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**Buddhist Discourses from a Perspective of Creative
Literature: A Stylistic Analysis of
“Parabhava Sutta” (On Deterioration) and
“Maha-mangala Sutta” (On Amelioration)
in Suttanipata**

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Abstract

The two discourses “Parabhava Sutta” (Sn 1.6) and “Maha-mangala Sutta” (Sn 2.4) present respectively from a Buddhist perspective some processes of deterioration and amelioration which cause respectively unhappiness and happiness, decline and prosperity, pain and consolation, as well as regret and gratification. They are considered contributory to the code of ethics recommended for the Buddhists to follow. Millions of Buddhists all over the world recite them in their daily life, as their contents are of universal value. Adherence to them is meant to sustain the wellbeing of any individual, irrespective of their age, gender, ethnicity, social standing, or religion. From an aesthetic perspective they signalize the grotesque and the sublime of the human

personality universally applicable to any form of literature. There are antagonists in social drama – true-life or fictitious - carrying those vices within themselves, while, protagonists, those virtues. Therefore, they are considered crucial in developing ethical and moral standards in the evaluation of human behaviours portrayed in different contexts. Moreover, the poetics deployed in the projection of these processes of deterioration and amelioration within a precise framework of morality makes them worth to be subjected to a stylistic analysis as works of oral poetry because they help critical thinking along with aesthetic appreciation. That determines the rationale for this paper.

Keywords: amelioration, Buddhist ethics, deterioration, Grotesque, sublime

1. Introduction

While exploring the literary and creative elements of the two respective Buddhist discourses “Parabhava Sutta” (Sn 1.6) and “Maha-mangala Sutta” (Sn 2.4), this paper draws attention to a lacuna in Sri Lankan cultural and literary studies in English. Academics and critics from Sri Lanka often ignore the profundity of the local Sinhala Buddhist culture while dealing with literary texts in English (Fonseka, 1998) because most of them are products of the educational system introduced by the British colonial administration which lasted in Sri Lanka from 1796 to 1948 (Arasaratnam, 2026). Thanks to Buddhism, which is still influential in articulating the ethical and moral foundations of Sri Lankan society, the solutions the local culture is capable of working out for burning human issues in the world are of high intellectual value. While analysing the moral and cultural bases of the major tragic flaws in the protagonists General Othello in Shakespeare’s (1622) *Othello the Moor of Venice* in comparison with King Chulapaduma in Rouse’s (2013) translation of *Chullapadumajataka* (Fonseka, 2018) and King Lear in Shakespeare’s (1608) *King Lear* in comparison with King Makhadeva in Chalmer’s (2023) translation of *Makhadevajataka* (Fonseka, 2019), it becomes clear that the characters of the protagonists in Buddhist literature have evolved in exposure to highly advanced approaches to human problems. The level of sophistication they maintain when confronted by similar challenges of various shades like romance, family, power, wealth, prestige, etc. is unimaginable in comparison with the primitive behaviours manifested in the behaviours of their counterparts in most literatures that have emerged even centuries later. Their performance styles implicitly contribute intelligent models for moral and ethical solutions to conflicting issue in human life.

Moreover, there are so many standard discourses which directly address such issues. The two relevant Buddhist discourses under focus here are as such. What is unique of this paper is that it analyses stylistically how the relevant moral and ethical substance is didactically conveyed in an aesthetically designed framework that clearly distinguishes the sublime from the grotesque. Thereby one is effectively guided to analyse one's own persona in exposure to the relevant processes of deterioration and amelioration. Accordingly, the paper focuses on an approach to the analysis of Buddhist discourses from an aesthetic perspective, under which representations of deterioration and amelioration of the human character are subjected to a critical investigation. Further, it endeavours to define the aesthetics in the Buddhist perspective of human personality, and subjects the texts of the relevant discourses to a stylistic analysis with a focus on the poetics formulated in their compositions. Finally, it assesses the contribution these discourses are capable of making to the development of character evaluation models, which can be universally appreciated.

2. An Approach to the Analysis of Buddhist Discourses from an Aesthetic Perspective

The Buddhist discourses on various types of truths are meant to support one's intellectuality, morality, and spirituality during every moment of living as a human being either in total isolation or in contact with others. They do not have the texture of most religious texts in the world. Although they are in an archaic language, they are meant to sound rational and secular. While reading them, one should mindfully work on the suggestions and solutions conveyed in them, rather than praying uneasily for a divine form of mercy. Nevertheless, in this paper the two discourses chosen for study are treated as literary texts in agreement

with some Western traditions of textual interpretation evolved in different academic settings. In his epilogue to the interpretative representations of a vast body of European literature, Auerbach (1946) presents his approach to his analyses in the following terms:

The method of textual interpretation gives the interpreter a certain leeway. He can choose and emphasize as he pleases. It must naturally be possible to find what he claims in the text. My interpretations are no doubt guided by a specific purpose. Yet this purpose assumed form only as I went along, playing as it were with my texts, and for long stretches of my way I have been guided only by the texts themselves. (Auerbach, 1946, p. 491)

Accordingly, it is clear that a critic has the freedom to adopt different approaches to suit his/her purpose while analysing a text as far as it does not distort its representation of reality as perceived by the original author. The texts are considered here the guides to their contents, and the interpretation of a text is the bi-product of the relationship between the author's perception of reality and the critic's perception of the text. This draws our attention to the four kinds of meaning of a text introduced by Richards (1929).

1. Sense

“We speak to say something, and when we listen we expect something to be said. We use words to direct our hearers' attention upon some state of affairs, to present to them some items for consideration and to excite in them some thoughts about these items.”

2 . Feeling in his epilogue

“We have an attitude towards it, some special direction, bias, or accentuation of interest towards it, some personal flavour or colouring

of feeling; and we use language to express these feelings, this nuance of interest.”

3. Tone

“Furthermore, the speaker has ordinarily an attitude to his listener. He chooses or arranges his words differently as his audience varies, in automatic or deliberate recognition of his relation to them. The tone of his utterance reflects his awareness of this relation, his sense of how he stands towards those he is addressing. Again, the exceptional case of dissimulation, or instances in which the speaker unwittingly reveals an attitude he is not consciously desirous of expressing, will come to mind.”

4. Intention

“Finally, apart from what he says (Sense), his attitude to what he is talking about (Feeling), and his attitude to his listener (Tone), there is the speaker’s intention, his aim, conscious or unconscious, the effect he is endeavouring to promote.” (Richards, 1929, pp. 179-183).

In line with such recommendations found in Auerbach (1946) and Richards (1926), the paper treats the two discourses from the Pali Canon of Tripitaka (2013) as texts produced for a secular readership. It is plain that most human utterances and nearly all articulate speech can be efficiently assessed from the four points of view known as Sense, Feeling, Tone, and Intention. Therefore, it is perceived that, under such a critical approach, the stylistic and literary consistency of the relevant discourses can be understood better.

3. Representation of Deterioration and Amelioration of the Human Character

The processes of deterioration and amelioration of the human character the two discourses “Parabhava Sutta” and “Maha-mangala Sutta” in Sutta Nipata present respectively can be represented within a framework as follows:

3.1. Processes of Deterioration

“The lover of the Dhamma prospers. The hater of the Dhamma declines.” The contrast effects of the positive and negative attitudes to the Dhamma are conveyed in this parallelism that opens the discourse “Parabhava Sutta”. It thus lists the processes of deterioration leading to personal destruction in twelve stanzas representing twelve different aspects of life as follows:

Attitude towards the Dhamma

Deterioration regarding attitude towards the Dhamma is depicted through one’s hatred against the Dhamma that professes spiritual satisfaction through the cultivation of wisdom.

Social Life

Deterioration regarding social life is depicted through attraction to the vicious, repulsion against the virtuous, and approval of evil doctrines.

Personal Demeanour

Deterioration regarding personal demeanour is depicted through addiction to sleep, company of the inactive and lazy, and manifestation of anger.

Family Life

Deterioration regarding family life is depicted through negligence of one's mother and father who are old, and past their prime.

Personal Conduct

Deterioration regarding personal integrity is depicted through falsehood and deception of either holy men or mendicants.

Interpersonal Relations

Deterioration regarding interpersonal relations is depicted through egotism that prevents sharing one's wealth and food with the needy.

Self-perception

Deterioration regarding self-perception is depicted through the tendency to be arrogant about birth, wealth, and clan, and to despise the relations.

Recreation

Deterioration regarding social life is depicted through addiction to a life of debauchery, alcoholism, gambling, and squandering.

Sexuality

Deterioration regarding sexuality is depicted through one's dissatisfaction with one's legal wife, association with prostitutes, and keeping clandestine relationships with others' wives.

Romance

Deterioration regarding romance is depicted through one's marriage to an under-aged that leads to frustration and sexual jealousy.

Authority Management

Deterioration regarding organizational life is depicted through appointment of drunkards and squanderers to positions of authority.

Personal Goals

Deterioration regarding personal goals is depicted through unattainable ambitions to achieve material goals and unrealizable aspirations to achieve career goals. (Adapted from “Parabhava Sutta”, 2013)

The twelve domains of life represented here under deterioration suggest where one is challenged in maintaining one’s spiritual integrity at a foundational level. The implication is that the higher order of thinking required for spiritual satisfaction should be cultivated by rectifying the issues perceived at this level in normal life which involves numerous interactions with the subliminal self as well as the conscious others in a social hierarchy determined by culture. Devastative choices made here with regard to one’s attitude towards the Dhamma, social life, personal demeanour, family life, personal conduct, interpersonal relations, self-perception, recreations, sexuality, romance, assertion of authority, and personal goals help forecast the end results in terms of deteriorations. They differ from the domains represented in the “Maha-mangala Sutta” confining the psychosocial horizons of the individual to a mundane atmosphere. The alignment of these processes of deterioration in that sense is highly logical and the degree of their relevance maintained in it is acceptable to any society.

3.2. Processes of Amelioration

In contrast, the “Maha-mangala Sutta” lists thirty-eight processes of amelioration leading to happiness in ten stanzas representing ten different aspects of life as follows:

Social Life

Amelioration regarding social life emphasises ostracising the foolish, association with the wise, and honouring those worthy of honour.

Residential Environment

Amelioration regarding residential environment emphasises residing in a suitable locality, having performed meritorious actions in the past, and setting oneself in the right direction concerning the organisation of life.

Intellectuality

Amelioration regarding intellectuality emphasises erudition in a chosen field, expertise in manual work, self-discipline in daily life, and effective diplomacy.

Family Life

Amelioration regarding family life emphasises supporting one's parents, respecting one's wife and children; and engaging in peaceful occupations.

Interpersonal Dealings

Amelioration regarding interpersonal dealings emphasises generosity, righteousness in conduct, assistance to relatives, and engagement in blameless deeds.

Mental Health

Amelioration regarding mental health emphasises separation from evil, abstinence from intoxicants, and performance of righteous acts.

Personal Enhancement

Amelioration regarding personal refinement emphasises respectfulness, humility, contentment, gratitude, and a timely hearing of the Buddha Dhamma.

Personal Refinement

Amelioration regarding personal enhancement emphasises tolerance, accommodativeness, meeting with holy men, and having timely discussions on the Buddha Dhamma.

Mental Development

Amelioration regarding mental development emphasises having self-control; being chaste, comprehending the Buddhist Noble Truths and realising Nibbana.

Spiritual Satisfaction

Amelioration regarding spiritual satisfaction emphasises the value of having a mind that is not shaken by the vicissitudes of life, but free from sorrow, unstained by guilt, and secure from vulnerabilities. (Adapted from Maha-mangala Sutta, 2013)

The ten domains of life represented here suggest a path to follow from the preliminary to the advanced in mental development leading from moral satisfaction to spiritual development. Virtues cultivated in connection with social life, residential environment, intellectuality, family life, and interpersonal dealings are obviously meant to pave way for such a path. The mind free from complications precipitated by issues concerning society, habitat, literacy, family, and personal relations can focus on lofty goals of life such as mental health, personal enhancement, and personal refinement. Mental development and spiritual satisfaction can be achieved only with a mind immune to the forms of vulgarity represented in the above processes of deterioration. Like that of the deteriorations in the “Parabhava Sutta”, the alignment of these ameliorations in that sense is again highly logical and relevant and universally acceptable.

4. Aesthetics in the Buddhist Perspective of Human Personality

The two discourses, the “Parabhava Sutta” and the “Maha-mangala Sutta” portray respectively the grotesque and the sublime of the human personality leading to an aesthetic appreciation of the beauty in the two contrast characterizations emerging from them. The level of precision maintained in the selection of the domains of life and the personality traits the human is supposed to cultivate in following the respective processes for either deterioration or amelioration introduces a complex portrait of society where all relevant vices and virtues are epitomized by various personalities. Therefore, regarding the identification of the verisimilitudes about the negative and positive facets of morality, the two discourses project a thorough framework. While the “Parabhava Sutta” addresses issues about the socio-psychological behaviour of a personality stuck in a banal social quagmire of mundaneness, the “Maha-mangala Sutta” addresses possibilities for one, free from all mundane vulnerabilities and ready to take up more challenging endeavours based on spiritual advancement leading to Nibbana, the eternal bliss of emancipation aimed at in Buddhism. The images of deterioration and amelioration processes of humanity developed for the interlocutor to retain in an oral memory are supported by a poetics appropriate to the oral culture where the Buddha presented his teachings.

4.1. Stylistic Analysis of the Texts

According to their respective prologues, the Buddha made both these discourses on two different occasions each time in response to an invitation received from a deity. The invitation to preach the “Parabhava Sutta” reads as follows:

Now when the night was far spent a certain deity whose surpassing splendor illuminated the entire Jeta Grove, came to the presence of the Exalted One and, drawing near, respectfully saluted Him and stood at one side. Standing thus, he addressed the Exalted One in verse: "Having come here with our questions to the Exalted One, we ask thee, O Gotama, about man's decline. Pray, tell us the cause of downfall!" ("Parabhava Sutta[A3.1]")

Similarly the setting where the Buddha preached the "Maha-mangala Sutta" appears in the following terms:

On one occasion the Exalted One was dwelling at Anathapindika's monastery, in Jeta's Grove, near Savatthi. Now when the night was far spent, a certain deity whose surpassing splendor illuminated the entire Jeta Grove, came to the presence of the Exalted One and, drawing near, respectfully saluted him and stood at one side. Standing thus, he addressed the Exalted One in verse: "Many deities and men, yearning after good, have pondered on blessings. Pray, tell me the greatest blessing!" ("Maha-mangala Sutta")

Although the presence of a supernatural being known as a deity on either occasion when the two discourses were held, may add a mythical element to the setting, from a critical perspective it can be observed as a value addition to the premises they strive to make respectively about the processes of character deterioration and character amelioration. It is understood that, irrespective of their identities as humans or deities, the two inviters make two different requests to the Buddha for some information that determines the sustenance of humanity. Hence the prologues initiate a dialogue between the Buddha and the respective deities where the Buddha enumerates the relevant

processes. So, the stylistic strategy used here in the texts is meant to manifest the relevant processes in a descriptive manner rather than a prescriptive. This preserves the liberal tone of the Buddha's communication.

4.2. Poetics in the Compositions

Like the entire corpus of the Tripitaka, these two respective discourses are produced in the archaic language Pali. Each sentence in them retains a proverbial quality because they each contain some valuable advice on how to remain immune against evil and how to achieve the best of life in a moral way of life. The application of parallelism in their formation helps align them each with a series of others as parts of a whole. Pali being a syllable-timed language, a metrical analysis of a set of stanzas carried out according to the prosody of the Sinhala language which belongs to the same Indo-Aryan family of languages (See Perera, 1932) appears as follows. These rhyming lines from the “Parabhava Sutta” form a dialogue to preserve a hierarchy of values to demonstrate how each relevant fault leads to another fault with further evil consequences.

සුවිජා|නො භවං| හොති — සුවිජා|නො පරා|භවො

(*suvijaa |noo bhavang| hoothi — suvijaa |noo paraa| bhavoo*)

- - ට | ට - ට | ට - — - - ට | ට - ට | - ට

ධම්මකා|මො භවං| හොති — ධම්මදෙස|සී පරා|භවො

(*dhhammōkaa |moo bhavang| hoothi — dhhammōdhes|sii paraa| bhavoo*)

ට - ට | ට - ට | ට - — ට - ට | ට - ට | ට -

ඉති හෙ|තං විජා|නාම — පඨමො|සො පරා|භවො

(*ithi hee|thang vijaa|naamö — patthömoo|soo paraa| bhavoo*)

- - ට | ට - ට | ට - — - - ට | ට - ට | - ට

දුතියං |භගවා| බ්‍රූහි — කිං පරාභවතෝ මුඛං

(*dhuthi yang|bhagövaa|bruuhi — king paraa|bhavöthoo| mukhang*)

- - ට | - - ට | ට - — ට - ට | - - ට | - ට

The same compositional strategy is applied in the “Maha-mangala Sutta”, although it is not in an explicit dialogue. It just indicates the thirty-eight processes of amelioration in twelve stanzas emphasising their virtue at significant intervals. There it is also realised that each relevant virtue is supposed to help another virtue to develop.

අසෙව|නා ව බා|ලානං — පණ්ඩිතා|නංව සෙ|වනා

(*aseevö|naachöbaa|laanang — pandithaa|nangchösee|vönaa*)

- ට - | ට - ට | ට ට — ට - ට | ට - ට | - ට

පූජාව| පූජනී|යානං — එතං මං|ගල මුත්|තමං

(*puujaachö|puujönii|yaanang — eethangmang|gölömoth|thömag*)

ට ට - | ට - ට | ට ට — ට ට ට | - - ට | - ට

The rhyming lines are strung to a series of stanzas that can be recited to a sober melody. The mnemonically powerful stanzaic structures as depicted above help keep the coherence among the idea

units projected in the discourses for constant revision and practice. All the features of oral poetry embedded in the lines together add an elegant poetic form to the doctrinal and didactic substance in the two discourses. The mnemonically powerful rhetorical and prosodic devices together turn the two discourses thus into a form of poetry of spiritual significance. The original Pali text, originally written in Sinhala script, has been transliterated into the Roman alphabet. This change uses the system created by Fonseka (2006) to help readers who do not know the Sinhala script. This is meant to ensure an accurate oral reading of the lines to perceive their prosody.

5. Contribution to Developing Character Evaluation Models

All behaviours suggested in the processes of deterioration and amelioration in the two respective discourses – the “Parabhava Sutta” and the “Maha-mangala Sutta” – are commonly witnessed in societies in any part of the world without any limitation on the time periods. We encounter them in characters we meet in histories and literatures belonging to different eras. In classical Greece represented by authors such as Homer, Herodotus, and Euripides; the Roman Empire, by those such as Pliny, Livy, and Virgil; the mediaeval age by those such as Dante, Cervantes, and Chaucer; the neoclassical era by those such as Shakespeare, Goethe, and Rabelais; the modern age by Dickens, Hardy, Tolstoy, and Flaubert; as well as the twentieth century by those such as Arthur Miller, Bernard Shaw, and E.M. Forster, we meet hundreds of characters as such. The models of behavioural evils and behavioural virtues formulated from these two discourses can be used in critical analysis of different genres of literature with characters behaving under various unique circumstances.

From the perspective of personality psychology, altogether with social intelligence, social behavior is affected by a set of non-pathological personality traits, first described in the Theory of the Dark Triad by Paulhus and Williams in 2002. The triad includes: (1) narcissism - characterized by excessive self-esteem and arrogance; (2) psychopathy - characterized by a lack of empathy and remorse, as well as such phenotypic domains as disinhibition, arrogance and courage; (3) Machiavellianism - characterized by a tendency to manipulate and use others for manipulator's purposes. (Moreno-Jiménez et al, 2026)

Virtuous persons as well as their acts are distinguished as agents, by a capacity to be disposed habitually not only to do what is required as duty but to seek the perfection—the excellence, the *arête* of a particular virtue. They see themselves as bound to act as excellently as possible in achieving their ends. Impelled by their virtues to strive for perfection—not because it is a duty, but because they seek perfection in pursuit of the *telos* of whatever it is they are engaged in. They cannot act otherwise. It is part of their character. (Gentry & Fleshman, 2020).

Models of both these behavioural patterns – vicious and virtuous - can be formed from these two discourses in a consistent mode. Their application in critical and literary analysis materialises when a long-term internalisation of these models contributes to an ethical and moral consciousness that becomes active while making judgements on characters and the circumstances under which they behave. In reader-response criticism which gained prominence in the late 1960s with the initiative of theorists such as Stanley Fish, David Bleich, and Wolfgang Iser. There is greater “emphasis on the role of the reader in actively constructing texts rather than passively consuming them ... [and making] meaning out of both purely personal reactions and inherited or culturally conditioned ways of reading” (Poetry

Foundation, accessed 2026). The reader's role becomes even more significant in a phenomenological approach to texts that "focuses on the subjective experience of reading, emphasizing how individual readers perceive, interpret, and engage with texts, [and exploring] ... the ways in which readers' consciousness and lived experiences shape their understanding and enjoyment of literature, connecting deeply to personal interpretation and emotional responses". (<https://fiveable.me>) In line with phenomenology and reader response theories, it is understood that the reader's mindset matters a great deal in the interpretation of what is read. There, inner dignity achieved in exposure to these vices and virtues is crucial because that ensures the quality of the judgments made on literary texts. Therefore, the two discourses - the "Parabhava Sutta" and the "Maha mangala Sutta" - can be ranked with high literature focused on the cognitive as well as psychological development of the readers.

6. Conclusion

So long, quotes from Buddhist discourses from the Tripitaka have been used in justifying positions arrived at in many works of creative literature. Nevertheless, this paper attempts to introduce the relevant two Buddhist discourses as creative literature in their own right. In light of it, the Richardsian (1929) and Auerbachian (1946) approaches to literary judgement and interpretation have been adopted in presenting their contents in a framework of literary appreciation. Their potential in portraying the sublime and the grotesque of the human personality is discussed with reference to the imagery in them. Moreover, their sustainability as a form of oral poetry is pointed out by scanning the metrical structures created in composing them as a form of verse. The stylistic analysis exposes the adoption of mnemonically powerful

discourse strategies to suit their function as didactic literature. Finally, it is argued that exposure to the behavioural models of vices and virtues in such literature of doctrinal and didactic value empowers the reader with intellectual, ethical, and moral profundity crucial in making accurate literary and critical judgments while wrestling with ideas projected in various forms of creative literature of all times. Overall, the paper argues that Buddhist discourses are meant to enhance the outlook of those who use them for knowledge, personal development, or pleasure, by stimulating their aesthetic perception of life.

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