



**The Wish of the Mother:
Re-writing Desire into Sacred Narratives in
Yaśodharāvata and the *Purāṇa Vessantara Jātaka Kāvya***

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Abstract

Buddhist hagiographies are laden with connotations of a symbolic ‘matricide’ where Māyā, the Buddha’s mother, has to pass away in order to fulfill a necessary pre-condition for Buddhahood. Cast as a supporting figure in Buddhist Canonical literature, Māyā is written away, de-sexed, and sanctified as Māyādevaputta (the mother god) in the name of her early death. As Jāti, or birth, is codified in Buddhism as a part of saṃsāric existence, the figure of the mother, while highly venerated is also associated with suffering and attachment. Yet, the use of terms such as Amā Māṇi (Mother of Deathlessness) to refer to the enlightened one points towards an ambiguous connection between the Buddha and the maternal. Recent studies have similarly understood and decoded this ambivalence while suggesting possibilities of understanding maternal love as a space of pure loving-kindness. Therefore, in this essay, I wish to read the domain of dreams and the maternal in Yaśodharāvata and the Purāṇa Vessantara Jātaka Kāvya, two folk-poems written during the Kandyan literary period as possible sites for further exploration of this ambiguity. The texts in question are of oral origin, passed down from one woman to another, especially during funerary practices. What is particularly interesting about both these texts is the folk poet’s rendering of dreams and wishes of the Bodhisattva’s mother that precede the main narratives, indicating the space of conception in light of a maternal unconscious. I wish to read this alongside the trope of the recurring maternal wish and its associated metaphors in Sinhalese Buddhism to render the



significance of the mother towards the Buddha's quest for nirvāṇa. Therefore, by re-reading Buddhahood as a realization of a maternal wish, I suggest that the alternative narrative possibilities for feminine sexuality and desire that emerge within the folk resist the erasure and subsumption of the matrix into greater traditions.

Keywords: Women in Buddhism, maternal wish, Māyā, folk poetry

Résumé

L'hagiographie bouddhiste est chargée de nombreuses connotations d'un 'matricide' symbolique quand Māyā, la mère du Bouddha, doit mourir pour répondre à une pré-condition nécessaire à la réalisation du Bouddha. Investie d'un rôle de soutien dans la littérature bouddhiste canonique, Māyā est effacée de l'histoire, désexualisée puis sanctifiée comme Māyādevaputta (la mère du divin) au nom de sa mort prématurée. Comme Jāti, la naissance, est codifiée dans le Bouddhisme comme faisant partie de l'existence saṃsārique, la figure de la mère bien que hautement vénérée, est aussi associée à la souffrance et à l'attachement. Cependant, l'utilisation de termes comme Amā Māṇi (Mère de l'absence de la mort) en référence à l'Illuminé, dirige l'attention vers une ambiguïté de la connection entre le Bouddha et le maternel. Des études récentes ont à cet égard compris et décodé cette ambivalence, tout en suggérant la possibilité de comprendre l'amour maternel, comme un espace de pure bienveillance-aimante. Deux poèmes populaires composés durant la période littéraire Kandyān, soit le Yaśodharāvata et le Purāṇa Vessantara Jātaka Kāvya, nous offrent des sites favorables pour l'exploration des relations entre le Bouddha et le maternel. Le but de cet essai est, en particulier, d'étudier ce thème à partir des références au maternel qui se trouvent dans les rêves cités dans les poèmes en question. Les textes en question sont d'origine orale, transmis d'une femme à l'autre, surtout durant les rituels funéraires. Ce qui est particulièrement intéressant dans ces deux textes, c'est la présentation par les poètes populaires des rêves et des désirs de la mère du Bouddha, des thèmes qui précèdent la narration principale, et qui traitent de l'espace de la conception à la lumière d'un inconscient maternel. Nous lirons ces thèmes en relation avec le thème du vœu maternel récurrent, avec les métaphores qui y sont associées, pour approcher de l'influence de la figure maternelle dans la quête du Nirvana par le Bouddha. En lisant la réalisation du Bouddha comme la réalisation d'un vœu maternel, je suggère que la possibilité de narratifs alternatifs pour la sexualité et le désir féminins, qui émerge dans le populaire, pourrait résister à l'effacement de la matrice dans les grandes traditions religieuses.

Mot-clés : Femmes en Bouddhisme, vœu maternel, Māyā, poésie populaire

Introduction: The Mother Question

A Double Bind: Tracing Motherhood in the Buddhist Canon

Mothers, being the progenitors of the saṃsāric cycle, are often thought to be dismissible from the Buddhist canon. This claim is further justified on the grounds that her womb gives birth (*jāti*), becoming the vessel that carries the very seed of continuous existence. As birth brings attachment, and attachment suffering, motherhood itself is sometimes thought to be negative and of no soteriological value in furthering one's quest. This may be further supported by canonical indications, where the post-natal death of the mother is the pre-condition for a Bodhisattva birth. However, what I term the canonical matricide of Māyā¹ does not limit itself to the physical death of the Buddha's mother but also extends to the erasure of her presence and significance from Buddhist hagiographies. As Liz Wilson has pointed out, one could speculate that this is owed to the canonical notion of spirituality being dominated by masculine ideals instead of the feminine, where women are written as aids of saṃsāra²— a 'man-trap'.³ Moreover, the literal mother was seldom associated with spirituality and was rather associated with stunted spiritual development drawing on the fact that the suffering ascribed to motherhood often made a female birth undesirable.⁴ In such instances, the move from saṃsāra to nirvāna⁵ is also articulated as a "rejection of the mother and an identification with the father."⁶

Marie Françoise Guédon problematizes such modes of reading, stating that asking questions about the status of women in societies assumes that cultures are already structured in a masculine logic and that women are only a second thought, a secondary aspect of culture.⁷ It follows that tracing only the strands of canonical misogyny and injustice, while opening our eyes to the limitations of patriarchal structures, may have closed them to certain fruitful ambiguities in the depiction of women which may provide points of identification with the mother and by extension, matriculture. In an attempt to avoid drawing identity and definition for women from larger patriarchal structures, she directs us towards non-dominant meaning-making processes such as folk imagination.⁸ I

¹ Māyā (also known as Mahāmāyā) is the mother of the Gautama Buddha. It is said that she must pass away within a week of giving birth as the womb which had borne a Buddha shall not bear another mortal being.

² The cycle of life laden with suffering due to life, death, and rebirth in Buddhist thought.

³ Liz Wilson, *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurines of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 70.

⁴ Rita Gross. "Feminism, Lay Buddhism, and the Future of Buddhism", in *Buddhist Women Across Culture: Realizations*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 283.

⁵ Sanskrit for 'blowing out' or being extinguished. A concept in Buddhism that represents the freedom from the endless cycle of saṃsāra and therefore, suffering.

⁶ Reiko Ohnuma, *Ties That Bind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 27. In her book, Ohnuma attempts to take up motherhood as a lingering tie which cannot be broken even if one gives up other worldly ties. However, she does so with regard to Gōtami and other canonical maternal-like women while considering Māyā as only serving the function of the birth-giver.

⁷ Marie Françoise Guédon, "Introduction," *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, 01, no. 1 (2020): 3-7; my paraphrase.

⁸ *Ibid.*

not only concur that such spaces are capable of nurturing and transmitting various cultural and religious imagery to write alternative, secular narratives within the sacred but trust Rowlatt's supposition that the notion of matriculture aims to support the expression of women, by taking their statements seriously while considering the "female world as primary."⁹ To take the female world as primary, we must look into intuitive, unconscious, and unexpected strands of transmission that cultures perform in order to sustain matricultures. Accordingly, my role as a reader here is informed by Karen Derris's notion of seeking out a "hermeneutic which, while accounting for the historical contexts of the Buddhist texts, also acknowledges these texts as a part of living traditions with futures that may be shaped by [and through] interpretation."¹⁰

In an attempt to explore the under-explored ambiguous attitude toward motherhood, I turn to Reiko Ohnuma's *Ties that Bind*:

Buddhism had a complex and ambivalent relationship with mothers and motherhood—symbolically, affectively, and institutionally. Symbolically, motherhood was a double-edged sword, sometimes extolled as the most appropriate symbol for Buddhahood itself, and sometimes denigrated as the most paradigmatic manifestation possible of the attachment to the world that keeps all benighted beings trapped within the realm of rebirth.¹¹

Given such opacities, that at times take motherhood as the 'most appropriate symbol for Buddhahood', and as 'a trap' at other times, it would be most productive to keep our interpretative possibilities open by not delimiting or conflating the maternal and the feminine, but by reading for the possibility of the feminine to emerge through the domain of the mother. This double bind of motherhood also seems to be extant across Buddhist traditions. For instance, in her work on the ideological landscape surrounding women in Mahāyāna Buddhism, Diana Paul identifies two recurrent themes that emerge in attitudes towards the feminine: firstly, the perception that the "feminine is mysterious, sensual, destructive, elusive and closer to nature" and secondly, "that the feminine is wise, maternal, creative, gentle and compassionate."¹² Though these two strands also recur in Theravāda Buddhism to a great extent, it does not promote an integrative view that identifies the masculine and feminine as two harmonizing facets of a singular spirit.¹³ Furthermore, while there has been ample attention given to Mahāyāna Buddhism, which was considered more democratic and acceptable towards women, little has been said about the maternal in Theravāda and its lived realities in South Asia, particularly Sri Lanka.

⁹ Linnéa Rowlatt, "Blind: The Western Gaze at Matriculture, Historically," *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies* 01, no. 1 (2020): 16.

¹⁰ Karen Derris, "Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 62.

¹¹ Ohnuma, *Ties That Bind*, 4

¹² Diana Y. Paul, "Introduction", in *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahāyāna Tradition*, (London: University of California Press, 1985), xxiv-xxv.

¹³ In the Mahāyāna conception the masculine corresponds to wisdom and the feminine, to compassion. See Diana Y. Paul.

Therefore, in this essay, by locating the transmission of a maternal metaphor in popular imagination, I trace the literary consciousness of the Buddha's mother through the folk laments in question. In doing so, I wish to argue that while the canonical matricide of Māyā performs an erasure of her physical body from Buddhist hagiographies, the folk poet's rendering of demands and desire through the tropes of wishes and dreams develop a psychological connection to the Bodhisattva, thereby establishing her undeniable presence in the Buddha's story. This will further allow us to re-read her depiction in light of a matricultural point of view where Buddhahood is articulated as a wish-fulfillment brought about by the mother.

'Amā Māñi': Mother as Metaphor

In Sri Lankan Buddhism, the mother is frequently in apposition to the Buddha. This is taken up by Richard Gombrich in his essay 'Feminine Elements in Sri Lankan Buddhism,' where he discusses the juxtaposition of *Budu amma* (Buddha-mother) as a metaphor that deserves further investigation. He does so with reference to quotidian coinages and usages, where the term is used generously and interchangeably to refer to both one's mother as well as the Buddha.¹⁴

While my inquiry began with an attempt to trace this relation in the Buddhist canon, I was struck by the realization that perhaps I was looking in the wrong place. The prevalent version of this maternal metaphor has made its way into popular consciousness to such an extent that a popular Sinhala song meant to be sung by a father retorts *ammāvarun pamaṇada matu buduvannē?* (Are only mothers capable of attaining Buddhahood someday?).¹⁵ This rendering of the mother in Sinhalese popular imagination is remarkable given the perceived exclusion of women from the soteriological path and the notion that one cannot attain nirvana during a female birth.

This can be further illustrated through the maternal metaphor that recurs within Sinhalese Buddhism in the *Maṭṭ Upamāva*, a text which is particularly used in a ritual communal context called *yugāsana bana* (the twin-seat sermon) where two Buddhist monks will take part in a *dhamma* recitation upon a *dhammāsana*.¹⁶ *Mātā iva Buddho yi, Khīram iva Dhammo yā, Khīrapayika dhārakā viya sangho yi*; the text goes on further to equate the Buddha to a mother, the Doctrine to milk, and Buddhist monks to children who nourish themselves on the Buddha's milk.¹⁷ What is stimulating about this maternal metaphor is the fact that it goes into lengthy descriptions of the things a mother would do for her children in order to construct the spiritual equivalent of a secular mother

¹⁴ Richard Gombrich, "Feminine Elements in Sinhalese Buddhism", *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 16 (1972): 68; Gombrich relates this connection to the notion of prediction in Buddhism where in certain Buddhist texts such as the 'Mātupōsaka Jātaka', the mother is seen wishing Buddhahood on behalf of her son.

¹⁵ T.M. Jayaratne 'Amma Sandaki,' YouTube. September 30, 2021, Song, 03:20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KojDgYygA7s>

¹⁶ Richard Gombrich, "Feminine Elements in Sinhalese Buddhism", *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 16 (1972): 70.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 70-73.

which sits within the role of the Buddha. Functioning as a comparison, the maternal metaphor also juxtaposes the selfless nature of a secular mother who goes out of her way for her children with a Buddha's carefully cultivated and perfected compassion. This can be further observed in the coinage *Amā Māṇi* (the mother of deathlessness) another name for the Buddha that holds him in the position of the mother. Reversing the metaphor, a popular household coinage *gedara budun ammā* (a mother is the Buddha of a home) presents to us another juxtaposition that hails the mother in the Buddha's position within the domestic sphere. These strands of transmission of the maternal metaphor not only complicate the attitude towards motherhood in Buddhist thought but may hold alternative implications that undo the notion of motherhood as an archetype of attachment that hinders a woman's ability to enter into the soteriological path.¹⁸ Therefore, in order to understand the origins of this maternal metaphor, we should trace the psychological significance of the relationship between the Buddha and his mother.

Tracing Matricultures: The Folk Appeal of Canonical Mothers

Barbara Watson Andaya credits the success of Theravāda Buddhism in South Asia to its appeal to women. She further goes on to state that what nurtures this particular appeal is the fact that it relies on a maternal metaphor that recurs in Buddhist imagination, thereby allowing secular women to relate to it irrespective of social standing.¹⁹ While her study is based on Early Theravāda Buddhism, the popularity that the two folk poems in question have gained among the common village women in Ceylon²⁰ speaks to a folk tradition that ensures the woman-to-woman transmission of these laments. Prominent Sinhala scholars have also underscored their significance by stating that while *Yaśodharāvata* relates the "Buddha's story in a manner that would be of interest to women,"²¹ *Purāṇa Vessantara Jātaka Kāvya* reflects "the harsh realities faced in the domestic life of one that leaves in search of a higher cause."²² Such engagements point towards how the laments in question deviate from previous canonical preoccupations with spiritual concerns to accommodate secular themes such as humane aspects of grief, mourning, and the loss of filial relationships that would be of more relevance to lay Buddhists. Therefore, it is not an overstatement to posit that while these post-canonical narratives may be at "the margins of those valued by scholars [they] offer us rich resources for thinking about the representation of mothering [and women] in Buddhist literary traditions."²³ Engelmajer upholds that this kind of interpretative approach will not only legitimize motherhood by contesting patriarchal structures but will also reveal "aspects of women's authentic and lived experience."²⁴

¹⁸ See Ohnuma, "A Mother's Heart is Tender", *Ties that Bind*, 11-35

¹⁹ Barbara Watson Andaya, "Localising the Universal: Women, Motherhood and the Appeal of Early Theravāda Buddhism," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33, no. 1 (2002): 16.

²⁰ Charles E. Godakumbura, *Sinhalese Literature* (Colombo: Department of Cultural Affairs, Sri Lanka, 1976), 280.

²¹ Ibid.

²² *Purāṇa Vessantara Jātaka Kāvya*, ed. Sucharitha Gamlath (Colombo: Godage, 1990), ii; my translation.

²³ Karen Derris, "Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering," 65.

²⁴ Pascale F. Engelmajer, "'Like a Mother Her Only Child': Mothering in the Pāli Canon," *Open Theology* 6 (2020): 91.

To develop my position further, it is important to introduce my primary texts: said to have their oral origins somewhere in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries during the Kandyan Literary period, *Yaśodharāvata* and *Purāṇa Vessantara Jātaka Kāvya* are two popular folk laments by unidentified authors. The former, which recounts the story of Yaśodharā²⁵ after Siddhārtha's *mahābhīnikmana*, the great renunciation,²⁶ is one hundred and thirty verses in length,²⁷ while the latter, written in nine hundred and seventy-five verses, narrates the *Vessantara Jātaka*, the penultimate birth of the Bodhisattva which relates his resolve towards the perfection of alms. While both of these laments were later published in the early nineteenth century with the advent of letterpress printing, their early transmission mostly owed to their appeal to women. There is further speculation that "in all these laments, the narrative persona, if not the actual author of the poem, is a woman."²⁸ Whether or not these speculations hold truth, these two laments have also gained popularity within Sinhala funerary practices and were sung during communal gatherings by women who came together to work. It is therefore abundantly clear that the poems may have had some impact to not only structure the lives of Sinhalese women but also to shape a literary consciousness of female figures who have been seemingly disregarded or cast aside in the Buddhist canon. Accordingly, I explicate the ways in which the dream sequences and the verses on motherhood in the two narrative poems may offer poetic renditions of the Bodhisattva's mother as Māyā in *Yaśodharāvata* and as Phusatī in *Purāṇa Vessantara Jātaka Kāvya*, which may speak to the significance and the symbolic value of the Bodhisattva's mother towards his quest for nirvāṇa.

The Domain of the Maternal

The Mother's Desire

Mothers and sons are at the heart of psychoanalytic thought. Freud postulates that this very first relationship that forms between an infant and his mother will have an impact on all object relations that follows in his life.²⁹ Therefore, it is not implausible for us to speculate a psychological connection between one of the most sanctified sons in history and his mother. Elucidating on such psychological connections, Sudhir Kakar argues that the maternal-feminine may be far more central in the Indian psyche, especially in relation to the mother goddess:

²⁵ Siddhārtha's wife in the Buddhist tradition.

²⁶ The *mahābhīnikmana* marks the moment of Siddhārtha's renunciation of worldly pleasures, including his newborn son and his wife on behalf of his quest for enlightenment.

²⁷ For the purpose of this study I will focus on excerpts from the manuscript, which Ranjini Obeyesekere identifies as 'Yaśodharāvata B' or 'Y (B).' For further information on Yaśodharāvata see: *Yaśodharā, The Wife of the Bōdhisattva: The Sinhala Yaśodharāvata and the Sinhala Yaśodharāpadānaya* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009).

²⁸ Ranjini Obeyesekere, *Yaśodharā, Yaśodharā, The Wife of the Bōdhisattva: The Sinhala Yaśodharāvata and the Sinhala Yaśodharāpadānaya* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 19.

²⁹ Sigmund Freud, "The Dissolution of the Oedipal Complex", *The Ego and the Id and Other Works: The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1961), 173-179.

[T]he hegemonic narrative of Hindu culture as far as male development is concerned is neither that of Freud's Oedipus nor that of Christianity's Adam. One of the more dominant narratives of this culture is that of Devi, the great goddess, especially in her manifold expressions as mother in the inner world of the Hindu son. In India at least, a primary task of psychoanalysis, the science of imagination or even 'the science of illusion' — Mayalogy — is to grapple with Mahamaya, 'The Great Illusion' as the goddess is so called.³⁰

This perhaps offers insight into our societal preoccupations with our mothers. For instance, given the close contact between Hinduism and Buddhism, it is highly probable that this sense of the great goddess as the Great Illusion transmitted into Buddhist imagination, at least as its namesake, Māyā.³¹ Therefore, perhaps, the real Great Illusion is the one in which we are lamenting the ephemeral presence of Māyā in the canon, reading her solely as a birth-giver and distracted from the possibilities of tracing her literary consciousness that spans generations and temporalities through Jataka stories, eventually emerging only as an integral element of her son's inner world.

Accordingly, to map her desire onto later folk renditions we must first visit her depiction as an aspirant in an origin story that dates back to the time of the Vipassi Buddha, ninety-one *kappas*³² before the time of Gautama,³³ where it is said that Māyā was born as the elder of the two daughters of King Bandhuma. Upon receiving an invaluable piece of sandalwood and a golden wreath, the King gifted the sandalwood to his elder daughter and the wreath to his younger daughter. The eldest powdered the wood and took it in a golden casket as an offering to the Buddha, who rubbed some on his body; the rest was scattered by her in his residence. Seeing the sight of the Buddha's golden-hued body, Māyā is said to have been inspired by a desire to be the mother of such a being.³⁴ This wish explains Māyā's characterization in the *Lalitavistara* as *pūrvābhilaṣinī* (the one who has wished or aspired from before).³⁵ The golden-hued body, a sign of a highly meritorious being, is also one of the thirty-two signs of greatness. Thus, we can construe that what inspired Māyā's wish of conception was the greatness and nobleness ascribed to a Buddha. Born alongside the Bodhisattva, in his many births, it is said that Māyā also

³⁰ Sudhir Kakar, "The Maternal-Feminine in Indian Psychoanalysis" in *The Essential Writings of Sudhir Kakar* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 183.

³¹ Mahāmāyā, also referred to as Devi, is known as the primordial Goddess or Divine Mother. She is the deification of all wealth, strength, beauty, fame, knowledge and renunciation. It is said that Pārvati is also a reincarnation of hers.

³² *Kappa* also known as *Kalpa* is a long period of time in Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies. It is translated as *aeon*.

³³ Gunapala Malalasekera, 'Māyā, Mahāmāyā', *Buddhist Dictionary of Pali Proper Names* http://www.palikanon.com/english/pali_names/dic_idx.html

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Lalitavistara*, trans. Rajendralala Mitra (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1882), 43.

practiced the ‘perfections’³⁶ or the ten qualities leading to soteriological development for one hundred thousand *kappas*:

සොළස අසංකෙයියක් කප් නිබ්බේ
 එසඳ අසංකෙයියක් හෝ නිබ්බේ
 පැතුටයි එබිසව සඳමහ නිරිබ්බේ
 බුදුවන උන්තම කෙනෙකුන් නිබ්බේ

Continuously for sixteen infinite eons
 Continuously even in infinite terms
 Wished that queen oh King Sanda Maha
 For a noble one who would become a Buddha³⁷

In the verses preceding the narrative of the Bodhisattva Vessantara’s story in *Purāṇa Vessantara Jātaka Kāvya*, we encounter a wish articulated by the mother born as Phusati in the penultimate birth of the Bodhisattva. The folk poet emphasizes the mother’s perseverance, accentuating the fact that she has been keeping up this resolve for ‘sixteen infinite eons’ in order to mother a Buddha. Through each lifetime, Phusati labors towards fulfilling perfections towards her ultimate wish to give birth to ‘a noble one who would become a Buddha,’ ascertaining her in a position that surpasses that of the mere birth-giver. Instead, her maternal wish locates her not only as the creator of her own trajectory but also as a patron of the Buddha’s quest. Through this, the folk poet also establishes the Buddha’s mother in a role capable of pursuing the soteriological path on her own terms.

The earliest detailed accounts of this mother can be found in the *Lalitavistara*, where the narrative finds the exalted one himself relating the story of his conception, birth, and his life. Seated in his palace in Tusita heaven the Bodhisattva contemplates four great objects: the time, continent, district, and the clan in which he would be born.³⁸ In later traditions, the mother is also added to this consideration amounting to five great objects. While contemplating the clan, the devas who are gathered around the Bodhisattva go on to specify thirty-two essential qualities of the noble lady into whose womb the next coming Bodhisattva must descend:

She should be (1) well known, (2) lovely, (3) free from defect, (4) of good birth, (5) of good lineage, (6) of great beauty, (7) of good name, (8) of good length and breadth, (10) childless, (11) charitable, (12) of smiling face, (13) clever, (14) frank, (15) gentle, (16) proficient, (17) well informed, (18) learned, (19) unintriguing, (20) deceitless, (21) unirascible, (22) unenvious, (23) uncovetous,

³⁶ These are the perfections of: *dāna* (alms), *sīla* (morality), *nekkhamma* (renunciation), *paññā* (wisdom), *virīya* (endurance), *khanti* (patience), *sacca* (truthfulness), *adhitthāna* (resolution), *metta* (loving-kindness) and *upekkhā* (equanimity). See Gunapala Malalasekera, ‘Māyā, Mahāmāyā’, *Buddhist Dictionary of Pali Proper Names* for more details.

³⁷ *Purāṇa Vessantara Jātaka Kāvya*, Verse 26. All translations from *Purāṇa Vessantara Jātaka Kāvya* by the author.

³⁸ *Lalitavistara*, trans. Rajendralala Mitra (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1882), 37.

(24) steady, (25) unwavering, (26) unscrullious, (27) full of aroma of patience, (28) modest, (29) free from passion, envy, and folly, (30) inheriting no defect from the mother's side, (31) faithful to her marriage vow and (32) well-endowed with noble qualities in every part of her person.³⁹

The above description of the thirty-two qualities of Māyā seems to establish her as an extraordinary, great, and noble woman akin to how the prince Siddhartha is described in relation to thirty-two auspicious signs that mark his greatness. While these thirty-two conditions may be read as unrealistic demands which are meant to constrict Māyā's sexuality and individuality as a woman at first glance, one should keep in mind that she is no ordinary woman. Having fulfilled *pāramī* (perfections) for eons, Māyā is an embodiment of the perfect human nature of a disciplined, mindful being who nurtures inner qualities to give birth to a being who will attain spiritual awakening. This is perhaps why she is not held as an ideal for secular mothers. Instead, reading about a Māyā who had inculcated discipline over her thoughts and actions may offer insight into how one will be able to accommodate motherhood within the Buddhist soteriological path itself and to understand the conditions which make a mother-Buddha metaphor possible. In light of my assertion, it is particularly interesting that some of her qualities, such as unwavering, free from passion, envy, and folly, patient, and uncovetous, reflect that of an ascetic and are analogous to certain qualities of the Buddha.

For our discussion, it is fruitful to view these qualities of the mother vis-á-vis Phusatī's demands, which are articulated in the verses before the Bodhisattva's conception in the *Purāṇa Vessantara Jātaka Kāvya*. Having completed her time as a female deity in the Tāvātimsa heaven, Śakra invites her to return to the human world. While she has fulfilled perfections towards becoming a Bodhisattva's mother, having to leave the luxuries of heaven behind, she is taken back at the prospect of leaving and is seen articulating ten demands. These wishes also function as incentives that motivate her re-entrance to the human world. My selection of verses is intended to delineate the range of feminine desires articulated through her wishes:

එන කල් නරලොව ගොස් උපදින්නටයි
 මන කල් සඳමහ රජුට වෙසෙන්නටයි
 සැමකල් ඉසකෙස් නර නොදකින්නටයි
 මෙමකල් පැතුවා මට සිදුවෙන්නටයි

Till I come back [here] I want to be born in the human world
 And to be with the King Sandamaha to my heart's content
 And may my hair never see a strand of silver
 May all these that I have wished for happen to me⁴⁰

දසන් කැකුළු කොඳ වැල සෙ සැදෙන් ටයි
 මුණ එ පුන්සඳ සේ බබළන් ටයි

³⁹ Ibid, Verse 42.

⁴⁰ *Purāṇa Vessantara Jātaka Kāvya*, Verse 34.

නුවණ ද තේජස්සි ඔද වැඩි වෙත් ටයි
 මෙමා පැතු දේ මට සිදු වෙත් ටයි

May my teeth take the form of blossoming jasmines
 May [my] face glow like the full moon
 May my wisdom and my majesty know no bounds
 May all these that I have wished for happen to me⁴¹

While these demands are also taken up in *Butsaraṇa* within a single paragraph,⁴² the folk poet goes into detail allocating a narrative space that articulates the mother as an individual (*mama*) and articulating her wishes as things she wishes upon herself (*maṭa*, to me). Upon closer reading, we can see that her wishes concern multiple domains. Some of them directly reference her appearance, identifying characteristics of supreme beauty: golden skin, hair, and teeth, while others mark her expected social disposition: lineage, clan, husband, etc. Engagement with these demands offers remarkable insight into the social parameters that determined a woman’s station.

However, instead of discontinuing this quest at what one would identify as women’s concerns, the folk poet goes on to articulate her desires in detail. For instance, the නුවණ ද තේජස්සි (wisdom and majesty) that she requests in the previously cited poem ties in with her wishes to bring about kindness through royal diplomacy and to play an active part in governance:

රාජ පරාජය කුල ඇතිවෙත් ටයි
 ඒ රජ ගෙට අල්ලා ගෙන යන් ටයි
 ඒ රජ මා කී බස් ගිවිසන් ටයි
 ඒ රජ නො මරා ඔවුන් අරින් ටයි

May kings be defeated in front [of my clan]
 May that king be captured and taken into our house
 May the king be negotiated by my words
 May that king then be given the chance to live⁴³

In the above verse, we see Phusatī wishing for the ability to sway the minds of men, මා කී බස් ගිවිසන්ටයි (negotiated by [her] words). Through this, she wishes to direct them away from thoughts of war and murder. This wish not only ascribes a benevolence akin to that of the Buddha in this aspirant Bodhisattva mother but also builds towards a spiritual connection with the son that she desires:

ඇස් ඉස් මස් ලේ ඉල්ලුව දන් දෙන

⁴¹ Ibid., Verse 36.

⁴² Vidyācakravartī, *Butsaraṇa* (Colombo: National Library and Documentation Services, 2019), 260; my translation. An early Sinhala canonical text which recounts the *navaguna* (nine qualities) of the Buddha.

⁴³ *Purāṇa Vessantara Jātaka Kāvya*, Verse 39.

සිත් ලෙස යදියන් සසරින් ගොඩලන
 පුත්සද මෙන් රළ මුළු ලොව බබළන
 පුත් රුවනක් පනනෙමි තෙද ගරුවන

[One who] gives eyes, [one's] head, bone or blood if asked
 [One who] escorts the beggars of saṃsāra out of it,
 to the heart's content
 [One who] glows and lights up the world like the full moon
 I wish for a son revered and majestic.⁴⁴

පනනෙමි (I wish) attempts to capture all the four wishes within the above verse as things for which the future Bodhisattva-mother hopes. In the Jātaka story, these demands are precisely what shapes the character of Vessantara, her Bodhisattva son, cast in his penultimate birth to fulfill the perfection of alms in order to be born in his final lifetime to attain enlightenment. Therefore, the verses that articulate the mother's wishes can be read also as a prelude that sets up the larger narrative, to be read in light of them. As the reader encounters the later events of Vessantara's fulfillment of the perfection of *dānā* (alms) they are reminded of the voice of the mother, who remains a specter that supports his spiritual quest. Likewise, as examined above, the Buddha's mother is portrayed in the folk poem as one with awareness of the concept of enlightenment and is privy to certain knowledge that only the awakened one is privy to. This follows that the woman in question is mother to the Buddha not only because the Buddha or the devas choose her as the ideal mother, but because she has willingly worked towards becoming an epitome of perfection.

Furthermore, a recurring line in *Purāṇa Vessantara Jātaka Kāvya*, repeats the same wish in different forms, see above: මෙමා පැතු දේ මට සිදුවෙන්නි ටයි (may what I wished for happen to me).⁴⁵ This seems to give particular prominence to the wish of the mother. The recurrence suggests that the maternal wish ought to be treated in its own right. It alludes to the fact that part of the Buddha's *adhiṭṭhāna* (perseverance) and *virīya* (strength) may have found an ally in his mother's unwavering wish and resolve. The well-wishing mother's blessing manifests as a drive and a motive that shapes the Bodhisattva's trajectory.

While the sections I elucidated above reveal strands of the mother's wish before the conception of the Bodhisattva, a further symbolic connection can be mapped through conception by looking towards the domain of dreams within the folk lament that reveals the mother's wishes.

Of Dreams and Desire: Interpreting the Wish of the Mother

In Buddhist literature, dreams are a common trope that indicate child-bearing and can also be understood as a site of prophecy. Within such narratives, deciphering such dreams with the help of interpreters often reveals the nature of the infant and the life

⁴⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁴⁵ *Purāṇa Vessantara Jātaka Kāvya*, Verse 58 (see page 87, note 41).

they will lead in the future. Given the symbolic significance of dreams, our exploration of the dream sequences in the two folk poems might benefit from Sigmund Freud's renowned conception of dreams as unconscious wish fulfillment.⁴⁶ Through this, he expounds on two types of content within dreams: manifest and latent. The manifest content is the remembered dream, which is often distorted and does not depict the wish itself. Here, the wish may be projected onto different symbols and objects. However, Freud also suggests that the interpretation of such dreams may make the latent content — the underlying meaning — of the wish apparent. Therefore, in reading these dreams closely I wish to treat them as a space that oscillates between manifest and latent narrative content. By rendering the sexually charged imagery within dreams in place of the act of conception, the folk poet draws attention to particularly secular wishes and desires of women that can only be articulated within the folk literary domain.

Before proceeding to the dreams in the folk poem, we must contextualize them by exploring how the renowned dream of a white elephant is depicted in *Buddhacarita*, the earliest known biography of the Buddha:

Free from sin, then, she produced the fruit
of her womb,
as knowledge does, when united with trance.

Before she conceived, she saw in a dream
a white elephant king
entering her body, yet she did not
thereby feel any pain.

Maya, then, the queen of that god-like king,
her womb bearing the glory of his line,
by her purity freed from delusion,
sorrow and fatigue, set her mind
on visiting that faultless grove.⁴⁷

One can also notice here that there is no mention of the Bodhisattva's descent from Tusita heaven as in *Lalitavistara*, where he spends his time contemplating his particular choices in front of an assembly of gods.⁴⁸ Instead, the Buddha's conception is depicted as devoid of sin and related without explicitly sexual connotation with a symbol often associated with purity and nobility: the white elephant.

To delve further into the domain of dreams it is particularly stimulating to follow Vanessa Sasson's conception of the womb as a perfect metaphor for the cosmos, which "predicts

⁴⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Avon, 1965), 10.

⁴⁷ Ashvagosha, *Life of the Buddha*, trans. Patrick Olivelle (New York: New York University Press and JJC Foundation, 2008), 3.

⁴⁸ *Lalitavistara*, trans. Rajendralala Mitra (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1882), 73-88.

of something far greater to come.”⁴⁹ Following suit, *Yaśodharāvata* relates a sequence of dreams following conception providing insight leading up to the birth of Siddhārtha within the span of eleven stanzas,⁵⁰ where each dream carries symbols of prophetic value. While the dream of the white elephant is more common and popular in Buddhist literature, the rest of the dreams can be read as an attempt of the folk poet to carve out a space for Māyā and to articulate her character given her later physical erasure following the son’s birth.

Yaśodharāvata records the dream of the white elephant as follows:

සුදු සක ලෙසට ඇත් පැටියෙක් විත් යහ නේ
 සුදු සොඩ වීකෙන් මගෙ බඩ පිරිමදිනී අ නේ
 සුදු යම දෙයක් සිදු වෙයි මම දුටු සී නේ
 සුදුසුන් නිරිඳුනේ මොකදැ යි ඔය සී නේ

Like a white conch an infant tusker has arrived at my bed
 And with a bit of his white trunk, he caresses my belly
 There is something pure occurring in this dream I saw
 Oh! King Suddhodana, what is this dream?⁵¹

The folk poet’s rendering of this dream is charged with a doxa of contesting desires: the soteriological desire to give birth to a Buddha is at odds with the sexual aspect of conception as understood and depicted by the folk poet. For instance, in the above poem, the infant tusker making physical contact with Māyā’s body, සුදු සොඩ වීකෙන් මගෙ බඩ පිරිමදිනී (caresses my belly with a bit of white trunk), has connotations of the buildup to a sexual act. What’s interesting here is the way the poem ends by asking King Suddhōdana to decipher the dream, implicating him in Māyā’s pleasure. While the verse sustains a certain purity through the repetition of the word සුදු (white), in contrast to the earlier depiction of the dream in *Buddhacarita* — which establishes that the conception was ‘free from sin — the folk poet may attempt to emphasize purity in order to naturalize the sexual act and introduce some form of sacrality into the sexual domain of conception.

Consider the following dreams in this sequence:

රත් යහනේ සැතපෙන කල බිසවුන් ට
 පුත් සඳ මඩල අහසින් ඒ යහන් පී ට
 රත් කඳ ලෙසට වැඩියා සුදොවුන් ළඟ ට
 තුන ජාමෙට පෙනුණා සඳ මඩල ම ට

⁴⁹ Vanessa R. Sasson, “A Womb with a View: The Buddha’s Final Fetal Experience,” in *Imagining the Fetus the Unborn in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, ed. Vanessa R Sasson and Jane Marie Law, (USA: Oxford University Press, 2008), 56.

⁵⁰ *Yaśodharāvata*, ed. Sucharitha Gamlath (Colombo: Godage, 1995), Verses 10-21. All translations from *Yaśodharāvata* by the author.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Verse 15.

As the queen lay upon her golden bed
 The full moon presided over the bedstead
 The golden-hued Suddhōdana approached her
 In the deepest hour of the night, I saw the moon⁵²

The first poem in the dream sequence depicts the romantic and sensuous imagery of the queen lying in her bed, bathed in moonlight, while the king approaches her. The folk poet's subtle rendition of Māyā facing upwards towards the moon juxtaposes Suddhōdana's golden-hued body with moonlight, placing her within the sexual act and building towards the sexual union of the two parental figures. In doing so, the folk poet imparts some form of previously absent sexual awareness and control to Māyā who is often sacralized and devoid of desire in her depictions.

දණක් පමණ මල් අතුරපු දිව යහ නේ
 පමණක් බිසව සැනපෙන කල දුටු සීනේ
 මැණිකක් දකින කොට ගැබ ඇතුළට වැදුණේ
 මොන මොන දෙයක් දේ නොදැනෙයි සුවාමිනේ

Atop a divine bed laden with flowers, knee-deep
 The queen alone, was asleep when she saw this dream
 As she dreamt of a precious stone, something entered her womb
 I cannot decipher what oh! what it is my lord?⁵³

රිදී යහනේ සැනපෙන කල බිසවුන් ට
 පිරි දෙනන කිරි ඵරිලා කරඬුව ට
 රිදී කදකි නයි පැටියෙකි දරණ ව ට
 නැරිය දරු සීන පෙනුණා බිසවුන් ට

As the queen slept atop a bed made of silver
 Her breasts brimming with milk to the casket nipples
 Appeared a silver log, around which a young serpent coiled
 And so, the queen saw a sure dream about conception⁵⁴

Once again, the poetic imagery marked by the words ගැබ ඇතුළට වැදුණේ (entered into the womb) and රිදී කදකි නයි පැටියෙකි දරණ වට (a young serpent coiled around a silver trunk) is drawn from a repertoire of corporeal sexual imagery. However, the folk poet isolates Māyā on her bed, පමණක් බිසව සැනපෙන කල (she alone was asleep), to reinstate her claim to the domain of conception and pleasure. In expressing her desire through dreams, the folk poet accounts for the subtleties of women's desire and pleasure which are not given prominence in canonical writing, where the sexual act is often indicated through the image of *keli* or sport and described in terms of the domain of men.

⁵² Ibid., Verse 10.

⁵³ Ibid., Verse 11.

⁵⁴ Ibid., Verse 21.

For our discussion then, we could imagine that the latent function of these dreams points towards articulating a domain of feminine desire that considers conception and the sexual act that leads to it as auspicious and sacred events. Thus, instead of performing the mere function of the prophecy of the prince's conception,⁵⁵ the dreams go on to articulate the domain of the maternal. In this articulation, we are also able to trace the growing psychological connection between the Bodhisattva and the mother.

Another function of this dream sequence is the portrayal of Māyā's role as the Buddha's mother as an active choice that is brought forth by the symbolic options within the dreams:

මහසෙන් රැස් ව කුඩකොඩි ගෙන වට කර ට
 අහසින් ඇවිත් රන් තරුවක් දෙරණ පිට
 වහසින් ඇහිද ගත්තෙමි අමයුරු ලෙසට
 සිනෙන් තරුව ගිලුණා මගෙ ගැබ තුළ ට

Crowds have gathered carrying parasols and flags
 From the sky, a golden star has come onto Earth
 Hastily, I picked it up, as if it were *amruta*⁵⁶
 In the dream, the star sank into my womb⁵⁷

This particular dream also functions as a premonition of the later very public birth depicted in canonical hagiographies and foretells the life of the Buddha as one who leads people out of saṃsāra. Interestingly, in the dream, it is Māyā who picks up the fallen star, once again evocative of her wish to give birth to a Bodhisattva. One could even go on to say that given the context, this dream develops on the metaphor of the Bodhisattva's descent from heaven by juxtaposing the act of conception as a mutual wish of the son and the mother. This posits the possibility to view Buddhahood and the quest for nirvāna as one emerging out of the mother's wish and followed by the son's resolve rather than a solitary resolve of the son.

The Mother and Son: A Dyad

Unified Cravings of the Mother and Son: Dola

To further elucidate the psychological connection between mother and son, and to understand motherhood as a “symbol of becoming,”⁵⁸ I think it is necessary to delve into the domain of *dola* or craving which is given significance during pregnancy. These specific

⁵⁵ The interpretation of these dreams are also included in the poem (Verses 16-17). They prophesy the birth of Siddhārtha.

⁵⁶ A divine nectar known to immortalize its consumers. It should also be noted that *amruta* is also an adjective often used to describe the everlasting truth that the Buddha sought and preached.

⁵⁷ *Yaśodharāvata*, Verse 19.

⁵⁸ Celine Grünhagen, “The Female Body in early Buddhist Literature,” *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis*, Vol. 23 (2011): (100-114).

and often uncontrollable longings are said to intensify during pregnancy and are thought of as an expression of impending childbirth. Owing to the biological connection, the mother is said to be ventriloquizing the infant's craving. Therefore, tracing the depiction of *dola* in literature is significant for our discussion as it may reveal strands of a psychological connection between the Bodhisattva and his mother.

Durt draws on two possible derivations of the term *dohada*: 1) *dvi-hṛd*, double-hearted (as the mother is housing a second heart in her womb, and 2) *dohida* (from *doha*, milk, to mean milky secretion). A third etymological possibility points towards *dauhrda* (suffering) which also corresponds to *duka* in Sinhala. This third meaning is picked up in Sinhalese Buddhism, which refers to this condition as *dola duka*; the term *can* be traced back to Pali, where an expectant mother is referred to as *dohalini*.⁵⁹ As the roots of the word *Dohala* also denote thirst, craving, or greed much like the word *taṇhā*,⁶⁰ this negative connotation seems to have been carried into Sinhala by identifying the pregnant mother herself as an embodiment of this very nature.

Through his field research in Laggala, Obeyesekere explicates that the common attitude towards *dola duka* suggests that it is a perverse appetite that should be satisfied at all costs, as its denial may have further detrimental implications on the infant.⁶¹ At times, *dola* cravings of the mother were also deemed ill-intended towards the father and are associated with despicable and feigned cravings which reflect destructive intentions. Given these ambiguous connotations, the folk poet's renditions of benevolent *dolas* in relation to two maternal figures point towards the possibility of unification of the mother and the son through their resolves. This can be further understood in the coinage 'two-hearted' which alludes to mutual nourishment, which I read as both biological as well as spiritual. It follows that the interpretation of *dola* cravings that arise in the Bodhisattva's mother during gestation may give us insight into how this maternal metaphor may be extended further in light of a joint quest. Durt further points out that *dohada* can be sublimated into generosities which may be connected to the embryo the mother is bearing:

Most commonly the woman expresses only one *dohada* but it can happen that her desires multiply. This multiplicity of desires occurs most often when desires are sublimated. This is seen, for instance, in the stories of mothers of prestigious sons: Māyā and the Buddha, Phusatī, and Vessantara.⁶²

This is helpful in the analysis of our poems, given that they draw on sublimated *dola* cravings concerning both Māyā and Phusatī. Durt makes the point that Phusatī is perpetually addicted to gifting (*sadā dānaratā*) as a suggestion that foretells the

⁵⁹ Herbert Durt, "The Pregnancy of Māyā: the Five Uncontrollable Longings (Dohada)," *Journal of International College for Advanced Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 5 (2002): 46

⁶⁰ Derivative of the Sanskrit *tr̥ṣṇā* refers to the physical or mental thirst, greed or longing.

⁶¹ Gananath Obeyesekere, "Pregnancy Cravings (Dola-Duka) in Relation to Social Structure and Personality in a Sinhalese Village," *American Anthropologist* 65, 2 (1963): 323. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/667447>.

⁶² Durt, 53.

generosity which will characterize her son Vessantara.⁶³ However, in my reading of the text, I suggest that the folk poet appears to offer an alternative reading of *dola*, depicting the mother as one who is already fond of giving alms through her request for a son who would be inclined to give.⁶⁴ Likewise, her wish seems to predestine the nature of the son in such a way that her *dola* now appears as her own wish fulfilment and the son as an executor of her legacy of giving. One could speculate that the folk poet’s articulations are deliberate, especially given that they explore the limits and the possibilities of motherhood within the domain of *dola*, where women are given a legitimate space to speak of their desire.

Phusatī’s tendency for giving alms is further depicted in her prosperous altruism, as she is said to be spending up to six hundred thousand a day for many days, until she fulfills her longing to give:

වෙසෙස වෙමින් ලද එ බිසව සිරිසර
 පිය සනි දන් සහ දෙවෙනි පහන් කර
 දවස සලකෂය දන වියදම කර
 මෙලෙස දිනෙන් දින දන් දී දොළ හැර

The very image of prosperity, the queen took efforts to
 Give alms in areas that were destitute, and alm-less
 Thus, spending as much as six hundred thousand every day
 She gave alms daily till her craving to give passed⁶⁵

There is a certain ambiguity in the term *dola* here which also lends itself to be interpreted as Phusatī’s own wish. A possible explanation could be that given both mother and son have resolved to fulfil perfections towards Buddhahood (the mother towards bearing a Buddha and the son towards being a Buddha), pregnancy — through mutual dependence — is unifying their resolves by articulating these wishes as one and the same.

A similar craving is carried on through the mother in *Yasodharāvata*:

මායා බිසවුන්ට දොළදුක් හට ගැනී ලා
 දයා සිතින් සැම යදියෝ රැස් කර ලා
 කියා සැම තැනම වාසල් කරවා ලා
 ගියා බිසව දන්සල දැක සතුටු වේ ලා

A craving’s awoken in Queen Māyā
 With a compassionate mind, she gathered beggars
 She ordered and erected shelters throughout the kingdom

⁶³ Ibid., 54

⁶⁴ *Purāṇa Vessantara Jātaka Kāvya*, Verse 41 (See this quatrain, translated and analyzed on page 88, note 44).

⁶⁵ Ibid, Verse 62.

Then she left after rejoicing at the sight of the alms-house⁶⁶

The folk poet's utilization of the structure of *dola* to articulate the benevolent and meritorious nature of the mother is noteworthy. Similarly, in early Buddhist biographies such as the *Lalitavistara*, Māyā requests Suddhōdana (the Bodhisattva's father) to liberate prisoners, bestow various alms on people, steer clear of disputes and punishments, and to propagate peace of mind and friendship. In doing so, she asks him whether he "look[s] upon all the crowd as [his] only son."⁶⁷ A version of this metaphor can be traced to the *Karaṇīya Metta Sutta* which preaches about propagating loving-kindness towards all beings in the world just as a mother loves her only child.⁶⁸

Through such depictions of Phusatī and Māyā, which suggest that the mothers are intuitively aware of the being they are about to bring forth, the folk poet further reifies the mother-son dyad. This translates into the folk poet's advocacy of the significance of the mother in relation to her contribution to the Buddha's soteriological path, as well as identifying Māyā's course of motherhood as a soteriological path she carves out for herself, especially since being the mother of a Buddha is no easy task and involves letting go of life and, therefore, the infant seven days following birth. This calls for a necessary recognition of the mother's presence. It renders us new insight with which to read about the birth of the Buddha, which takes place in public sight and is not limited to a private birth house. In the two folk poems, the decision to travel to the citadel and the Sal park⁶⁹ is portrayed as a *dola* of the mother, this time a craving which can be interpreted as one for recognition:

දොළ උපතක් විය නුවර වඩින්නන්
සැල කරපුව මහ වෙ සරසන්නන්

A craving arose to visit the citadel
Ask for the streets to be decorated⁷⁰

සල් උයනට යන්ට දොළක් උනිය මට
රන් රිදියෙන් සරසන්නේ උයන වට

A craving arose to visit the Sal Grove
In and around the park is being decorated in Silver and Gold⁷¹

සැල කරපුව in the first excerpt above can be translated into 'ask' or 'send for,' indicating that the special provision is written as a specific demand made by Māyā before she sets

⁶⁶ *Yaśodharāvata*, Verse 20.

⁶⁷ *Lalitavistara*, trans. Rajendralala Mitra (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1882), 77.

⁶⁸ *Karaṇīya Metta Sutta: The Buddha's Words on Loving-Kindness*, Trans: The Amaravati Sangha. <https://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.1.08.amar.html>

⁶⁹ 'Sal Grove' refers to a garden of *Shorea robusta* trees.

⁷⁰ *Purāṇa Vessantara Jātaka Kāvya*, Verse 64.

⁷¹ *Yaśodharāvata*, Verse 27.

out on her walk towards the citadel. This depiction is particularly significant as it is customary for a pregnant daughter to return to her parents' house in order to deliver the child in India and Sri Lanka (and possibly other South Asian countries). Yet the articulation of this decision as a craving of the mother and the fact that she delivers the blessed infant in plain sight of gods and men speaks for the culmination of the mother's wish to give birth to a Buddha. The roads and the parks are decorated in honor of the queen's visit and the birth is a celebration of the exalted mother as much as it is of the noble son.

Thus, the folk poet rewrites the domain of *dola*, often categorized as a site for uncontrollable and wicked cravings that arise in pregnant women with an underlying ill-wish towards the husband, into a space of soteriological desire and as a domain in which a mother articulates her own wishes pertaining to the infant that she is carrying. This, combined with the fact that not much has been said of the Buddha's father, points one towards the importance of the maternal and furthers my claim that there is a fundamental spiritual connection between the Buddha and his mother which cannot and should not be reduced to the biological connection.

Concluding Thoughts: Imagining the Mother as Prophet, The Mother as Buddha.

I have discussed and delineated above how the folk poems are written in a manner that not only gives a sense of fecundity to the sacred, de-sexed Buddha-mother but also claims for her the ability to make choices. We must keep these facts in mind as we revisit Māyā's depiction in light of our understanding of this matricultural strand which recurs within the site of dreams and cravings in the folk poems as the wish of the mother.

We have on many occasions heard of the Buddha's mother as a sanctified being, often devoid of desire. Yet, I turn to *Lalitavistara* and a representation of Māyā which, while noting that it was limited to her husband, does describe her as having desired him (perhaps at the onset of marriage)⁷² in order to suggest that the Buddha-mother was in fact not devoid of desire but was aware of it and the role it plays in soteriological ambition. Then her choice of the path of celibacy can be read as a renunciation, which draws an undeniable parallel between her path and the Bodhisattva's own path. I believe that this gives us insight into how one could understand the desire for non-desire, the cessation of all desires, as an aspiration and a resolve much like the one that the Buddha's own mother expressed. Here I believe that, unlike its counterpart, this desire is not directed towards possessing an object but towards reaching an object in order to relinquish or renounce it — much like the Buddha's mother does on the seventh day after giving birth. This naturally brings us to the fact that the term 'desire' here should be understood in relation to Māyā's ambition and resolve, a form of wish which may be better articulated in terms of the Pali words *āsimsana* (which embodies a wish and well-wishing) or *panidhāna* (wish or resolve).

⁷² *Lalitavistara*, trans. Rajendralala Mitra (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1882), 43.

To tie up our final strands of thought together, we must turn to a recurrent jātaka in the Sinhalese repertoire misidentified as the *Mātuposaka Jātaka*.⁷³ It relates the story of a son who swam across oceans with his mother on his back in order to save her life. This is also the subject of an extant folk-poem, *Manō Pranidhānaye Sivpada*, which relates this very same story in the folk repertoire. The poem is said to go on about the merit acquired by the mother in the act of mothering by drawing on Mahāmāyā's rebirth in heaven.⁷⁴ Being a Buddhist myself, I am reminded of how I first came across this story during my first year in Primary school among the pages of a government textbook given for the purpose of learning Buddhism. My most significant memory of this story follows the utterance of the saved mother, මගේ පුතා බුදුවේවා! (May my son attain Buddhahood!), through which to date I have thought of a connection between Māyā and the Buddha.

What then is the significance of this wish originating from the Buddha's mother? Classical canonical texts deem it a requirement for this *pranidhāna* [resolution] to take place in the presence of a Buddha, to be immediately followed by his *vivaraṇa* (prediction) of success. Moreover, there is just [the] one prediction which is said to be imparted on a Bodhisattva by a Buddha.⁷⁵ Accordingly, we too are told that the Gautama Buddha received his *vivaraṇa* to continue his career as a Bodhisattva from a Buddha named Dīpamkara during a lifetime born as an ascetic named Sumedha. However, the story with the mother that I drew on above is said to date backwards beyond Sumedha,⁷⁶ complicating our understanding of *vivaraṇa* by establishing the mother's blessing itself as preceding that of a Buddha. Gombrich also states that this line of narrative, which gives prominence to the mother, only occurs in the non-canonical texts and that "it isn't clear when the role of the mother promoting Buddhahood is made explicit."⁷⁷ Yet the very existence of this narrative, re-christened as the *Mātuposaka Jātaka*, is crucial for our project as it may reveal the origin of our culture's preoccupation with the Buddha-Mother.

Given the canonical silencing of Māyā, while it may seem extraordinary to think about the suggestion that the Bodhisattva's career originated with his mother's blessing, the popular imagination that seems to depict this vital role of her wish explicitly through demands and cravings paves a distinctive path to trace the maternal. What's most interesting here is the fact that the vow to attain Buddhahood is taken in front of one's mother instead of a Buddha. Given this, we can even go on to further even imagine the mother in the position of a Buddha as her resolve unites with her son's resolve within the category of enlightenment. This further renders the unification of the mother-son dyad in the term *Amā-Māṇi*, as the mother in the popular imagination is present as a consciousness that strives through a wish towards her son's quest for Buddhahood until its final resolution. In such a case, we could conclude that the Buddha's mother is indeed, deathless.

⁷³ No. 455 of the Jātaka Stories, relates the story of the Bodhisatta born as an elephant looking after his blind mother. Here too it is said that Mahāmāyā was the mother elephant.

⁷⁴ Gombrich, "Feminine Elements," 79.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 81

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