

Book Review



***Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice: In Search of the Female Renunciant.* By Nirmala S. Salgado**

Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
319 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-976001-5 (paperback),
978-0-19-976002 (hardcover).

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The last few decades have been a time of great change for Buddhist nuns around the world. In this book, Nirmala Salgado directs her attention to Sri Lankan Buddhist nuns and their relationships with the government, Sri Lankan monks, the lay community, the international community, and scholars of women in Buddhism. She focuses primarily on the construction and deconstruction of scholarship on Buddhist nuns, notions of female renunciant identity, and narratives of agency, subjectivity, and liberation, both secular and religious. Her thesis is that previous studies about Buddhist nuns are deficient in multiple ways and she aims to identify those deficiencies. After outlining the focus of each chapter, I will highlight some strengths and weaknesses of the volume. The text makes an important contribution to bringing to the fore the voices of Sri Lankan nuns themselves around issues of renunciation and ordination, outside the framework of a western liberal or “globalatinized” discourse. However, at times this position and its ensuing critique are pursued too strongly and Salgado ends up effectively denying that Sri Lankan nuns are able to exercise their own agency in selecting the path to *bhikkhuni* ordination.

Part one, “Narration,” begins with “Decolonizing Female Renunciation,” setting out “to question how academic writers represent women in Buddhism in general and female renunciants in particular” (8). To this end, in Chapter 1, Salgado assesses the work of Rita Gross, Tessa Bartholomeusz, and Wei-Yi Cheng, and contends that they “use a language of secular liberalism” that results in a “narrative disjunction” between the lives of the nuns and the ways scholars represent them.

Chapter 2, “Institutional Discourse and Everyday Practice,” continues with this theme, questioning binary distinctions such as lay and renunciant, worldly and otherworldly, private and public. These dualities, Salgado contends, “articulate a colonial discourse” that is Orientalist and persistently hegemonic in positioning the nuns in “a secular-liberal narrative that does not measure up to their lived lives” (10).

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Chapter 3, “Buddhism, Power, and Practice,” addresses the issue of the *aṭṭhagarudhammā* which Salgado translates as “Eight Revered Conditions.” An inquiry into the history, context, and implication of these conditions is arguably central to understanding the lives and attitudes of nuns both in contemporary Sri Lankan society and in other times and places.

Part two, “Identity,” begins in Chapter 4 with “Invisible Nuns,” examining the concept of renunciation and the public debates about nuns that took place in Sri Lanka in the latter decades of the twentieth century with the aim of establishing the nuns’ identity as renunciants. Salgado discusses the nomenclature for nuns, their modes of dress, and their renunciant identity. Based on selected interviews with nuns, she raises questions about the nature of their ordinations, their religious standing, and their perceived authenticity as monastics. Here, she notes uniquely Sri Lankan distinctions between the householder (*gīhi*) ten-precept ordination, the renunciant (*pavīdi*) ten-precept ordination, the *anāgārika* (“homeless ten moral virtues”) ordination, and the ten-precept ordinations given to novice monks and nuns. She differentiates between two types of renunciation: a “sociological” disassociation from kinship relations and a Buddhist disassociation from desires and attachments.

Chapter 5, “Subjects of Renunciation,” challenges the representation of Sri Lankan renunciant women’s development as a movement, particularly as a resistance movement aimed at forging a *bhikkhunī sangha*. In discussing “female renunciant identity,” Salgado traces the development of national networks of *sil matas* (female ten-precept renunciants) in cooperation with the state and the changes that occurred in the nuns’ self-perceptions as *bhikkhunī* ordination gradually became socially acceptable amidst vociferous debates.

Chapter 6, “Becoming *Bhikkhunīs*, Becoming Theravada,” examines the debates about higher ordination for nuns from the perspective of Theravada identity. Salgado begins by questioning assumed realities and claims of authority and authenticity, specifically regarding contested categories such as “Theravada” and the complicated dynamics of seniority, competing narratives, and power involved in what it means to be a Theravada *bhikkhunī* or a *sil mata*. Next, she discusses the question of a uniquely Theravada *bhikkhunī* identity in the context of what she regards as an international “mission,” where the absence of full ordination for women is seen as discriminatory. Finally, she describes recent ordinations of Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs* and the politics of ordination, which she depicts as a competition for the authority to conduct legitimate *bhikkhunī upasampadā* (full ordinations).

Part three, “Empowerment,” begins in Chapter 7 with “Renunciation and ‘Empowerment.’” Here Salgado takes up Saba Mahmood’s important critique of “liberalist concepts of freedom and power that are grounded in notions of resistance and agency” and applies it to “the so-called empowerment of Buddhist nuns” (185). Following Mahmood, she rejects the binary between “subordination and subversion” and asserts that renunciant women in Sri Lanka are empowered by the “renunciation of selfhood, marriage, and property—that is, from the very practice of *sīla*” (186).

In Chapter 8, “Global Empowerment and the Renunciant Everyday,” Salgado argues that the ideals of higher ordination and a transnational renunciant sisterhood are “the product of a Western project” that is “framed with reference to liberal notions of equality and freedom” (211) and “the vanishing point of a Western teleological project” (233). Her conclusion is that “The narratives of contemporary Asian nuns have yet to be appreciated on their own terms, aside from their situatedness within dominant Western projects” (233).

One of the book’s overall strengths is Salgado’s discussion of the terminology for nuns (116-120). Interrogating terms and concepts such as “*nun*, *lay nun*, and *female renunciant*” is a positive contribution to the study of women in Buddhism, though it is unfortunate that the pejorative “*ani*” (“auntie”) for nuns of the Tibetan tradition is used uncritically. Her observation that variant representations of nuns and the nomenclature used to designate them are entangled with “monastic lineage, power, and social acceptability” (120) is very helpful. She notes that “claims about status and identity are inseparable from *claims* about power” (121) and contends that claims about whether or not nuns are indeed renunciants seem to correlate with support for or opposition to the *bhikkhunī upasampadā*. For example, the monks Salgado interviewed “all said that they did not think of *sil matas* as renunciant (*pavidi*)” (121). This amounts to claiming that only monks are legitimate renunciants.

As Salgado affirms, it is certainly not true that Buddhist nuns across cultures, or even in one culture, represent “a monolithic collective renunciant subject or agent... who is easily available for representation across space and time” (123) and it would be a mistake to portray them as such. I concur that it would be a mistake to objectify the nuns’ religiosity and replace their living, breathing humanity with a single, dominating academic discourse. However, I disagree with Salgado’s assertion that “Thinking about the lives of nuns as resisting translation helps one understand why pre-conceptualized notions of gender, identity, and religion should be re-considered” (12). This claim itself can be seen as an orientaling turn that seeks to mystify the nuns’ fairly straightforward lives. Equally mystifying is the notion that “apparent indicators of female renunciation are far from definitive” (12). Shaved heads and robes have been the definitive signs of Buddhist renunciation for over two and a half millennia, and Sri Lankan nuns quite clearly consider themselves renunciants.

More positively, Salgado’s critical assessment of categories such as “lay” and “ordained” is an important direction for research. At the same time, it must be recognized that these categories are quite clearly delineated (albeit not with those labels) in scriptural passages ascribed to the Buddha himself. He describes the four assemblies of disciples—*bhikkhus* (monks), *bhikkhunīs* (nuns), *upāsakas* (laymen), and *upāsikās* (laywomen)—as necessary for a strong and balanced Buddhist society and indicates that he will not rest until the *bhikkhunī sangha* is firmly established. Nuns in all Buddhist societies consider themselves distinct from householders by their practice of intentional celibacy, their practice of specific precepts (*sīla*), their robes and shaven heads, and their full-time dedication to Buddhist practice. The distinction is so clear that many nuns in Asia do not consider themselves to be women, since the word “woman” implies worldly duties and expectations very different from those of a renunciant. Indeed, Salgado

includes a typical quote from a Sri Lankan *bhikkhuni* who says, “We are not women” (8). This *bhikkhuni* clearly sees herself as possessing definitive signs of Buddhist renunciation.

The question that Sri Lankan and other Buddhist women (including myself) have been asking is why women’s choices should be more limited than men’s when it comes to Buddhist monastic practice. It is true that women can shave their heads, put on robes, and practice the Dhamma very well without taking the *upasampadā*. But it is also true that, since the time of Mahapajapati (the Buddha’s foster mother and the first *bhikkhuni*) some have not been content with this median step. Salgado and I differ radically in understanding the roots of these women’s choice to ordain.

Although it is unclear exactly what Salgado means by “globalatinization” in the Sri Lankan Buddhist context, we can be fairly certain that millennia of ordinations were not conducted due to colonialist oppression or “globalatinized” influences. The Buddha himself affirmed the equal potential of women to achieve the fruits of the path and personally allowed women to enter the *sangha*, so it is unclear why full ordination for women should be considered, as Salgado puts it, a resolution framed or imposed “according to liberal and liberating secular assumptions about the need to affirm gender equality or equal rights” (4). Further, the fact that this critique of liberal, secularist maneuvering is directed only to the full ordination of women as *bhikkhunis* and not to the full ordination for men as *bhikkhus*, needs to be questioned.

It may well be argued, as Salgado does, that “renunciant practice does not easily equate with a liberal juridical notion of social activism” (124), yet it is clear that the lifestyles and attitudes of Sri Lankan nuns are diverse and that their renunciant practice is closely related to the social dimension of their lives, including questions of sustenance, education, and social justice. The claim that a concern for social justice is not appropriate behavior for nuns, which is often leveled when nuns dare express egalitarian aspirations, can be a form of intimidation that serves to disempower nuns and discourage them from acquiring the knowledge and requisites they need to live healthy renunciant lives. To dismiss social and material well-being, the pursuit of knowledge, and the aspiration for higher ordination as factors of foreign instigation can function to keep nuns poor, undereducated, and disenfranchised.

If higher ordination is taken for granted and applauded for monks, why is it suspect, threatening, or dispensable for nuns? For Salgado, “the liberating identity that is sought in terms of the *upasampada*... is shaped by a dynamic of oppression or inequality” that “reinforces a politics of domination” (215). Indeed, alternative perspectives on the lives of Buddhist women, such as Wei-yi Cheng’s book (Cheng, *Buddhist Nuns in Taiwan and Sri Lanka A Critique of the Feminist Perspective*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006), which is itself critiqued by Salgado, also attempt to deal with this type of concern. Yet such views may easily collapse into an anti-feminist agenda that erodes the well-being of nuns whose lives continue to be full of very real challenges.

Conditions for nuns in Sri Lanka have certainly improved since 1987. Nuns, as renunciants, may now become scholars, meditation adepts, teachers, and social welfare

workers, as they so choose. By their own concerted efforts, nuns have demonstrated that they cannot be consigned to an inferior social category or to the sidelines of Sri Lankan religious life. It is easy to speak against the ills of outside intervention when one is educationally privileged and financially independent, but quite a different matter for people who live in destitution. Moreover, the process of Buddhist transnationalism is an exchange, with crosscurrents running in many directions. According to the Sri Lankan nuns I have known, gaining a voice to articulate their feelings of neglect and marginalization is not an unwelcome imposition from abroad, but a new freedom that, used judiciously, is helping nuns gain access to valuable spiritual and intellectual resources. Higher ordination is certainly not the only foreseeable goal for these nuns, but demarcating only certain allowable subjectivities and identities for these nuns can add yet another layer of objectification that acts to circumscribe their lives.

Salgado repeatedly claims that the *dasa sil matas* are not interested in the *bhikkhunī upasampadā* and that some nuns simply accepted it, not as an expression of resistance or rights, but because it presented itself (146). This seems to deny the very notion of independent agency that she theoretically supports. She claims that those who assisted the *sil matas* “by invoking discourses of deprivation, human rights, and feminism, or by upholding a religious heritage, rarely harmonized with *sil matas*’ understanding of themselves” (147). That does not explain why close to half of Sri Lanka’s estimated 2000 nuns have opted to receive the higher ordination in the past two decades. Presenting the nuns who have become *bhikkhunīs* as either passive recipients or as opportunists “seeking access to state and ritual privileges” (148), seems to underestimate and even disparage them. After all, the initial impetus for reestablishing the *bhikkhunī* ordination came not from Western academics, as frequently stated, but from Sri Lankan Buddhist women who attended the first conference of Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women in Bodhgaya in 1987. In Thailand, similarly, in my view the impetus for full ordination is coming from Thai Buddhist women, not outsiders.

In this book, a plethora of ideas are castigated as “liberal assumptions” and thus pitfalls (152), but competing claims about religious identity, renunciation, and empowerment abound in any religious context and are a natural concomitant of social change. Transnational networks like Sakyadhita need not threaten the integrity of local Buddhist heritages. On the contrary, these networks encourage a fuller appreciation of unique, local cultural heritages, along with greater awareness of the diversity, richness, and value of the world’s Buddhist heritages. Sri Lankan nuns do not need to be isolated from outside influences. Although an awareness of the dangers of cultural imperialism, hyper-intellectualism, and similar adversities are important when negotiating unequal power relations, Sri Lankan Buddhists are fully capable of envisioning their own futures. Buddhist women are increasingly aware of the very real power imbalances that exist in their societies and Sri Lankan women, in their own unique ways, have been pioneers in helping redress these imbalances. For example, the goals, and indeed the name “Sakyadhita” itself, were suggested and vigorously advocated by the Sri Lankan contingent in 1987.

As with higher ordination, Salgado seems to advocate for differing practices for men and women with regard to transnational forces. In this case the salient question is why nuns

should be shielded from outside influences while monks enjoy the privilege of traveling freely and engaging actively in the global marketplace of ideas. Salgado answers that “Transnational venues effectively serve to perpetuate economic differences” (214), but that has not been the case with the transnational spaces Sakyadhita has created for Buddhist women. Salgado must be aware of this, since she joined Sakyadhita in the 1990s, has attended Sakyadhita conferences, and has been a witness to the increased well-being of nuns in Sri Lanka since 1987. Anyone involved in this vibrant transnational exchange can attest that the nuns are anything but “dumb” (214). Portraying Sri Lankan nuns as resigned or unaware of the blatant gender inequities, and helpless in the face of some presumed secular-liberal misrepresentation, does not sufficiently credit the nuns’ own initiative and imagination. Sri Lankan renunciant women are not focusing less on their daily religious practices because they now have the option to receive the *upasampadā*; if anything they are encouraged to practice more, by virtue of being recognized as “fully nuns.”

Salgado relates that, “In 1983 when I first began interviewing *sil matas* in Sri Lanka, a university professor asked me why I would want to study them, since ‘They are like beggars’” (239). At the first Sakyadhita conference, Sri Lankan nuns themselves expressed an urgent need to address these problems. The aspirations they expressed had little to do with “a liberal feminist story about feminism” (10), but a great deal to do with getting support (spiritual, psychological, and material) for renunciant women practitioners. Happily, the nuns’ *dukkha* has been ameliorated as a result of the nuns’ own efforts, encouraged by their interactions with Buddhists from other countries. To deny these mutually enriching interactions ignores and distorts an important chapter in Buddhist women’s history. Intercultural exchanges need not be evidence of a colonialist agenda; they may also be evidence of profound compassion, mindful awareness, and genuine respect. The recent history of Sri Lankan women—nuns and laywomen alike—is a truly liberating narrative and a source of inspiration for countless women around the world.

Salgado critiques the use of master narratives “of a certain profile” (9) and then proceeds to replace these narratives with master narratives of a different profile, namely, theoretical frameworks borrowed from Arvind-pal Mandair, Saba Mahmood, Chandra T. Mohanty, Dorothy E. Smith, and others. She claims that Rita Gross and Wei-yi Cheng provide a “framework for understanding the lives of nuns to which the nuns themselves clearly do not subscribe” (9). Rather than allowing the nuns to speak for themselves or provide insight into their lives, the book appears to be yet another ascription of theoretical frameworks developed in the academy rather than on the ground, with little fresh, constructive analysis.

Salgado contends that “monastics inhabit a world where questions of gender equality and agency do not figure in the manner assumed by secular-liberal thinking” (11). In fact, *male* monastics inhabit a very privileged world, one in which access to full ordination and resources are taken for granted, whereas until recently, *female* monastics’ lack of access and agency were visible everywhere. Salgado correctly observes that nuns variously “challenge, ignore, or bypass apparent structures of male domination” (11), but unequal monastic power structures are not simply appearances; they affect the nuns’

lives in very tangible ways, beginning with how they get their food. Symbolically, their lives are constrained by the legendary *garudhammā* that relegate nuns to the bottom of the monastic pecking order. How can questioning the subordination of nuns that is explicit in these rules “bespeak an ideological complicity that reinforces a supposedly patriarchal Buddhism?” (10-11). If nuns cannot afford bus fare to study Buddhism, this is not simply an academic question or a case of “narrative disjunction”; it is a very real problem that the nuns would like to solve. Questioning the social and institutional structures that enforce the nuns’ overt and internal subordination to the monks may be both wise and ethical, regardless of what passport one holds. To superimpose additional theoretical frameworks from outside will not resolve the urgent issues that nuns face. In Sri Lanka, “the subaltern” (6) has been speaking clearly on its own behalf for more than a quarter century. If we listen closely, original frameworks for understanding the “lived lives” of the nuns will emerge of their own accord. The task is not to cure anyone, but simply to listen.