

## Srila Prabhupada on Suniti Devi: Only Woman, not Mother, is the Prohibited Category

By Krishna-kirti Das (BVKS), 21 January 2021

Srila Prabhupada wanted his books to be put into standard English; that necessarily means he wanted his true intention to be conveyed according to the standard rules and conventions of that language. Unless there is good reason to believe otherwise, Srila Prabhupada's intent as expressed in his books in the English language is to be understood according to standard grammar in the English language.

The explanation that follows establishes what is **the standard grammar** and the meaning that necessarily follows from it. And this is done by citing authoritative sources such as the Chicago Manual of Style (which is the BBT's default style manual) and other well-known books of style and grammar, much the same way we establish some conclusion by quoting shastra, other acharyas and Srila Prabhupada.

As a case study, we shall consider the "Suniti statement" in Srila Prabhupada's purport to SB 4.12.32.

In the purport, does Srila Prabhupada state any reason for Suniti's ineligibility to become her son Dhruva's diksa-guru? The answer is yes. He says, "being a woman, and specifically his mother", but various interpretations of it, some fallacious, have been put forward. Standard grammar taken "as is" from the text, however, clarifies which of the various interpretations are valid.

Here is the full sentence, with the phrase under consideration bolded:

"Sunīti, however, **being a woman, and specifically his mother**, could not become Dhruva Mahārāja's dīkṣā-guru."

### 1 Only a "mother" is prohibited, not "woman"

The fallacious claim is that "woman" and "mother" are joined in the text with the conjunction "AND", and therefore both conditions must be true for the prohibition to be valid.

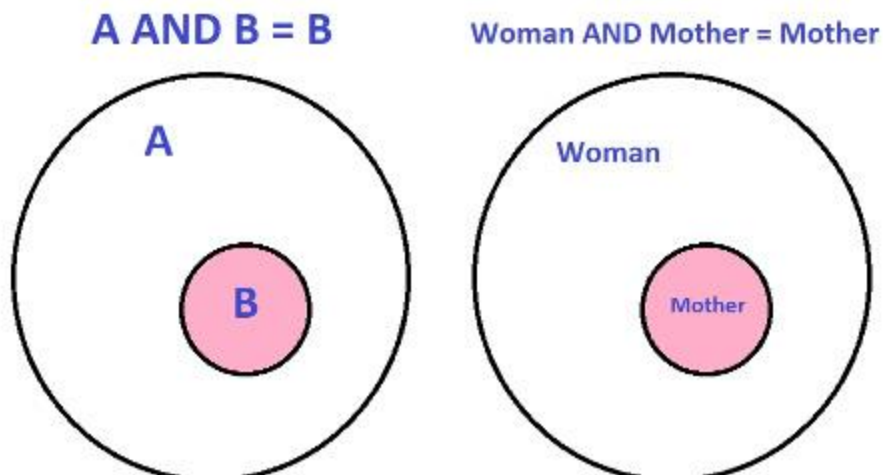
Here is a statement written by someone named Anuttama.IC:

In simpler terms, the Sunīti Statement cannot be taken as an indicator of disqualification of Sunīti simply due to her womanhood, because the statement itself has an additional proposition connected by the logical connector AND. In order to take the Sunīti statement and apply it in other contexts, one will have to take both logical propositions along with the propositional connector AND. One cannot remove a single proposition or the AND connector from the statement.<sup>1</sup>

This argument is fallacious, however, on account of "woman" and "mother" not being mutually independent conditions—"mother" is a subset of "woman". This results in "woman" being an unnecessary term in their proposition. In propositional logic, when B is a subset of A, then A AND B (A intersect B) results in B only (see graphic).

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<sup>1</sup> Anuttama.IC et. al., "Sunīti's Ineligibility in ISKCON" 11 Jan 2021.



If someone is a “mother”, then “woman” is redundant because a “mother” is a “woman.” And if someone is a “woman” but not a mother, then “woman” is unnecessary in the definition because only the condition of being “mother” is actually prohibited. In either case, “woman” is an unnecessary term, because the only condition that matters is whether one is a “mother”.

So, contrary to the claim of Anuttama.IC et. al. that “one cannot remove a single proposition or the AND connector”, according to propositional logic you can remove one of the terms (“woman”) and the “AND” connector, because the result “mother” is identical with the initial proposition. Therefore, the proposition as stated above by Anuttama.IC is faulty.

Now, if Anuttama.IC wants to maintain this proposition by saying that “woman” must be kept in the proposition because Srila Prabhupada used the term, then they have determined that Srila Prabhupada’s own utterance of “woman” is a mistake. But that is rejected on the grounds that a pure devotee does not make mistakes: arsa vijna vakye nahi dosa ei saba (CC Adi 2.86). Anuttama.IC’s proposition must therefore be faulty.

The next section will show that the above faulty logic is based on a misreading of the grammar used in the Srimad-Bhagavatam.

## 2 Standard grammar gives a superior understanding

The conventions of English grammar used in Srila Prabhupada’s Srimad-Bhagavatam rescues us from the flawed claims of the previous section. The authoritative books for grammar include the Chicago Manual of Style (the BBT’s default style manual) and other well-regarded grammars and style guides. As a general rule, the grammatical is to be accepted over the ungrammatical, and the books are expected to help us decide. It was, after all, according to Srila Prabhupada’s order that his books be edited according to these conventions. So, we are justified in asking whether Anuttama.IC’s proposition is in-line with standard grammar, or not.

Here again is the sentence:

“Sunīti, however, **being a woman, and specifically his mother**, could not become Dhruva Mahārāja’s dīkṣā-guru.”

The phrase “specifically his mother” must be read as a parenthetical appositive that is subordinate to a participle phrase, which itself is parenthetical to the subject, Suniti. The participle phrase (bolded) and its relationship with its own parenthetical clause is of interest to us, because it gives the reason for the prohibition.

A participle is a verb with an “ing” on the end that acts like an adjective; a participle phrase is an adjectival phrase based on a participle. According to *The Handbook of Good English* (Johnson, 1991), “*Diminishing in the distance, the road leading to the foothills seemed endless*” contains the participle phrases “*Diminishing in the distance*” and “*leading to the foothills,*” which both modify “*road*”.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, “*being a woman*” is a participle phrase, but because we already know that Suniti is a woman, it is treated as a parenthetical construction.

A parenthetical construction gives information about some other term or phrase without modifying it. Such a phrase is enclosed by commas (one before and one after the phrase), by dashes, or by parentheses.

Example:

“Mary, the abbess of the convent, was a saintly lady.”

“Mary—the abbess of the convent—was a saintly lady.”

“Mary (the abbess of the convent) was a saintly lady.”

The phrase “the abbess of the convent”, offset by commas (or dashes or parentheses), gives further information about Mary without restricting the term as it is used in the rest of the sentence. Even if she were not the abbess of the convent, she would still be a saintly lady.

This entry on “parenthetical construction” from the *The Handbook of Good English* (1991), by Edward J. Johnson gives a fuller account of parenthetical constructions:

**parenthetical construction** a construction used not to identify a word or phrase but merely to provide further information about it. A construction with parenthesis is, of course, parenthetical, in *John (who won the tournament) is smiling*, the **relative clause** *who won the tournament* is a parenthetical construction. Instead of a pair of parentheses, a pair of commas or a pair of dashes can be used to set off a parenthetical construction: *Mary, who won the tournament, is smiling*; *Mary--who won the tournament--is smiling*. Parenthetical constructions are often called nonrestrictive, because they do not restrict the meaning of the words they modify. In *The woman who won the tournament is smiling*, the clause *who won the tournament* is no longer parenthetical; it is a **defining construction**, restricting the meaning of the word *woman*. Proper punctuation often depends on determining whether a construction is parenthetical or defining; see rule 2-1.

This definition is consistent with these rules for Commas in the *Chicago Manual of Style* (14<sup>th</sup> Edition):

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<sup>2</sup> *The Handbook of Good English* (1991), by Edward J. Johnson, pages 376 – 377. These are examples of present participles but there are also past participles and participle phrases. Johnson or any other grammar will provide further information.

5.41 - An adjectival clause or phrase that follows a noun and restricts or limits the reference of the noun in a way that is essential to the meaning of the sentence should not be set off by commas; but an adjectival clause or phrase that is nonrestrictive or is purely descriptive, which could be dropped without changing the reference of the noun or the meaning of the sentence, is set off by commas:

- McFetridge, sitting comfortably before the fire, slowly and ceremoniously opened his mail. [page 167]

5.44 - Parenthetical elements that retain a close logical and syntactic relation to the rest of the sentence should be set off by commas; those whose relation to the rest of the sentence is more remote should be set off by dashes or parentheses (see 5.1 06-10, 5.123-25):

- Wilcox, it was believed, had turned the entire affair over to his partner.
- The Hooligan Report was, to say the least, a bombshell.
- The members of the commission were, generally speaking, disposed to reject innovative measures.
- Bardston—he is to be remembered for his outspokenness in the Wainscot affair—had asked for permission to address the assembly.
- The Wintermitten theory (it had already been dropped by some of its staunchest early supporters) was dealt a decisive blow by the Kringelmeyer experiments. [page 169]

We should also consider whether the comma in “being a woman, and specifically his mother” is a serial comma (also known as the Oxford Comma). If it applies, then “and specifically his mother” could be considered coordinate with “being a woman” and therefore restrictive. The rule, however, is that a comma may be optionally used before the penultimate term in a list of three or more terms: “France, Italy, and Spain”, not two or more terms. We never say, “peanut butter, and jelly”; only “peanut butter and jelly.” (Because the serial comma rule is so well known, references are omitted.) Hence, the commas enclosing “and specifically his mother” should be considered parenthetical, making the phrase a parenthetical construction—it is “for your information”, not restrictive.

Therefore, because the phrase “and specifically his mother” is offset by commas and the preceding comma is not a serial comma, it has to be taken as a parenthetical construct that is subordinate to “being a woman.” That means it gives further information about “being a woman” without restricting it.

“Sunīti, however, being a woman, **and specifically his mother**, could not become Dhruva Mahārāja’s dīkṣā-guru.”

Since “*and specifically his mother*” is parenthetical and therefore not restricting the term “*being a woman*,” the only reason to be considered for Suniti’s ineligibility is the fact that she is a woman. “Being a mother” is not a disqualification separate from “being a woman.”

Final confirmation that Srila Prabhupada did not intend “mother” to be a restrictive criterion can be found in Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura’s commentary on Sri Caitanya Bhagavata, *Adi Khanda 8.7*, in which he comments on Sri Caitanya Mahāprabhu’s upanayanam ceremony and describes the process of pancharatrici-diksha. In this regard, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura quotes a verse

from Bharadvaja-samhita (Narada Pancharatra) 2,34, which directly says that the spiritual master may initiate sons and other dependents.

svayam brahmani niksiptan jatan eva hi mantratah  
vinitan-artha putradin samskrtya prati-bodhayet

**“An acarya should purify his sons and disciples by engaging them in the service of the Absolute Truth after initiating them with proper mantras so that they will be purified and knowledgeable.”**

The word “putra” is used here to indicate sons. So, if a man is not restricted from initiating sons, why would a woman?

So, what has been shown here is that the grammar when read “as it is”, in the sense that that when the meaning of Srila Prabhupada’s statements in his books is generally understood as per authorized, conventional usage of English, we avoid coming to wrong conclusions about what Srila Prabhupada said or intended. Being a parenthetical phrase, “and specifically his mother” cannot be considered restrictive on the phrase “being a woman.” That is, Srila Prabhupada himself never meant it to be, so a parenthetical construction is used for it. Therefore, the only criterion considered in this particular sentence is the fact that Suniti *is* a woman, and that is the reason given in the participle phrase for Suniti’s ineligibility.