A Silent Protest Against Gender Inequality: A Case of Karen Armstrong’s *Buddha* (*)

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the growth of the Buddhist tradition, the persona of Siddhatta Gotama is indeed something that has continued to nurture our patriarchal value system or its androcentric social structures which, it must be stressed here, may still largely account for the ‘justified’ cultural subordination, marginalization or de-empowerment of many of our women especially in some (poor) third-world Buddhist countries of the East.

It is no wonder, therefore, that the grave consequences of gender discrimination should today be considered as one of the eight top concerns of the world’s highest-level body as has clearly been stipulated in the UN’s Millennium Development Goals (MDG’s). The above androcentric manner of describing, picturing or portraying the Buddha—which is a direct consequence of the continuing practice of male superiority or chauvinism—seems to have characterized the life writing of Gotama Buddha over the past ages. But, as there has never been any serious attempt to present the image of Gotama Buddha otherwise, “so the cycle continues, as it seems to have spun itself out time after time in Buddhist history,” to use Gross’ wording (2001: 229).

However, the pressuring demand by our oppressed women (read ‘also our mothers, sisters or daughters’), from the other side of the fence, for greater gender equality or/and fuller recognition is now unstoppable and, therefore, can no longer be silenced or ignored. In fact, as emphasized by Runzo and Martin (2000), this universal outcry has been one of the two main forces which characterize the field of religions in the wake of the 21st century. The institutionalized religions, according to Runzo and Martin, urgently need “to redefine [their] attitudes toward gender as women have...
stepped forward to insist that their full humanity be acknowledged in the religious as well as the social realm” (2000: 1).

One of those liberated women who have made it to the centre stage at present times, in order to make her stance publicly recognized, is Karen Armstrong, a world-famed author and biographer. In addition to her bestseller books on the three Abrahamic religions and biographies of their founders\(^5\), Armstrong has produced a life account of Gotama Buddha. And, it is in this biographical text as well, for the purpose of making known her dissenting voice against the age-old practice of sexual discrimination or gender inequality, that she has attempted to reveal to the open the woman-unfriendly portrayal of the Master.

The present undertaking, based on Norman Fairclough’s critical discourse analytical research method (CDA), attempts to expose and reassess the traditional portrayal of the Buddha especially those aspects showing the Master’s complex interaction with the female. It aims to explore the extent to which Armstrong seems to have justified her obvious resentment towards the older male-oriented depiction of the Buddhist sage and, more importantly, her expectation of a redefined or revisited Buddha who may be more sympathetic towards the call for the cessation of sexual discrimination or towards the appeal for the immediate realization of greater women’s empowerment.

By bringing this gender issue into the spotlight, the present paper expects to contribute, though in a somewhat indirect way, towards raising a wider public awareness of the significance of the UN’s MDG-3 of gender equality and women’s empowerment. Also, the present endeavor

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may hopefully show some comforting support to those oppressed women who are continuing to suffer in many ways and in many parts of the world.

**A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF KAREN ARMSTRONG**

Born on 14 November 1944 into a Catholic Irish family at Wildmoor, Worcestershire, Armstrong became a nun in her teens at the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus. After spending some seven painful years at the convent, she left it in 1969 for pursuing an academic study at Oxford. However, as she did not graduate with a doctoral degree in English literature from Oxford, due to an administrative policy imposed on her, Armstrong became disillusioned with her dream for an academic career.

In 1976, however, she started teaching English at a girls’ school in Dulwich while writing the memoir of her convent experiences entitled *Through the Narrow Gate*. She has also taught at the Leo Baeck College for the Study of Judaism and the Training of Rabbis and Teachers. However, it was clear to her that, in exchange for her initial academic ambition to be a professor of English, she would have to opt for a writing and researching profession. Thus, in 1982—the same year in which *Through the Narrow Gate* came out in print—Armstrong started to work as a freelance writer and broadcaster.

In 1983, on an assignment by the British Channel Four to document the life and works of St. Paul for a six-part television documentary series, Armstrong visited the Holy Land where her traveling experience turned out to be a turning point in her career as a religious historian, scholar and thinker. She later aspired to reconcile especially the believers of the three religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam through her works and projects. She believed that it was high time that compassion and the

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6. In the Introduction of her first book about her life at the convent entitled *Through the Narrow Gate: a Memoir of Spiritual Discovery*, Armstrong speaks of her “state of grief and depression [as] probably not dissimilar to the experience of a bad divorce or a major bereavement” (1981 (2005): xiii). However, years later, Armstrong regarded her “convent life as a gift. It was not a mistake. I entered my order because I wanted to find holiness…” (1981 (2005): xv).
Golden Rule had replaced the widespread religious fundamentalism in today’s world.

Armstrong came to prominence as a writer only in 1993 with the publication of *A History of God: the 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. The production of this work, which focuses on ‘the Golden Rule’ believed to be able to strongly unify the believers of the three Abrahamic religions, was motivated by the self-transforming visit to Jerusalem.

Her other important professional involvements ever since can be briefly summarized as in the following. In 1996, Armstrong participated in Bill Moyers’ television series “Genesis”. She was awarded the Muslim Public Affairs Council Media Award in 1999. In 2005, she was appointed by Kofi Annan to take part in the UN initiative known as “The Alliance of Civilizations”, sponsored by the prime ministers of Spain and Turkey, in order to counter the “clash of civilizations” theory.

In 2007, Armstrong was awarded a medal by the Egyptian government for her services to Islam under the auspices of the Al-Azhar madrassa (the first foreigner to have received the award so far). In the same year, she was invited by the Malaysian government to give public talks in Kuala Lumpur. She also delivered the Muis Lecture in Singapore. Also in the same year, Armstrong became a keynote speaker on Islamphobia in Istanbul. In 2008, in Lahore, Islamabad, and Karachi, she delivered a series of lectures on Islam. In 2008, for her successful role to promote the Freedom of Worship, she was awarded the Four Freedoms Award by the Franklin & Eleanor Roosevelt Institute. And, in February 2008, having won the TED prize, Armstrong started her major international project to create, launch and propagate the *Charter for Compassion*.

7. The Golden Rule that Armstrong has been referring to in much of her public addresses is the fundamental value which transcends all institutionalized religions and, for that matter, also unites all of them at that fundamental level. Formulated first time by the Chinese philosopher Confucius (*Analects* 12: 2), the Rule stipulates that a person should not do to others what he/she does not expect them to do to him/her (Armstrong, 2004: 147; see also www.ted.com/speakers/karen_armstrong.html; Matthew 7: 12 in the Bible; Samyutta Nikaya 3: 1-8 in the Tipitaka).
This well-known Charter for Compassion, co-produced by the world’s religious leaders and thinkers (including the Dalai Lama and Bishop Desmond Tutu) and launched through a shared multi-lingual website on 12 November 2009, perhaps best captures Armstrong’s most salient viewpoint and all-embodying philosophy. With regards to what should be done right from the grassroots level in order to foster worldwide understanding and peace across major religious traditions and cultures, she is of the opinion that only by “restoring compassion to the centre of religious, moral and political life” can the world peace be realized. The third paragraph of the Charter, for instance, reads as follows:

“We therefore call upon all men and women to restore compassion to the center of morality and religion – to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate – to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures – to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity – to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings – even those regarded as enemies.

KAREN ARMSTRONG VERSUS THE MISOGYNISTS

In addition to the Abrahamic religions, Armstrong has also nurtured a strong passion for Buddhism. Her decision to write and publish another biography of Gotama Buddha for her Western audience is self-explanatory, indeed.

8. Though initiated by Armstrong, the final draft of the Charter was completed by 14 world-renowned religious thinkers and leaders. See http://www.ted.com/speakers/karen_armstrong.html.


11. Armstrong is also of the opinion that Westerners often find certain teachings within the religion “nihilistic and depressing” (Armstrong, 2004: 113) and at times even get “baffled and frustrated” (Armstrong, 2004: 87) for not being able to understand the Buddha’s experience of enlightenment and Parinibbana which they sometimes equate with “total extinction” (Armstrong, 2004: 87). According to Armstrong, this is made even worse by the fact that the Buddhist scriptural texts often “dwell in such detail
However, it must still be stated herein that her profounder involvement in the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and, especially, Islam is still strongly overshadowing her enthusiasm for the Buddhist religion or other Eastern religions.

As shall become clearer later, Armstrong has found within the Buddhist religion some clear traces of misogyny. Right from the beginning, according to her, the way the Buddha has been depicted seems to demonstrate a never-failing side-taking or attachment to the socio-cultural imposition of patriarchy. In her biography of the Buddha, Armstrong cannot conceal this utter disappointment. She cries out, “What are we to make of this misogyny?” (Armstrong, 2001: 153) and speaks out against the explicit mistreatment of the female members of the monastic order (sangha) which, according to her, have been treated as “an inferior breed” (Armstrong, 2001: 153).

However, instead of attacking the Buddhist religion point-blank with a sweeping generalization, she nevertheless found the very origin of the misogynistic practice in the “chauvinism in the Order” (Armstrong, 2004: 154) even though the Buddha’s condoning knowledge of it must not be forgotten (Armstrong, 2004: 154). To refer to Arvind Sharma’s (2000) illuminating binary theory below, it can probably be said herein that, rather than blaming it on the gender-neutral soteriology of Buddhism, Armstrong has particularly laid the blame on the sociological circumstances within which the Buddhist community has structured itself.

And, as the knowledge of the difference between the theological and the sociological concepts above is essential for a better understanding of Armstrong’s position, Sharma’s binary theory of “religion and women” and “women and religion” shall be briefly introduced below. According to Sharma:

“A general theory of “religion and women” is not interchangeable, is not synonymous, with a general theory of “women and religion.” A general
theory of “religion and women” will be primarily oriented towards religion as a soteriological structure and women as human beings, whereas a general theory of “women and religion” will be primarily oriented toward the social power structure and women in relation to men and toward the role of religion (and specially of its soteriological dimension) in this set-up” (Sharma, 2000: 171).

By referring to Sharma’s viewpoint above, the present paper argues that, despite her strong rejection of the Buddhist misogyny or her inability to conceal her utter resentment or disappointment with the sociological Buddhism; most of the time, however, Armstrong can still be expected to respect the Buddha’s teachings “in terms of its soteriological intention and never lose sight of this fact” (Sharma, 2000: 169). In Buddha, she has, for instance, noted the following observation:

“By the first century B.C.E., some of the monks certainly blamed women for their own sexual desires, which were impeding them from enlightenment, and regarded women as universal obstacles to spiritual advance. Other scholars argue that the Buddha, enlightened as he was, could not escape the social conditioning of the time, and that he could not imagine a society that was not patriarchal” (Armstrong, 2001: 154).

Despite her critical rejection of the Buddhist misogyny, it must be said at this stage nevertheless that Armstrong has not been recognized as a staunch critic of sexual discrimination or gender inequality in a rather exclusive sense. Being particularly well-known as a commentator of religious affairs (especially after the 9/11 tragedy in the US), she has more often than not been described as a strong campaigner of religious liberty. However, that said, her unmistakable stance with regards to the unfair sexual injustices or inequalities imposed on women, as resulting from the way the Abrahamic religions have been construed or interpreted over the past ages by chauvinistic male believers, can be quite easily encountered in some pages of her published works.

In her most famous work A History of God (1993), for example, Armstrong traces the origin of the misogynistic treatments of women within the Abrahamic religious communities down to a sociological point
of departure. She clearly stated that the ill fate suffered by the Jewish, 
Christian and Muslim women, rather than something obliged through 
a doctrinal imposition, has been largely due to the fact that the three 
religions have all this time been “hijacked by the men” (1993: 158).

To cite another example, in a later work entitled The Great 
Transformation (2007), Armstrong has spoken of the Axial age (from 
about 800 to 200 B.C.E.)—the period in which the world’s greatest 
religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Judaism, 
and Zoroastrianism emerged—as characterized by “its indifference to 
women” (2007: xxi). Finding this to be the origin of the misogynistic 
practices known to date, Armstrong said:

“It was not that the Axial sages hated women; most of the time, 
they simply did not notice them. When they spoke about the “great” or 
“enlightened” man, they did not mean “men and women”—though most, 
if challenged, would probably have admitted that women were capable of 
this liberation too” (Armstrong, 2007: xxii).

NORMAN FAIRCLOUGH’S CDA

A discourse—including, of course, the biographical discourse of the life 
of the Buddha—is often used by its producer to perpetuate the dominant 
power or ideology in society (Fairclough, 1989: 86; see also Henderson, 
2005: 16). This is done especially through a mechanism known as incul-
cation (Fairclough, 1989: 75).

The social practice of the Buddhist biographical discourse or, in 
simpler wording,

The traditional imposition of a certain set of values, rules or conventions 
on all biographers of the Buddha as regards the do’s and the don’ts, 
constitutes the most important point of departure for the production of any

12. The term ‘discourse’ here is employed in Fairclough’s sense to mean “the 
whole process of social interaction of which a text is just a part. This process includes 
in addition to the text the process of production, of which the text is a product; and 
the process of interpretation, for which the text is a resource” (Fairclough, 1984: 24).
Buddha biographies; and, for that matter, it is basically but necessarily biased.

However, it must be stated right from the outset that, as Armstrong does not seem to have succumbed to the pressure of the Buddhist biographical discourse, her *Buddha* can be viewed as a counter-discourse, as it were. The CDA analysis proposed herein, as well as unraveling the patriarchal ideology characteristic of the traditional Buddha biographical writing, expects to make manifest Armstrong’s counter argument in response to it. But, in order to do that, Fairclough’s CDA needs to be briefly introduced first so that the research tool can be fully appreciated for the proposed revelation of the counter-position.

Drawing on the views of Halliday, Foucault, Critical Theory, the Frankfurt School, etc., Fairclough is widely known as one of the pioneering critical discourse analysts who introduced CDA or what he calls CLS (Critical Language Study) (Fairclough, 1989: 5) at its earliest stage of development. He published his most influential book entitled *Language and Power* in 1989—ten years after Fowler and his colleagues introduced the term ‘critical linguistics’ in their *Language and Control*—and renamed it as CDA (Xin, 2000: 20).

Also known as the Sociocultural Change Approach, Fairclough’s version of CDA covers the following three successive layers of analysis; namely, the analyses of the text, its discourse practice, and its social practice respectively. These stages have been referred to by Fairclough as the stages of *description, interpretation* and *explanation* (Fairclough, 1989: 109). In conducting Fairclough’s version of CDA, which is predominantly a text-based analysis (see Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002: 65), it is therefore imperative that the discourse practice and the social practice of the discourse be investigated equally thoroughly.

At the level of *description*, a discourse analyst investigates first and foremost the lexico-grammatical features of the text under scrutiny. These features are related to the vocabulary, sentence structures and/or coherence/cohesion encountered in the discourse. In particular, s/he shall try to figure out (1) how those features help project certain ideas
(ideational), (2) how they show certain patterns of relationships among the discursive participants (relational), and, lastly, (3) how those lexico-grammatical properties help her/him to construct the identities of all the participants involved (identity) (see Fairclough, 1989: 112).

Next, at the level of interpretation, the analyst investigates the productive process of the text. S/he attempts to figure out how the text has come into being (read: the process of textual production) as well as how the text has been socially or collectively received (read: its textual consumption) (see Fairclough, 1989: 141-162). In other words, the analyst herein analyses the text in relation to its order of discourse.

There are three things to be done here. First, the analyst will figure out how the personal backgrounds of the text-producer have made their ways into the text. Second, s/he will track down the interdiscursivity and the intertextuality of the text under scrutiny in order to establish any outside contributions instrumental to the production of the text. The former means the text-producer’s implicit reference to certain discursive systems; while the latter his more explicit borrowing from them (Wu, 2011: 97). In other words, the analyst shall conduct a genre analysis and an intertextual analysis on the text under scrutiny. Finally, s/he shall look at how the text-producer’s target audience has affected the eventual quality of the text produced.

Lastly, at the level of explanation, the CDA analyst can interpret her/his own research findings by relating them carefully to all the relevant social practice prior to making important inferences about them (see Fairclough, 1989: 162-166). S/He can explore the extent to which the discourse under scrutiny has followed, maintained, upheld, supported or, even, challenged or modified the assumptions, ideas, concepts, conditions, rules or values adopted or accepted collectively within the discourse community concerned. Only by having completed this final task, can the analyst be said to have conclusively arrived at the closest possible destination in her/ his quest for the real meaning of the discourse concerned.

With the adoption of Fairclough’s three-stage CDA, it is expected that the investigation shall come full circle in establishing Armstrong’s critical
and skeptical response to the traditional depiction of Gotama Buddha. However, due to the constraint of space herein, the research findings from the three separate (though not mutually exclusive) analyses above shall only be summarized in one and the same delivery under the following sub-title. All the essential references, quotes or excerpts shall nevertheless be cited carefully to show their reference page numbers in Armstrong’s *Buddha*. This way, it is expected that the readers of the present paper may be able to continue with their own further exploration at their disposal.

**THE ORIGIN OF THE BUDDHIST MISOGYNY**

To begin with, through her published biography entitled *Buddha*, Armstrong among others has voiced her deep concern with regards to the lack or absence of gender equality within the Buddhist community. By tracing its origin down to Gotama Buddha’s life and person, supposedly from whom it all departed initially, she attempts to explore the origin of the Buddhist patriarchal system of old—something which has presumably triumphed to this day. With the help of her linguistic, generic, intertextual and philosophical repertoire, Armstrong has tried to demonstrate to her Western readership that the unjust Buddhist treatment to womankind, which has been happening for over 2,500 years, is in fact much more closely associated with “a [male] chauvinism in the Order” (p. 154)\(^{13}\) than with the Buddha’s soteriological teaching.

The serious lack of respect for women, according to Armstrong, had already been quite prevalent in the Indian spiritual scene before the emergence of the Buddha\(^{14}\). Armstrong has used the expression “homelessness” (p. 1) or its derivatives to suggest what for “thousands of men and even a few women” (p. 1), who lived under the spell of the

\(^{13}\) In this sub-section, all the page numbers cited, unless otherwise specified, refer exclusively to those in Armstrong’s *Buddha* (2004).

\(^{14}\) Armstrong has stated that the date of the Buddha’s attainment of Nibbana or enlightenment, supposedly the starting point of his missionary service, is still a case of controversy: “The scriptures say that the Buddha attained Nibbana in late April or early May, but they do not reveal the year in which this important event took place. The conventional date has long been held to be 528 B.C.E., though some modern scholarship would put it as late as 450” (p. 123).
pre-Buddhistic Indian ethos, constituted “a lifestyle that had nothing to do with domesticity” (p. 1). This idea of homelessness was radically opposed to that of the typical Indian household or that “miasma of petty tasks and pointless duties” (p. 1).

Thus, to realize any spiritual goals, those early Indians thought it both obligatory and celebratory to abandon domesticity. In a way, according to Armstrong, it was “a romantic decision” (p. 2) to lead an ascetic lifestyle (brahmacariya) in “[t]he thick luxuriant forests that fringed the fertile plain of the Ganges river” (p. 1); and, as such, the lifestyle was naturally quite desirable for both men and women of those early days—“Some of them had brought their wives along and had set up a household in the wild while they pursued the holy life” (p. 37). And, as he had been born into the same socio-religious climate, Gotama could only be so overwhelmed by the excitement that he made up “his mind to join them” (p. 2).

However, “one might think” (p. 4) that Gotama’s unstoppable desire for homelessness was propelled by the loss of an “ability to live” (p. 4) or “a profound depression” (p. 4). But, according to Armstrong, “that was not the case” (p. 4). In fact, as far as Gotama was concerned, “the endless round of duties and responsibilities that made up a householder’s life became a symbol of samsara and of exclusion from holiness” (pp. 40-41).

Armstrong has consequently interpreted homelessness at this stage of Gotama’s life as the man’s “rejection of the domestic world and women” (p. 155) because domesticity had provided him with “no hope of liberation” (p. 41). But, it must be said at this juncture, however, that for the Buddha’s followers later on homelessness must also mean leaving behind “their own selves” (p. 158) or aspiring to “a death to self” (p. 50).

By making a reference to the Christian Biblical discourse, Armstrong found a striking parallel between Gotama and Jesus in terms of their similar rejection of women within the framework of the spiritual quest above. She has found that both sages “took it for granted that family life was incompatible with the highest forms of spirituality” (p. 2); and, consequently, “they must leave their wives and children and abandon their aged relatives” (p. 2).
Gotama had insisted that he pursue his spiritual career without the accompaniment of his wife Yasodhara. His misogynistic attitudes, as Armstrong has strongly implied here, were in fact so deeply rooted in his way of thinking—"It did not occur to him to take his wife with him, as some of renouncers did, when he left home to begin his quest" (p. 154). But, as far as Armstrong is concerned, the underlying significance of that was quite clear: "In the Buddha’s mind, women may well have been inseparable from the ‘lust’ that made enlightenment an impossibility" (p. 154).

However, this is not to say that Gotama has found his wife to be sexually disgusting at all. Armstrong instead believes that his rejection of his spouse was more to do with Gotama’s attachment to his wife—"But this was not because he found sexuality disgusting, like the Christian Fathers of the Church, but because he was attached to his wife" (p. 154). In other words, Gotama’s clear disapproval of his wife’s participation was due more to a soteriological reason than to a sociological necessity. In other words, the domestic realm, seen from Gotama’s rationale, could only offer him more obstructive attachment; whereas, a genuine pursuit of spiritual emancipation requires a total separation or detachment from domesticity.

But, Armstrong does not want her Western readers (whom she intimately addresses as her equals with the use of the inclusive pronoun ‘we’) to forget that Gotama did not leave home or “this fool’s paradise” (p. 32), which was “dominated …by lust, greed and ambition” (p. 40), for the fulfillment of his own selfish desire. Instead, as clearly implied in Armstrong’s use of the following medicinal metaphor, it aims ultimately to heal the rampant disease of the entire humanity—“Gotama was leaving

15. It is interesting to note that Armstrong has not mentioned the name of Gotama’s wife; i.e. Yasodhara at all in her published biography. Gotama’s mother’s name, Maya or Mahamaya cannot be found anywhere in her Buddha, either. This may perhaps raise a tickling question as regards whether or not this was something deliberate on the part of the biographer.

16. The pronoun ‘we’ is repeated as many as 203 times by Armstrong in her 222-page-long Buddha (which includes the Introduction chapter on pp. xi-xxix) as a grammatical means for referring inside and outside the text.
home to find a cure for the sickness that plagues humanity and which fills men and women with unhappiness” (p. 6).

Gotama’s rejection of female involvement in men’s spiritual quest can be seen to have also occurred sometime after his enlightenment. Despite his foster-mother’s or Pajapati’s repeated begging and pleading for an ordination into the Sangha (or the Buddhist Order), Gotama Buddha strongly disapproved of it. Armstrong has used a strong word (i.e. to bar) in order to compare the Buddha’s refusal of Pajapati with his seemingly “bar[ring] [all] women from the Sangha” (p. 152). Her rewording of the Buddha’s scriptural discourse\(^\text{17}\) also suggests the Master’s uncompromising stance—“There was no question of admitting women to the Order” (p. 151). To Ananda, his closest disciple, the Buddha later disclosed his very reason:

“If women had not been admitted, he told Ananda, the Dhamma would have been practiced for a thousand years; now it would last a mere five hundred years. A tribe with too many women would become vulnerable and be destroyed; similarly, no Sangha with women members could last long. They would fall upon the Order like mildew on a field of rice” (p. 153).

However, Armstrong has found the above reasoning to be an absolutely feeble, disturbing excuse. She used the following interrogative mode of sentence to mark her strong disagreement: “But the Dhamma was supposed to be for everybody: for gods, animals, robbers, men of all castes—were women alone to be excluded? Was rebirth as a man the best they could hope for?” (p. 152). And, sensing that “[t]here seems to be discrepancy in the texts” (p. 153) and doubting whether or not the Buddha’s answer above, as some scholars have concluded, could have been “added later and reflect[ed] a chauvinism in the Order” (p. 154)—implying that there might have been some amount of redaction done to it over the past ages-

\(^{17}\) Armstrong has made it quite clear that, instead of cutting and pasting directly from other scholars’ translations of the Buddhist scriptures, she paraphrased them in order to produce “[her] own version to make them more accessible to the Western reader” (2004: xxix).
she made an issue out of the textual accountability and reliability of this scriptural event on at least three grounds.

First, Armstrong doubts the effectiveness of the method of the Buddhist scriptural canonization. Even though “[i]t is generally agreed that the most useful texts are those written in Pali” (p. xiii)….the Pali Canon was orally preserved and probably not written down until the first century B.C.E.” (p. xiii). “[T]hey developed ways of memorizing the discourses of the Buddha and the detailed rules of their Order. As the Buddha himself had probably done, they set some of his teachings in verses and may even have sung them; they also developed a formulaic and repetitive style” (p. xiv).

As a result, “[t]his mode of oral transmission precludes individualistic authorship” (p. xvii); and, for that matter, it “cannot satisfy the standards of modern scientific history” (p. xxiv). Armstrong says that “we have very little information that can be considered historically sound” (p. xii) and, accordingly, this transmission mode can only be “inevitably flawed” (p. xvii). This may perhaps explain why there is an overly frequent repetition of such dubious expressions by Armstrong in her biography as “we are told that”, “some scholars believe”, “we cannot be certain that”, “we do not know”, “we know nothing about”18, etc.

Second, Armstrong argues that, over such a long time lapse, there must have been various kinds of intrusive corruption committed to the Pali canon-“Much material was probably lost, some was misunderstood, and the monks’ later views were doubtless projected on to the Buddha” (p. xvii). Thus, according to her, it is possible that some “fictional embellishment” (p. 36) could have made its way into the canon as, for instance, the case of King Bimbisara’s spontaneously making the wandering Gotama “his heir” (p. 36) and that of the miracle shown by the unchanging shade of the tree at the ceremonial ploughing for which Suddhodana “paid homage to the little boy” (p. 67).

By comparing the Buddhist canon with the Gospels, Armstrong pointed

18. In Armstrong’s Buddha, the expression “we are told that” is repeated as many as 6 times; “some scholars believe that” = 4 times; “we cannot be certain that” = 3 times; “we do not know = 4 times; and, “we know nothing about” = 1 time.
out one case in point. Unlike the latter which “tell[s] us next to nothing about Jesus’s\(^{19}\) early life” (p. 122), the former recorded only “the first five years of his [Buddha’s] teaching career in some detail, but after that the Buddha fades from view and the last twenty years of his life are almost entirely unrecorded” (p. 122).

Finally, as the canon is basically associated with the Theravadin interpretation of Buddhism, Armstrong has suspected it of carrying a certain hidden (sectarian) agenda. This was possible because, even though the Pali texts contain some narrative accounts of the life of the Buddha, they do not constitute a “continuous narrative of the Buddha’s life” (p. xviii). Thus, the Theravadin scholar-monk Buddhaghosa came in on working out the “chronological order” (p. xix) through his commentaries. But, even then, according to Armstrong, Buddhaghosa’s work has left a yawning gap—“But even these extended narratives have lacunae. They contain almost no details about the forty-five years of the Buddha’s teaching mission, after his enlightenment” (p. xix).

Armstrong has accordingly argued that, even though “[t]he Buddha predicted that women would blight the Order” (p. 160), as already pointed out above, it was the male chauvinism or “a clash of male egos” (p. 160) that would instead ruin the Sangha in the first place—thus, making it the main factor prompting the Buddhist misogyny. Armstrong further cited another example as follows:

“The scriptures contain a passage which, scholars agree, is almost certainly a monkish interpolation. “Lord, how are we to treat women?” Ananda asked the Buddha in the last days of his life. “Do not look at them, Ananda.” “If we do not see them, how should we treat them?” “Do not speak to them, Ananda.” “And if we have to speak to them?” “Mindfulness must be observed, Ananda” (p. 154)\(^{20}\).

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19. It is interesting to note that, in Armstrong’s Buddha, the intertextualization of Christian names is quite noticeable. The name ‘Jesus’ is mentioned as many as 17 times; those of his disciples (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) = 1 time each; ‘Paul’ = 2 times; ‘Bible’ = 2 times; and, “Gospels” = 4 times.

20. Cf. Edward Conze’s view about this text in his Buddhism: Its Essence and Development (2001: 43) in which he views it “as a defence mechanism, since women must be a source of perpetual danger to all celibate ascetics—especially in a hot climate.”
Though somewhat uncertain, Armstrong is of the view that the intertextualized excerpt above is quite inconsistent indeed with the mainstream character of the Buddha’s teaching. So much so that she implicitly suggests that her readers spare the Master from all the too-heavy charge of total misogyny levied on him. The use of the modal verb “may not” and the adjective ‘possible’ in the following excerpt cannot fail to imply just that: “The Buddha may not have personally subscribed to this full-blown misogyny, but it is possible that these words reflect a residual unease that he could not overcome” (p. 154).

By relying on the views of some referred scholars, Armstrong therefore agrees that: “[E]nlightened as he was, [the Buddha] could not escape the social conditioning of the time, and that he could not imagine a society that was not patriarchal” (p. 150).

In addition to that, Armstrong has also agreed with those scholars who consider the Master’s reluctant approval for the establishment of the female Sangha as having been particularly ‘radical’—“the ordination of women was a radical act … [because] perhaps for the first time, [the Buddha] gave women an alternative to domesticity (p. 154).

In relation to the Buddhist misogyny, Armstrong has additionally identified the socio-religious and cultural milieu of the Buddha’s day with what the philosopher Carl Jaspers has termed the Axial age. Through this act of intertextual referencing, she seems to be better able to place the Buddha in a bigger picture instead of ‘penalizing him in solitary confinement’.

By referring to Jaspers, Armstrong has found the Buddha’s misogyny to be an even more universal phenomenon—“If the Buddha did harbor negative feelings about women, this was typical of the Axial Age. Sad to say, civilization has not been kind to women” (p. 155). In other words, it was not only Gotama Buddha, but also the Axial sages (i.e. Confucius, Lao Tzu, Zoroaster, the Jewish prophets, Jesus, Muhammad, etc.) who showed a lack of respect for them (see Armstrong, 2007: xxii).

Thus far, it can probably be concluded that Armstrong’s critical response to the issue of gender inequality, via the production of her *Buddha*, has
presumably challenged some of the long-existing concepts, assumptions
or ideas circulating within the Buddhist community in general. Three of
them at least can be presented briefly below.

Firstly, Armstrong’s *Buddha* has attempted to show that the origin of the
continuing Buddhist misogyny can be traced back to the male chauvinism
of the early *Sangha*. However, this idea may not be too widely welcomed
as many devout members of the Buddhist circle shall presumably still
look up to those chief disciples of the Buddha as faultless *Arahants*.21

Secondly, Armstrong’s *Buddha* has suggested quite emphatically that
the Buddhist misogyny is only an integral part of the Axial philosophy.
Identifying Gotama Buddha as an Axial sage (as opposed to the Buddhist
sage *par excellence*), Armstrong has proposed to her Western audience
the idea that the Buddha was a spiritual equivalent of such Axial sages
as Confucius, Lao Tzu, Zoroaster, Jesus and Muhammad. While this is
no doubt an interesting interpretation, it may however contradict with the
generally-accepted doctrinal position of the Buddha as “the highest being
in all the universe” (Sangharakshita, 2002: 157) within the Buddhist
tradition.

Finally, in addition to the two challenging views or positions above,
Armstrong’s Buddha biography has shrewdly linked the emergence of the
Buddhist misogyny to the downward progression of sociological Buddhism
(as opposed to ‘the upward progression of soteriological Buddhism’). The
gender inequality, which has been staining the Buddhist community as it
were, has in principle resulted from the worsening nature of the power
relation and struggle between its male and female members as well as
from the complex in which the Buddha’s teaching has been expected by
both groups to play its soteriological role in the power structure.

Out of the three views above, the last position—as suggested by
Armstrong—may perhaps be the most rationally acceptable because, as
Sangharakshita’s illuminating metaphor clearly implies, “Man is not only
risen ape but fallen angel” (1987: 60).

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CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION

A contemporary Western woman biographer, in the person of Karen Armstrong, has launched a silent and somewhat solitary protest against the still-continuing patriarchy or patriarchal value system which has been surviving alongside with the 2,500-year-old Buddhist tradition. In line with what a scholar of Buddhism has once predicted—i.e. that many reforms within the Buddhist community are likely to come particularly from the people of the West (see Gross, 2001: 230)—Armstrong’s role herein may perhaps be considered as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Through her *Buddha*, Armstrong has implied quite clearly that, even though the Buddha’s soteriological teachings apply indiscriminately to all living beings or, in traditionally Buddhist phraseology, to “gods, humans and animals alike” (Armstrong, 2004: xi), the status of women especially in the male-dominated Buddhist lands has not improved and, hence, is still appalling (cf. Gross, 2001: 205). Armstrong’s position, therefore, is so strongly reminiscent of Rita M. Gross’ view below.

Though “agreeing with the conclusion that such disempowerment of women does not accord with basic Buddhist teachings,” Gross, however, stresses the fact that “to date, little has been done within Buddhism to correct these ‘cultural factors’ that have been so detrimental to women” (Gross, 2001: 205).

Therefore, with Armstrong’s voiced concern about and sympathy with the real vulnerability of women’s position in Buddhism above, contemporary (lay) female Buddhists may now shoulder the same responsibility to push forward for an immediate societal reform. They can follow in Armstrong’s footsteps to stand up against the patriarchy monster. Perhaps it is not too belittling to say that a similar breed of women may now be required to immediately spearhead a consistent or ceaseless struggle against the abovementioned culture of androcentrism.

22. Perhaps the same thing should also be said about the fate of women elsewhere. Diana Kendall in her *Sociology in Our Times* (2004), for instance, has noted the following: “[W]e have a long way to go before all people, particularly women, are valued as human beings rather than as passions or sex objects” (p. 340).
or male superiority.

It seems that only liberated women, equipped with excellent education, perfect world knowledge, and articulate communication skills, as Gross has clearly stated (2001: 230), can be expected to best pioneer the progress “in the intellectual and spiritual development of Buddhism” (Gross, 2001: 230).

There is no doubt that the whole bulk of biographical information about the Buddha and, in fact, all other similar kinds of information as well, that has come down to the present generation of Buddhists (and non-Buddhists alike), instead of being readily taken at its face value, should be re-assessed, re-evaluated or, even better, re-addressed in order for it to be inclusively felicitous.

The research findings above have clearly indicated that, through the passage of time, the life account of the Master (despite the still-existing difficulty in working out the many narrative gaps within it23) has been inevitably embellished with numerous biased details as well as other sociological impositions which, though initially intending to do a due justice to the universal portrayal of the Buddha, have often in reality been one-sidedly abused for the strengthening of patriarchy or, to borrow the words of the feminist Marilyn French, for “the structural manifestation of patriarchal values” (1985: 23).

Armstrong’s voicing for more gender equality or the cessation of structural male domination through her learned reassessment of Gotama Buddha, if continuously appreciated and consistently supported by more and more of her other liberated counterparts in the Buddhist East, may serve as yet another important driving force in the setting of the wheel of gender equality in motion. Like Armstrong, contemporary women should no longer let the pervasive practice of gender inequality—resulting from “a way of thinking that is unthinkingly accepted by most of a society” (French, 1985: 23-24)—pass by their untutored eyes unchecked.

Perhaps, they probably should even adopt a totally new morality

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23. Armstrong, for instance, has noted that “There are twenty years of the Buddha’s mission about which we have no information at all” (2004: xix).
because “only by adopting a new morality, “writes French further, “can we restore enough emotional, physical, and intellectual equilibrium to create a more felicitous society” (1985: 16).

Hopefully, this proposed effort may in turn inspire more and more of our marginalized women in the Buddhist East as well as in many other parts of the world, indeed, to rise to their fullest potential. When this happens, and only when this happens, can the UN’s MDG-3 (for the elimination of gender disparity and for the promotion of women’s empowerment) be expected to have a well-earned chance to succeed.

The present paper may appear to have taken sides in its line of argument by making an issue out of the blatant penetration of patriarchal morals which continue to contaminate most aspects of the unisex life—including, of course, the way the Buddhist sage has been depicted or portrayed androcentrically over the centuries. However, putting that aside, the bottom line should still be recognizable; i.e. that we are all human irrespective of our gender and sexuality; and, as such, there should never be any doubt in firmly proposing that everyone regardless of their sexual background shall only be treated on absolutely equal terms.

Thus, as a concluding remark, though the present paper may not agree with French’s strong views24 with regards to how to end the socio-cultural de-empowerment of many oppressed women, it nevertheless shares her conviction in the following common sense—something which is reminiscent, at least partly, of the Golden Rule mentioned above:

[W]e must recognize that since we are all human and share the same basic human condition, we also share the same basic needs and aversions, and what is good (in the profoundest sense) for some of us is good for all of us (French, 1985: 23).

24. French has, for instance, identified patriarchy feministically as a “pattern of thinking” (1985: 22) which should be immediately replaced with “the feminist vision of social-political order” (1985: 23). However, French’s view here may not be ideal as, according to the writer, a lasting solution to the problems of gender inequality should perhaps transcend both poles of masculinity and femininity, as taught in the soteriological Buddhism (as opposed to the sociological Buddhism). It should, therefore, not be redirected or reoriented towards one of them.
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