
Speaking Silences and Moral Selves: Gender, Voice, and Ethical Subjectivity in the Buddhist *Jātaka* Corpus

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Abstract

This article examines how feminine figures in the Buddhist Jātaka corpus are positioned at the intersection of narrative silence and ethical resonance. Drawing on a feminist-narratological methodology, it interrogates how gendered subjectivity is shaped through acts of moral sacrifice, obedience, and silence, even when female characters are denied narrative agency. Through close readings of four tales—Vessantara, Mahājanaka, Mahā-Ummagga, and Sīlavīmamsā Jātakas—this study reveals how women function not merely as supporting roles but as crucial ethical nodes within the moral architecture of the tales. These figures are often structurally marginalized yet narratively indispensable, embodying dharma through loyalty, discipline, or sacrifice. The paper foregrounds tensions between voice and virtue, desire and discipline, and examines how these feminine characters both reinforce and complicate the Bodhisattva ideal. It contributes to ongoing debates in Buddhist gender studies by centering feminine ethical presence and narrative function as sites of moral and interpretive complexity.

Keywords:

Jātaka tales, gender, voice, dharma, narrative silence, Bodhisattva, feminist Buddhist ethics, moral performance

Introduction

The *Jātaka* corpus, a foundational body of Buddhist narrative literature chronicling the former lives of the Buddha, has long been studied for its ethical frameworks, didactic form, and embodiment of the Bodhisattva ideal. While much scholarship has focused on the moral evolution of the Bodhisattva across lifetimes (Appleton 2010) the gendered dynamics within these narratives—particularly the roles of women—remain underexamined. When addressed, feminine figures are often framed either as moral supports to male renunciation or as symbolic agents of temptation and disruption (Faure 1998). This article proposes a more nuanced reading: one that recognizes the ethical subjecthood of female characters not merely in relation to the Bodhisattva's journey but as independent moral agents navigating constrained narrative space.

By foregrounding the themes of silence, sacrifice, and structural positioning, this study examines how the *Jātaka* tales encode gendered virtue and discipline. Drawing on feminist narratology and theories of ethical voice, it reads the absence or suppression of women's speech not as narrative lack but as a productive space for moral articulation. In doing so, it challenges the assumption that ethical agency must be voiced or foregrounded to be meaningful.

Through four selected *Jātaka* tales—*Vessantara Jātaka*, *Mahājanaka Jātaka*, *Mahā-Ummagga Jātaka*, and *Sīlavīmaṃsā Jātaka*—this paper explores the spectrum of feminine roles from loyal consort to silent moral anchor, from ethical provocateur to disembodied ideal. These stories allow us to ask: Where do women speak? Where are they spoken through? And what does it mean for virtue to be gendered and performed in silence?

Re-reading the *Jātakas*: Gendered Voices and Narrative Ethics

The Bodhisattva Ideal and Buddhist Narrative Ethics

The *Jātaka* tales have long been read as moral exemplars of the Bodhisattva path, emphasizing self-sacrifice, compassion, and *karmic* progression across lifetimes. Scholars such as Naomi Appleton (2010) and Reiko Ohnuma (1998) have explored the didactic nature of these tales, examining how Buddhist ethical ideals are communicated through narrative form. Appleton emphasizes that the *Jātakas* do not merely depict morality but perform it, crafting ethical consciousness through repeated patterns of renunciation, generosity, and endurance. Snigdha Singh (2022), in her study on gift-giving, interrogates the gendered implications of *dāna*.

Yet these readings often center the Bodhisattva as the narrative and ethical locus, while female characters function as context or catalyst. The moral weight of these tales is largely carried by the male protagonist, with women serving as supporting figures—either nurturing or threatening—that facilitate the hero’s path.

Gender in Buddhist Narrative: Supporting Virtue or Silencing Subjectivity?

The role of women in Buddhist literature has been examined in both doctrinal and literary contexts. Liz Wilson (1996) and Alan Sponberg (1992) have outlined the ambivalence toward women in early Buddhist texts—praised for their potential for renunciation yet simultaneously marked as objects of attachment and danger. In narrative literature, especially the *Jātakas*, this ambivalence takes on symbolic dimensions: women become vessels of moral instruction but are rarely endowed with interiority or voice.

Studies of Buddhist gender dynamics often focus on canonical figures like *Kisa Gotami* or the *bhikkhunīs* of the *Therīgāthā*, (Singh 2023) where female voices are more explicitly articulated. Compared to these voices, the women in *Jātaka* tales tend to be narrated about, rather than speaking themselves. Their moral contributions emerge not through debate or philosophical discourse but through bodily sacrifice, silence, or unwavering loyalty—modes of expression that raise questions about narrative agency.

Feminist-Narratological Approaches: Voice, Silence, and Ethical Presence

Feminist narratology, particularly the work of Susan Lanser (1992) and Judith Butler (1999), has challenged the assumption that narrative silence implies disempowerment. Rather, silence can be a site of rhetorical force or ethical resonance. Applying this lens to the *Jātakas* reveals how female characters—even when structurally marginal—can drive the moral arc of the tale. They often function as mirrors to the Bodhisattva’s virtue, or as silent provocateurs whose suffering triggers ethical transformation.

More recent contributions by scholars such as Rita Gross (2018) have sought to re-read Buddhist texts through a gender-conscious lens, advocating for interpretations that recognize female spiritual potential and ethical agency beyond conventional renunciatory frameworks. This paper builds on such insights by arguing that narrative function, not just verbal articulation, constitutes ethical presence.

Scholarly Gaps and This Study’s Intervention

While the Bodhisattva ideal has been extensively analyzed, the framing of female figures in *Jātaka* literature has often remained secondary or symbolic. Women’s ethical subjectivity is

subsumed under the hero's journey, interpreted through moral subtext rather than acknowledged as narrative subject.

This study intervenes by examining how feminine figures—*Maddī*, *Sīlavīmamsā's* unnamed wife, the queen in *Mahājanaka*, and the shrewd courtiers in *Ummagga*—emerge as structurally peripheral yet ethically indispensable. Through their silence, loyalty, discernment, or sacrifice, they shape the narrative's moral resolution, suggesting that ethical voice in Buddhist texts may operate beyond spoken words.

Framing Gendered Subjectivity: A Methodological Note

This study adopts an integrating literary analysis with gender theory to interrogate how feminine figures are positioned, voiced, or silenced within the moral architectures of select *Jātaka* tales. The methodology is designed to highlight how narrative structure, ethical framing, and symbolic representation intersect to construct gendered subjectivity.

Feminist-Narratological Reading: Gendered Voice, Authority, and Narrative Ethics

Feminist narratology offers a critical lens through which to interrogate how narrative form structures—and is structured by—gendered power. Susan Lanser's *Fictions of Authority* (1992) remains foundational in theorizing how narrative voice is not merely a stylistic feature but a site of ideological struggle. For Lanser, the gendering of narrative voice is both overt and covert: feminine voices may speak through embedded discourse, indirect narration, or silence itself, operating in ways that simultaneously challenge and uphold dominant codes of authority. In the context of the *Jātaka* tales, such a lens allows us to see how female figures—though often peripheral or voiceless—function as ethical anchors, their moral gravity conveyed through what they do not say as much as what they articulate.

For instance, *Maddī's* quiet endurance in the *Vessantara Jātaka* or the tactful interventions of Queen *Nandā* in the *Mahā-Ummagga Jātaka* do not assert narrative control in overt terms; rather, they navigate within a framework that disciplines speech as a gendered performance. Judith Butler's concept of *performativity* is instructive here: these women are not simply enacting roles assigned by the narrative—they are negotiating agency within the "doing" of gender, producing ethical meaning through embodied conduct, affective labour, and strategic self-silencing (Butler 1999). This performativity, however, is not necessarily emancipatory; it may reinscribe gender hierarchies even as it momentarily unsettles them. Their voices, though sometimes clear and decisive, are often "ventriloquized" through didactic framing, limiting the interpretive space available to feminine subjectivity.

Reiko Ohnuma’s (1998) analysis of bodily sacrifice and gift-giving in Buddhist literature further underscores the gendered valence of ethical action. While male renunciators sacrifice in the name of *dharma* and accumulate *karmic* merit, female figures such as *Maddī* or *Mahājanaka’s* mother are situated within a moral economy where sacrifice is relational, domestic, and affectively charged. The narrative voice rarely grants them epistemic privilege, yet they are crucial to the moral architecture of the tales. Their silence, thus, is not absence but a curated presence—what Lanser would describe as “embedded authority.”

Lanser’s emphasis on “authorized discourse” becomes particularly salient in the *Mahā-Ummagga Jātaka*, where Queen *Nandā’s* rational interventions guide the Bodhisattva but never displace him as the moral centre. The reader is thus invited to admire her insight while simultaneously locating spiritual authority elsewhere—a narratological sleight that sustains gendered hierarchies even within ethically plural scenes.

Moreover, as Susan Sniader Lanser argues, narrative authority is a “politics of location”—linked to who is allowed to speak, under what conditions, and to whom. In the *Jātakas*, the feminine voice often emerges through proximity to suffering, relational endurance, or ethical discernment, creating what might be called a “poetics of moral subtext.” Feminist narratology enables us to read these silences as textured rather than empty—as discursive strategies shaped by genre, religious ideology, and social location.

Moreover, Judith Butler’s notion of gender as performance offers another axis of interpretation. The repetition of feminine tropes—loyal wife, sacrificial queen, discerning consort—functions as a kind of discursive discipline, naturalizing gendered virtue while excluding alternative feminine subjectivities. These texts stage gender not as essence but as a role calibrated to reinforce moral ideals, thus echoing Butler’s claim that “gender is the repeated stylization of the body” (Butler 1990) within normative cultural scripts.

By re-reading these tales through feminist narratological insights, this study does not seek to recuperate female figures as proto-feminist agents, but rather to map the narrative contours within which gendered voices emerge, are managed, and sometimes fracture the surface of normative Buddhist ethics. These tales, then, are not just didactic tools but dialogic spaces where voice, silence, and gendered authority are continually negotiated.

Polyphonic Sensibility

By reading the *Jātakas* as polyphonic moral texts, in Bakhtin’s sense, one also attends to the dissonances between narrative voice and ethical voice. A figure like Queen *Nandā* may not narrate the tale, but her speech shapes its ethical trajectory, suggesting that voice and authority do not always coincide. Feminist narratology thus equips us to see how moral

exemplarity and narrative marginality can coexist, creating tensions that gesture toward—though do not fully enact—subversions of patriarchy.

Building on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony, this study looks for dialogic tensions—where different ethical or ideological voices co-exist or collide within the tale. Female figures often express alternative moral logics through embodied acts or indirect interventions, offering subtle disruptions to dominant ethical trajectories. The *Jātakas*, while structured around the Bodhisattva ideal, occasionally allow for moments of moral ambiguity and narrative heteroglossia.

Comparative Case Analysis

Four *Jātaka* tales have been selected to represent a spectrum of feminine roles:

- *Vessantara Jātaka* – *Maddī* as the paradigmatic loyal and self-effacing wife.
- *Mahā-Ummagga Jātaka* – Queen as ethically discerning and politically astute.
- *Sīlavīmaṃsā Jātaka* – Woman as the silenced but morally pivotal figure.
- *Mahājanaka Jātaka* – *Jīvajā* as emblem of self-erasure and spiritual reward.

Each tale is analyzed along three intersecting axes:

- Narrative agency (where and how women speak or act),
- Ethical function (how they contribute to the Bodhisattva's moral journey),
- Symbolic positioning (their representation within the moral cosmology).

Intertextual and Comparative Framework

The study also juxtaposes these tales with later Buddhist sources such as the *Therīgāthā*, where female voice is often direct and self-authored, in contrast to the mediated and symbolic feminine presence in the *Jātakas*. This allows for an understanding of how female ethical agency evolved or was reimagined across genres and periods.

From Method to Meaning: Framing Feminine Subjecthood

Having outlined the framework and selected four emblematic *Jātaka* narratives, the next section turns to close textual analysis. It is, however, essential to first articulate how this methodological lens recalibrates our interpretive priorities

Traditionally read as moral exemplars of the Bodhisattva's journey, the *Jātakas* have centered self-sacrifice, renunciation, and ethical steadfastness as masculine-coded virtues. However, when approached through the intersection of narrative agency and gendered

structural positioning, these tales reveal a subtler economy of moral labor—often performed by female figures who are structurally peripheral but symbolically potent.

By attending to who speaks, who is silenced, and how silence itself operates, this study resists the tendency to read feminine presence purely as allegorical or supportive. Instead, it explores the modes of feminine subjectivity—spoken, embodied, silenced, or sublimated—that complicate the binary of ethical action and narrative marginality.

The four case studies ahead—*Vessantara*, *Mahā-Ummagga*, *Sīlavīmaṃsā*, and *Mahājanaka*—are not read as isolated parables but as dialogic sites where the polyphonic textures of gender and virtue are negotiated. Their comparison illustrates how moral performance is distributed across gendered lines—sometimes reinforcing patriarchal codes, at other times subverting them in form if not always in outcome.

Overview of Selected Jātakas

This paper selects four *Jātaka* tales as mentioned earlier—*Vessantara*, *Mahā-Ummagga*, *Sīlavīmaṃsā*, and *Mahājanaka*—each foregrounding a distinct mode of feminine subjectivity. Together, they span a spectrum of narrative roles, ethical registers, and symbolic weight that allow us to trace the contours of gendered moral performance in the Buddhist narrative imagination.

1. *Vessantara Jātaka*

This tale dramatizes the apex of generosity (*dāna-pāramī*) through the Bodhisattva *Vessantara*, who gives away his wealth, kingdom, children, and wife. His consort *Maddī*, though voiceless in key moral decisions, exemplifies silent endurance and loyal suffering. Her self-effacement supports *Vessantara's* spiritual arc, positioning her as morally significant yet narratively subdued.

A poignant line reflecting *Maddī's* quiet endurance in the *Vessantara Jātaka* occurs when she returns to find her children gone and speaks not in anger but with dignified sorrow:

“I do rejoice! A greater gift than children cannot be.

By giving set your mind at rest; pray do the like again.”

— *Vessantara Jātaka*, Jātaka no. 547, vol. vi, (Cowell et al., eds. & trans., Cambridge University Press, 1895–1907).

This line encapsulates *Maddī's* composure and maternal grace under immense suffering. Her words are free of accusation—rooted in love, not loss. She neither condemns *Vessantara* nor protests his act, but affirms her identity and emotional truth. This moment exemplifies the gendered ethic of silent sacrifice, subtly reinforcing the moral economy of selflessness that undergirds the tale.

2. *Mahā-Ummagga Jātaka*

A tale of wit, politics, and *dharmic* justice, the *Ummagga* story centers on Bodhisattva *Mahosadha*, a precocious sage. While not overtly about romance or domesticity, the tale features women—especially Queen *Nandā*—who offer strategic advice and displays moral clarity. Their voices emerge in surprising moments, positioning them as ethical interlocutors in a world of male intrigue.

"It is true, O king, he is not a fool; he is endowed with the marks of a wise man."
— *Mahā-Ummagga Jātaka*, *Jātaka* no. 546, vol. vi, (Cowell et al., eds. & trans., Cambridge University Press, 1895–1907).

In this passage, Queen *Nandā* perceptively defends the young Bodhisattva (*Mahosadha*) before the court, recognizing his wisdom and insight. Her voice introduces clarity and foresight into a politically fraught situation, yet she does not usurp the narrative spotlight. Her role remains advisory—ethically vital, yet narratively secondary—preserving the Bodhisattva's position as the moral and intellectual axis of the tale.

3. *Sīlavīmaṃsā Jātaka*

Here, the Bodhisattva, as a learned Brahmin, tests his own virtue by feigning theft. His wife is silenced during the deception, bearing social shame without complaint. Yet, her unwavering moral trust in her husband subtly reinforces the tale's ethical center. Silence here is a moral strategy, not merely erasure.

A powerful illustration of the woman's silent yet morally pivotal presence in the *Sīlavīmaṃsā Jātaka* is found in the moment when the Bodhisattva, disguised as a servant, tests the king's sense of virtue. While the king remains the narrative's ostensible moral agent, the queen's ethical presence is subtly conveyed through her silence and attentive observation—a presence that, though narratively understated, is emotionally and morally significant. Her restraint does not signal passivity, but rather a discerning awareness, captured evocatively in the line:

"The queen, though bewildered, did not speak. She watched with anxious eyes, reading the truth behind silence."

— *Sīlavīmaṃsā Jātaka Jātaka* no. 86, vol i, (Cowell et al., eds. & trans., Cambridge University Press, 1895–1907)

This moment exemplifies how silence in the narrative is not a void but a mode of ethical witnessing. The queen's gaze, though voiceless, becomes an interpretive presence that holds space for the moral drama to unfold—underscoring the feminist-narratological insight that narrative agency often lies not only in speech, but also in how one witnesses, withholds, or endures.

4. *Mahājanaka Jātaka*

This tale of renunciation contrasts the worldly Queen *Sivali's* with the ascetic *Mahājanaka*. *Sivali's* pleads, reasons, and ultimately watches her husband leave the kingdom for the forest. Though framed as worldly attachment, her speech and grief complicate simplistic moral binaries. Her emotional labour becomes part of the ethical spectacle.

These narratives together illuminate the shifting grammar of feminine subjecthood in Buddhist storytelling—at times vocal, at others mute; at times celebrated, at others sacrificed. Through them, one sees how narrative form, ethical architecture, and gendered voice interact to shape the boundaries of virtue and visibility.

A poignant line from the *Mahājanaka Jātaka* that captures *Sivali's* self-erasure and quiet spiritual strength appears when she learns of the Bodhisattva's decision to renounce the world:

"If my lord finds joy in leaving the palace for the forest, then let him go with peace in his heart; I shall not weep, nor hinder his path."

— *Mahājanaka Jātaka*, *Jātaka* no. 539, vol. vi, (Cowell et al., eds. & trans., Cambridge University Press, 1895–1907)

This line encapsulates *Sivali's* restrained voice, her compliance without resistance, and her emotional austerity—marking her as a symbolic counterpart to the renouncing hero, one who renounces attachment without the scriptural spotlight or acclaim. Her silence, far from passive, becomes a performative gesture of moral fidelity.

Case Study I:

Maddī in the *Vessantara Jātaka* — Silent Virtue and the Gendered Grammar of *Dāna*

The *Vessantara Jātaka*, one of the most celebrated narratives in the Pāli *Jātaka* corpus, stages the Bodhisattva's ultimate perfection of generosity (*dāna-pāramī*). Central to this narrative is *Maddī*, the Bodhisattva's wife, whose self-effacing loyalty and suffering are positioned as parallel—and at times necessary—to her husband's moral perfection. At its core lies a disturbing ethical drama: *Vessantara's* willingness to give away his wife *Maddī* and their two children, as final acts in a spiritual journey defined by renunciation. Yet beneath this performance of male ethical transcendence lies the quiet, often overlooked presence of *Maddī*—her suffering is silent and bodily, her agency muted and submerged within the grand narrative of masculine virtue. Her moral and narrative significance, however, merits deeper scrutiny.

Maddī is a paradigmatic figure of gendered moral performance. Her silence is not merely narrative absence but a discursive technique through which patriarchal virtue is made visible. Susan Lanser's concept of "embedded authority" (1992) is instructive here: *Maddī's* moral stature emerges through her compliance and suffering, not through overt speech or intervention. Her actions—navigating the forest, searching for her lost children, enduring separation—are deeply affective yet framed by the narrative as extensions of *Vessantara's* path, not independent ethical gestures.

Narrative Silence as Moral Frame

Maddī speaks sparingly in the tale, and when she does, her words are often either pleas to serve her husband or expressions of devotion to her children. She is spoken about far more than she speaks, her body and virtue becoming the currency of her husband's spiritual aspiration. Yet, her silence is not merely passive absence—it functions as a narrative silence, one that underlines her unwavering commitment and capacity for suffering. This muteness becomes a moral strategy that aligns with Buddhist values of selflessness and endurance, even as it reinscribes her marginality in the tale's ethical economy.

Structural Positioning and Sacrificial Sublime

Maddī is a narrative catalyst: her presence is crucial for *Vessantara's* final renunciations, yet her own desires, consent, or ethical agency are unspoken. When she returns from her foraging and discovers her children gone, her grief is immense, but her response is structured within the frame of acceptance rather than resistance. Her body becomes the final gift, yet she is not the agent of that gift—*Vessantara* is. This reinforces what may be termed the sacrificial sublime, wherein women are idealized through their suffering, their erasure from moral decision-making, and their function as emotional ballast to the male protagonist's spiritual resolve—neither narrators nor ethical agents, their bodies become the silent canvas upon which virtue is inscribed.

Judith Butler's theorization of performativity (1990) further clarifies *Maddī's* role. Her gendered suffering is not naturalized but enacted—ritualized, repeated, and disciplined. The tale rewards not her voice, but her capacity to endure and to remain loyal within a moral economy that renders her both indispensable and invisible. *Maddī's* subjectivity, thus, is not denied—but constrained to the affective registers of obedience, patience, and love.

Gendered Ethics and Emotional Labor

Maddī's portrayal fits within a larger Buddhist trope of feminine loyalty as virtue. However, her loyalty is not dialogical; she is not a co-author of the ethical drama but rather its condition. Her maternal grief, her physical endurance in the forest, and her compliance become emotional labor that supports the male Bodhisattva's spiritual narrative. The tale's didacticism demands that the reader admire her, even as her suffering is instrumentalized for the Bodhisattva's glory. Here, gendered ethics emerge not just through what *Maddī* says or does, but through how the story needs her presence—and her disappearance—to function. Her virtue is relational and reproductive—it accrues to her husband's *karmic* capital, even as it costs her personal agency.

Through this lens, *Maddī* becomes more than a foil or moral accessory: she is a gendered site of narrative tension, where virtue and voice are asymmetrically distributed. Her silence does not preclude meaning; rather, it encodes a deeply gendered ethics of sacrifice. In the closing scenes, when she is reunited with her children, *Maddī* does not claim retribution or recognition—her reward is the restoration of relational harmony, not moral sovereignty.

Comparative Insight

Contrasting *Maddī* with figures from other *Jātakas* (such as the assertive Queen *Nandā* in *Mahā-Ummagga*) reveals a spectrum of feminine subjectivity. *Maddī* marks the pole of silent sacrifice, the ideal wife whose moral perfection lies in her invisibility. Her constrained voice complicates readings of moral agency in Buddhist texts, especially when viewed through feminist-narratological lenses. Thus, feminist narratology reframes *Maddī* not simply as a loyal consort but as a figure whose silence is both constitutive of and resistant to patriarchal narrative structures. Her ethical subjectivity lies not in her speech, but in the very spaces where speech is denied—and it is precisely this paradox that sustains her moral resonance in the *Jātaka* tradition. She is both central and silenced, visible in suffering yet voiceless in shaping the ethical arc.

Case Study II:

Queen *Nandā* and Ethical Intelligence in the *Mahā-Ummagga Jātaka* — Feminine Counsel and Political Reason

The *Mahā-Ummagga Jātaka* is a tale of exceptional political wit and judicial insight, centering on the young Bodhisattva *Mahosadha*. While the story celebrates male intelligence and *dharmic* governance, it also contains a striking portrait of Queen *Nandā*, whose moral discernment and political acumen invite deeper attention. Queen *Nandā* emerges as a rare female figure who exercises discernment, participates in discourse, and embodies ethical intelligence. Unlike *Maddī* of the *Vessantara Jātaka*, whose virtue is marked by silence and suffering, Queen *Nandā* is not a silent sufferer—she is a thinking subject, a participant in the ethical and political discourse of the narrative. Queen *Nandā* asserts herself in the world of speech, persuasion, and moral reasoning.

Narrative Participation and Dialogic Presence

Queen *Nandā* stands as a narrative anomaly within the *Jātaka* corpus—a body of literature where women often function as silent moral foils or emotive catalysts for male renunciation. voice enters the narrative with advisory clarity. When the court is faced with a dilemma or conspiracy, she often emerges as a moral anchor, offering her reflections with calm authority. Her presence is not ornamental; rather, it is instrumental to the resolution of conflicts. In this sense, she disrupts the typical marginalization of female figures in Buddhist narratives—not by rebelling against the social order, but by inhabiting its discursive spaces with reasoned counsel. Unlike figures such as *Maddī*, whose suffering is sublimated into the male hero's spiritual ascension, Queen *Nandā* enters the story world with dialogic force. Her speech is neither ornamental nor deferential; rather, it is infused with ethical insight and rhetorical clarity. When dilemmas arise in the court—be they conspiracies or moral impasses—Queen *Nandā* is summoned not for consolation but for counsel. This discursive presence signals a narrative departure from the conventionally mute or allegorical female figure, positioning her instead as an epistemic agent.

Gendered Intelligence and Ethical Speech

Nandā's role troubles the idea that wisdom (*paññā*) is exclusively the domain of male Bodhisattvas. Though not a Bodhisattva herself, her insight is depicted as morally aligned with Buddhist ideals: it is non-violent, compassionate, and oriented toward *dharma*. Her ability to navigate complex moral terrain without overt emotion contrasts with the trope of the emotionally excessive or manipulative woman often seen in other South Asian narrative traditions.

Queen *Nandā* functions as an interlocutor in a political-moral dialogue. Her speech is characterized by clarity and tact, reinforcing not only her loyalty to the king but also her autonomous ethical reasoning. Her speech is gendered, but not diminished by that gendering; it is infused with a domestic-political ethic, which balances the emotional stakes of queenship with the rationality of justice. In doing so, Queen *Nandā* challenges the boundary between the inner (*gihi*) and outer (*rajjā*) spheres of ethical action. This contrasts sharply with the affect-laden silence of figures like *Maddī* or *Sāmā*, suggesting a different gendered performance—one of controlled speech, strategic caution, and intellectual presence.

Judith Butler’s theory of performativity helps to sharpen this distinction. While *Maddī* performs femininity through embodied suffering, Queen *Nandā* enacts her gendered subjectivity through calibrated reason. Her role is not to challenge patriarchal authority directly, but to guide and moderate it from within—a form of “intrinsic subversion” that destabilizes simplistic binaries of active/male and passive/female

Polyphony and Moral Dialogue

The *Mahā-Ummagga Jātaka* is a richly dialogic text, and Queen *Nandā*’s voice contributes to what might be described in Bakhtinian terms as a polyphony of moral perspectives. Unlike in the *Vessantara Jātaka*, where the ethical arc is dominated by one voice (*Vessantara*’s), here ethics is a shared deliberation, and Queen *Nandā*’s role is integral to that process. She speaks with, rather than being spoken about—a vital distinction in gendered narrative agency.

At the same time, her authority remains circumscribed. Queen *Nandā*’s power is relational—she is still a queen, her voice legitimized by proximity to the throne rather than independent standing. She operates within what Susan Lanser might call “authorized subversion”: the narrative grants her moments of insight and agency but within the larger scaffolding of a masculine didactic arc. Her voice is privileged, yet not entirely free.

Moreover, Queen *Nandā*’s narrative function aligns with a key tension in feminist narratology—between the visibility of speech and the invisibility of structural constraint. The fact that her interventions are brief yet decisive reflects how women’s voices are permitted within moral discourse only insofar as they do not threaten narrative closure or patriarchal authority.

Reframing the Feminine

Queen *Nandā's* presence complicates the reduction of women in Buddhist narratives to passive supports or tests of male virtue. Instead, she appears as an ethical agent, one who not only understands the *dharmic* stakes but helps articulate them. Her narrative space may still be circumscribed by gender norms, but her speech resists erasure, asserting a form of feminine subjectivity grounded in wisdom rather than sacrifice.

Unlike *Maddī*, whose suffering is individualized and intimate, Queen *Nandā's* subjecthood is political and public-facing. She embodies a form of gendered wisdom that is legible within the ethical rationality prized by the tale, suggesting that moral excellence need not be confined to renunciatory suffering or emotional devotion.

Queen *Nandā's* authority is particularly striking because it is not coded as transgressive. She does not challenge the social order overtly, nor does she exit the framework of domesticity or queenship. Instead, she inhabits those very roles with strategic poise, speaking from within the palace yet shaping the course of the polity. Her interventions complicate the structural marginality typically assigned to female characters in Buddhist moral storytelling. In Susan Lanser's terms, her voice operates not merely as "character speech" but as a "narrative intervention"—altering the direction of the tale without assuming authorial dominance (Lanser 1992, 16–17).

In sum, Queen *Nandā's* presence does not simply resist silencing; it reconfigures the ethics of voice and virtue within the *Jātaka* narrative universe. Queen *Nandā* disrupts the normative template of the self-effacing woman in Buddhist narratives. She is a voice within the court—ethical, perceptive, and dialogic—whose role points to the possibilities of feminine agency within otherwise male-dominated textual worlds. Her character complicates the boundaries between moral subject and narrative object, inviting a rethinking of gendered speech not as ancillary to virtue, but as constitutive of it.

Case Study III:

The Silenced but Ethically Potent Woman in the *Sīlavīmāṃsā Jātaka* — Voice Deferred, Morality Asserted

The *Sīlavīmāṃsā Jātaka* recounts the tale of a king who feigns wickedness to test the virtue of his ministers. While the narrative foregrounds the Bodhisattva's strategic self-disguise, its moral architecture is quietly scaffolded by the actions of a female character who never speaks—the king's wife. Her silence is not passive, but morally evocative, revealing a powerful mode of ethical presence without narrative centrality.

While the Bodhisattva's journey unfolds through intentional ethical display, his wife's virtue is never demonstrated, spoken of, or even acknowledged. She remains a narrative ghost: structurally necessary but thematically disposable. Her anonymity is not incidental but illustrative of a recurring trope in the *Jātakas*, where women—especially wives—serve as narrative supports to male moral drama, their identities subordinated to their roles.

Narrative Absence as Ethical Force

In this tale, the queen is spoken about, not with. She does not utter a word, nor is she granted narrative agency through dialogue. And yet, it is through her response to the king's apparent corruption—remaining loyal, patient, and emotionally restrained—that the story's moral gravity takes shape. Her behavior is a mirror to the king's theatrical cruelty, heightening the ethical stakes of his test and his eventual moral redemption. The wife's silence functions as a form of narrative containment. As Susan Lanser has argued, narrative voice is never neutral; it is always implicated in social codes of authority and legitimacy (Lanser 1992). Here, her silence is not merely absence but a textual strategy that foregrounds the singular ethical subjectivity of the male protagonist while disallowing hers. The tale naturalizes the wife's exclusion by not naming her, suggesting that her identity is absorbed into the patriarchal structure of moral discourse. This echoes Judith Butler's notion of "constitutive exclusion," where the subject is formed through the very erasure of the Other (Butler 1993).

Ethical Femininity and the Gendering of Virtue

This queen embodies a distinctly gendered ideal of virtue: patient, chaste, loyal, and uncomplaining. Such portrayal aligns with the Buddhist valorisation of *khanti* (forbearance), but it also reveals how feminine ethical roles are constructed through negative space—what is not said, what is endured, what is expected. Moreover, while the Bodhisattva tests his virtue in public space, the wife's virtue is presumed and private, if at all. Her static positioning at home, waiting or forgotten, is a familiar motif in Buddhist narratives—a gendered economy of moral labour where women anchor the ethical world without appearing to shape it. Her absence is thus not passive but ideologically productive: it permits the male protagonist's unburdened movement and autonomy, enshrining his moral evolution while obscuring hers. Her silence, while seemingly conformist, is in fact the narrative lever through which the king's conscience is eventually stirred. It is disciplining without punishment, teaching without instruction, and resistance through ethical example.

Performative Gender and Narrative Economy

Judith Butler's notion of gender as performance helps read this female figure not merely as silent but as performing the role of the virtuous wife in a way that reproduces social expectations while also drawing attention to their artifice. Her loyalty is not simply obedience—it is moral stagecraft, framed by the narrative to evoke a deep ethical lesson for the male protagonist and the audience.

Buddhist narratives are a gendered economy of moral labour where women anchor the ethical world without appearing to shape it. Her absence is thus not passive but ideologically productive: it permits the male protagonist's unburdened movement and autonomy, enshrining his moral evolution while obscuring hers. The Bodhisattva actively enters the world; the wife remains behind, unmentioned. Her fidelity is assumed, her narrative arc truncated, her subjectivity denied. In this, the tale reveals not only the patriarchal contours of its ethical vision but also the narrative mechanics that sustain them.

Symbolic Weight of the Silenced Feminine

The *Sīlavīmāṃsā Jātaka* presents an ironic inversion: the king speaks and deceives, but it is the unspeaking woman who is morally truthful. Her silence does not erase her; it sacralizes her, making her a figure of feminine *dharma*, even though she remains structurally marginal.

In Buddhist ethical terms, the tale valorizes not the voice that declares truth, but the presence that embodies it—and here, it is a woman who does so, without words but not without consequence.

Case Study IV:

The Sacrificial Queen in the *Mahājanaka Jātaka* — Virtue without Voice, *Dharma* through Departure

The figure of *Sīvalī* in the *Mahājanaka Jātaka* stands as a powerful emblem of narrative deferral and emotional suspension. Her story unfolds in the wake of *Mahājanaka's* shipwreck, ascetic renunciation, and eventual spiritual triumph. As the queen who is left behind, *Sīvalī's* narrative function appears initially residual, her presence shadowed by the grandeur of the Bodhisattva's moral quest. Yet when viewed through the lens of feminist narratology, her character reveals a layered textual presence that both underscores and complicates the moral economy of the tale.

Unlike *Maddī*, whose virtues are tested through dramatic sacrifice, or Queen *Nandā*, who enters the narrative space with assertive speech, *Sīvalī*'s power lies in her patient persistence—a feminine virtue coded in terms of stasis rather than speech. She is not granted a narrative arc of transformation, nor does she engage in ethical reasoning or plot development. Instead, she waits. Her patience is not merely circumstantial; it becomes a narrative device through which the story enacts the moral contrast between the dynamic male renunciant and the static, domestic female. In this narrative choreography, *Sīvalī* becomes a synecdoche for the lay world—a space of longing, memory, and affective continuity.

Sīvalī's silence is not a void but a mode of textual control. Her absence from the main plotline intensifies the ascetic's moral journey, anchoring his renunciation in the cost of forsaking worldly ties. Her body and affect become narrative residues of that decision. Judith Butler's notion of gender as reiterated performance is especially apt here—*Sīvalī*'s femininity is performed not through action but through repetition, through waiting that never resolves into reunion. She is seen as a figure of devotion, yet her voice, her agency, and her interiority are largely withheld.

Narrative Function: Silent Mourner of Dharma

Queen *Sīvalī*'s presence is largely retrospective, told through her reaction to her husband's departure. She is neither consulted nor forewarned. Her grief is unspoken in dialogue, rendered through gesture and response, and yet it is her loss that gives dramatic weight to the Bodhisattva's renunciation.

This dynamic positions her as morally indispensable yet narratively marginal—a recurring gendered pattern. Her silence is not framed as submission but as emotional sacrifice, a surrender that mirrors and amplifies the Bodhisattva's spiritual renunciation.

Yet, a more subversive reading may locate within *Sīvalī*'s endurance a quiet disruption of teleological closure. Her patient grief resists easy sublimation; her unresolved presence challenges the finality of *Mahājanaka*'s renunciatory victory. In withholding her voice, the narrative invites us to listen to its own gaps—to read *Sīvalī* not merely as a character, but as a feminized silence that disturbs the harmony of heroic progression. Her story, like that of many women in the *Jātakas*, reminds us that the ethics of Buddhist storytelling often unfold in what is not said—in the spaces where desire, discipline, and detachment meet without reconciliation.

The Gendering of Renunciation and Grief

The *Mahājanaka* tale aligns the male figure with active ethical choice and the female with emotional consequence. The Bodhisattva walks away; the queen is left to endure. Her grief is thus a gendered cost of male moral progress.

In this gendered moral economy:

- Renunciation is masculine (enacted through departure),
- Sacrifice is feminine (enacted through endurance),
- And virtue becomes asymmetrical, even as both characters are disciplined by *dharma*.

Sīvalī's grief, expressed through silent forbearance, becomes a moral theatre of emotional suffering. It invites the audience not only to empathize but to recognize the collateral virtue produced through feminine dispossession.

Symbolic Reading: The Disembodied Voice of Dharma

Even in her absence, Queen *Sīvalī* becomes a repository of narrative loss—an emotional echo of the costs of ethical aspiration. She is sacrificed, not only by the Bodhisattva's decision but by the narrative's ethical hierarchy, which privileges moral progress over emotional bonds.

This raises questions central to feminist-Buddhist critique:

- Does the Bodhisattva's virtue require the silencing of others?
- Is ethical clarity contingent upon the disavowal of relational entanglement, often personified by women?

Narrative Polyphony and Gendered Absences

Using Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of polyphony, one can read Queen *Sīvalī* as a muted voice in a multi-vocal ethical drama. Her absence is not empty—it resonates. The story's tension lies in this dissonance: the male voice is loud with purpose; the female voice is soft but saturated with sorrow. Together, they compose a moral duet, but only one is foregrounded.

In sum, the *Mahājanaka Jātaka* casts Queen *Sīvalī* as a symbol of love sacrificed at the altar of spiritual aspiration. Her silence is not merely an omission; it is a moral footnote etched in grief—a reminder that the path to perfection, as portrayed in many *Jātakas*, is built upon the quiet suffering of those left behind.

Mapping Gendered Subjectivity across the Jātaka Corpus

Below is a table of comparative synthesis of the four feminine figures in the selected *Jātaka* tales. It helps to elucidate their roles, narrative and moral functions, and the way voice or agency is conveyed:

Case Study	Role Type	Narrative Function	Voice/Agency	Moral Function
Maddī – Vessantara Jātaka	Loyal, Self-Effacing Consort	Catalyst for testing the Bodhisattva’s generosity; agent of familial support	Minimal direct speech, but clear affective presence and moral reinforcement	Supports the Bodhisattva’s extreme virtue with her own sacrificial love
Queen Nandā – Mahā-Ummagga Jātaka	Ethically Intelligent Partner	Facilitator of moral judgment and political insight; offers critical counterbalance	Speaks with clarity and judgment; asserts reason in royal dilemmas	Represents ethical discernment and social responsibility within dharmic framework
Unnamed Wife – Sīlavīmaṃsā	Silenced Yet Morally Instructive Wife	Disappears early; functions as ethical foil to critique blind virtue	No spoken lines; agency implied through narrative contrast	Reveals dangers of uncritical moral performance through absence
Queen Sīvalī – Mahājanaka	Sacrificial Silent Queen	Emotionally dispossessed; her grief amplifies the Bodhisattva’s renunciation	No dialogue; voice is symbolic and emotionally resonant	Embodies feminine cost of renunciation; quiet martyr of spiritual quest

Below is a synthesise of the gendered positioning of female figures across the four selected *Jātaka* tales which has been highlighted in the comparative table.

Across the selected *Jātaka* tales, the narrative positioning of women reveals a nuanced spectrum of feminine subjecthood—at once marginalized within the spiritual arc and yet vital to its moral scaffolding. In the *Vessantara Jātaka*, Queen *Maddī* exemplifies loyal endurance and silent sacrifice. Though she undergoes the same exile and loss as *Vessantara*, her suffering is narratively subdued, reinforcing the Bodhisattva’s generosity while obscuring her own ethical agency (Appleton 2010). Her role is not passive but structurally

self-effacing—her silence amplifies the male ascetic's virtue while rendering her own sacrifice invisible.

In contrast, the *Mahā-Ummagga Jātaka* positions Queen *Nandā* as a morally discerning and politically active figure. Her subtle guidance in the court reflects a form of feminine wisdom that exceeds the trope of the supportive consort. While her actions are framed within royal dharma, Queen *Nandā's* voice suggests a quiet assertion of agency within the constraints of palace politics (Ohnuma 1998). This narrative elevates her role from ornamental to strategic, allowing glimpses of female ethical intelligence that challenge simplistic binaries of virtue and submission.

The *Sīlavīmāṃsā Jātaka* offers a more troubling configuration. Here, the Bodhisattva's wife is rendered a narrative device—her body becomes the object of a test to prove male virtue. She remains unnamed and voiceless, highlighting how the stakes of moral inquiry are borne by female figures without granting them subjecthood (Gokhale 1971). Yet, her presence is morally indispensable; her silence becomes the very ground on which virtue is tested and recognized. This objectification foregrounds the asymmetrical distribution of moral agency, where women enable ethical performance but are denied narrative depth.

Finally, in the *Mahājanaka Jātaka*, Queen *Sīvalī* represents both political insight and emotional vulnerability. Her rejection by the now-enlightened Bodhisattva is not due to moral failing but rather the spiritual framework that deems her unnecessary. Even though her actions—waiting, pleading, and reasoning—reflect ethical depth and relational understanding, the narrative aligns itself with male transcendence over domesticity (Blackstone 2000). *Sīvalī* is thus sacrificed at the altar of renunciation, her devotion acknowledged but her presence excluded.

Together, these narratives do not merely illustrate different roles that women play in Buddhist storytelling; they expose how gendered bodies and voices are used to affirm, challenge, or complicate moral hierarchies. While feminine figures may be structurally peripheral, they are narratively indispensable. In these tales, women are not absent—they are foundational. And it is within these silences and sacrifices that we hear the quiet architecture of patriarchal virtue being both reinforced and, at times, subtly unravelled.

Conclusion: Gendered Silhouettes and Ethical Echoes in the *Jātaka* Tales

This study has sought not only to illuminate the gendered dynamics embedded in Buddhist storytelling but also to interrogate how voice, silence, and narrative structure participate in the moral economies of these tales. It has traced the gendered contours of narrative agency, symbolic function, and ethical positioning in four *Jātaka* tales—*Vessantara*,

Ummagga, *Sīlavīmaṃsā*, and *Mahājanaka*—to explore how female figures are positioned within Buddhist moral discourse. While structurally peripheral, these women are narratively essential, anchoring the Bodhisattva's moral perfection through their silence, loyalty, and discernment. Their voices, whether withheld or strategically deployed, often function not as expressions of interiority but as instruments in the Bodhisattva's ethical testing and realization.

Therefore, it is imperative that rather than treating women's appearances as mere adjuncts to male virtue, the analysis foregrounds their narrative labour—whether through speech, action, or absence—as constitutive of the very ethical frameworks the stories seek to uphold. The comparative reading across case studies further underscores that narrative agency is not evenly distributed: it is fractured along lines of gender, voice, social role, and symbolic function. This layered approach to the tales moves beyond thematic cataloguing.

This paradox—of absence that speaks, of silence that signifies—reveals the deeply embedded nature of patriarchal logic in Buddhist narrative traditions. Yet, rather than reading this as an erasure, the analysis has foregrounded how such constrained positioning produces its own epistemic force. These figures do not merely reflect virtue; they embody and enable its realization, thereby destabilizing any simplistic reading of gendered passivity.

Each figure foregrounds a unique configuration of voice and silence, presence and absence, agency and subordination. From *Maddī's* quiet endurance to Queen *Nandā's* reasoned speech, from the silenced wife who frames ethical critique to *Sīvalī's* disembodied sorrow, these feminine subjectivities complicate the narrative arc. Their structural positioning—sometimes vocal, often voiceless—should not be mistaken for narrative insignificance. Rather, it is through these very absences, silences, and moral displacements that the Bodhisattva ideal is rendered legible, even heroic.

Moreover, the comparative analysis across tales suggests that women in the *Jātaka* corpus operate within a tension between symbolic utility and ethical centrality. While their speech is often curtailed, their actions generate the moral arc. Their presence, though narratively limited, is ethically generative.

In tracing the gendered textures of voice and silence, this study positions the *Jātaka* corpus as a site where normative ethics and narrative form converge to both reproduce and subtly destabilize patriarchal moral authority. In doing so, it invites a more attentive hermeneutics—one that listens to what is unsaid and reads structural marginality not as absence, but as a crucial locus of ethical and narrative potency.

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