

# Buddha Launches Literary Realism<sup>1</sup>

Suwanda H J Sugunasiri, PhD (Toronto)

(Relevant credentials of Author:

*Academic study and lifelong practice in Buddhadhamma,*

*Literary Theory, Creative Writing, Linguistics and Moral Philosophy)*

## 1 Introduction

Buddhism is a Religion, Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology, Science and so on. But, outside of the Academy, few are aware that it also has a rich *literary* history, dating back from the Buddha's time itself, and later flowering within the various Inherited Buddhist traditions – Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana, written in the Classical Buddhist languages of Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan, not to mention other languages - Burmese, Japanese, Korean, Sinhala (in Sri Lanka), Thai, Vietnamese, etc. Then there are increasingly the modern day works by Acquired Buddhists in Western Buddhism, either adaptations of classical works (such as *Jātaka* (Birth) tales for children), novels, poetry, drama, etc.

This paper takes a brief look at them. Having explored how the Buddha introduces a literary realism in getting his message across, we go on to show how he has opened the sluice doors of creativity, resulting in a whole Buddhist literature lasting two and half millennia, across lands and oceans around the world. Additionally, we show how Sanskrit literature itself came to be influenced by the Buddha's realism, diverging from an earlier Vedic literary mythicism<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. Buddha as Literary Maestro and Language Entrepreneur

Let us begin with the Buddha announcing his Enlightenment (*Dhammapada*, 153-154):

Through many a birth in <i>saṃsāra</i>	<i>Anekajāti saṃsāraṃ</i>
Running through and through but not finding	<i>sandhāvissaṃ anibbisaṃ</i>
Looking for the house-builder	<i>gahakārakaṃ gavesanto</i>
In many a painful birth again n' again.	<i>dukkhājāti punappunaṃ</i>
Seen art thou House-builder!	<i>gahakāraka ditthosi</i>
Not again build a house you will.	<i>puna gehaṃ na kāhasi</i>

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<sup>1</sup>This paper constitutes the opening remarks prepared for the launch of the first Buddhist Literary Festival in Toronto, Canada, as part of the 28th Word on the Street Festival <<http://thewordonthestreet.ca/toronto/festival/schedule/>>, Sunday, Sept. 24, 2017, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto (11 am – 6 pm). The publicity material included the following as well: “So the intent of the Buddhist Literary Festival is to educate the Canadian public, beginning with the Buddhists themselves, in this rich resource. The event expected to be held annually, the pedagogical expectation is that eventually Buddhist Literature will become part and parcel of the public school and University curricula. Not to be forgotten towards social harmony and personal happiness through a minimizing of *dukkha* ‘suffering’, is that all our literary efforts will be guided by the language-related personal ethic, “I commit myself to true speech, not false; to healing speech, not divisive; to amiable speech, not unkind; to meaningful speech, not idle chatter” (*Sāmaññaphala Sutta, Digha Nikaya*, 2). This latter was inspired by the Buddha's emphasis on *sīla* ‘self-discipline’ in whatever we do.

<sup>2</sup> We coin ‘mythicisim’ as a parallel to ‘realism’. The relevance is that, as we shall see later, literary features are not absent in Vedic mythological compositions.

Your rafters - all of 'em shattered,  
Ridge pole decapitated,  
Drained of force, the mind,  
Thirst crushed, gone, no more!

*sabbā te phāsukā bhaggā  
gahakūṭaṃ visamkhitaṃ  
visamkhāragataṃ cittaṃ  
taṇhānaṃ khayamajjhagā*

Let us note here how the Buddha uses down to earth examples and language to make the point - housebuilder, rafters, ridgepole, ridgepole shattered. Then consider the rhyme and rhythm: *ditthosi, kāhasi; bhaggā, khayamajjhagā; visamkhitaṃ, gataṃ cittaṃ*.

But what we find in the Canon (*Tipitaka* 'Tricompendum') are not just single or compound poetic compositions. The *Dhammapada* (*Khuddaka Nikaya*), a collection of the Buddha's Teachings, is all in poetry, numbering over 400. Indeed on one occasion, speaking to the Bhikkhus, says the Buddha, "I'll recite it in verse" (*silokaṃ anukassāmi*) (*Mahasamaya Sutta, Digha Nikaya, Discourse 20*)<sup>3</sup>.

In many a Discourse, we find verses interspersed with prose. To take the Sigalovada Sutta (*Digha Nikaya, 31*), e.g., the Buddha is advising a young householder paying homage to the six directions – N, S, E, W, zenith and nadir, as per Brahminic practice, recommending six alternative directions: parents in relation to children, teacher ... pupil, wife.. children, friends ...companions, recluses/ Brahmins ...devotees, and employers ...employees. It is in prose that the Buddha first speaks to Sigalaka. But then he breaks into poetry, in a two-liner: "Taking life and stealing, lying / Adultery, the wise disprove" (# 4). Next returning to a prose para or so, he breaks into poetry again, but this time in 8 lines (# 6). The third time when he returns to poetry, again after advice in prose running to about a printed page, he resorts to quatrains – 9 of them, in fact (# 14). And three more times does he break into poetry (# 20, 26, 34), all this in this one single Discourse.

And imagery he uses is powerful. E.g., here are two lines characterizing the Dhamma:

*vanappagumbhe yathā phussitagge*      Just as Blossoms crown the woodland groves  
*gimhānamāse paṭhamasmiṃ gimhe*      In the month of summer, in the early summer,  
*tathūpamaṃ dhamma varam adesayi ..*      Comparable to them is the sublime Dhamma taught...

Here (Ratana Sutta, KN), the Dhamma that is deep, and to be "known by the wise experientially" (*paccattam vedītabbo viññūhī*), is given a visual grip with the imagery of the blossoms crowning at the height of Spring<sup>4</sup>, bringing it as close as possible to one's own living experience. Realism enough?

The Birth Stories (*Jātaka*) (*Khuddaka Nikaya*) introduce us to another genre - the short story. Numbering 547, they are again in both poetry and prose. "Taking the motley Jataka-mass, ... it is scarcely an overstatement to say that, for all much foolishness, ..., the oddities, the inconsistencies, the many distortions, in ideals and in the quest of them, they are collectively the greatest epic in literature of the Ascent of Man, the greatest ballad-book on the

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<sup>3</sup>It may sound contradictory that the Buddha who indeed uses poetry in his Teachings says that he doesn't engage in "poetic composition" (*kāveyya*) (DN I 11). But what he is actually referring to, as the context makes clear, is spending time in poetic composition as other Teachers of the time did by way of a livelihood. Indeed the Buddha, by way of showing how he is different, says, "Whereas some ascetics and Brahmins make their living by ... accounting, computing, calculating, poetic composition, philosophizing, the ascetic Gotama refrains from such base arts and wrong means of livelihood." We find a similar distinction made by the Buddha in relation to delivering the Dhamma artistically, distinguishing between *sarabhañña* and *gītassara*, a point we shall come to later. While the latter is promotive of sensuality, *sarabhañña* can be said to be promotive of calm. So, it is not that there is anything wrong in resorting to poetry, but that it should not be a livelihood of a spiritual seeker.

<sup>4</sup>This is as suggested by the usage 'early summer' (*paṭhamasmiṃ gimhe*), *gimhāna* in the Indian calendar including 'Spring' (*vasanta*).

theme that man, willing the better becomes the better” (Mrs. Rhys Davids, cited in Wickramasinghe, 1997, 201). That should speak to the quality of the genre as in the Canon.

But what is of even more literary relevance is that we see in the *Jātakas* the very structure of modern fiction: introduction, rising action and denouement (resolution) (*samodhāna*). A *Jātaka* has three parts: present story, past story and a linking of the two. The Present story is the Buddha addressing one or more listeners, Disciples or otherwise. Then he tells a story from past lives. At the end he makes up the link. We give an example from the *Cula-Nandiya Jataka (Jātaka 222)*: “In those days, Devadatta was the hunter, Sariputta was the famous teacher, Ananda was Jollikin [name of younger brother monkey], the noble lady Gotami was the [monkey] mother and I was the monkey Jolly.” (Chalmers Tr., 1981, Book II, 142). Clearly what we then have is a ‘resolution’ of the ‘conflict’ in the reader’s mind as to who the characters are.

So we can see the Jataka stories displaying features of contemporary modern literature<sup>5</sup>.

We have thus far seen the Buddha introducing us to poetry and prose. But what of drama? Let us begin by drawing attention to how the Buddha resorts to Dialogue to hone in a point. Here, then, is a short dialogue from the *Aggañña Sutta (Digha Nikaya, 27)*<sup>6</sup>:

Buddha: Vāsetṭha, you two are Brahmins<sup>7</sup> born and bred, and have gone forth from the household life into homelessness from Brahmin families. Do not the Brahmins revile and abuse you?

Vāsetṭha: Indeed, Lord, the Brahmins do revile and abuse us....

Buddha: Well, Vasetṭha, what kind of reproaches do they fling at you?

Vāsetṭha: Lord, what the Brahmins say is this: “The Brahmin caste is the highest caste. ..They are purified..., the Brahmins are the true children of Brahma, born of his mouth... And you have deserted the highest class and gone over to the base class of shoveling petty ascetics, servants, dark fellows born of Brahma’s foot”. It’s not right, not proper that you mix with such people.” That is the way the Brahmins abuse us, Lord.

Buddha: Then the Brahmins have forgotten their ancient tradition... Because we can see Brahmin women, the wives of Brahmins, menstruate and become pregnant, have babies, suckle them...<sup>8</sup>

If the example above shows one dimension of the theatre, namely Dialogue, what about the other features - characters, stage sets, lighting, etc.? To begin with character, a look at any of the Suttas in the Canon will show that each begins with the words, “Thus have I heard”. These are, of course, the words of Ven. Ananda, the Treasurer of the Dhamma (*dhammabhandāgārika*). So this makes him the narrator<sup>9</sup>, taking the listener into the details,

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<sup>5</sup> See later, too.

<sup>6</sup> We shall come to the translation of *aggañña* later.

<sup>7</sup> Though not addressed by name, the second young man here is Bhārdvāja, who had himself left Brahminism and already become a disciple of the Buddha. While Vāsetṭha, too, had left Brahminism, he had not yet come over to the Buddha. Still sitting on the fence, so to speak, the Buddha is trying to win him over, by giving a realistic explanation of the unfolding of the universe, very different from the Vedic ‘Creation myth’ (MacDonnell, 1917, 207-211).

<sup>8</sup> Following this, he explains how the social classes came to be formed, taking the two young men back to the origins of this evolutionary cycle and unfolding the universe, much in agreement with the Western scientific understanding (see Sugunasiri, 2014, for this novel interpretation) but quite different from the Vedic ‘Creation Myth’.

<sup>9</sup> We shall note later how this is a critical character in Sanskrit drama of a later period.

threading it all together. To take an example, the Mahamangala Sutta<sup>10</sup>, following this opener, continues in the following words:

“On one occasion the Exalted One was dwelling at...”.

What we have here is the introduction to the context of the story. The line continues expanding the context:

“... at Anathapindika's monastery, in Jeta's Grove, near Savatthi..”

The dramatist in you is sure to see here a playwright providing details for stage settings - a monastery set in a forest, and perhaps even with the words, “Jeta's Grove, Savatthi..” written on a post standing beside the monastery. The audience can now begin to contextualize the drama on the stage.

But the introduction provides more detail for the stage designer:

“Now when the night was far spent, a certain deitess<sup>11</sup>, illuminating the entire Jeta Grove with her surpassing brilliance and beauty ...”.

Now here is direction for, ready, the Lighting Manager! The discourse continues:

“... came to the presence of the Exalted One..”

Now we envision the opening scene of the play. The stage is dark in the centre as the curtain opens. But as it opens very slowly, the light begins to show up gradually, with a model of a figure of a sky-being on one side of the stage, but soon an actress entering the stage, indicating that the deitess has now indeed descended, the deitess model now coming to be gradually moved away (electronically, with no stage-hands appearing on stage). Now we can envisage the ‘co-hearts’ (*sahṛd*), meaning audience, being moved emotionally, as in a modern day drama, the specific emotion (*vibhāva*) here being ‘astonishment’ (*viṣmaya*), bringing the parallel ‘taste’, i.e., ‘esthetic experience’ of ‘marvel’ (*adbhuta*) (Warder, 1989, 23)<sup>12</sup>.

The Discourse continues:

“...drawing near, [the Deitess] respectfully saluted him and stood at one side.”.

We now see the continuing first movement on stage, the actress now moving across<sup>13</sup> and saluting respectfully (the Buddha, still unseen), with folded palms<sup>14</sup>. And, as the narrator continues, the Deitess having saluted (*abhivādevvā*), and stands to a side (*ekamantaṃ aṭṭhāsi*), still with folded palms.

The curtain now fully open, on the other side of the stage is the Buddha sitting serenely. If the audience was thus far just watching the unfolding of events in awe, the appearance of the Buddha can be now said to bring to the audience the emotion of ‘calm’ (*praśānta*) and the taste of ‘calmed’ (*śānta*; Pali, *sānta*)<sup>15</sup>.

Still standing, the Deitess addresses the Exalted One in verse:

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<sup>10</sup><http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.2.04.nara.html>. See also [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mangala\\_Sutta](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mangala_Sutta).

<sup>11</sup> This is as in my interpretation of ‘*sā devatā*’, taking *devatā* to mean female. See Sugunasiri, forthcoming 1.

<sup>12</sup> Bharatamuni’s Nāṭyaśāstra, the Indian classical treatise on drama, lists eight ‘emotions’ (*vibhāva*) and eight paralleling ‘tastes’ (*rasa*), a ninth coming to be added later.

<sup>13</sup> In a modern day context, the actress may even approach the Buddha in a slow dance step, with the Buddha shown not physically but symbolically, so as not to offend a pious audience, even though they may be at the theatre and not a temple.

<sup>14</sup> In a modern setting again, perhaps the actress will make a ‘five-point contact’ (*pasanga piḥṭuvā*), as can be seen in a Sinhala Buddhist context.

<sup>15</sup> See later for the addition of this Taste and Emotion.

"Many deities and men, yearning after good, have pondered on blessings. Pray, tell us the greatest blessing(s), for the good of the many!"

Now we see the first words spoken on stage, and this in poetry, bringing the audience a new esthetic experience of poesy, and refined language usage.

But that is not all. Soon we come to be introduced to the Buddha himself, responding to the request, also poetically, beginning to list the blessings, totaling thirty eight<sup>16</sup>. To get a sense of the rhyming and the rhythm, I'll sing out the first verse [in Pali]:

<i>Asevanā ca bālānam,</i>	‘Not associating with fools’;
<i>Paṇḍitānañca sevā,</i>	‘Associating with the wise / learned’;
<i>Pūjā ca pūjaniyānam</i>	‘Respecting those worthy of respect’;
<i>etam mangalamuttamam.</i>	‘This the Noble Blessings’.

What we note here is a quatrain, i.e., four lines, with a rhyming ending in three of them: *bālānam, pūjaniyānam, uttamam*, with each line also having a similar syllabic structure.

But that is not all. Judging from how this particular Discourse<sup>17</sup> is delivered in Sri Lanka where Buddhism has flourished unbroken for over two millennia<sup>18</sup>, what we are introduced to is a *musicality*, too! Let me then chant it out loud<sup>19</sup>: [repeat of the four lines above].

Now, this chanting style may well have been the *sarabhañña* ‘musical speaking’ form of chanting, allowed by the Buddha<sup>20</sup>. And it would be a good bet that a musical-minded Director will use this as an opportunity to introduce music, introducing a musicality on stage.

So what we see in a single opening paragraph of a Discourse is an introduction to the modern day theatre – characters, dialogue, music, stage sets and lighting, introduced sequentially, suggestive of the unfolding of a drama!

But we meet in the Discourse a specific character, not seen in contemporary western theatre, though a critical one in Indian theatre. And that is the character of ‘thread-bearer’ (*sūtradhara*), i.e., the narrator, Ven. Ananda playing this role in every Discourse. However in the Jataka, it is the Buddha himself that plays this role - telling the Past and Present stories, but also threading the two together making the connection.

It is in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN, 16) that we see the Buddha as the continuing character over time and space, as in a novel, as indeed it has come to be seen<sup>21</sup>. In this longest Discourse in the Digha Nikaya, made up of two parts and six ‘chapters’<sup>22</sup>, he is clearly the ‘hero’ in literary terms. To give a brief overview, then, the

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<sup>16</sup> The thirty-eight blessings are : Not associating with fools but associating with the wise; Respecting those worthy of respect; Living in a suitable location; Having meritorious deeds (Good Karma) in one's past; Setting oneself up in life properly; Learnedness; Artfulness.; Self-discipline; Artful speech; Filial piety; Cherishing one's children; Cherishing one's spouse; Not leaving work undone; Generosity; Restraint in liquor; Non-heedfulness in the Dhamma; Respect; Humility; Contentment; Gratitude; Listening to the Dhamma in due time; Patience; Openness to Criticism; Sighting a Wanderer [Monk or Nun]; Regular discussion of the Dhamma; Practicing austerities; Practicing the Brahma-faring; Seeing the Four Noble Truths; Attainment of Nibbāna; The mind being unbeaten when hit by the World Realities; Sorrowlessness; Being freed of defilement; and Tranquil.

<sup>17</sup> This constitutes the first Discourse of a Paritta ‘Protection’ chanting, the other two being, Ratana Sutta and Metta Sutta.

<sup>18</sup>This was when Buddhism was introduced by Arahant Mahinda (*Mahavamsa*, Ch. XIII). See also Sugunasiri, 2012, for how the Buddhapūjā, shown to be introduced by him as well, would have played a critical role in keeping the Dhamma established in the island.

<sup>19</sup> The lines are sung again here by me, in the *sarabhañña*, i.e., *paritta*, style, with *ālāpa* (‘vowel lengthening’), etc. (see Sugunasiri, forthcoming 2), cutting at *-ca* in the first line, and the rest, and repeating with the other three.

<sup>20</sup> This is as contrasted with *gīṭassara* not approved by him. See Sugunasiri, forthcoming 2.

<sup>21</sup> While I have seen this suggestion made, unfortunately I don't have the reference. But see Suvimalee Karunaratne, 2002, for a treatment.

<sup>22</sup>This comes to 47 pages in the English translation by Walshe (1995, 231-278).

‘story’<sup>23</sup> begins with a grabbing of the reader (historically, of course, ‘listener’), as in a good novel opener, with King Ajatasattu declaring an attack on a neighbouring Kingdom (of Vajjians) (1.1). So the reader is immediately introduced to a potential conflict, the emotion of ‘anger’... and the taste of ‘furious’<sup>24</sup>. After talking the King out of it, the Buddha then moves on to several cities, in a developing *oeuvre*, this introducing variety as in a good novel - in terms of location, context, social conditions, etc., maintaining the realism as well.

In a continuing realism, we also see the Buddha falling sick twice. The first time he recovers (2.23-24), but the second context takes us to what may be seen as the ‘climax’ (in literary terms) when, partaking of some disagreeable food<sup>25</sup>, he attains Parinibbāna (6.9). While this may be seen as a ‘climax’, it really is not, since, literary-wise, there is no build up to it, even though there is a foreshadowing<sup>26</sup>. Another reason why it is not a climax is that hardly much time is spent on the event, the Sutta moving on to how two Devas - Brahma Sahampati and Sakka, and two Sangha members - Anuruddha and Ananda, each utters a verse. This is followed immediately by what may be considered a denouement ‘resolution’<sup>27</sup> when everybody finally comes to accept his passing away as a confirmation of his Teachings that “Whatever is born, become, compounded is subject to decay...” (6.11). Another dimension of the resolution is when relics are divided (6.25). However, we have here the reader introduced to the emotion of ‘grief’ and the taste of ‘compassionate’ (see later for a full listing).

The novel, I mean the Sutta, introduces us to other characters as well. In all the Discourses, as noted, Ven. Ananda is the narrator, the ‘string-bearer’, but then the action moves away from him. In this Discourse, however, the personal attendant of the last 26 years of the Buddha’s life is the active participant, being present throughout. So he can be said to be the main secondary character, after the Buddha. In this role, he also serves to interestingly introduce to us yet another conflict, innocently, of course. The Buddha hints, not once but three times (3.3, 3.5), that he could live for a *kappa*<sup>28</sup> “or the remainder of one”. But Ananda fails to grasp the “broad hint” (3.4). Not much later, the Buddha, in an ironic twist, accepts Mara’s invitation to pass away (3.9), ironic in that Mara is the Buddha’s antagonist throughout his life! Next we see Ananda entreating the Buddha to continue to live, only to be rebuked, in another ironic twist, by the Buddha himself (3.40), protagonist turned antagonist, for not getting the hint! If this is not realism, then I don’t know what it is.

Still with characters, there are others, including women, as e.g., Ambapali the courtesan who donates a park to the Buddha (2.19) and eventually ends up as an Arahant. While this again can be seen as a twist, it also speaks to the efficacy of his Teachings. We are also introduced to life in the sky sphere as well, as e.g., the nun Nanda born spontaneously (i.e., in the sky sphere) through the destruction of lower fetters, projected to attaining Nibbāna in the sky itself without returning to earth (2.7). Then there are other characters of the sky-sphere who utter verses upon the Buddha’s passing away – Brahma Sahampati and Sakka, the ruler of the Devas (6.10).

<sup>23</sup> Of course, it is no fiction, as a novel is, but historical reality. But then so are historical novels.

<sup>24</sup> Again, it should be noted that this is not with any such intention on the part of scribes of the Canon, but purely in literary terms.

<sup>25</sup> It is to be noted incidentally that what was partaken of by the Buddha was not pork (*sūkara*), as sometimes it is taken to be, or a variety of truffle called ‘pig’s delight’, but possibly a kind of mushroom (*sūkaramaddava*). Or may be it “was some kind of preparation, the ingredients of which have long ago been forgotten.” (<http://www.buddhisma2z.com/content.php?id=252>). So possibly, “the Buddha died of the typical complications brought on by exhaustion, sickness and old age, not because of what he had eaten the day before. This more sound conclusion was still current when the Milindapanha was written. It says: ‘It was not from the food that the Lord became sick. It was because of the natural weakness of his body and the completion of his lifespan that the sickness grew worse’”. But, of course, partaking of the *sūkaramaddava* could have been the immediate condition.

<sup>26</sup> The closest to such a build up is the Buddha’s declaration of possibly living a *kappa*, Ananda not getting the hint, the Buddha agreeing to Mara’s invitation and Ananda unsuccessfully entreating in an attempt to have the Buddha revoke it. See next.

<sup>27</sup> This, of course, is only speaking symbolically, or in literary terms, since there is no ‘conflict’ as such in the Discourse to be resolved.

<sup>28</sup> *Kappa* is literally ‘eon’, but translated by Walshe as ‘century’, and more likely an unidentified length of time, as in the English usage, “It’s been ages since ....”. Indeed in the Mahamngala Sutta, we have the words, *kevalakappaṃ jetavanam obhāsetvā*, ‘illuminating the entire Jeta Grove’. Here surely the reference is to a place and not to a time. And the meaning is ‘entire’ or ‘whole’. So the meaning of *kappa* is tricky. The Buddha might simply have said he could ‘stay longer’. But it is also possible that given the Sutta is of later origin, and sort of a cut and paste job (Karunaratne, 2002, 462, fn. 7), the scribes added it to introduce another miraculous note to a Discourse not short on them.

There are also the elevating elements, the details of the moral and the immoral life rendering the Sutta as a didactic novel. Other values encountered are respect, politeness, cleanliness, etc. People and sky beings salute to the Buddha, sit on one side, listening to him and the people themselves “having washed their feet” before going to meet the Buddha, speaking to the Buddha’s emphasis on cleanliness<sup>29</sup>.

What we have seen in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta then are some of the key characteristics of a modern day novel – multiple characters, change of scene, dimensions of beauty, conflict and resolution. However, what gives the Discourse the characteristic of a novel may be, as noted, the very absence of a climax. In a review of the novel, *Untouchable Woman’s Odyssey*, by Suwanda Sugunasiri<sup>30</sup>, the late University of Toronto English Professor Chelva Kanaganayakam (2012) observes how he was looking for a climax but not finding it. And then he comments:

*Typically, epics need climactic moments. With all their digressions and repetitions, epics tend to move towards a culminating point, a battle, an epiphany, or a union of one kind or another. This novel does away with that technique. The lives of ordinary people do not necessarily involve melodramatic moments. I must confess that when I first read the novel I waited and waited for a dramatic turn of events, but that did not happen. The novel works so well not in spite of that, but because of that. Since there is no single moment to draw our attention, we are struck by the entire canvas, by all those moments that cohere and lead to a unity of vision<sup>31</sup>.*

It is such a vision, then, that we get by reading the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, promotive of the taste and emotion of calm<sup>32</sup>. If the Discourse, covering several months and complex encounters, instead of the usual single or simple encounters as in most other Discourses, adds to its features as a novel, Suvimalee Karunaratne (2002, 464) draws our attention to what is characterized as “a grand musical score”. The reference here is to the Buddha, at the point of the Parinibbana, first moving up the Jhana scale to “the very peaceful pinnacle of Nirodha samapatti”, having begun at the lowest. Then he moves down back to the first jhana, and finally going up the scale again up to the fourth Jhana, attaining Parinibbana “immediately after” (*samanantarā*). She also points to how there is “never a dull moment in the narrative” (465), with the sub-theme of an “ethical aspect” running through the Discourse, “like a recurring refrain” (466).

As our exploration shows, then, the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta may be seen as the earliest Asian novel. It may also be seen as a classic literary case of action but no actor – *anattā* ‘asoulity’<sup>33</sup> in action!

So we have now seen poetry, fiction and drama in the Canon. But how about *Autobiography*, another aspect of contemporary popular literature? Can we give the Buddha credit for initiating this as well? We began this presentation with the Buddha announcing his liberation in poetry, which was in the first person. And there are

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<sup>29</sup> Even today, a temple comes to be cleaned everyday, this practice in vogue even today, in as diverse countries as Sri Lanka (with the longest unbroken tradition), Thailand and Canada (both temples and meditation centres). Devotees in traditional countries, coming to the temple or other religious events, wearing white may be seen as symbolic of this, white being the colour of purity.

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.amazon.com/Untouchable-Womans-Odyssey-Suwanda.../B005RFUSBY>.

<sup>31</sup> See also Kimberly Beek, <<https://buddhistfictionblog.wordpress.com/2014/11/30/five-things-i-liked-about-untouchable-womans-odyssey/>> for comments on the novel.

<sup>32</sup> As per Bharatamuni’s Nāṭyaśāstra, a work of literature is to focus on a single emotion and taste, but with other emotions and tastes drawn upon, too, a characteristic admirably present in the Discourse.

<sup>33</sup> This is my translation. See Sugunasiri, 2011.

innumerable places where the Buddha talks about himself<sup>34</sup> in the first person, but also in the third person, referring to himself as Tathāgata (‘Thus-come One’ and/or ‘Thus-gone One’). Here, then, is an example

There are, Bhikkhus, other, matters profound, hard to see, hard to understand, peaceful, excellent, beyond mere thought, subtle, to be experienced by the wise, which the Tathagata, having realized them by his own super-knowledge, proclaims” [and making a sort of self-congratulatory addition], “about which those who would truthfully praise the Tathagata..” (Walshe (Tr.) [with modifications], 1995, 73, DN, I, 12).

Elsewhere, the Buddha refers to himself as the ‘Fortunate One (*bhagavā*), Gotama (drawing upon the clan name), etc. It is thus then that we may consider these as examples of Biography, if not strictly Autobiography.

So what we have seen above is the Buddha as Literary Maestro, drawing upon elements of what we know as literature – poetry, prose, drama and music, to bring his message across. And it is clear that they are all at a level understandable by the average masses. Indeed, then, we can say that what the Buddha has resorted is Literary Realism (see later for an expansion).

### 3. In the Footsteps of Buddha’s Literary Realism

#### 3.1 Disciples

We have seen above how the Canon is a vast literary ocean. As if tasting the salty waters<sup>35</sup>, we find his Disciples, both male (*bhikkhu*) and female (*bhikkhuni*), following in his literary footsteps, just as they were in his spiritual footsteps. The best examples of expressing themselves in poetry are the two collections, *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā*, each with a multi-authorship. Here is one of my favourites from the *Therīgāthā*, by Arahant Bhikkhuni Muttā:

Freed! So thoroughly freed am I! — from three crooked things: mortar, pestle & crooked old husband.  
Having uprooted the craving that leads to becoming, I’m set free from aging & death<sup>36</sup> (*Therīgāthā*, poem110).

Here is an example from the *Theragāthā*, a confession by Angulimāla, the famous serial killer who eventually becomes an Arahant:

... canal makers lead water, arrow-makers bend the bow, carpenters bend wood, clever men tame the self. Some tame with a stick, or hooks or whips. I was tamed by the Venerable one without stick, without sword. (Angulimāla<sup>37</sup>, *Theragāthā*, 877-878).

Then there are the more esthetic poems:

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<sup>34</sup> This is, e.g., if only as a way of winning over a hesitant inquirer or seeking to strengthen the *saddhā* (‘Trust’) in the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha.

<sup>35</sup> The language here is inspired by the Buddha’s characterization of the Dhamma: “Just as the great ocean has a single taste, that of salt, so also is this Teaching and Discipline, the taste of liberation.” (*Udāna*, Ud 5.5 ;PTS: [Ud 51](#)).

<sup>36</sup> For a parallel by a Male Disciple, see Sumangala, *Theragatha*, poem 43, the three crooked things being the sickles, ploughs and curved spades, clearly a reference to farming equipment.

<sup>37</sup> This is Angulimāla in his own words (*Theragāthā*, 880): “I was formerly the infamous Angulimala [Finger-garland]. Being carried along by the great flood, I went to the Buddha as a refuge.”

Those rocks delight me, the colour of the blue clouds, beautiful, with cool waters and pure streams, covered with Indragopaka insects” (Vanavaccha, *Theragāthā*, 13).

### 3.2 Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan Followers

We have seen above how the Disciples, living under the same roof, so to speak, taking a cue from the Buddha. But we also see the Pali literary tradition continuing long after the passing away of the Buddha and the Disciples. Sri Lanka, where the Canon was first committed to writing (3<sup>rd</sup> c BCE), may stand out here, given that in introducing the Buddha’s message in the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE, Arahant Mahinda had brought with him the Canon and the Commentaries<sup>38</sup>. Then there were the other Southeast Asian countries to which Buddhism was introduced later, such as Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and so on<sup>39</sup>.

If our examples relate to Pali, it should be hardly surprising to see a literary flowering in the other three classical languages of Buddhism as well – Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan.

*Divyāvadāna* ‘Divine narratives’ is a Sanskrit anthology of Buddhist tales, many originating in Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya texts<sup>40</sup>, dateable to the 2nd century CE. The stories themselves are therefore quite ancient. If Asvaghosa’s *Buddhacarita* (partial in Sanskrit, complete in Chinese) serves as a classic example of epic poetry, it also takes us to the genre of Biography. Along the same lines is the *Lalitavistara Sūtra*, a Mahayana Buddhist Sutra that tells the story of Gautama Buddha, from the time of his descent from Tusita until his first sermon in the Deer Park near Varanasi. The term *Lalitavistara* has been translated ‘The Play in Full’ or ‘Extensive Play’, referring to the Mahayana view that the Buddha’s last incarnation was a ‘display’ or ‘performance’ given for the benefit of the beings in this world<sup>41</sup>. So does it not speak to a dramatic element as we have seen in the Canon above?

In Chinese Buddhist literature, by the end of Tang Dynasty, almost all Buddhist scriptures were translated into Chinese, and many catalogues have been compiled to collect the different translations of all the sutras<sup>42</sup>. However, outside of the *agama* (meaning the Canon), comprise “a vast diversity of biographical, philosophical, encyclopedical and .. poetry writings, some freely translated from the Sanskrit original, but there exist also many Buddhist writings by Chinese Buddhists, among them rulers and eminent persons who wrote poems about Buddhism and Buddhist life, including the Empress Wu Zetian”<sup>43</sup>.

In Tibetan, “Some of the ...translations [to Tibetan] even imbibe better rhythms and flow than the original works. Especially, the translation of Bodhisattvavadana-kalpalata of Acarya Ksemendra became an outstanding literary piece in the secular field. It came to be known as the ‘king of all literary works’”<sup>44</sup>. ‘Namtar’, or spiritual biographies, are another popular form of Tibetan Buddhist texts, whereby the teachings and the spiritual path of a practitioner are explained through a review of their lifestory<sup>45</sup>. We also find Vajrayana adepts, known as *mahasiddha*, often expounding their teachings “in the form of songs of realization”, just as in the case of Thera / Therigatha in the Canon we have seen above. The *Dohakosha* is a collection of *doha* songs by the yogi Saraha from the 9th century. A collection known in English as *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa* was composed by Tibetan Buddhist yogi Milarepa and is especially popular amongst members of the Kagyu school. With the

<sup>38</sup> See Malalasekara, 1994, for a detailed study.

<sup>39</sup> See Bode (2004) and Saddhatissa (2004) for treatments.

<sup>40</sup><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divyavadana>.

<sup>41</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lalitavistara\\_S%C5%ABtra](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lalitavistara_S%C5%ABtra).

<sup>42</sup> [http://www.chinabuddhismencyclopedia.com/en/index.php/Chinese\\_Buddhist\\_Literature](http://www.chinabuddhismencyclopedia.com/en/index.php/Chinese_Buddhist_Literature).

<sup>43</sup>[http://www.chinabuddhismencyclopedia.com/en/index.php/Chinese\\_Buddhist\\_Literature](http://www.chinabuddhismencyclopedia.com/en/index.php/Chinese_Buddhist_Literature).

<sup>44</sup>[http://www.chinabuddhismencyclopedia.com/en/index.php/Tibetan\\_Buddhist\\_Literature:\\_A\\_preview\\_of\\_Sanskrit\\_texts\\_translation\\_in\\_Tibet](http://www.chinabuddhismencyclopedia.com/en/index.php/Tibetan_Buddhist_Literature:_A_preview_of_Sanskrit_texts_translation_in_Tibet).

<sup>45</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhist\\_texts#Other\\_products\\_of\\_the\\_Vajrayana\\_literature](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhist_texts#Other_products_of_the_Vajrayana_literature)>.

emergence of Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltzen Pal Sangpo (1181-82 to 1251 A.D.), we see the development of a new phase in the literary tradition of Tibet. Up until then “Tibetans mostly exerted themselves in the work of translation and their writings were mainly composed in a more freestyle, not based upon particular Kavya rules. But Sakya Pandita foresaw the need for a profound literary development on the basis of Sanskrit literary works.”

This brief overview then shows us how the rich literary tradition of realism established by the Buddha has continued to flower in the classical languages, if also expanding and developing it beyond realism.

### 3.3 Maintaining Buddhian<sup>46</sup> Realism in Non-Classical Languages

But it is not only in the classical languages that we find the literature flourishing but also in the vernacular. We begin with Sinhala, the majority language in Sri Lanka, and the oldest living language in the world with an unbroken association with Buddhism<sup>47</sup>. It provides a long standing rich literature of realism<sup>48</sup>. The poems written on the Mirror Wall by visitors inspired by 500 Apsaras (female beauties) on the ceiling of the Rock Fortress of Sigiriya, the citadel of King Kasyapa, can be said to be the world’s first examples of *blankverse*<sup>49</sup>. Here is one of my favorite poems:

<i>Budalmi.</i>	Budal am I .
<i>siyovae āmi;</i>	Came alone.
<i>baelu baelu bohodenā līluyen</i>	Looking around, many had written.
<i>no līmi!</i>	So didn’t write!

We also have Sinhala rulers, can you imagine, spending their time writing literature instead of governing! There is e.g., King Parakramabahu the Great credited with the ‘Crest Gem of Poetry’ (*kav silumina*). Then there are the Epics (*Mahākāvya*), Messenger Poems (in imitation of Sanskrit Sandesas of India). Authored by both the Sangha and the laity, much of this medieval literature is inspired by Canonical works, drawing upon the Dhamma towards cultivating a harmonious society.

“The traditional art of writing haiku (Japanese short poetry) first started with Buddhist monks in Japan and has now spread all over the world. The spiritual art form emphasizes being in the moment, with the shortness of the poem (just three lines) a reflection of Zen Buddhist philosophy”<sup>50</sup>. Vietnam is another country in which Buddhism has shaped its literature<sup>51</sup>.

### 3.4 Contemporary Buddhist Literature in the West

Moving away from the classical scene, and coming to contemporary times, there are both the Inherited and the Acquired Buddhists in the diaspora producing works of literature in English<sup>52</sup>. *Light of Asia* (1879), by British writer Sir Edwin Arnolds, comes to mind immediately, as does Alexandra David-Neel whose teachings and books (over 30) “influenced the beat writers Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, the populariser of Eastern philosophy Alan

<sup>46</sup> By ‘Buddhian’ I mean ‘relating to the Buddha’, as distinct from ‘Buddhist’ meaning the geosocial varieties.

<sup>47</sup> The earliest Rock Inscription dates back to the 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> c.BCE. This is “-The cave of Waruna Datta Upasika the sister of the queen of King Devanampiyatissa” who ruled from 307 BC to 267 BC. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stone\\_inscriptions\\_in\\_Sri\\_Lanka](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stone_inscriptions_in_Sri_Lanka)).

<sup>48</sup> See Reynolds (Ed.), 1956, for a collection up to 1815.

<sup>49</sup> See Paranavitana, 1956, for a comprehensive study.

<sup>50</sup> <https://theculturetrip.com/asia/japan/articles/12-haiku-that-reflect-on-zen-buddhism/>.

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=55,9478,0,0,1,0#.Wcwrnrg9Irg>.

<sup>52</sup> [https://books.google.ca/books?id=lfMYBwAAQBAJ&dq=buddhist+women+novelists&source=gb\\_s\\_navlinks\\_s](https://books.google.ca/books?id=lfMYBwAAQBAJ&dq=buddhist+women+novelists&source=gb_s_navlinks_s).

Watts, and the esotericist Benjamin Creme<sup>53</sup>. Then there are the pioneer works of fiction, such as Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*.

In his work, *Jataka Stories and the Russian Novel*, Martin Wickremasingha, the doyen of Sinhala literature and a respected critic, points to how the Jatakas have come to influence modern day Soviet writers, as e.g., in character development. "The dissatisfaction with life, which was a malady of the spirit, manifested by the Russian novelists themselves in later life<sup>54</sup>, can be seen in some of the characters created by ... them. Of the characters created by Dostoevsky representing this type, Father Zossima and Aloysha Karamazo in *Brothers Karamzov* and Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* approach the character of the bodhisattva as depicted in the Jataka book" (Wickramasinghe, 1997, 190). Indeed the story value of Jatakas is such that several of them have become modern day children's books<sup>55</sup>.

Kimberly Beek, Canadian student of Buddhist Literature and publisher of the Buddhist Fiction Blog, writes, "Buddhism intersects with modern literature at a multitude of junctions. In all its various forms, schools, and geolocations, the teachings of the Buddha continue to appear in literary cultural products of the 20th and 21st centuries. The products of this convergence bear the marks of modernity such as globalization and secularization. For modern literature this translates into the dissolution of metanarratives, the blurring of boundaries, including genre boundaries, and a self-reflexivity that highlights issues of identity"<sup>56</sup>. Writing an overview of Buddhist Literature in the US, Kimberly French notes how a few years ago *Shambhala Sun* had declared "an explosion of Buddhist fiction in the West". The Religion News Service more recently announce "a bevy of Buddhist fiction writers . . ."<sup>57</sup>.

#### 4. Buddha as Inspiration for Sanskrit Literary Realism

What we have seen thus far is a Buddhist literature – in the Canon, and in the various Buddhist traditions. But what is interesting is how the Buddha may have opened the doors to a Sanskrit secular literature of realism as well in his own homeland of India.

There was, of course, no shortage of poetry and song in the Vedic literature dating back to about the 13th c. BCE, and they were indeed of high quality. The hymns of the Rgveda "are without exception metrical" with about fifteen metres, and the hymns "have a quantitative rhythm." (MacDonnell, 1951, xvii). "The diction of the hymns is on the whole natural and simple", and contains "much genuine poetry" (xxviii), giving rise to "much beautiful and even noble imagery". Overall, "the "degree of literary merit ... is remarkably high." And there is much "beauty of language." (xxix).

However, they were basically mythological, featuring a total of thirty three gods, "distributed in earth, air and heaven" (xviii). A sample listing of the gods to whom the hymns are compiled should give us a sense of the practically exclusive mythological nature of the hymns: Agni ("personification of sacrificial fire" (MacDonnell, 1917 / 1951, p.1)), Apām Napāt (Water (67)), Parjanya (Rain-cloud (104)), Sūrya (Sun (124)), Soma (sacrificial drink(152)), (goddess) Rātri (Night (203)) and Vāta (Wind (216)). Even though the gods were conceived as human in appearance, their bodily parts are "simply figurative illustrations". Thus, e.g., the arms of the Sun god (*Sūrya*) are nothing more than its rays" (xviii). Even when the odd animal is panegyricized, as e.g., the Frog (*Maṇḍuka* (141)), it is still as a spell to produce rain."

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<sup>53</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexandra\\_David-N%C3%A9el](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexandra_David-N%C3%A9el)>9

<sup>54</sup> Having lived the life of a peasant for ten years, "Tolstoy renounced his family and leaves home to live the life of a sanyasi" (Wickramasinghe, 1997, 193).

<sup>55</sup><http://mocomi.com/fun/stories/jataka-tales/>.

<sup>56</sup> Beek, 2016. See also Buddhist Fiction Blog, run by Kimberley Beek <<https://buddhistfictionblog.wordpress.com/>>.

<sup>57</sup> French, Kimberly <<http://www.uuworld.org/articles/good-buddhist-novel>>.

Following the Vedas were the Brahmanas and the Upanishads. But there is not much in them by way of change of content or treatment either. “The Brahmanas are the commentaries and explanations attached to the Vedas. They mostly deal with the ritualistic aspects of religion and explain the intricacies of sacrificial procedures”<sup>58</sup>. And, adds Warner, “The style here is insufferably bad, the content is puerile, and without any literary value whatever...” (Warner, 2008, p. 7914). The Upanishads, the earliest ones still pre- Buddhist<sup>59</sup>, are often elevated and are always dignified ...”. But, “their aim is always the same, the search for the true being and the explanation of early problems – what is being, what is death, what is soul, and what is heaven, or does heaven exist. The answer forms the kernel of pantheistic philosophy”.

And although, on the one hand, “the Upanishads and the earliest hymns are far apart from each other”, they “stand very near to those speculative Hymns which close the various Collections”, the reference being to the four Vedas.

This is not to say that there has been no development in thought in them. “While the hymns of the Vedas emphasize rituals and the Brahmanas serve as a liturgical manual for those Vedic rituals, the spirit of the Upanishads is inherently opposed to ritual”, the older Upanishads being of increasing intensity. Anyone who worships a divinity other than the self is called a “domestic animal of the gods” in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. The Chāndogya Upanishad “parodies those who indulge in the acts of sacrifice by comparing them with a procession of dogs chanting *Om! Let's eat. Om! Let's drink.*” However, they are all still in the mythological sphere.

And so it is in this context that we need to see the pioneering role of the Buddha in introducing realism into Indian literature, the results of which comes to be seen following upon his own time. And it is this thrust and orientation, then, that we see in the post-Vedic Sanskrit literature, distinct from the Vedic literature as seen above.

To take the drama scene, e.g., the fragments of Sanskrit drama date from the 1st century CE, i.e., about six to seven centuries after the Buddha, the *Mahābhāṣya* by Patañjali containing the earliest reference to what may have been the seeds of Sanskrit drama<sup>60</sup>. To take the theoretical work, *A Treatise on Theatre (Nāṭyaśāstra)* by Bharata Muni (est: 200 BCE to 200 CE), “The *Treatise* is the most complete work of dramaturgy in the ancient world. It addresses acting, dance, music, dramatic construction, architecture, costuming, make-up, props, the organization of companies, the audience, competitions, and offers a mythological account of the origin of theatre. In doing so, it provides indications about the nature of actual theatrical practices.”

But what is interesting is that the Sanskrit theatre, at least in its early stages, was performed, on sacred ground, and by priests, who obviously, had the necessary skills (dance, music, and recitation) but

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<sup>58</sup><[http://www.indianetzone.com/24/brahmanical\\_sources\\_ancient\\_indian\\_history.htm](http://www.indianetzone.com/24/brahmanical_sources_ancient_indian_history.htm)>.

<sup>59</sup> “The Brhadaranyaka and the Chandogya are the two earliest Upanishads. They are edited texts, some of whose sources are much older than others. The two texts are pre-Buddhist; they may be placed in the 7th to 6th centuries BCE, give or take a century or so... The three other early prose Upanisads—Taittiriya, Aitareya, and Kausitaki come next [and] ... probably pre-Buddhist and can be assigned to the 6th to 5th centuries BCE.<<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upanishads>>.

<sup>60</sup>“This treatise on grammar provides a feasible date for the beginnings of theatre in India. Its drama is regarded as the highest achievement of Sanskrit literature. It utilized stock characters, such as the hero (*nāyaka*), heroine (*nāyikā*), or clown (*vidūsaka*). Actors may have specialized in a particular type.” <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanskrit\\_drama](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanskrit_drama)>.

who in traditional times would have had nothing to do with a secular type drama. “The purpose of [the] ancient hymns was to propitiate the gods ...” (MacDonnell, 1917/1951, xii). But now the aim of theatre was “both to educate and to entertain”<sup>61</sup>, clearly a far cry from the intent of Vedic hymns intended to serve a practically exclusive religious and mythological function.

As another feature of Sanskrit drama, performers belonging to professional companies were directed by “a stage manager (*sūtradhara*), who may also have acted. This task was thought of as being analogous to that of a puppeteer—the literal meaning of “*sūtradhara*” being “holder of the strings or threads”. Have we not seen Ven Ananda playing an identical role, with his words beginning every sutta - “Thus have I heard”? So in a real sense Ananda was the original ‘holder of the Thread of Dhamma’, the thread made up of the Discourses<sup>62</sup>. But can we not trace this to the role played by the Buddha himself in the Jatakas, bringing together the threads of the Present and the Past stories? Indeed we have seen how the single discourse of the Mahamangala sutta captures all the elements of drama as outlined here. So, just taking the genre of Sanskrit theatre alone, we can see how the element of realism introduced by the Buddha has snaked its way into Sanskrit theatre over the course of the next five to six centuries.

Now if the single example of the theatre speaks to the possible influence and impact of the Buddha on Sanskrit literature, the ‘Embedded Story’, of which the *Pancatantra* and *Hitopadesa* are the best known manifestations, is another genre where we can clearly see the Buddha behind it. The *Pancatantra* ‘Five Threads’, e.g., is intended to instruct young Princes in statecraft, this done by relating stories embedded in stories. In general, a character begins telling a story, but then before completing it, tells a sub-story. And sometime, before completing the sub-story, there may be yet another sub-sub-story. Once that is told, the character returns to the sub-story, completes it, and then finally returns to the original story. This is what may be called the embedded story genre.

The author of the Pañcatantra is said to be “[N]either a Buddhist nor a Jain”, but of a Brahminic persuasion (Keith, 1923, 105). However, clearly evident is the strong Buddhist influence, as e.g., we see from a close look at Book I (Ryder, 1956, translation) where the advice given is not rarely drawn upon Buddhadhamma (see Sugunasiri, 2014, 225-232). However, it is not just in the advice we see the hand of the Buddha, but in the very structure of the genre, the Aggañña and the Patika Suttas providing the model (233-241). Judging by it all, then, it may be said that the Buddha may indeed well have been the originator of the embedded story genre (Sugunasiri, 2014, 225 ff.).

There is also a specific, though perhaps a minor, contribution, made by Buddhism to Indian esthetics theory itself. It was noted how in Indian esthetic theory, a work of literature, a play in particular, is intended to generate one or more ‘emotions’ leaving a parallel ‘taste’ in the ‘tongue’, i.e., the mind, of the *sahrd* ‘co-heart’, meaning the audience. Originally in Indian esthetic theory, there were only eight *rasa* and *vibhāva* (= *sthāyibhāva* (Warder, 1989, 23))<sup>63</sup> but now there came to be added a ninth, and this was by the Buddhist writer on drama, Rahula. The added ninth was the taste of ‘calmed’ (*sānta*) paralleling the emotion of ‘peace’ (*sāma*) (Warder, 1989, 40), also called *prasānta*.

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<sup>61</sup><[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanskrit\\_drama](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanskrit_drama)>.

<sup>62</sup>This is as in the Five Nikayas .

<sup>63</sup> These are ‘sensitive-love’, ‘comic-humour’, ‘compassionate-grief’, ‘furious- anger’, ‘heroic-energy’, ‘horrific-disgust’, ‘marvelous-astonishment’ ‘apprehensive- fear’ (*śrngāra-rati*, *hāsya-hāsa*, *karuṇa-soka*, *raudra-krodha*, *vīra-utsāha*, *bhayānaka-bhaya*, *bībhatsa-jugupsā*, *adbhuta-vismaya* respectively) (Warder, 1989, 23)

So we can see how within a span of 4 to 8 centuries, Sanskrit literature had come to flower in a literary realism, even though the authorship comes to be, at least in the earliest stages, from religious personalities themselves. It is of course, not that every single development in Sanskrit literature can be traced to the Buddha. However, it is the launch of literature on the path to realism by the Buddha, away from a strictly mythological and religious domain, and setting it free, encouraging creativity, that can be said to have resulted in an unlimited flowering of Sanskrit literature at creative hands.

## 5. Buddha Launching Literary Realism

The title of my remarks is ‘Buddha Launches Literary Realism’, noting the word ‘launch’. Thus far we have talked about the Realism. But what about the launching, which means a new beginning? So what is the new beginning made by the Buddha?

We begin by noting that by the time of the Buddha India was not a literary desert. However, as noted above, Indian literature of his time was by and large mythological. So the primary sense in which the Buddha can be said to have launched a Literary Realism is by demythologizing, and demystifying, literature. This was done through multiple paths.

The first relates to choice of language. The language of literature and learning in the Buddha’s time, of course, was Vedic Sanskrit. Literally meaning ‘reconstructed’, Sanskrit had all the associations of elitism, studied and becoming learned in only by the priestly Brahmin class. But the Buddha’s decision was to go in the opposite direction – to use the language of the masses, namely a Prakrit (literally ‘original’, but with association of uncouth and uneducated), formalized eventually in Pali. So the first path towards literary realism can be said to be the use of vernacular languages. This was also to render the vernacular languages richer and healthier by being put to literary use, going beyond their use in day to day conversation.

The choice of vernacular languages meant that there was now a vast storehouse to draw from - the lives of people, their stories, folktales, metaphors, identifications, etc. If the Teachings now coming to be a vast storehouse of knowledge as to the social conditions of the time, it also brought a realism to his Teachings, since the listeners could well relate to them.

But that is not all. Still in the area of language, we also see in him the ‘language entrepreneur’, making creative use of language. An example is the use of *double entendre* ‘double meaning’ as e.g., in the title of the Discourse Aggañña Sutta (as above). The term *aggañña* is analyzable as *agga* + *-(ñ)ña* meaning ‘knowledge’ or ‘knowing’. But *agga-* is rich in meaning, cutting two ways. It means both ‘ancient’, ‘primeval’ and ‘end’ on the one hand, and ‘best’ on the other. So while “*agga-* in relation to the process of Evolution can be said to refer to the beginning process, it refers to being the ‘best’ in relation to Dhamma” (Sugunasiri, 2014, ix). A *double entendre* indeed! This, of course, is only one example of the Buddha using language creatively, particularly in the context of the poverty of vocabulary in Prakrits, as e.g., contrasted with Sanskrit. This then is a second path he treads to ensure a literary realism.

A third literary realism was telling it like it is, with no attempt to immortalize, or divest the stories of the human qualities. While the Buddha did speak about himself in the first and the third persons as noted above, there is no attempt on his part to elevate himself to mythological levels. We have noted above how at the end of a Jataka, a link is made, bringing Story Present and Story Past together. We have seen in the *The Cula-Nandiya Jataka* above how he identifies himself as a monkey. So we can clearly see how there was no attempt to mythologize himself, but telling it like it is – born a monkey. How much more realism can we expect in a work of fiction or a play?

So what he does by demythologizing literature, using the common man’s language and drawing upon contemporary life is to ‘set literature free’! So this then is the way he launches literary realism.

By setting literature free, the Buddha can be said to ‘launch’ his disciples into the realm of literature, and literary realism, ensuring that the shackles of their rigorous monastic rules don’t stand in the way of creativity and creative thought. Taking the cue, we see the Disciples producing their own works of poetry, as collected in the *Theragatha* and the *Therigatha* which “allow a unique glimpse at very early Indian poetry otherwise completely lost”<sup>64</sup>. These are “partly love lyrics adapted to religious purposes”. The “form of these stanzas [are] .. completely different from anything found in Vedic literature”. If *Therigatha* represents “the first surviving poetry ... composed by women in India”, the “poetically excellent quality of these verses is not matched by [even] Indian poetesses of later periods”. So we can see a freedom of literary expression launched through the Disciples. And it is the launching of the Disciples on their literary journey of creativity that has resulted in the continuation of a rich literature over the last 2500 years.

So what we see is a multi-phased launch of a literary realism by the Buddha, resulting in the flowering of literatures over the last two and a half millennia, across lands and oceans, East and West, in many a classical and contemporary language.

## 6 Concluding Remarks

While this overview is by no means comprehensive, but merely indicative and random, it is hoped that it amply speaks to the historic launch of Literary Realism by the Buddha. In the final analysis, we can actually say what all this speaks to in volumes is the creative literary genius of the Buddha. The fruits of a tree come to be indeed determined by the quality of the seed planted.

The Buddha says that he teaches only two things: reality of *dukkha* and elimination of *dukkha*. This clearly is a spiritual goal (*mokkha magga*) - personal liberation (through *sīla, samādhi, paññā*). However, knowing full well that only a few will have this as their primary goal in life, he also launches an interim goal for the majority, namely the ‘path to Heaven’ (*sagga magga*), through *dāna, sīla, bhāvanā*. So an unrelated benefit of launching Literary Realism is to help homo sapiens sapiens access the Path to Heaven in a pleasant way based in reality, and not mythology, also building a harmonious society.

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<sup>64</sup>v. Hinuber, 1996, 53-54.

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