

Love and Liberation – Autobiographical Writings of the Tibetan Buddhist Visionary Sera Khandro, by Sarah Jacoby. Columbia University Press, 2014. 456pp, 19 b&w photographs. Pb. £30. ISBN-13: 9780231147699.

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Love and Liberation – Autobiographical Writings of the Tibetan Buddhist Visionary Sera Khandro is an impressive study on the autobiography of the early twentieth century treasure revealer (Tib. *gter ston*) and tantric adept Sera Khandro Dewe Dorje (Tib. *se ra mkha' 'gro bde ba'i rdo rje*) (also called Künzang Dekyong Chönyi Wangmo, Tib. *se ra mkha' 'gro kun bzang bde skyong dbang mo*, (1892–1940)). One of the few examples of an autobiography written by a woman in the Tibetan literary corpus, Sera Khandro's life begins as a member of a wealthy and politically influential family of the Lhasa nobility. Growing up as a naturally devout child, Sera Khandro struggles to adjust to changes brought to her life by the untimely death of her mother and the arranged marriage imposed upon her by her own father. Desperate to escape her family situation after a failed suicide attempt, Sera Khandro joins the entourage of Drime Özer (Tib. *dri med 'od zer*, 1881–1924), a master who was at the time visiting Lhasa on pilgrimage. Despite an age gap of more than a decade, Sera Khandro later enters into a consort relationship with Drime Özer, after following him to Eastern Tibet. Away from home and family connections, she becomes a castaway, subjected to constant mistreatments by women and men alike. Whereas the first considered her a threat to their intimate relationship with their master, the latter – her husband included – doubted her value as a laywoman and tantric practitioner.

Sarah Jacoby skilfully presents Sera Khandro's self-narrative as a life dedicated to a religious quest, started by her decision to renounce her aristocratic upbringing in Lhasa to follow her root teacher and destined consort Drime Özer to his tantric encampments in the Golok region of Eastern Tibet. Divided into five chapters and an epilogue, the book starts with an introduction to key elements of Jacoby's methodology and moves on to describe the religious and cultural milieu of Sera Khandro's life from its earlier phase in Lhasa to her journey to Golok, and the estrangement that followed her being there as a young woman aspiring for spiritual advancement. By a careful analysis of the dialogues Sera Khandro had with the members of the religious community, local worldly deities, *dākinīs*, *bodhisattvas*, and high lamas, Jacoby provides the reader with a clear picture of the idiosyncratic nature of Sera Khandro, both a woman – and as such bound to an inferior birth (as denoted by the common Tibetan term for women, *skye dman*) – and a tantric practitioner and treasure revealer, receiver of divine instructions, as well as reassurance of her unique role.

In the following chapters Jacoby explores the theme of sacred sexuality in Tantrism and discusses the consort's role in advanced tantric practices by presenting a review of the theoretical approaches to tantric companionship in rela-

tion to intimacy and love. In that regard, Sera Khandro's autobiography presents a unique and detailed narrative of the intimate sphere of spiritual/tantric companionship built upon mutual love and shared dedication to Buddhist tantric practice.

Jacoby compares Sera Khandro's account to the autobiography of an earlier contemporary of hers, Shugseb Khandro Lochen Chönyi Zangmo (Tib. *shug gseb mkha' 'gro lo chen chos nyid bzang mo*, 1853 or 1865 to 1950/1951) from the perspective of gender. The latter's narrative appears at first sight quite different and somehow less tormented in comparison to Sera Khandro's story; Shugseb Khandro apparently enjoyed a more supportive female network and was less affected by gender discrimination as a nun, especially after her formal recognition. For the sake of comparison, Jacoby also provides examples from male accounts, namely from the autobiographies of Gara Terchen (Tib. *mgar ra gter chen*, 1857–1910) and Düdjom Lingpa (Tib. *bdud 'joms gling pa*, 1835–1904), practitioners connected to Sera Khandro through lineage transmission and marital allegiance. A gender-based comparison of biographies of treasure revealers, such as the famous Tertön Tsogyal Lerab Lingpa (Tib. *gter ston bsod rgyal las rab gling pa*, 1856–1926), who was another earlier contemporary of hers, is much needed in order to get a clearer picture of the differences between the societal recognition and support enjoyed by female and male tantric treasure revealers.

Jacoby concludes her book with a glimpse of the next reincarnation of Sera Khandro, Khandro Tāre Lhamo (Tib. *mkha' 'gro ta re lha mo*, 1938–2003). The last chapter does not offer a conclusive reflection on the traditional understanding of lineage transmission through reincarnation, but rather allows the story to unfold across successive lifetimes.

Jacoby's book offers a fresh analysis of the life-writing genre in the Tibetan canon, an engaging multi-angled perspective supported by a solid theoretical background. Her study, focused on Sera Khandro's style – a unique blend of hagiographic features typical of a *nam-thar* with her tantric conversations with the *ḍākinīs*, the celestial female beings who acted as her divine supporters and companions throughout the turbulent times of her life. The contrast between the latter's constant reassurance of Sera Khandro's role as a spiritual adept and competent treasure revealer, and her own concern to present herself as an inferior within the religious hierarchy, follows the norms of classical Tibetan autobiographical style as well as socio-cultural expectations. It is especially in her dialogues with the *ḍākinīs* that Sera Khandro uses this contrast to provide a stage on which she could establish her own role through the *ḍākinīs'* voices and persona, thus raising herself above the restrictive societal norms regarding women. Despite constantly reminding herself of her being just a lowly born woman, trapped in an inferior body, Sera Khandro defies the societal norms, making herself heard through the voice of the *ḍākinīs*. Jacoby presents Sera Khandro's writing style as a verbalization of the criticism and disbelief she received by religious society during her lifetime, due to her being both a non-local (as Central Tibetan) and socially inferior (as a lay woman), showing how the *ḍākinīs*, worldly gods, and *bodhisattvas* counterbalanced these harsh criticisms by encouraging and supporting her throughout her life, and eventually assisting her becoming a treasure revealer and Buddhist teacher. *Love and Liberation – Autobiographical Writings of the Tibetan Buddhist Visionary Sera Khandro* is first and foremost a testimony to

the bravery of a woman who was able to change her life, growing from a young and naïve lay devotee, trapped in a forced marriage, to a Tantric consort and ultimately a Buddhist lineage holder in a religious setting ruled predominantly by the male lineages. Indeed one of the most inspiring examples for any Tibetan Buddhist female practitioner even today.

Jacoby's detailed analysis on the tantric community of Sera Khandro's time in Serta and Golok also gives us a glimpse of consort practices as they were perceived by Sera Khandro. Despite the preconceived idea that consort practices rarely imply a romantic involvement, it appears clear from Sera Khandro's account that they are definitely not bereft of love. In her story, love and intimacy merged with advanced tantric practice, resulting in a remarkable and inspiring story of enlightenment. Her open description of private experiences of the consort practice is truly rare. This dismisses the debate on sexual agency of the female consort – often left ambiguous or seen as objectified merely from the 'karmically destined' standpoint based on earlier and more mythical narratives, such as Yeshe Tsogyal's (Tib. *ye shes mtsho rgyal*) biography – and presents hers as a story of love and spiritual companionship.

Jacoby's scholarly guidance also provides a chance to look at Sera Khandro's life more closely by carefully stripping the classical literary style and getting to know more of the inner and outer turmoils of a female practitioner, together with her deeper psychological processes. Her mention of a suicide attempt in early adolescence, the constant suicidal thoughts and the depression caused by living in an unsupportive society, the problematic marriage where she was devalued by the constant jealousy not only of her estranged husband but also of other women, whether consorts or mother-in-law, her miscarriage and other illnesses, especially the painful arthritis towards the later part of her life, are all elements that concur to make her life story a human and realistic account. Her capacity to receive instructions and recognition from important lamas, despite all of these obstacles, presents the reader with a life full of hardship but also one that was spiritually fulfilled. Jacoby's detailed presentation makes the book a must read for all of those who are interested in autobiographical hagiographies, gender roles, tantric worldview and consort practices written from the female perspective.