



## **GENDER IDEOLOGY AND (RE)CONTEXTUALIZATION OF URAGA JATAKA PAINTING AS DEPICTED IN MEDAWALA TEMPLE, SRI LANKA\***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Medawala Temple, one of the most prominent archaeological sites in Sri Lankan art and architecture, is situated in the district of Kandy. In the present study, the murals that embellish the image house of the temple have been examined as primary sources for a comparative analysis. The main narrative stories for these paintings are Vessantara and Uruga jataka, of which the latter has been analysed in the article. Primary data were collected through observational fieldwork conducted in 2010, 2012, 2017 and 2018 respectively, and museum surveys in Sri Lanka and the United Kingdom. This research evaluates the artists' orientation to gender and attempts to understand the social ideology that exhorted the artist in his visual liturgies. The main argument of this iconographic analysis has been that the artist had visibly recast the central idea of the story with a gender bias. The artist situates women in a less important position in spiritual understanding, and emphasizes crying as a trait characteristic of women. This indicates contemporary attitudes towards women, with supplementary sources also revealing evidence to show that women had been given a less important place in society. The murals of great traditions such as those in Medawala convey that they aimed to condition the socio-religious behavior of the people of that time.

**Key words:** Medawala Temple, Murals, Uruga Jataka, Gender Ideology

\* This is an author's own previous unpublished work. The author (Dulma Karunarathna) originally submitted this analysis as an assignment in 2012 and combined this analysis in to her PhD in 2014 (see the relevant citations).

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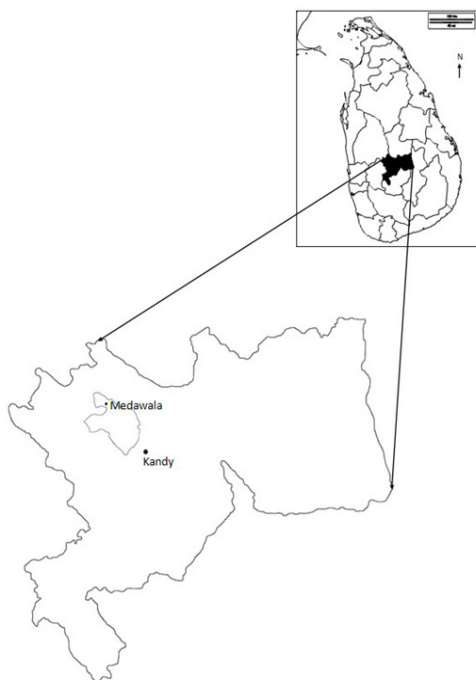
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## INTRODUCTION

Medawala Temple, one of the most prominent archaeological places in Sri Lankan art and architecture, is situated in Medawala village, Harispattu Secretariat Division, Kandy District, Central Province (Map No. 01). Though the legendary history of this temple goes back to the reign of King Wattagaminiabhaya of the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. (Lawrie 1898, p. 580)<sup>1</sup>, the archaeological evidence suggests that the image house was constructed by the Kandyan King Kirti Sri Rajasinghe (Geiger 1953; Dammananda 1969; Lawrie 1898) in (1755) 18<sup>th</sup> century A.C. i.e. in 1755. The temple is called *Tampita Vihāre*<sup>2</sup> which is an image house (Figure No. 1) built with timber, wattle, and daub which is raised above the ground on short monolithic pillars (Dammananda 1969; Lawrie 1898). This is a small shrine in

Map No.01: Location of Medawala Temple in kandy district,Sri Lanka



1. "Medawala Sannasa", or the written voucher inscribed on a copper plate given to Medawala temple by the king Kirti Sri Rajasimha date in the Saka era 1677 (Lawrie 1898: 580-582)  
 2. A special type of image house built on piles. Bandaranayake introduces this as a rural architectural tradition (Bandaranayake 1974: 13).



Figure No. 01: Medawala Temple  
 magnitude and the central figure venerated is a seating Buddha statue.

There is no complete study on the portrayal of women in the Medawala Temple painting, and the present paper is the first in-depth analysis of the *Uruga Jataka* in visual medium. In 1990, the Department of Archaeology published a series of books titled *Paintings in Sri Lanka*. A variety of temples covering different areas of Sri Lanka were selected for the survey and Medawala was one of them. The series mainly records architectural features, history of the temple, and a basic description about the temple. Gunasinghe published a book on Sri Lankan mural paintings in 1978, which is essentially a painting album together with a brief description of the plates selected. He mentions about Medawala and its mural paintings to highlight the basic characteristics of the Kandyan painting tradition where necessary. Bandaranayake and Wijesinghe also discuss Medawala Temple and its painting style in their book on *Rock and Wall Paintings in Sri Lanka* (1986). Godakumbure has authored a booklet on the Medawala temple in which a preliminary description about the temple is given (n.d.). *Design Elements from Sri Lankan Temple Painting* by Manjusri (1977) is considered

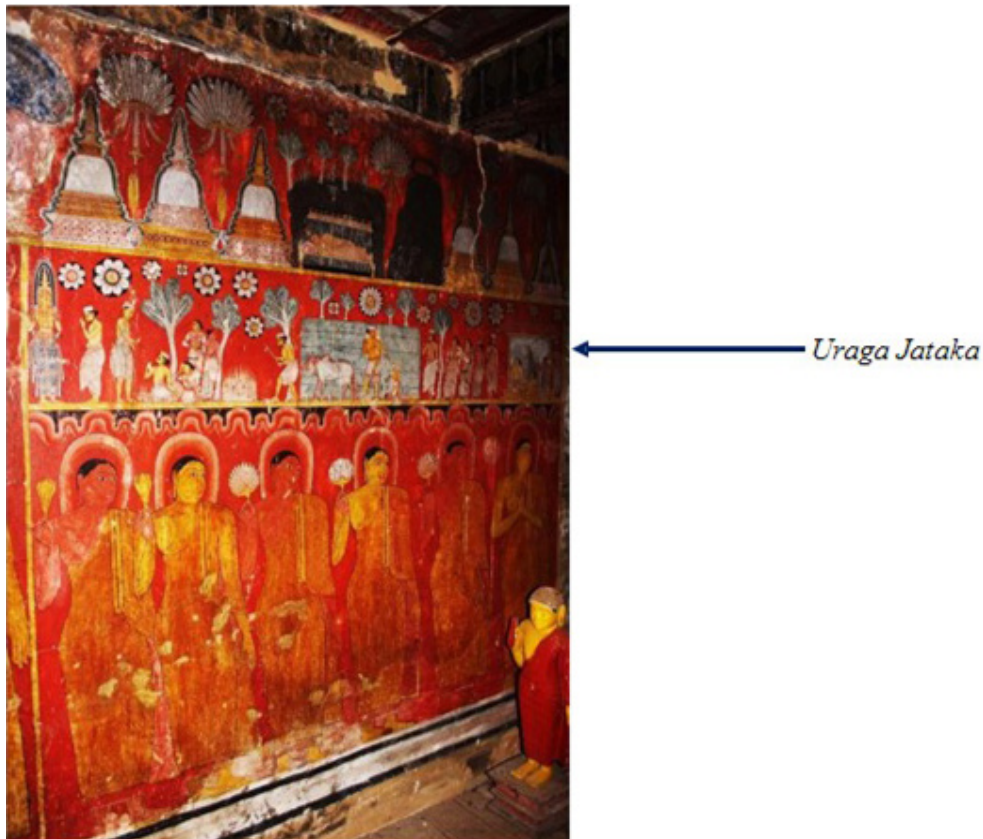


Figure No. 2- Left wall, inside the image house

a seminal, systematic survey of Sri Lankan mural paintings. Generally, his effort can be identified as a classification of mural paintings presented in a line drawing format. There are some methodological or technical issues in his survey. One of them is the accuracy of his line drawings. Though Manjusri presents the overall shape of the scenes he has selected, he fails to provide correct replicas as accurate representations of the original paintings. For instance, in Plate CV 5, Manjusri (Figure No. 11) shows the weeping mother of *Uraga Jātaka* on the painting at Medawala Temple, and the mother is portrayed to be carrying a small baby. This is an entirely incorrect reproduction by the author. In the original painting as well as in the story, there is no such infant on the lap of the mother (Figure No. 9). This representation of Manjusri misleads the researcher who has not visited the original paintings. The first serious discussion and analysis of the religious patronage of King Kirti Sri Rajasinghe, the patron of Medawala

Temple, was done by J. C. Holt in 1936. However, far too little attention has been paid to the women in the paintings in the temple, and even in this study, Holt sometimes misinterprets the female in *Uraga Jātaka*, which will be discussed in this paper.

The inner walls of the image house are ornately decorated with mural paintings (Figure No. 3). Paintings of this temple were created according to the fresco tempera technique and all figures are depicted in two dimensions. The artistic expression of these paintings is similar that of typical Kandyan art. The mural paintings of Degaldoruva and Ridi Vihare, cloth painting (*pethikada*) of Arattana Temple can be equal to that of Madawa visual imagery. The paintings were depicted as continuous narrations in horizontal strips where *Jātaka* stories<sup>3</sup> have been employed as the main theme. *Vessantara and Uraga Jātaka*

3. Jataka stories are known as the stories of Bodhisattva in previous births of Buddha

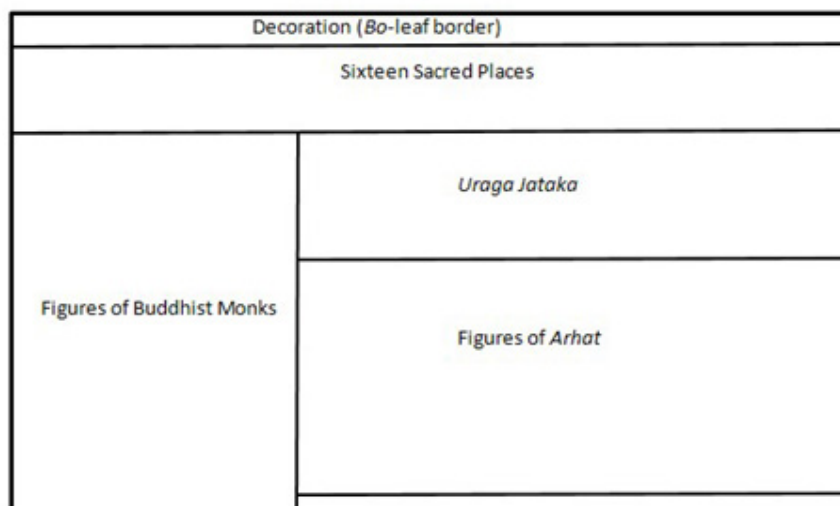


Figure no: 03 – Schematic Plan of the Paintings on the left wall

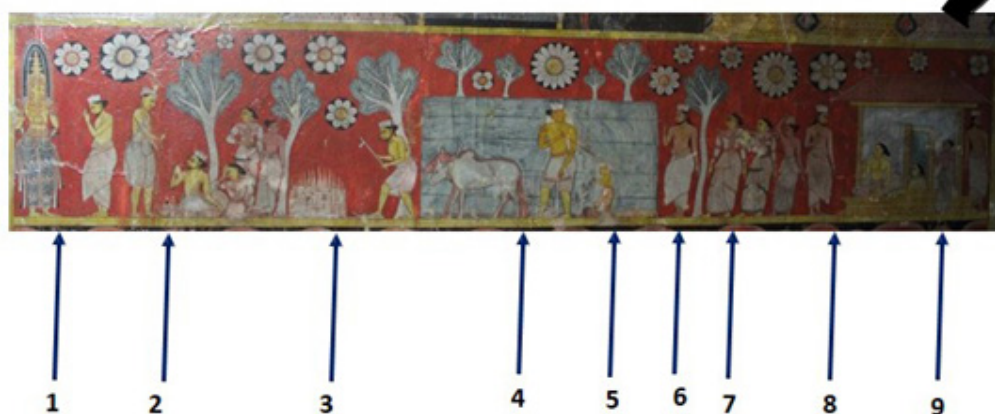


Figure No. 4 - Scene of Uraga Jataka in Medawala Temple

have been selected as main narrative stories<sup>4</sup> for these mural paintings. The panel of *Uraga Jātaka*, portrayed in a strip on the left wall has been analysed here. The central idea of the story is that all beings are subject to death, and all compounds are subject to dissolution (Cowell 1897, p. 108). Nine incidents of the story (Figure No. 4) were selected to transmit this message to the intended audience and three of them undoubtedly showcase the social-archaeology of gender. They are the scenes of:

#### I. Women in the house (Figure No. 6)

4. Medawala Sannasa also mentions the name of these two Jatakas as the selected stories for paintings (Dammananda 1969: 266)

#### II. Carrying food to the field (Figure No. 7)

#### III. Householder having lunch in the field (Figure No. 8)

The portrayal of women in these scenes provides evidence to reconstruct the history of women and social attitudes towards them during this period.

#### Iconography

The deconstructed data of this panel were re-examined in a problem-oriented and an issue-related perspective. Iconography and social archaeology of gender have been applied as the two main approaches to look for the hidden imaging and to disclose the



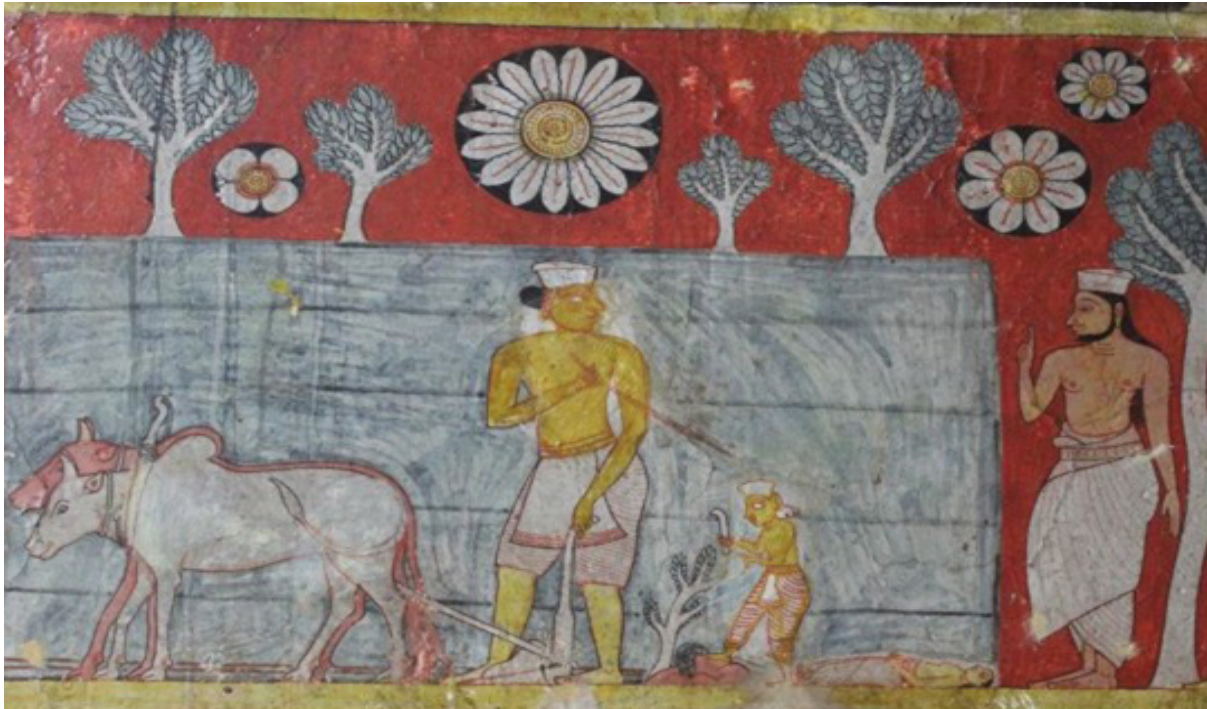


Figure No. 5 - Farmer and Son in the paddy field



Figure No. 6 - Farmer's wife meet the massenager

real image of the women, then to understand how the artist re-contextualizes the story in his social context and shapes social values with regard to women.

"Iconography is that branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, as opposed to their forms" (Panofsky 1939, p. 3). The

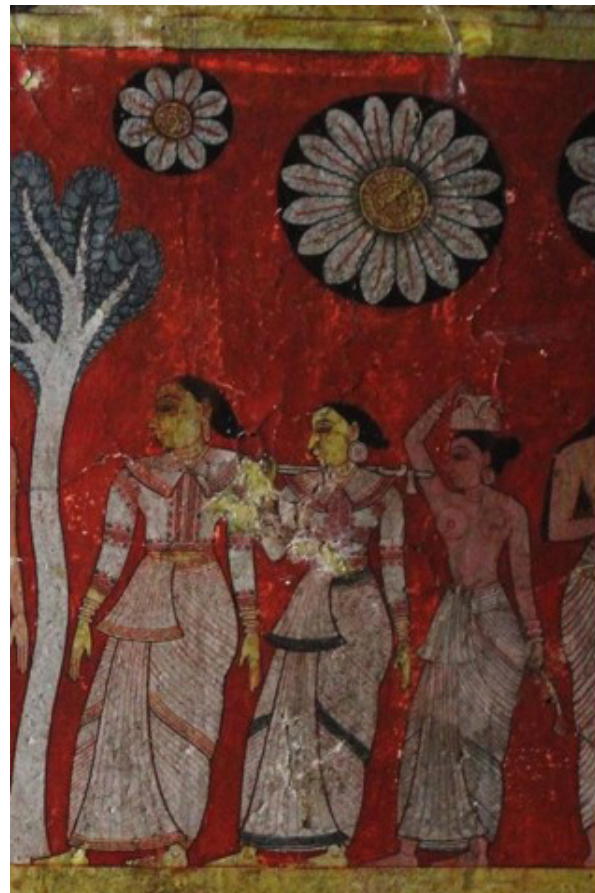


Figure No. 7 - Carrying food to the field



Figure no. 8 - Arrival of god sakka and the cremation

application of iconography in the history of art plays an important role, and the interpretation process is carried out over three main phases. They are pre iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconographic interpretation (Burke 2001, p. 35-36).

The *Uraga Jātaka* panel of Medawala Temple was analyzed using the iconographic approach to reconstruct the history of women during this period. This study begins by asking a range of questions about the background of this production. Understanding the social status of the artist and his role provides us a clear picture of these paintings. Though the artist of this temple was unidentified, evidence from literary sources on endowment say that a royal artist named Ullandupitiye<sup>5</sup> Hittara Naide lived in a village called Ullandupitiya around 1786 A.D. Medawala is the most prominent Buddhist Temple in the area (Lawrie 1898), and it can be assumed that the royal artist of Ullandupitiya or his ancestors contributed to the paintings of this temple. Thus, these paintings are likely to be a portrayal of women created by a male artist's mind and

5. Ullandupitiya- Hittara tenants: Wattegedarayalage and Galewattege. Hold 1 acre field and 1 acre garden. services (communal for Rs. 14.70): to serve as a painter and decorator at the Maligawa for one year in every ten. The tenant is supplied with loadings, food and clothing, and all necessary pigments, & c., when employed (Lawrie 1898:873).

hands. Furthermore, the *Medawala Sannasa* convinces that it is a creation of a royal artist enjoying royal patronage (Dammananda 1969). Therefore, the paintings of Medawala Temple can be established as the work of a male artist and a male patron.

The subject matter is one of the most important areas which could be analyzed through iconography. Some of the questions to be asked regarding these images include: What is the basis of selecting such themes and subject matter? How is it similar to or different from literary representations? (D'Alleva 2005, p. 26). The panel is based on *Uraga Jātaka*<sup>6</sup> and it directs us to inquire as to why this artist selected this story for his collection. The foremost idea of the *Jātaka* story is that all beings are subject to death, and it is essential to find out the ideologies behind the painter, patron, and of the intended audience of the painting in this selection. The political background of Kandy undoubtedly fits with this selection and the patron could have played a remarkable role in defining the subject matter. There was political instability in the Kandyan kingdom and it faced various outside threats from European colonial

6. Uraga Jataka is one of the seldom subject in temple murals in Sri Lanka. It can be seen only from Medawala temple, Minigamuva temple and Muppane temple.





Figure no. 9 - Uraga Jataka narration, Minigamuwa Temple, Hataraliyadda, Kandy District

powers. European occupation caused thousands of deaths and brought about desolation particularly to the hill country of Sri Lanka. The *Medawala Sannasa* also mentions that the original temple at Medawala had been destroyed by the Portuguese (Dammananda 1969). The chronicle *Chulavamsa* and the more recent part of *Mahavamsa* describe the attacks by the Dutch during the reign of King Kirti Sri Rajasinghe and how they despoiled the peaceful lives of the Kandyan folk (Giger 1999). This eventually led to a depressing time when young men joined the army and the Kandyan society required healing to understand and come to terms with the loss of their offspring. The artist has deliberately selected stories featuring the loss of children and donating of children (the latter is the theme in the *Vessantara Jataka*, the other story depicted in Medawala Temple). The Buddhist painting tradition acted as a social medium to cure the society during this period. The artist may thus have selected these stories to encourage people to dwell on the uncertainty of life.

Though the order of incidents in the original story has been changed by the artist, it is still understandable to villagers since the story is very familiar to them. Further examinations reveal that the main idea of the story has also

been changed by the artist. This prompts the following questions in the interest of figuring out the rationale of visual representation involved here: What are the changes of the main theme? How did the artist make these changes? Why did he make the changes? How was it accepted by the society?

(I) According to the *Jataka* story, the farmer sends a message to his family via a passing wayfarer, saying (Figure No. 6) that only one meal would be needed as lunch and not to bring food for two as was the usual case. The artist also shows female members of the family bringing food to the field, but he does not indicate that the food is for one person only. The absence of the quantity of food creates a great vacuum in the main idea of the story. Bringing food for one person is the symbolic message through which the wife of the farmer understood the death of one. Though the wife of the farmer was intelligent enough to understand this message in the *Jataka* story, the artist or the patron did not have an intention to portray that capability in the visual narration. Did the artist try to imply the lack of understanding of females?

(II) The *Jataka* story tells us that there are four females in the house: the farmer's wife, the daughter, the daughter-in-law and the female



Figure no. 10 - Meal at the field and the cremation

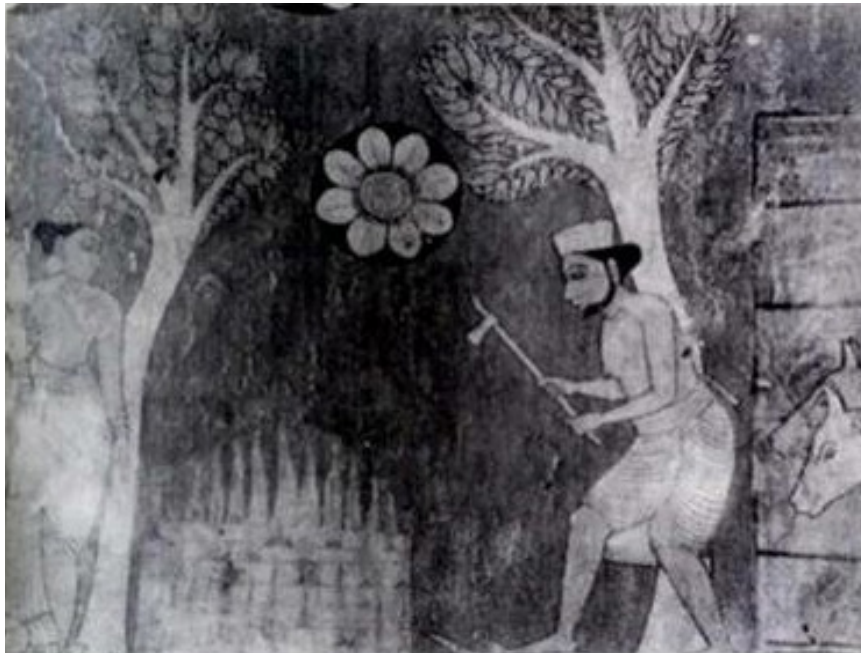


Figure No. 11- Plate no 25 of Holt 1996

slave. The artist of Medawala Temple has dropped one female character from the story in his visual representation. The farmer's wife and female slave are obviously visible in the panel and the other woman in the painting may be the daughter or the daughter-in-law. There is no suggestion to determine who the missing character is. However, the artist of the Minigamuwa Temple depicted four females in two incidents as described in the Jātaka story (Figure No. 9). This could have

happened when the artist tried to save space on the panel, where the image house is very small in size.

(III) The *Jātaka* story reports that the farmer stressed on the need of female members to have a bath, put on clean garments, and come with perfumes and flowers in their hands. These must have been the funeral customs of that period. The garments of females are changed in the panel from those that they were wearing in the house (Figure Nos. 6 and





Figure No. 12 - Plate No CV5 of Manjusri 1977

7). All of them had bare upper bodies while they were in house but the two noble women changed into elegant clothes on their way to the field. The artist had no way of showing that they had taken a bath, but he could have easily visualized the females with flowers in their hands.

(IV) In the story, the entire family and the servant take up fire-wood and lift the body on to the funeral pyre, make offerings of perfumes and flowers, and then set fire to it. It is a symbolic way of showing the understanding of death and shows women's participation in funeral activities as well. The scene (Figure No. 7) shows only the farmer performing these activities. The Medawala Temple painting therefore indicates that the society kept women away from such activities. Was the artist trying to convey that women were mentally not strong enough to understand religious truth or meaning? One can also argue that this artist does this in order to save space in the strip. In that case, the artist could have visualized only the cremation without any human figures. The presence of only the farmer during the cremation reflects the gender bias of space management by the artist. In his description on Plate No. 25, Holt claims that the son's wife observed the cremation (Figure No. 10)<sup>7</sup>. This is a misconception and a misinterpretation of two different events. The woman who looks

7. Plate 25 depicts the funeral rite as it is being observed by the deceased son's wife (Holt 1996: 76)

on from the side of the cremation is a female slave and belongs in the next scene. She can be clearly identified by her outer appearance (Figure No. 10). Superficially, one could say that a woman observed the funeral, but if we thoroughly understand and analyze the unique characteristics of Kandyan art, it can be noted that the Kandyan artists divided scenes by including trees and streams. The artist of the Medawala Temple has followed the same principle by including a tree (Figure No. 10) in between the young woman and the cremation. Holt has not observed this and he cropped the scene inaccurately (Figure No. 11) to build his interpretation (Holt 1996) which misleads the readers who have not seen the original painting.

(V) In the final incident of the story, God *Sakka* questions the family (Figure No. 8) as to why they have not shed a tear, remarking on the absence of lamentation on the part of the entire family. Here, the artist makes an important deviation from the story: In the story, God *Sakka* emphasizes that crying is a habitual reaction of women to calamities including death. In contrast to the description of the *Jātaka* story, the artist in this painting places the hand of the farmer's wife on her head as a symbol and visual representation of lamentation (Figure No. 8). At the same time, the farmer is shown in such a way so as to establish his equanimity. God *Sakka* further says in the story that men do not cry because men are knowledgeable and are courageous, and so is surprised that women are brave enough to face this loss this way. By making a deviation from this, the artist has re-emphasized that women are not knowledgeable, that they are not courageous, and weeping is the nature of women.

The main argument of this iconographic analysis is that the artist has visibly recast the central idea of the story with a gender bias. The artist situates women in a less important position in spiritual understanding.

This indicates contemporary attitudes towards women, with supplementary sources (mentioned above) also revealing evidence to show that women were given a less important place in society. Thus, the Medawala artist's portrayal could be considered as reflecting the ideology of contemporary society.

### Social Archaeology:

Social Archaeology is one of the sub-disciplines in the field of archaeology used to reconstruct past societies and social practices in their totality by placing artifacts in a wider social context. It can be defined as a 'top-down' view that focuses on the systems, institutions, and social organizations prior to attempting to look at the role of the individual and their actions (Renfrew and Bahn 2008). Gender is used to indicate the cultural values inscribed on sex (Hays and Whitley 1998). The social archaeology of gender is applied as an efficacious theoretical approach to understand the meanings and values attributed to gender in different social contexts in history. Thus, the social archaeology of gender was selected as one of the most suitable approaches to analyze the profile of women depicted in the *Uraga Jātaka* painting panel at the Medawala Temple.

The socio-archaeological background for this painting is that the artist has re-contextualized the *Uraga Jātaka* story to suit a Kandyan village in Sri Lanka, deviating from its original context in India. The artist invites the intended audience to assume this as their own social reality by politicizing the story according to the patronage. At the same time, the artist converts the Brahmin family into the Kandyan agricultural caste of *Goyigama*, *Goewanse*<sup>8</sup>, *Wellala* or *Handuru* castes. The artist could have easily depicted a Brahmin by drawing

a traditional "*Puna Nula*", the sacred thread across his body. But the artist preferred to reflect a *Goyigama* family background since the Brahmin caste is not present in the Sri Lankan caste system, and also because the *Goyigama* caste fits well with the occupation of the Brahmin in the original story. The nature of social organization during this period is also depicted by including people from two



Figure No. 13: Dress of Kandyan elite woman, Ivory carving, The British museum

different social classes: elites (farmers) and non-elites (slaves) which prevailed in the period.

Several questions could be raised to examine the social organization reflected in the panel and the status of women within this social context: How did the artist indicate two

8. Davy explains, "the Goewanse, or, as named in the low country, wellales, constitute by far the largest caste of the Singalese. Agriculture, their original employ, is not now their sole occupation. They are a privileged people, and monopolized all the honours of church and state, and possess all the hereditary rank in the country" (Davy 1821: 113)



different castes? Did he follow the methods used by former or contemporary artists? Did he present to the audience a stereotypical social stratification as suggested by the textual source of the story?

stressed by the artist to mark a distinction between elites and lower castes. The depiction shows a disparity, particularly between women of seemingly higher and lower castes, in garments, jewelry, hair styles, scale, situation, complexion, posture, and



Figure No. 14 - Dress used by Kandyan elite Women, National Museum,(cupboud no: 2 ) circa seventeenth-eighteenth century



Figure No. 15 - A: figure of noble women, sketch of Knox (1681)

The social archaeological approach provides the opportunity to recognize some elements



Figure No. 16 - A: figure of a noble woman, sketch of Davy (1821)

the services performed. The painting also provides clues to gender attribution, gender ideology, gender hierarchy, and gender roles during the period, along with which class and caste dynamics have also been implied. Placing deconstructed data in an issue related platform directs us to examine closely the social construction of gender identities and relations through the material of past societies. In analyzing the Medawala *Uraga Jātaka* painting panel, the following questions can be raised: What were the criteria used by the contemporary society to assign individuals to gender categories? What were the meanings and values attributed to gender categories? Does this painting reflect any kind of inequalities in relations between the genders? Is there differential access to social activities and privileges? What did men and women do in the specific social context depicted? The scale, transposition, postures, gestures, absence in movements or function all allow reconstruction of the social archaeology of gender to understand answers to these questions.

Attention may also be paid to the women's roles and power relations between them according to age. The artist tries to show different ages by using different visual methods. Those elements are very similar to the form used to distinguish gender by the artist.

**Garments:** Both noble women have worn elegant, decorated garments in the scenes where they carry food to the field and where the farmer has lunch in the field. Elite women of these paintings wear a long cloth similar to the Indian *Dhoti* to cover the lower part of the body. Robert Knox (1681) has written about the outer appearance of aristocratic

women during the period<sup>9</sup>. In contrast, the female slave wears a very simple poor quality cloth to cover her lower body. This shows us that there may have been a restriction on wearing decorative clothes by low caste people. Though they were allowed to cover the lower part of their body, the shortest cloth had to be worn by the female slave. There is another distinction in the upper garments of the women depicted. Upper bodies of elite women are covered with ornately decorated long sleeved jackets. This may have been the accepted and fashionable way of covering the upper body of women in the period (Figure No. 14). Female figures depicted in sculptured art in other places such as the Degaldoruwa Temple and Gangarama also show the same dress. The garments of ivory carvings of the two noble women displayed in the British Museum are of similar visual representation to the Medawala female figures (Figure No. 13). Textual sources also project the same picture of noble women's garments. The sketches of noble women provided by Knox and Davy in their records on Sri Lanka also corroborate the external appearance of women in the period (Figure No. 15-16). But this is only applicable for noble women. Even the paintings show the covering of the upper bodies of two noble women with decorated jackets, while the female slave is nude in her upper body. The artist of the Minigamuwa Temple also clearly demarcates the difference in the garments of the female slave (Figure No. 9). This discrimination prevalent in Kandyan society has been clearly noticed by Knox who was a captive of the Kandyan court for nearly 20

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9. "In their houses the women regard not much what dress they go in, but so put on their cloths as is most convenient for them to do their work. But when they go abroad, and make themselves fine, They wear a short Frock with sleeves to cover their bodies of fine white Callico wrought with blew and red Thread in flowers and branches..."(Knox 1681: 90)



years<sup>10</sup>.

There are enough examples to say that the elderly women become simple as they grow old. The society did not accept the same decorations on old women, that young women adorned themselves with. The Medawala artist also wishes to project this perception through his narration. The ribbon ornamentation of the young women's upper garment is not visible on the elder woman's jacket. Furthermore, she does not wear earrings (Figure No. 07). Removing jewelry may have been due to the damage caused to their ears as a result of

female slave has been decked with three simple bangles and earrings. This may have been another restriction imposed on low caste people in society. Moreover, the elderly women in this picture are not adorned with earrings. Due to the heaviness of earrings, the ears get damaged eventually and they cannot wear such jewelry anymore. Textual sources also describe the felicity of jewelry and how the ears of women were prepared to wear such huge jewels since their childhood<sup>11</sup>. There is a great deal of similarities in the jewelry of women depicted in *Uraga Jātaka* panel with other art representations and



Figure No. 17 - King and queen at the palace, Vessantara Jataka, Medawala Temple

wearing heavy earrings for a long time as discussed below. In contrast, wearing bangles was common to both generations.

**Jewelry:** Noble women are equipped with shapely earrings, bangles, and necklaces in this painting. In contrast to the elites, the

textual accounts, including the narrative panel of the Minigamuwa Temple.

It is noteworthy that the feet of human figures in the Medawala Temple paintings are not covered. Only the members of royal family were privileged enough to have footwear on.

10. "...the wearing of their cloth, which the Men wear down half their Legs, and the Women to their Heels: one end of which Cloth the Women fling over their Shoulders, and with the very end carelessly cover their Page 67Breasts; whereas the other sort of Women must go naked from the waist upwards, and their Cloaths not hang down much below their Knees: except it be for cold; for then either Women or Men may throw their Cloth over their Backs. But then they do excuse it to the Hondrews, when they meet them, saying, Excuse me, it is for warmth..." (Knox 1681:67)

11. on their Arms Silver Bracelets, and their fingers and toes full of Silver Rings, about their necks, Necklaces of Beads or Silver, curiously wrought and engraven, gilded with Gold, hanging down so low as their breasts. In their ears hang ornaments made of Silver set with Stones, neatly engraven and gilded. Their ears they bore when they are young, and rowl Coker-nut leaves and put into the holes to stretch them out, by which means they grow so wide that they stand like round Circles on each side of their faces, which they account a great ornament, but in my Judgment a great deformity, they being well featured women." (Knox 1681:90)



Figure No. 5 - Farmer and son in the paddy field

The description of Knox<sup>12</sup>, sketches of Davy, and other sculptured art of the period also prove this point.

**Hairstyles:** Hairstyles have also been used to demarcate social strata in this painting panel. Both the aristocratic women have tied their hair according to the same upward hairstyle while it is completely different for the female slave. The artist of the Minigamuwa Temple also highlighted this difference deliberately. The artist's illustration of upper class hairstyles shows the influence of Burmese hairstyles. Enough literary evidence<sup>13</sup> can be obtained about female hairstyles in the

12. But notwithstanding all their bravery, neither man nor woman wears shoes or stockings, that being a royal dress, and only for the King himself (Knox 1681, p. 90).  
 13. "...Their other ornaments and Apparel show very comely on them Their Hair they oyl, with Coker-nut oyl to make it smooth, and comb it all behind. Their hair grows not longer than their waists, but because it is a great ornament to have a great bunch of hair, they have a lock of other hair fastened in a Plate of engraved Silver and gilded, to tie up with their own, in a knot hanging down half their Backs. Their hands are bare, but they carry a scarf of striped or branched Silk or such as they can get, casting it carelessly on their head and shoulders. About their Waists they have one or two Silver girdles made with Wire and Silver Plate handsomely engraved, hanging down on each side, one crossing the other behind..." (Knox 1681:90)



Figure No. 18 - Sri Lanka Kolam mask of a European soldier, British museum. (Reg No: AS 1927, 0108.)

Kandyan Kingdom.

**Scale:** Not only in Sri Lankan art history, but in global art history too, the scale was utilized as one of the most common and distinctive features of establishing social status (Renfrew 1984). The variation of scale can be seen in both scenes the artist portrays; elites as large figures and the female slave as the smallest.

The scene of having food reflects the gender bias of the artist's usage of scale in his painting. The farmer appears in the form of a full body:



Taller and bigger than other female figures. The wife (the eldest woman in the story) has been given the opportunity to sit in the field. The place given to her is somewhat behind the farmer and smaller in size. The woman is shorter than the male figure and some parts of her body are covered by the male figure. Young women and the female servant did not get the chance to sit with the family, and they stand in the background (Figure No. 10).

Power relations among the females can also be traced by analyzing the *Uraga Jātaka* panel. Elderly women played a leading role in society and the artist often gives his priority to the eldest women while the latter is also involved in social and domestic affairs (Figure Nos. 6 and 7). The artist has increased the scale of the older woman to emphasize her position among other women.

**Situation/transposition:** The Medawala artist has used several methods when he situates human figures in the scenes according to contemporary socio-cultural values.

The sitting posture is one of the most outstanding ways of establishing gender hierarchy in oriental art history. The most common practice is of situating men on higher seats and the women on lower seats. In contrast, the farmer and his wife of this painting sit on the same level. Does this artist assign them equal status with this representation? When we closely examine the *Vessantara Jātaka* panel in the same image house, King Sandamaha sits on a higher seat than his queen's, while they stay in the palace (Figure No. 17). It says that the contemporary society prescribed a gender biased seating arrangement and it had been followed in the Medawala paintings. Then why did the artist place both the farmer and his wife on the same level? My reading is that as the artist had no option but to seat them at the same level when locating them in a field, he used another visual method to indicate the gender difference, the use of scale.

The viewer's attention is attracted to the way the artist prioritizes a group of women when they are walking as a group. Transposition at journeys is prioritized according to age and social status. In the painting, the journey is led by the eldest woman who is followed by the young noble woman. The female slave is placed behind the elites. Therefore, this visual narration indicates to the viewers that slaves did not have the privilege to overtake their masters.

**Complexion:** Changing the complexion was also one of the most prominent customs used by artists to demarcate the diversity of social stratification. This approach has also been followed by the Medawala artist in his *Uraga Jātaka* panel. He uses a different color for the complexion of the female slave. The female slave has been portrayed three times in the panel and in each of them, she is colored in light pink while both the other male and female figures are yellow in color (Figure Nos: 07-10). In contrast, all human figures except the stranger appear in yellow in the Minigamuwa visual narration. The usage of pink color here draws some issues when compared to the principle of ancient artists as mentioned above. According to the oriental mode of paintings, light colors were always utilized for noble classes. It is worth searching the reason for the usage of a light color on the female slave in Medawala painting. There is a belief among the general folk that low caste women had a bright complexion and they attract men as a result. This bright complexion is called the "low caste white" by the privileged class in order to underrate it. Therefore, it can be said that the artist has tried to show the bright white color in terms of light pink. At the same time, it can also be argued that Kandyan hated the white color of Europeans since Sri Lanka had been suffering from threats of European colonialism for a few centuries. It could be a certain means of revenge or underestimating the Europeans by giving their color to a slave who performs services to the Kandyan upper

classes. The application of pink color for low castes has not been a popular practice in sculptured art of other religious places in the Kandyan region. But it can be noted that the traditional masks used for *Kolam* dancing in the period had applied the same pink color to indicate Europeans. The Sri Lankan *Kolam* mask of a European soldier (Figure No. 18) displayed in the British Museum is a good example for this.

**Performing seivices or the posture:** Most of the affluent Kandyan families had slaves in their houses to perform domestic duties. Their workload and the sorrowful stories of their miserable lives have descriptively been reported in textual sources<sup>14</sup> When they were depicted in art, artists used their service postures to emphasize their role and status. The artist of Medawala Temple also preferred to follow this popular tradition and has portrayed the female slave carrying a box of food covered by a white cloth on her head (Figure No. 7). Depiction of the Minigamuwa Temple also resembles this situation.

**Division of labor:** This painting clearly stresses that chores were decided by gender in the Kandyan society. The males of the family (the father and son) were directly involved in farming while females contributed towards household activities (Figure No. 5). Carrying food for males who work in the field was the women's responsibility. It was assigned to female slaves in some families. The *Uraga Jātaka* story states that the female slave carried the food to the field, and the painting also depicts the female slave carrying food on her head. The young woman also carries some agricultural equipment on

her shoulders, which was not mentioned in the original story. This may be a symbolic way of expressing that women also helped with some activities after they had finished their domestic workload. Foreign records such as Robert Knox's description elaborately describe Sri Lankan women's work in fields and forest gardens (Knox 1681; Cordiner 1907; Davy 1821).

**Meeting guests:** The *Uraga Jātaka* painting portrays some traditions and customs of the Kandyan society. It shows how women behave when welcoming visitors to their house. According to this visual representation, this was determined by age and class. The eldest member of the family comes forward to the verandah to receive the message sent by the farmer via a neighbour. The daughter or the daughter-in-law remains inside the house and the female slave is depicted outside the house (Figure No. 6). It may have been the custom in Kandyan culture that young women stayed inside the house in the presence of strangers. Moreover, the servants were kept away from visitors as outsiders of the family, and they were not allowed to interact with family visitors.

**Dining:** There is a longstanding tradition in Sri Lankan history where women have food after the men of the household. This is confirmed by Robert Knox's observation on the eating habits of Kandyans<sup>15</sup>. This has also been practiced in India (Chowdhry 2004). The scene of the farmer having his lunch also depicts this cultural norm. Any kind of gesture of females having food in the field cannot be seen. They were expected to have their lunch after they get back to the house and after serving the men working in the field. The *Jātaka* story does not mention anything about the women's lunch either. Due to the

14 "A slave girl at wattergama Walawwa bore a number of children, but as she had too much to do in tacking care of her master's young children, her own to the number of eight were buried as soon as they were born; but after her master's children were grown up, she had four children, whom she was allowe to bring up. These for children were distributed by her master among his relations. The descendants, two women and six children, were valued in 1822 at 730 ridis, or 333 rixdollars (Lawrie 1898: 923)

15 ...their wives serve them with it, when they call for it. For it is their duties to wait and serve their Husbands while they eat, and when they have done, then to take and eat that which they have left upon their Trenchers. During their eating they neither use nor delight to talk to one another...(Knox 1681:87).

similarity of food habits in the *Jātaka* story and the gender norms of the Kandyan period, the artist might have been encouraged to draw it in this manner.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

To sum up, it is important to highlight that the issue of female gender stereotypes sometimes were so strong that even religious heritage was modified to accommodate them. This is exemplified by the weeping scene in the *Uraga Jātaka* painting at the Medawala Temple which demonstrates how pervasive was the social consensus regarding gender characteristics. Here, the painter completely breaks down the depiction of the woman as portrayed in the *Jātaka* story, and at the same time destroys the central idea of the story as well. In the story, God Sakra was impressed with the mindfulness of the farmer's wife, even when faced with the tragic demise of her own son. In contrast, ignoring the description of the *Jātaka* story, the hand gesture of the farmer's wife symbolizes her lamentation. Similarly, the farmer is shown with a gesture and posture to establish that he is stoic. The main argument of this iconographic analysis is that the artist had visibly recast the central idea of the story with a gender bias towards the notion of weeping. The artist emphasizes on crying as a gender characteristic. This current research identifies *Uraga Jātaka* as depicted in the Medawala painting as a reflection of the gender ideology of the contemporary Kandyan society. The murals of traditions such as those found in Medawala tend to depict social values in an attempt to condition the socio-religious behavior of the people at the time.

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Dulma Karunaratna - Medawala Temple Field surveys 2010; 2012; 2017

Muppane Temple Field survey 2012

Minuwangamuwa Temple Field survey 2018