. The duality of self-other relation has been transcended and now the true self reveals itself – the one that is known through knowing the other. Paradoxically, this loss of self is not an "inadequacy" or "incompleteness" or a debilitating state, but one that is spiritually empowering – an impetus to renounce what we perceive as the markers of our selves in order to realise the real self. Moreover, there is no prescriptive know-how to go about it because each seeker treads this path in her unique way.

Speaking of unique ways of seeking the beloved, I shall now explore the songs of a Baul woman. Bauls are known as musical mystics and spiritual practitioners, historically low-status, low-caste, and both Hindus and Muslims, who would wander from village to village singing songs and receiving alms (*madhukari*) in return for their singing. Some Bauls describe themselves as "Bhabonmad; Premonmad!" (one fanatically in love). Often, they are

described as the "mad one"— *pagla* (madman) or *pagli* (mad woman) (Parvathy Baul, 2005). Clad in an ochre saree, *iktara* (one-stringed rhythmic instrument) and *duggi* (drum) in hands, Parvathy Baul beckons to Krishna, "Oh Kaala," and dances with total abandon, her ankle-length dreadlocks spiralling along. The Baul song addressed to God Krishna is being performed an auditorium in New Delhi, India:

Hey Kaala (Krishna, The dark one)

Kaala, my dark beloved

Has driven me crazy

How can I stay at home?

….

He's the flame that flickers within

Kaala is life and death itself

How can I stay at home?

….

I can't hold onto

Honour and pride anymore

What should I do?

Where can I go?

I can't see the way ahead

I can't hold onto

Honor and pride anymore

What kind of love is this?

It makes me snap all my ties

I can't hold onto

Honor and pride anymore (translated from Bengali by Ajab Shahar–Kabir Project)

This song in which Radha, intoxicated with Krishna's love, calls out to him, portrays the deep love that Radha feels for him, which cannot be withheld. She is driven "crazy" and cannot be contained by society's notions of honour or pride. The song brings forth a subversive potential in such love that renounces the worldly markers of identity and honour.

Parvathy is an educated and well-known contemporary Baul artiste who performs at various national and international platforms. She was studying arts at a university in West Bengal, India, when she met Sanatan Das Baul, who initiated her into the Baul path (Interview with Mataei Georgescu, 26 Sep. 2015). She was so inspired by him that she pursued him to his *ashram* and requested that he take her as his student. Born in Bangladesh, Sanatan Das Baul was a highly respected Baul master. Parvathy studied with him for seven years before he urged her to embark on her own spiritual path and practise independently. After he passed away in 2016, Parvathy has been spreading his teachings across the world. In an interview to Matei Georgescu in Romania, Parvathy gives us an insight into her spiritual practice. She says that the essence of Baul practice is to find the divine within through love and surrender. But this surrender is arrived at through disciplined practice and meditation (*sadhna*), which enable one to be aware of oneself, to know oneself. She further says that once we know ourselves, we can begin to know the other (YouTube interview, 26 Sep. 2015).

In a song of Lalon Fakir performed by Parvathy during Rajasthan Kabir Yatra Festival (original song 'Paare Loye Jao' in Bengali; translation Ajab Shahar–Kabir Project), the lover/seeker is left alone in peril and calls out to the beloved/god who is seen as a compassionate redeemer who shall take the lover/seeker ashore. The song can be read as a forlorn lover/seeker's plea to the beloved/god to rescue him/her. This song could also be read as an allegory for the guru-disciple relationship, which is crucial in the Baul tradition. The seeker urges the "redeemer" to take her across because she has "no practice" and "no path." A deluded/disillusioned/ignorant seeker is guided into the right path towards awareness and

self-realisation by a guru. Another song "Sailing into Your River" uses the imagery of the "body boat" that the seeker lets sail into the guru's river, thereby becoming a "loser" who will have no one else to blame for her "loss" but her guru. She leaves the "Truth Mart (Narayangunj)/To the Fair of the Fancies (Madangunj)", but on the banks her "little boat" gets stuck, and she had to fight the "desire-crocodile" with bare hands (Parvathy Baul, 2005). The seeker here sings how she has struggled with illusions and seduction of the senses in the "unfathomable bazaar" on the banks of the river. In this bazaar the "merchants sell'n'buy" and leave her blind "with their colourful sharp light." They "rob [her] soul in front/Of several open eyes" (Parvathy Baul, 2005). The seeker cannot see through the deceptions and illusions that bedazzle her vision. Her soul becomes a site for transaction for the merchants with deceiving allure. Only when she has defeated all predatory desires and dropped all the veils that she arrives at the realization of truth and urges the guru, "the boatman" (Parvathy Baul, 2005) to guide her ashore.

Incidentally, Parvathy is married to one of her Baul gurus, Ravi Gopalan Nair. Traditionally, the ideal Baul path implies undertaking the renunciatory journey as a couple with an intent to pursue spiritual goals as co-practitioners (Knight, 2011). Parvathy discusses that there are layers of meaning in the simple and native Baul compositions. Among the two kinds of meanings, "one is apparent, the other hidden. The apparent part is for the listeners to enjoy; it also provokes a thought within them. Through years of *sadhana* and listening, one can perceive the hidden text. Actually, a Baul will not explain the inner meaning. I have seen that most of the Masters would explain it to the Disciple only at an intimate moment, which they think is appropriate" (Parvathy Baul, 2005). As for the *theri*s and Rabia, for the Bauls too the spiritual anchor – the Buddha, or the guru, or the beloved/god – is a crucial guiding force in their spiritual journeys.

Conclusion

The present paper has explored selected vignettes with an aim to illuminate how philosophical and conceptual frameworks intersect across Asian spiritual traditions. The paper has explored different aspects of the construct of renunciation through selected narratives of women's spiritual journeys from diverse traditions across space and time. The idea of renunciation entails the idea of liberation. Although the meaning of liberation varies among the diverse spiritual seekers, there is a subversive strain that runs through all the narratives discussed in this paper. Renunciation challenges the constraints of women's prescriptive roles in a patriarchal society. It becomes a means of reaching greater self-realisation; of relating with god/beloved in way that transgresses institutionalized ways of devotion; and of recognising the self and the other as subjects, in all their complexity. Renunciation also becomes a means to transcend various social, cultural, and political structures that slot women within neat and convenient categories such as householder-renouncer or respectable-deviant. The women's spiritual journeys discussed in the foregoing analyses demonstrate how the women renunciants have creatively, and, at times, radically dissented from their prescribed roles. The critical force of renouncing lies in this subversive potential, which allows women space to reimagine and rescript their lives.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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