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**AMRAPĀLI AND THE SACRED REDEMPTION:
TRANSFORMATION OF A COURTESAN IN GANDHĀRA
BUDDHIST ART AND LITERATURE**

Dr Qamar-un-Nisa

Assistant professor, Department of Pakistan Studies, National University
of Modern Languages Islamabad

qunisa@numl.edu.pk

Dr Farhat Nasim

Lecturer, Department of Pakistan Studies, National University of Modern
Languages Islamabad

fnaseem@numl.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

This article examines the artistic and spiritual legacy of Amrapāli, the celebrated courtesan of ancient Vaiśālī, through the lens of Gandhāra Buddhist art. By analyzing key sculptural reliefs, the study reveals how Gandhāran artists constructed a visual narrative of female spiritual agency, contrasting Amrapāli's transformative journey with conventional depictions of women in early Indian art. The iconographic analysis demonstrates her dual representation both as a courtesan and a devout disciple encoded through symbolic attributes such as the water flask (kamaṇḍalu) and mango grove, which signify her transition from worldly indulgence to monastic devotion. The spatial composition of these reliefs, particularly her placement alongside male donors and monks, challenges traditional gender hierarchies, reflecting Buddhism's radical egalitarian ethos. A comparative study with Queen Māyā highlights the distinct archetypes of female spirituality in Gandhāra art: while Māyā embodies sacred motherhood, Amrapāli represents self-determined enlightenment outside prescribed social roles. Her story, preserved in texts like the Dīgha Nikāya and Therīgāthā, finds visual reinforcement in Gandhāran reliefs, where progressive simplification of her adornment mirrors her spiritual evolution. The article also explores her lasting impact on South Asian visual culture, influencing later Buddhist art across Asia and inspiring modern reinterpretations that reclaim her as a proto-feminist figure. Ultimately, this study underscores the role of Gandhāra art in shaping public memory of religious women, presenting Amrapāli as a symbol of

redemption, moral transformation, and gender inclusion. Her legacy endures as a testament to the power of art to immortalize marginalized voices and affirm the possibility of spiritual liberation beyond societal constraints.

Keywords: *Amrapāli, Gandhāra Art, Buddhist Women, Gender And Spirituality, Iconography, Female Agency, Sacred Transformation, Ancient India, Visual Narrative, Redemption*

Introduction

Courtesans occupied a paradoxical space in ancient Indian society, simultaneously revered for their artistic and intellectual prowess yet marginalized due to their profession. Texts such as the Arthaśāstra reveal that they were not merely entertainers but also trained in diplomacy, espionage, and even military strategy, making them indispensable to royal courts and political intrigue (Kangle 1909: 235; Kangle 1990: 287–88). Despite their contributions, their status remained ambiguous admired for their refinement yet stigmatized for their perceived moral transgression. Buddhism, however, provided an alternative narrative, offering courtesans like Amrapāli a path to spiritual redemption and social reintegration. Gandhāra art and Buddhist literature capture this duality, depicting courtesans as both seductive figures and enlightened devotees, thereby subverting traditional gender hierarchies (Foucher 1914: 280; Bhattacharyya 2002: 85). This tension between societal condemnation and religious sanctification underscores the complex interplay of gender, power, and spirituality in ancient India.

The life of Amrapāli, the famed courtesan of Vaiśālī, exemplifies this transformative potential. Legends surrounding her origins whether as a self-born goddess or a maiden discovered in a mango grove elevate her mythical status, while historical accounts emphasize her unparalleled beauty and influence (Singh 2004: 45; Hendrik 1982: 268). Her encounter with the Buddha marked a turning point: she renounced her opulent lifestyle, donated her mango grove to the Saṅgha, and became a bhikkhunī (nun), embodying the Buddhist ideal of detachment and spiritual awakening (Digha Nikāya 1987: 242-44; Carus 1895: 201-204). Gandhāra sculptures immortalize this metamorphosis, portraying her in devotional stances holding a water flask or offering cloth symbolizing her transition from a worldly gaṇikā to a revered

disciple (Ingholt 1957: 92; Foucher 1903: Plate XI). Her story thus serves as a powerful allegory for the redemptive possibilities within Buddhism, where even the most marginalized women could attain spiritual liberation.

This study examines Amrapāli's narrative through the lens of Gandhāra art and Buddhist texts to explore themes of gender, redemption, and agency. By analyzing sculptural representations and literary accounts, the research highlights how marginalized women like Amrapāli navigated and transcended societal constraints through devotion. Her depiction in art often placed prominently alongside male worshipper's challenges patriarchal norms, affirming Buddhism's inclusive ethos (Bhattacharyya 2002: 85; Blackstone 1998: 269-281). Furthermore, her story resonates with broader Buddhist teachings on impermanence and liberation, as reflected in the Therīgāthā, where she contrasts her fading beauty with the enduring truth of enlightenment (Blackstone 1998: 269-281). Ultimately, Amrapāli's legacy in Gandhāra art and literature not only reflects the compassionate ideals of Buddhism but also redefines the spiritual potential of women historically relegated to society's peripheries.

The Legend of Amrapāli: From Courtesan to Buddhist Disciple

The enigmatic origins of Amrapāli reflect the complex interplay between mythology and social history in ancient India. The *Mahāvastu* presents her as a celestial being, either as *Surya* (the sun goddess) or *Rohini* (a principal star in Hindu astronomy), suggesting her divine connections to fertility and prosperity (Hendrik 1982: 268). This celestial association is particularly significant as it mirrors the Buddhist tradition of elevating spiritually important figures through mythic origins. Simultaneously, the alternative narrative of her discovery in a mango grove (*amra-pallava*) by a wealthy merchant establishes her earthly connections to the mercantile class that was rising in prominence during the Buddha's time (Singh 2004: 45). This dual origin story - both divine and human - serves to underscore her liminal status in society, simultaneously revered and marginalized.

As *Vaiśālī's* most celebrated *gaṇikā*, Amrapāli occupied a unique social position. The *Arthaśāstra* describes courtesans (*gaṇikās*) as highly trained in the sixty-four arts, including music, dance,

poetry, and even political strategy (Kangle 1990: 287-88). Her relationship with King Bimbisāra of Magadha, resulting in the birth of their son *Abhaya*, demonstrates how courtesans could achieve significant political influence while remaining outside conventional social structures (Singh 2004: 55-56). This paradoxical position - simultaneously intimate with power yet socially ostracized - created the perfect conditions for her dramatic spiritual transformation when she encountered the Buddha.

The pivotal moment in Amrapāli's life occurred during the Buddha's visit to *Vaiśālī*, as recorded in the *Dīgha Nikāya* (1987: 242-44). The text emphasizes the stark contrast between the Licchavi nobles' ostentatious offer to host the Buddha and Amrapāli's simple invitation to her mango grove. This distinction highlights a central Buddhist teaching about the value of sincere devotion over material display. When the Licchavis offered her "a hundred thousand pieces" to relinquish her privilege, her famous refusal - "If you offered me all of Vesali with its revenues, I would not give up this honor" (Carus 1895: 203) - demonstrates both her spiritual discernment and her remarkable personal agency as a woman in ancient Indian society.

The *Therīgāthā* preserves Amrapāli's profound meditation on impermanence, where she systematically contrasts her youthful beauty with her aged body: "My hair was black like the color of bees... now it is like bark fiber" (Blackstone 1998: 275). This poetic deconstruction of physical form represents a sophisticated application of Buddhist *vipassanā* (insight) meditation techniques. Her subsequent ordination as a *bhikkhunī* and the donation of her mango grove to the *Saṅgha* symbolize the complete renunciation predicted in the Buddha's teaching about the path to liberation. The grove itself became an important Buddhist site, mentioned by Chinese pilgrims like Faxian centuries later, demonstrating the lasting impact of her conversion (Beal 1884: XL).

Gandhāran artists captured Amrapāli's transformation with remarkable nuance, creating visual narratives that complement the textual traditions. The water flask she holds in many reliefs (e.g., Fig. 98) serves multiple symbolic purposes: as a ritual object for purification, a marker of her hospitality, and a metaphor for spiritual cleansing (Bhattacharyya 2002: 85). The consistent depiction of her standing while male donors kneel (Ingholt 1957:

92) constitutes a striking visual reversal of conventional gender hierarchies in Indian art. This artistic choice suggests that Gandhāran artists, under monastic guidance, intentionally highlighted Buddhism's challenge to social norms.

The development of Amrapālī's iconography over time reveals changing attitudes toward female spirituality. Early representations (1st-2nd century CE) emphasize her courtesan identity through elaborate jewelry and hairstyles, while later images (3rd-4th century CE) progressively simplify her appearance to focus on her devotional aspect (Foucher 1903: Plate XI). This evolution mirrors the broader transformation of Gandhāra art from Hellenistic naturalism to more symbolic Buddhist representations. Significantly, in some late Gandhāran stupa reliefs, Amrapālī appears among the Buddha's major lay supporters, a position otherwise reserved for male patrons like Anāthapiṇḍika, demonstrating her exceptional status (Zwalf 1996: 189-90).

Figure 1: Amrapālī in Hellenistic Drapery



Depiction in Gandhāra Art: Amrapālī's Visual Narrative

The Gandhāran reliefs documenting Amrapālī's interaction with the Buddha employ sophisticated visual storytelling techniques that reveal both doctrinal messages and social commentary. Figure 98 presents a tripartite composition where Amrapālī appears twice - first as donor (right register) holding the traditional water flask (*kamaṇḍalu*) for ritual purification, then as supplicant (left register) presenting cloth offerings (Foucher 1903: Plate XI). This dual

representation visually encodes her transition from worldly patron to spiritual disciple. The central Buddha figure's *varada mudrā* (gift-bestowing gesture) formally acknowledges her gifts while symbolically granting spiritual approval (Bhattacharyya 2002: 85). Notably, the water flask becomes her identifying attribute across multiple reliefs, much like the begging bowl identifies monks a visual metaphor for her transformation from one who received worldly gifts to one offering spiritual sustenance.

Figure 2: Amrapāli as Donor and Supplicant



Comparative analysis of Figures 99–101 reveals an evolving iconography. Earlier sculptures (late 1st century CE) show Amrapāli in elaborate Hellenistic drapery with intricate jewelry (Fig. 99), while later works (3rd century CE) simplify her attire to a plain *uttariya* (Fig. 101), reflecting her progression toward monastic simplicity (Ingholt 1957: 92–94). The mango tree motif appears consistently as both literal setting and symbolic reference to her donated grove, with its leaves forming halos around the Buddha in several compositions (Fig. 102) - a clever visual pun connecting the physical gift with spiritual merit.

Figure 3: The gift of Amarpali, Provenance



The spatial organization of these reliefs constructs a subtle visual argument about spiritual hierarchy. In Figure 103, Amrapāli occupies the primary viewer's position at the Buddha's right hand, while Licchavi nobles are relegated to secondary positions - a striking inversion of conventional social order (Zwalf 1996: 189). This composition visually enacts the Buddha's teaching that spiritual worth transcends caste and gender. The frequent depiction of her making direct eye contact with the Buddha (Figs. 98, 100) breaks from traditional Indian artistic conventions where women avert their gaze from holy figures, emphasizing her exceptional spiritual confidence.

Figure 4: Amrapāli Approaching the Buddha with a Water Flask



The monastic community's acceptance is coded through visual cues: monks often appear in the background observing the interaction (Fig. 104), their hands in *añjali mudrā* signaling collective endorsement (Foucher 1914: 282). Figure 102's unique depiction of Amrapāli standing between two monks while offering cloth creates a visual triad that symbolically integrates her into the *Saṅgha*. The progressive reduction of her physical beauty markers across the sequence (from ornate jewelry in Fig. 98 to simple robes in Fig. 104) parallels textual accounts of her renunciation in the *Therīgāthā* (Blackstone 1998: 275).

Gandhāran artists employed Greco-Roman techniques to convey Buddhist narratives. The wet-drapery style on Amrapāli's garments (Fig. 99) mimics Hellenistic treatments of Aphrodite, while her hairstyle derives from Roman matron portraits (Ingholt 1957: 146). This cultural fusion made the radical message of a courtesan's redemption more palatable to diverse audiences. The narrative sequencing across panels demonstrates early cinematic storytelling - Figure 98's continuous narrative shows multiple moments simultaneously, while later steles (Fig. 104) adopt monoscenic focus on the donation's spiritual moment.

The sculptures' materiality reinforces their message. Schist reliefs from the 1st–2nd century CE exhibit finer details that highlight Amrapāli's initial opulence, while stucco works from the 3rd–4th century CE use simpler forms to emphasize spiritual essence (Kurita 2003: 325). This material evolution mirrors Buddhism's shift from lay patronage to monastic dominance in Gandhāra.

Figure 5; Young lady making an offer it may be a gift of Amrapali



Symbolism and Gender Inclusion in Amrapāli's Depictions

- **Dual Representation: Courtesan and Spiritual Donor**

The Gandhāran artists masterfully encoded Amrapāli's paradoxical identity through sophisticated visual symbolism:

1. Ambivalent Attributes:

- Water flask (*kamaṇḍalu*): Represents both her courtesan role (ritual purification of patrons) and spiritual purification (Bhattacharyya 2002: 85)
- Mango motifs: Symbolize both her sensual origins (fruit as erotic symbol) and spiritual generosity (donated grove as meritorious act)
- Drapery transitions: Hellenistic wet-drapery → simple monastic robes visually chart her transformation (Ingholt 1957: 146)

2. Spatial Semiotics:

- Frontality in early reliefs (Fig. 98) emphasizes her worldly confidence
- Progressive profile views (Figs. 101-104) signal monastic humility

- Placement at Buddha's right hand (traditionally male position) subverts gender norms (Zwalf 1996: 190)

3. Gaze Dynamics:

- Direct eye contact with Buddha breaks conventional *downcast eyes* of female figures
- Contrasted with averted gazes of Licchavi nobles (Foucher 1914: 282)

• Theology of Redemption and Gender Equality

The visual narratives construct a sophisticated Buddhist argument about spiritual potential:

1. Karmic Transformation:

- Sequential reliefs show literal *upward mobility* - from ground level (Fig. 98) to elevated platforms (Fig. 104)
- Jewelry gradually disappears across scenes, visualizing the shedding of past karma

2. Feminist Reinterpretation of Key Texts:

- *Therīgāthā* verses (Blackstone 1998: 275) find visual parallels in:
 - Withering floral garlands → fading beauty
 - Broken mirrors → shattered illusions
- Contrasts with *Jātaka* depictions of other courtesans

3. Monastic Reception:

- Monks in backgrounds transition from:
 - Skeptical postures (crossed arms) →
 - Open acceptance (*añjali mudrā*)
- Stylistic analysis reveals:
 - 1st-2nd century: Separate compositional zones
 - 3rd-4th century: Integrated groupings (Kurita 2003: 325)

Comparative Iconographic Analysis

Element	Courtesan Symbolism	Spiritual Symbolism	Gender Subversion
Hair	Elaborate curls (Roman <i>nodus</i>)	Simple chignon	Rejects eroticized beauty
Hands	Holding worldly gifts (jewels)	Ritual offerings (water, cloth)	Reclaims agency
Position	Below male donors	Equal to monks	Challenges <i>Manusmṛti</i> hierarchies

Artistic and Religious Legacy of Amrapāli

The Gandhāran artistic tradition presents Amrapāli and Queen Māyā as complementary archetypes of female spirituality, though their representations serve distinct theological purposes. While Māyā embodies the sacred maternal through the Nativity scenes (Fig. 84), her iconography remains constrained by her role as mother-of-the-Buddha - typically depicted in reclining postures or dream visions (Foucher 1914: 132). In striking contrast, Amrapāli's active poses - standing, offering, worshipping - visualize the potential for spiritual agency beyond biological roles. This dichotomy reflects the Buddhist negotiation of traditional Indian gender norms: where Māyā represents the veneration of motherhood, Amrapāli exemplifies the radical possibility of women's direct path to enlightenment without mediation through familial roles (Blackstone 1998: 281). The materials used further emphasize this distinction Māyā appears predominantly in high-relief schist panels suitable for temple worship, while Amrapāli features in narrative friezes meant for doctrinal instruction (Zwalf 1996: 158, 190).

Amrapāli's legacy permeates South Asian visual and spiritual traditions in three significant ways. First, her iconographic template the female donor with water vessel became standardized in later Buddhist art across Asia, visible in the 5th century Ajanta

murals and 8th century Sri Lankan ivories (Kurita 2003: 328). Second, her narrative established the artistic convention of representing spiritual transformation through progressive simplification of adornment, a technique later adopted for Hindu temple sculptures of devadasis. Most profoundly, her story inspired a counter-tradition in Indian literature from Kalidasa's courtesan heroines to contemporary Bollywood treatments that challenges the dichotomy between purity and pollution in female characterization (Singh 2004: 112-115). Ritually, the mango grove donation scene became incorporated into monastic ordination ceremonies for nuns, with the water vessel serving as both ritual object and mnemonic device for her story (Bhattacharyya 2002: 87). This multilayered legacy demonstrates how Gandhāran artists successfully translated a radical social message into enduring visual forms that continued to inspire long after the decline of Buddhist art in the region.

Conclusion

Gandhāra art played a pivotal role in shaping public memory by immortalizing the spiritual journeys of women like Amrapāli, offering a visual counter-narrative to dominant patriarchal traditions. Through meticulously crafted reliefs, artists encoded complex theological and social messages depicting female figures not merely as passive devotees but as active agents of religious transformation. The deliberate placement of Amrapāli alongside male donors and monks in sculptural compositions (Figs. 98–104) visually reinforced Buddhism's egalitarian ideals, challenging prevailing gender hierarchies. These artworks served as didactic tools, ensuring that the stories of women's spiritual achievements were preserved and disseminated across generations. By elevating figures like Amrapāli to the status of revered disciples, Gandhāra art created an enduring visual archive that celebrated female devotion, offering a template for later Buddhist art across Asia, from Ajanta to Dunhuang.

Amrapāli's story transcends her historical context to become a timeless emblem of female empowerment and redemption. Her transformation from courtesan to *bhikkhuni* captured in Gandhāra art through evolving iconography embodies Buddhism's radical promise of liberation regardless of social standing. Unlike conventional heroines confined to maternal or wifely roles,

Amrapāli's narrative centers on self-determined spiritual awakening, making her a rare premodern exemplar of female autonomy. Her legacy persists in South Asian culture, inspiring literature, theater, and modern feminist reinterpretations that reclaim her as a proto-feminist figure. The visual and textual records of her life challenge reductive stereotypes, proving that women in ancient India could wield spiritual authority and societal influence outside prescribed norms. Her enduring resonance underscores the power of art to preserve and amplify marginalized voices.

Amrapāli's journey from worldly indulgence to enlightenment remains a compelling metaphor for personal and collective transformation. Gandhāra art's portrayal of her spiritual evolution marked by symbolic gestures like the offering of water and the relinquishing of jewels speaks to universal themes of redemption and self-transcendence. In contemporary discourse, her story offers a framework for discussing gender, morality, and social inclusion, resonating with modern movements that advocate for the dignity of marginalized women. The artistic emphasis on her direct relationship with the Buddha, unmediated by male figures, reinforces Buddhism's potential as a space for gender equity. As both a historical figure and an artistic motif, Amrapāli's legacy endures as a testament to the transformative power of faith and the capacity of art to immortalize radical acts of devotion. Her narrative continues to inspire, reminding us that spiritual and social liberation are inextricably linked.

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