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Stories of Gender and Ethnicity: Discourses of colonialism and resistance in Burma[1]

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This paper charts the discursive shift between colonial and 'post' colonial discourses about gender and ethnicity in Burma, and attempts to counter such representations by offering alternative stories to those colonialist rumours which have established their status as 'truth'. The first part deals with missionary discourses in colonial Burma; the second with 'post' colonial discourses on Burmese women; and the final section offers stories told by women involved in the political struggles of contemporary Burma. The aim of the paper is to attempt to de-territorialize Burma as a site of colonialist knowledge.

Introduction

> Story-writing becomes history-writing, and history quickly sets itself apart, consigning story to the realm of tale, legend, myth, fiction, literature. Then, since fictional and factual have come to a point where they mutually exclude each other, fiction, not infrequently, means lies, and facts truth.
>
> Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989:120)

1. The re-assembling of this paper from my honours thesis would not have been possible without the assistance of Margaret Jolly - thank you. Kalpana Ram and Alison Vicary also deserve a great deal of thanks for their close critical reading and comments.

I wish also to acknowledge my father, the late Dr Than Lwyn, who taught me the value of outspokenness, rebellion and freedom, and who lodged Burma firmly in my heart so that my blood sings my history.

> As far as I understand it, the notion of textuality should be related to the notion of the worlding of the world on a supposedly uninscribed territory. When I say this, I am thinking basically about the imperialist project which had to assume that the earth that it territorialised was in fact previously uninscribed. So then a world, on a simple level of cartography, inscribed what was presumed to be uninscribed. Now this worlding is also a texting, textualising, a making into art, a making into an object to be understood.
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> Spivak (1990[1984]:1)

Burma has existed under military rule since the coup of 1962. While the military have been in power, the country has been almost totally intellectually and physically closed off. It is one of the least researched countries in the world. Given the lack of resources available, I have used material from disparate sources. The effect is that of a *collage*. If at times the paper appears to lack internal thematic cohesion, it is out of necessity rather than choice. As Rey Chow (1991a:98) points out,

> . . . 'other women' speak without good manners as a rule. For them, articulation means the crude assembling of what is presently and urgently at hand, in order to stockpile provisions for the longer fight.

This paper is part of the stockpile for the longer fight against colonialist knowledges which continue to territorialize the non-Western subject. Where once colonial powers directly ruled Other countries, in the contemporary context, technologies of power operate with much greater subtlety. Knowledge acts as a crucial terrain in the 'post' colonial struggle for domination.

This paper charts a discursive shift from colonial discourses to 'post' colonial discourses about the women of Burma. Within colonial discourses (associated historically with imperialist rule) gender and ethnicity acted as a site of division between the different Burmese[2] peoples. The first section of this paper will particularly focus on those divisions created between Karen and Burman in missionary discourse. Such a discourse portrayed particular ethnic groups of women as possessing a monstrous agency, and as resistant to the 'civilizing' process, whilst others were regarded as possessing no agency and open to 'civilized' ways. I will only deal with colonialist *constructions* of gendered/ethnic differences in the colonial period, as I do not have access to the historical material necessary in reflecting on resistance.

The second part of this paper will deal with particular contemporary 'post' colonial discourses, which homogenize all Burmese women (both Karen and Burman) into the category of the Third World-woman-victim. The continuity between colonial and 'post' colonial discourses lie in the maintenance of the privileged position/identity of the Western subject.

The discontinuities between colonial and 'post' colonial discourses is to be expected given the differing historical contexts operating. Whilst it is outside of the scope of this

2. In this paper, I use the term 'Burmese' to refer to all the different ethnic groups who make up the Nation-State. The term 'Burman' specifically indicates the majority ethnic group.

paper to analyze in detail the conditions of this discontinuity, we could speculate that part of the reason for its shift is the result of the movement from direct control via a colonial government to indirect operations of power via the circulation of knowledge about the Third World Other.[3] The voices of the Third World Other, in this case Burmese women, are introduced in the final part of this paper to contradict 'post' colonial discourses which represent these women as victims. The stories of the women who are fighting in the current political struggles of Burma counter this victim status. Their stories problematize the 'truth' claims of colonialist discourses, which relegates the subjectivity of the Other to absence or lack.[4]

Marking boundaries: Colonial Constructions of Ethnicity and Gender

Modern 'ethnicity' with its stress on notions of authenticity was a crucial part of colonial discourses which shaped the politics of Burma.[5] The British encouraged perceptions of difference along European lines of ascription. They encouraged 'minority ethnic' leaders to express political demands using the language of ethnicity and nationalism (Taylor 1982:9).[6] The concentration on ethnic differences amongst the peoples of Burma benefited the colonizer's divide-and-rule strategy, for example, the use of Karen troops to put down the Saya San rebellion[7] (Ling 1979:86). Ethnic divisions

3. I wish to thank Kalpana Ram for her insightful comments on this point.

4. I acknowledge that to some extent I have created what appears to be a static opposition between 'indigenous' discourses and 'colonial' discourses. I do so as a political act rather than a philosophical belief in their status as essential categories. Such closures are at times necessary for political struggle against the colonizing intent of the West. The 'indigenous' versus the 'colonialist' and similarly the 'West' versus the 'Third World' are not self-evident, but rather strategic categories, that are caught in an interdependent relationship of power/meaning.

5. I am using 'ethnicity' to mean 'consciousness of kind', a sense of peoplehood (Bottomley 1976:119); ethnicity and ethnic identity are political constructs developed out of conflicting relations of power. I am not suggesting that prior to colonial discourses there did not exist ethnic identity, I am suggesting that the ethnic identity of contemporary politics is very different from the ethnic identity of pre-colonial rule. The notion of the 'ethnic community' is not a primordial, but rather, a conceptual construct, moulded by the developing possibilities of communication over great geographical distances. Anderson (1983) argues that capitalism and mass printing are preconditions of the contemporary 'imagined community'. For a more detailed analysis of the way in which contemporary 'ethnicity' was constructed through the discourses of the colonizers see Tinzar Lwyn (1991). In this paper, my analysis of colonial representations of ethnicity will focus on the Karen (the largest minority ethnic group) and the Burmans (the majority ethnic group). In order to secure political and cultural rights, the Karen, Mon and other ethnic groups revolted against the central Burmese government a few months after independence in 1948. Nearly a decade later, the Shan, Kachin and Chin also began fighting the central administration.

6. Guidieri and Pellizzi (1988:8) argued that: 'In the modern era, regional, ethnic and religious groups of the Third world quite often appropriate the ideologies that had legitimized the modern states; these then appear to fuel the struggle for autonomy from central authority in those very states that were created from the collapse of the colonies.'

7. The Saya San rebellion began in December (1930-31) in Tharrawaddy District in lower Burma. The rebellion was led by a monk, U Saya San, who hoped to re-establish Burmese kingship (Ling 1979:85-87).

were encouraged by giving preferential treatment to particular ethnic groups over others.[8] Of the ethnic groups in Burma, the Karen were the most visible to the British due to their extensive conversion to Christianity[9], and English language skills acquired in mission schools (Steinberg 1982).

The focus of missionary conversion was not just on the Karen, but in particular on Karen women. Thus they established the Karen Girl's Training School and a maternal association for Karen women. The Karen Maternal Association (KMA) was first established in 1885 by the Wades (American Baptist missionaries) and was the prototype of the modern social welfare institution in Burma. Like the Karen Girl's school, the KMA was used to gain recruits among children by working through the concerns of mothers (Trager 1966:171).

Religious differences compounded ethnic differences. As a response to imperialist intrusion, Buddhism became an expression of Burman nationalism: 'To be Burman is to be Buddhist' (cited in Ling 1979:82).[10] Such pronouncements excluded all non-Buddhists from access to a 'Burmese identity'. During the independence struggles Buddhism became synonymous with nationalism[11] (Smith 1965; Sarkisyanz 1965; Ling 1979). The upholding of Buddhist philosophy became an act of defiance against imperial rule.[12] An identity based on Buddhist nationalism necessarily set itself in opposition to an identity based on Christianity which was associated with colonial rule.

Missionary discourse on ethnicity contributed to a notion of an essentially divided Burmese nation. Whilst the discourse of the colonial administration on ethnicity concentrated on linguistic differences, missionary discourse hinged on the capacity to be converted to Christianity. According to missionary discourse being 'civilized' meant to be converted to Christianity and a particular lifestyle. Given the differential levels of conversion between Burmans and Karens, the two ethnic groups were perceived quite differently.

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8. In 1940, Burmans made up only 12% of the indigenous armed forces, the nucleus of which was formed by the Karen, Chin and the Kachin, who were favoured by the British (Steinberg 1982:40). The reason given for such low recruitments was that the Burmans 'could not be trusted'.

9. I wish to stress again that in the context of the colonial period, I am limiting my discussion to discursive colonialist *construction*. I am unable to speak of Karen resistance. I would however suggest that it is essential to recognize that religious 'conversion' is not a passive process but rather an active principle. As de Certeau ([1984]1988) suggests, consumption is productive.

10. 85% of the population of Burma is Buddhist, whilst 99% of the Burman majority ethnic group is Buddhist (Steinberg 1982:12).

11. See Sarkisyanz (1965:chapter 15) for an interesting analysis of the intersection between Buddhism and Marxism in the philosophy of the independence struggle.

12. Leaders such as U Ottoma, a Buddhist *pongyi* (monk) were pivotal in Burma's independence struggle. In 1921 U Ottoma returned to Burma from India. In India he had been a left-wing member of the Indian National Congress party. U Ottoma was sentenced to 10 months imprisonment for seditious activities, and released in 1922. His imprisonment greatly enhanced his status and spread nationalist fervour with added speed. U Ottoma was arrested and imprisoned several times, until he died in prison in 1939 (Ling 1979:84). One of the first 'religious' issues which activated nationalist sentiment was that of footwear on the premises of pagodas. On October 4, 1919 *pongyis* (monks) violently attacked a group of Europeans for wearing shoes on the ground of Eindawya pagoda (Smith 1965:88). The monks were later tried and sentenced to prison.

Whilst Burmans were constructed as possessing monstrous agency - untrustworthy, arrogant, brutal and highly resistant to Christian teachings - the Karen were portrayed as lacking agency - characterized in patronizing tones as backward children, harmless and easily converted (Trager 1966; Furnivall 1956:55). Dr Judson often commented that it took as much labour to convert two Burmans as it took to convert one hundred Karen (Trager 1966:85). The Reverend Francis Mason suggested that ' . . . the faith of the Karen is the faith of a child with no deep roots in the (sic) understanding . . . ' (ibid:84). However, it was suggested that 'the Burmans read and listened, objected and argued, but very few believed' (Brockett in Trager 1966:49).[13]

The dichotomy between the Karen and the Burmans in missionary discourse is encapsulated in a letter the missionary Mrs Stevens wrote to her mother. To highlight the distinction, she quoted a metaphor that Dr Judson had used: the animist Karen are like an empty jar and the Buddhist Burman are like a jar filled with a very strong smelling oil.[14] Judson suggested that when the missionaries approached the animist Karen and offered to fill their empty jar with the 'pure and sweet water' of Christian truth, the Karen gratefully accepted. Once filled, the water smells sweet, because the jar contained no stains of ancient superstition. However, when they approached the Buddhist Burmans and offered to empty the stinking oil and fill their jar with the 'pure and sweet water', they were accused of robbing the Burman of their ancestral oil. Once the missionaries had successfully dripped out all the oil and filled the jar with sweet-smelling water, the 'stink' remained (Trager 1966:83-84). As Dr Judson's metaphor indicates, ethnic identity was encoded with notions of 'civilizing' potential within missionary discourse.

'Civilizing' savage women

Gender became the site at which 'civilization'/ethnicity/religious identity were encoded and contested. Given that women and women's work were rendered symbolic of either Christian 'civilization' or barbarism, control over women's behaviour became critical.[15]

The discourses on Burmese women of the colonial administration and of the missionaries were similar,[16] in that they wrote in amazement of Burmese women's perceived equality with men and their relative freedom and independence. The early

13. Trager interprets this comment in a positive light. She cites it as evidence of the colonizer's inability to resist noting the intelligence of the Burmans. However, given the belief of the missionaries in their own superior knowledge, I would suggest this comment could not be regarded as altogether positive.

14. The English translation of the Burmese name is 'stink water'. Once a jar has contained this oil, the smell cannot be extracted from the container.

15. Attempts to render indigenous women 'feminine' (according to European bourgeois ideals) is a central tenet of the colonization process. It is not specific to Burma alone, similar examples can be found in India (Forbes 1986), in Hawaii (Grimshaw 1989), in Polynesia and Melanesia (Jolly and Ralston 1984; Jolly & Macintyre 1989; Jolly 1991), and no doubt many other countries which experienced colonization.

16. Whilst the colonial discourse of the missionaries and the administration share much in common, there nevertheless exist differences. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore in detail the differences between the discourses of the colonial administration and the missionaries, and between the missionaries themselves. See Kalpana Ram's paper (n.d.) for a study of the complexities of colonial discourses in the construction of caste in India.

colonialists recorded Burmese women's centrality in political debate; their ability to inherit land and income; maintain their own individual name; handle family finances; and their central role in business and trade. The 1872 Census report stated that women's education 'was a fact in Burma before Oxford was founded' (Daw Mi Mi Khiang 1984:9-13; Furnivall 1956:128;[17] Hall 1906:260-268). However, the colonialists were appalled by much of Burmese lifestyle, including many aspects of gender relations: divorce seemed 'shockingly common' in traditional life (Daw Mi Mi Khaing 1984:10). Thus their 'civilizing project' attempted to feminize and domesticate women in the light of their beliefs about 'a woman's place'. Attempts were made to change economic, social and political aspects of women's lives in order to 'civilize'.

The observations of Burmese women's apparent equality during colonial rule were understood within a scientific discourse that regarded such equality as a mark of 'primitivism', rather than within contemporary discourses of liberalism which regards such equality as a mark of 'civilization'. The relegation of gender equality as lack is exemplified in the following statement by Fielding Hall (1906), who wrote within the framework of socio-biological evolutionary theory. Hall perceives the lack of gender difference between Burmese women and men as 'a mark of a young race. Ethnologists tell us that. In the earliest people the difference was very slight. As a race grows older the difference increases' (ibid.:262).

Janet Sayers (1982) argues that biological theories were used during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to explain and legitimate women's domination in Western industrialized societies. Importantly, this period when socio-biological discourse on the 'woman question' was proliferating coincided with colonial rule in Burma. These discourses were used simultaneously to justify male domination, and to uphold notions of the industrialized 'West' as biologically more evolved and therefore superior. Propounders of social Darwinism, such as Herbert Spencer, were arguing that the sexual division of labour was an 'organic law', the result of an evolutionary process (Spencer in Sayers 1982:34).

Missionary discourse reinforced such scientific evolutionism, for both suggested the superiority of the bourgeois Western model of gender relations. Within missionary discourse, two axioms existed in juxtaposition: one suggested that women in Burma were free and independent; the second that Burmese people were savages. When the two axioms inter-related, women's agency was regarded as a sign of their savagery. She - the Other woman - was therefore in need of rescue from herself, intervention in the form of the 'civilizing mission' was justifiable. In order to rescue Burmese women from savagery, missionaries attempted to feminize them in the image of the devoutly Christian, modest, bourgeois Western woman. In order to 'civilize the natives', and to inhibit women's capacity to dominate, their behaviour necessarily needed to be controlled. Gender became a site at which a battle between the 'civilizing mission' and the religious/collective honour of the colonized was fought.

17. Furnivall contests this point and suggests it was an exaggeration. He argues that women's literacy was in fact fairly rare (ibid.:128).

During colonial rule, Buddhism was central to anti-colonialist discourses, and Buddhist women became the major bearers of religious practice, given that capitalist enterprise and 'modern' living had usurped men's time which had traditionally been set aside for worship (Daw Mi Mi Khaing 1965:118). Women's association with the provision of food made them central to acts of Buddhist worship (Daw Mya Sein 1972:289). Women and women's work marked the boundary between 'civilized' and 'uncivilized', between Christian and Buddhist, and between Karen and Burman. Gender was not only the site at which these three dichotomies converged but also the battleground on which civilization, ethnicity and religious faith was contested.[18] Control over women and women's work becomes imperative, given that it was her social/familial function that marked the division between 'civilized'-Christian-Karen and 'uncivilized'-Buddhist-Burman.

Ellen Mason (a 'missionary wife') portrayed Buddhist women as 'savage mannered', describing them as 'porpoises with human hearts' (Mason in Trager 1966:114). Mason suggested that on her extensive travels to convert the 'heathens', she was treated with 'contemptuous laughter', incredible 'rudeness' and 'scorn', by women with 'rolling eyes and mischievous tricks', who continued chopping fish and ignoring her (ibid.:87-88). Buddhist women's refusal to be 'civilized' was interpreted as a sign of their savage agency. Ann Judson quoted a typical response which she received from Buddhist women: 'Your religion is good for you, ours is good for us. You will be rewarded for your good deeds in your way - we in our way ' (Knowles in Trager 1966:75).

Juxtaposed with Mason's construction of Buddhist women as devilish beings - aggressive and wild, inhabiting the recesses of darkness, is her representation of Western women as heavenly beings - angelic, 'delicate' and inhabiting a place of lightness. Mason described one Western women as such:

> Mrs Wylie has blue eyes, and expression to correspond - I mean a heaven blue - so ethereal the last time I saw her, it seemed to me the soul must burst through the transparent veil. Her health was very delicate, which may have accounted in part for that peculiar beam of spirit radiancy (ibid.:207).

Not just Christian belief but a Christian way of life was pre-eminent in the colonizing discourses. The Christian missionaries attempted to shape 'home care' and women as 'good housewives' according to their notions of 'civilized' Christian living.[19] There were constant references made to the squalor and filth of Buddhist existence. Mrs Wade (an American missionary) reported with glee the 'reformation' in housekeeping that came with conversion to Christianity. Suggesting that conversion changed everything in the village: that life became 'civilized and rising'; people took to European/American notions of cleanliness; the village was swept; the houses were 'cleaner'; polygamy was rejected; children and adults were now modestly clothed (Trager 1966:136). Such changes had far greater effects on women than men, as 'morality' and 'modesty' in missionary discourse hinged on the appropriateness of women's behaviour and dress. Father Sangermano wrote

18. For a discussion of women as a site of struggle over national/ethnic identity and religious honour see Yuval-Davis (1980); Yuval-Davis & Anthias (1989); Rozario (1991).

19. For an analysis of missionary production of 'good housewives' in the context of Hawaii, see Grimshaw (1989). Grimshaw argues that missionaries tried to impose their notions of appropriate 'public' and 'private' behaviour on the women of Hawaii: colonizing Hawaiian women by attempting to encode them with 'proper femininity'.

with abhorrence about the immodest dress of women in Burma, lamenting that 'part of their thighs (sic.) exposed when they walk' (Sangermano in Trager ibid.:134).[20]

Missionary discourse on 'civilization' also focused on parental responsibility. Trager suggests that parents were the target of the missionary's 'civilizing' project, and yet by her own account, missionary accusations of violent parental passion, neglect and cruelty, were predominantly levelled at women. Ellen Mason, a missionary, wrote:

> I saw one mother in a fit of weariness fling her nursing babe from her bosom out upon the bamboo floor, and that mother a chief's wife, and among the best of them too. The little one died, I think the next day, and I dressed it in flowers for the grave with my own hands, for the father was an excellent Christian man, and was inconsolable. This woman, was not naturally cruel, nor are the women generally, but passion, passion rules. (Mason in Trager 1966:111).

In such representations, Buddhist women signified the dark and brutal Burmese nation, the embodiment of 'passion' and 'uncivilized' behaviour, and Christian men helpless and good-hearted Christians. Child-rearing practices, and pre-eminently motherhood, encoded a contrast between 'civilized'/Christian and 'uncivilized'/ Buddhist existence. There were many accusations of neglect and cruelty, parents were portrayed as '. . . ignorant and depraved . . .', they were thought to be, '. . . neglectful, treating their offsprings [sic.] with indifference. More frequently they are harsh, without feeling, affection or concern, irresponsibly disregarding the physical and moral welfare of their children' (Trager 1966:103).

Missionaries regarded schools as a way of rescuing children from their parents. If children were to receive education in mission schools, parents were forced to sign contracts giving up their authority over the child for a specific period. Missionaries told stories of mothers coming to mission schools and beating daughters who were there to be educated in the Christian faith (Trager 1966). 'Parenthood', or rather Buddhist motherhood, was seen as the impediment to 'civilizing' the Burmese nation. Christian motherhood which acted as a vehicle for colonization was valorized by the missionaries. The Reverend Knowles pleaded, '. . . will not the *females* of our land combine their prayer, and their efforts, to support and multiply our schools (Knowles in Trager 1966:173) [emphasis mine].

The missionaries used education to recruit members to their fold (Furnivall 1956:357-358). In fact, the colonialists had a lot more success with girls' attendance than boys' (Furnivall 1956:128;208).[21] Missionaries established schools specifically for Burmese

20. It's interesting to note that within colonial discourses, women often mark the boundaries between notions of the 'traditional' and the 'modern'. Once the 'modestly' covered body of the colonizing woman was regarded as a sign of modernity, and the 'immodestly' *uncovered* body of the Other women was considered a mark of pre-modernity or 'tradition'. During colonization, many colonial projects, via missionaries, took pains to cover the Other woman's body. Interestingly, now the 'immodestly' uncovered body of the western woman is regarded as a symbol of post-modernity (Madonna is a prime example) and the now *covered* body of the Other woman is regarded as a symbol of her lack: she is once again 'too traditional'!

21. From 1901-1940, figures for boys attending schools rose from 307,000 to 827,000; for the same period girls attending schools rose from 36,000 to 220,000 (Furnivall 1956:203).

girls: the first such school was established in 1827 in Amherst (Trager 1966:164).[22] The emphasis on women's education was not due to any simple regard for women's rights, rather, women were used as potential vehicles for colonial re-education. Whilst Burmese parents sent girls to schools in order to learn skills such as arithmetic to further their economic potential, the colonial advocates of women's education stressed its 'cultural values in domestic life' (Furnivall 1956:128). Both the missionaries and the colonial administration held great hopes for women's education. Lord Curzon (Viceroy of India-Burma) suggested female education would strengthen the 'morality' and 'ethics' of the Burmese nation (Furnivall 1956:208). With the rise of the British State, the status of the *pongyis* as moral guardians was eroded. Colonial discourses attempted to replace the *pongyis* with women as the new guardians of a Christian morality.

Absent or Appropriated: Contemporary Colonialist Representations of Revolutionary Women

Where once Buddhist Burman women were presented as wild agents, in contemporary representations,[23] all Burmese women are now presented as victims rather than agents of the political struggle. Whilst the representational form has shifted from certain women as 'savage agents' to all women as 'victims', they are still regarded as in need of rescue, this time from their 'victim' rather than 'agent' status. Within this new discursive construction woman's agency completely disappears, she simply becomes the mother who is brutalized, who needs to be rescued by another who has agency:

> She *patiently waits* with her wooden bowl,
> A three year-old crying in her lap.
> Soon his stomach won't hurt anymore,
> If only the trucks can get through.
>
> (Deni Gross 1989:10) [emphases mine].

Within this 'post' colonial discourse, the Other woman - the Third World woman - the victim - 'patiently waits'. Given that the men of Burma are also represented without agency, the saviour must again be from elsewhere, that is, the 'West'.

'Post' colonial discourses on the struggle of the people of Burma often echo the 'motherhood' discourse of the missionaries in colonial Burma. Many of the contributors to *Women Speak Out For Peace In Burma* (Mirante 1989) dichotomize 'men . . . fighting each other' and women who want peace because we 'love children and . . . do not want to

22. In colonial Burma, education was left almost entirely to private agencies (Furnivall, 1956:125). Western education was taught mainly at the missionary schools and Burmese education at the monasteries.

23. For a more in depth analysis of contemporary representations of the Burma struggle see Tinzar Lwyn (1991;1993). The broader issues of contemporary representations of the politics of Burma are outside the scope of this paper. However, broadly speaking, such representations attempt to reassert the privileged identity of the 'West' by denigrating Burma's 'difference'. These representations often appropriate the 'democracy' in 'Burma's struggle for democracy' to privilege 'Western' capitalism as an economic, political and social system. Further, aid agencies and activists (including feminists) are often implicated in attempts to colonize the revolutionaries in the Burma struggle through their 'helping' discourses, which reflect their 'Messiah complex'. There exist many traces of the missionary zeal of colonial missionaries in the 'helping' discourses of the contemporary period (Tinzar Lwyn 1993).

see them killed . . . ' (Jan Nelson 1989:18). The dichotomy between fighting men and peaceful mothers renders invisible women who are involved in military struggle, as in the words of Deni Gross' (1989:10) poem:

> These women have no ears for war
> Above their babies cries.

The notion of women as innately peaceful due to maternal instincts has the effect of de-politicizing women's role in the revolution - our political stance simply becomes a product of our biology. Such a representation renders invisible women who are fighting in the revolution, their power to do more than just 'patiently wait' goes unacknowledged, their agency is elided.

Representations of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi[24] in contemporary discourses on Burma are much more complex, shuttling between two apparently contradictory positions: she is both 'Western' subject and 'Third World' Other. Whilst her power is legitimated because she is seen as an agent of the Western mission - she was educated and has lived in the 'West' - she also remains the Other, whose power as a 'Third World' *woman* is considered illegitimate. Although the two representations appear to be contradictory, they are in fact part and parcel of the colonial project, operating to protect the 'West's' privileged identity by constructing the identity of the Other as lack.

'Post' colonial discourses continually refer to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's contact with the West and construct her as the embodiment of the Western 'civilizing' mission. She becomes recognizable and acceptable to the West because of her perceived sameness, her difference, that is her Burmeseness, is mentioned to simply make the same more colourful, to give an illusion of difference. She is accepted by the 'West' because of her *perceived* sameness. As Papastergiadis (1986:55) suggests: 'When the periphery can provide a representative whom the centre perceives as being 'like-minded', then the channels for negotiation are immediately opened'.

This form of special treatment is often, as Trinh T. Minh-ha suggests, 'confused with the consciousness of difference' (1989:86). The threat of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's difference is neutralized through *encoding* her as ultimately 'Western', that is, reading her difference within the logic of the same. As Edward Said ([1978]1991:58-59) suggests:

> Something patently foreign and distant acquires . . . a status more rather than less familiar. One tends to stop judging things either as completely novel or as completely well known; a new median category emerges, a category that allows one to see new things, things seen for the first time, as versions of a previously known thing . . . In essence such a category is not so much a way of receiving new information as it is a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things.

Thus, typical references to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, dubbed her the 'Oxford housewife' because of her marriage to an Oxford academic, and because she has lived and studied in Oxford (Leser 1990:111). Joseph Silverstein (1990a:1011) suggests that

> On the basis of her education and writing, her experience at the United Nations, in Japan, India and the Himalayan states, and her observation in Burma, she was better prepared

24. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is the main opposition leader in Burma today. She has been under house arrest since July 19, 1989. She has won both the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought (1990) and the Nobel Peace Prize (1991).

> than most to comment on, and criticise the rule of the military and to argue for an alternative system - a return to the democratic ideas of her father.[25]

Western imperialist representations legitimate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's power because of her contact with the 'outside world' (read the capitalist 'West').[26] Her insight into the situation in Burma is explained in terms of 'Western' influence, rather than an insight that was born of being Burmese. This explanation of her special and insightful knowledge as originating in contact with the 'West' undermines 'indigenous' knowledge and 'alternative system(s)' born out of a purely Burmese experience.

Against an emphasis on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's 'Western' mind her Burmeseness is only alluded to. Her Burmeseness is explained away at the level of dress and language: language which is viewed as communicative rather than conceptual. In terms of her deepest philosophy, she is perceived as 'Western'. Silverstein (1990a:1011) states that she is

> . . . dressed always in traditional Burmese clothing and *speaking idiomatic and perfect Burmese*, she quickly won the hearts and support of the people who came to hear her speak and *stayed to support her movement* [my emphases].

Though it is often stated that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is deeply Burmese (Leser 1990:111), her difference is constantly represented to belie such a notion. Regardless of the anecdotes told of her Burmeseness,[27] Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is constructed by 'post' colonial discourses as an embodiment of 'Western' ideals. There is created a corporeal hierarchy between her mind (her political philosophy) which is 'Western' and her heart and body which is Burmese. It is rendered safe for the West to entrust the 'democracy' movement to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi because she is not considered a threat to, but rather an extension of, the Western subject. By defining the struggle as 'her movement' (Silverstein 1990a) - as though she single-handedly incited the revolution - the masses of people in Burma who reached political consciousness without contact with the 'West' are rendered invisible.

Bertil Lintner (1990b), a highly respected Burma watcher, is at times complicit with the terms employed in contemporary colonialist discourses. Lintner analyses Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's success in politics in the context of women's position in Burmese society, suggesting that it surprised many outside observers that in a 'basically patriarchal society' such as Burma, a woman has taken on the 'momentous task' of leading the opposition. He states that few women have achieved leadership in their own right in Burma, and that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is a 'new phenomenon' in Burmese politics. He further suggests that '. . . she is a *fresh breeze* in a country where *time has stood still* for nearly three decades' [emphases mine] (ibid.:18). Our understanding of how she became a 'new phenomenon', a

25. The political ideals of U Aung San, who was very much leftist in his thinking and whose politics was informed by Marxism, are appropriated in this context as part of the colonialist/capitalist notion of 'democracy'. I would argue that the 'democratic ideas' of U Aung San have been white-washed with sameness, to aid the contemporary colonialist project.

26. Whilst Silverstein also makes references to non-Western countries, I would argue that these countries are all incorporated into the notion of the 'West'. The 'West' is an arbitrary closure which serves the purposes of 'post' colonial discourses. In this instance, all the non-Western countries (constituting the 'outside world'), are incorporated into a notion of 'West' as an oppositional term to Burmese closure.

27. For example, we are informed that her friends in Oxford referred to her as 'Burmese Suu', because she never 'took to Western ways' and always wore a *longyi* to university (Lintner 1990b:15-16).

'fresh breeze' in a country which is viewed as totally stagnant, privileges her connections with the 'West'. The ability of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to lead is constructed as part and parcel of the West's 'civilizing'/modernizing influence. Because of her contact with the 'modernizing' influences of the West, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is represented by many, including Leser (1990:111), as 'the natural choice to break her country's 30-year hermetic seal'. Ross Munro argues that Burma's '. . . central economic problem is the unwillingness of Ne Win and the military to permit *foreign trained economists to introduce reform*' [emphasis mine] (*Time* 14/8/89:29).

What is viewed as unforgivable in such 'post' colonial discourse is not just the military junta's human rights record but Burma's impenetrability: its 'xenophobia'. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi thus becomes the perfect tool in the penetration of the 'Eastern'/Other/woman by the 'Western'/Subject/man. Whilst at one level Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is legitimated because she is a symbol of the 'Western' subject, at another level, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is positioned as the 'Third World' Other. The agency she is presented as possessing is a tenuous one, dependent on her perceived sameness with the 'West'. In terms of her position as the Other woman, her difference is represented as a lack. Within contemporary colonialist representations of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, in her role as a symbol of a 'Third World' woman/leader, her power is presented as lacking personal agency. The editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (August 27, 1988) stated that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi 'has no obvious credentials to lead apart from being the daughter of a revered independence leader'.[28]

'Post' colonial discourses continually remove Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's agency. We are told that she was 'swept' into the leadership role (*Time* 14/8/1989:24), the term 'swept' suggesting powers external to the human subject. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi simply becomes the object that an outside force moves, her power is portrayed as conferred, mystical, magical. The terms used to describe Daw Aung San Suu Kyi are not words usually applied to 'First World' political leaders but rather leaders of a religious or spiritual cult. A Western diplomat suggests that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's name is 'magic' amongst the people (Silverstein 1990a:1007);[29] she is described in *Time* magazine as a '*mesmerizing* political force', her eyes are described as 'spellbinding' and we are told that she 'has *haunted* the regime since her return to the country in 1988' (*Time* 11/6/1990:28-29) and that the opposition forces '*invoke her name* as they struggle' [emphases mine] (Silverstein 1991). The most common term used to describe Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is 'charismatic'.

28. Given that the notion of Western liberal democracy is based on a belief in the upholding of a popular government, the perceived illegitimacy of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's power seems inconsistent. In the 1990 elections in Burma, the National League for Democracy, the party in which Daw Aung San Suu Kyi acts as secretary, won over 80% of the votes. A Western diplomat suggested that the people of Burma often did not know who the candidates in their electorate were, but that they had all heard of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, that the votes were in fact for her (*Time* June 11, 1990:25).

29. The military junta also refers to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as having magical powers; the guards surrounding her house are routinely rotated so they will not fall under the 'magic' of her eyes. However, within the context of Burmese belief systems, the notion of her 'magic' gives her power more rather than less legitimacy/agency.

In representations of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, there are often references made to a 'destiny' that is driving her to power, for example in Silverstein (1990). The notion of 'destiny' used in a Western sense suggests a lack of personal agency and suggests an agent outside the human subject. Given that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is presented as 'Burma's woman of destiny', and 'destiny' renders the human subject powerless, the corollary of such a representation is Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's powerlessness. The agent's 'will' whilst lost in the 'Western' notion of destiny, is a crucial factor in shaping destiny within an 'indigenous' (i.e. Buddhist) reading. The human agent within Buddhist philosophy is active rather than passive in determining destiny. Agency is exercised when a human subject encodes her/his own *karma*, through her/his actions and thoughts. The Buddha preached, '. . . it is the will (*cetana*), O Monks, that I call *karma*; having willed, one acts through body, speech or mind' (Harvey 1990:40).

Karma, encoded by our own actions, in turn determines who we are born as. Many people in Burma consider Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to be the reincarnation of her father whom she physically resembles (Daw Maureen Aung-Thwin 1991:19). I would suggest that such a view of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in fact gives her power more legitimacy within an 'indigenous' reading than if she had 'worked her way up'.

Another 'indigenous' discourse on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is that of the military junta.[30] Whilst the military regime, predominantly 'Buddhist', may not necessarily challenge the *legitimacy* of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's power, they would challenge her *right* to hold power. The military regime itself utilizes a dichotomy between the 'indigenous' and the colonial, where Daw Aung San Suu Kyi occupies the space of the colonial. For the military regime, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi also acts as a symbol of the intruding 'West', the intrusion in this case being regarded as negative rather than positive. Her marriage to an Englishman and the years spent living in 'Western' countries are cited as evidence of her colonialist intentions. Posters had been distributed by the junta containing pornographic cartoons of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her 'foreign husband' (*Time* 14/8/1989:26-27; Daw Maureen Aung-Thwin 1991). The regime continually played up the fact of her marriage to a foreigner (Jones 1989; Silverstein 1991; *Far Eastern Economic Review* 12/9/1991:33). It is suggested that she is working to sell out Burma to foreign nations and that she is anti-Buddhist (Silverstein 1990:1014). Accusations of her sexual and spiritual impurity are attacks on the authenticity of her Burmese identity, given that Buddhism was central to Burmese nationalism in the independence struggle and sexual impurity is viewed as a threat occasioned by 'Western' contact.[31]

A vastly different representation from the military junta's, yet one which also deploys this division of Burma and the 'West', and further, one that could equally lay claims to being an 'indigenous' discourse, is Corinna E. Allmark's contribution in *Women Speak*

30. It is imperative that we critique the continued Western colonization of Burma in the modern context since the only publicized attempts to deal with this particular issue are those of the military junta which uses the spectre of Western colonization for purposes of propaganda against the revolutionaries. It is crucial that we wrest the issue of contemporary colonialism from the regime and not simply evade it because it is part of the discourse of the enemy.

31. Burmese students living as political exiles and activists in Bangkok often express their contempt for the sex industry in Thailand, regarding it as evidence of the negative influence of the 'West' on a Buddhist country.

Out For Peace In Burma (1989:14). Allmark, who is a Burmese with European ancestry, states:

> Whenever I am asked from where I've come from, I ask myself the same question. *I am ashamed to say I'm Burmese, so hopefully my European ancestry can make me proud of being part of a civilisation* that shows freedom, peace, human rights, humanitarian [sic.] and respect for one another- - - - -it spells DEMOCRACY. [emphases mine].

Allmark's statement clearly dichotomizes the notion of the barbaric Burmese and the 'civilized West'. The essence of Burma's heritage and Burmese identity becomes a place of 'uncivilized' brutality, and her 'European ancestry' the site of 'civilization'. Allmark's statement, although 'indigenous', is also an example of colonialist discourse. Her remarks are typical of the way in which brutality is identified with Burmeseness, that is, difference (rather than with the specific despots of the regime), and the 'democracy' struggle is represented as inherently 'Western'.

Clearly the notion of a pure 'indigenous' discourse is problematic. The differences which exist within 'indigenous' discourse destroy assumptions about the essentially static nature of the categories. Often it is assumed that the 'indigenous' is a birth right, yet, the fact that Allmark is Burmese, and employs the logic of colonial discourses, clearly problematizes the 'indigenous' and 'colonial' as essential and distinctly separable categories. Nevertheless, we cannot eliminate the 'indigenous' as a category, as it is a *necessary* political and strategic closure that allows for opposition to colonialist discourses.

Reading Against the Grain: Kawthoolei Women's Organisation (KWO)[32]

Whilst it is important to analyse the intent of particular discourses to colonize, it is equally important to recognize that resistance exists. We cannot trace a direct relationship between colonialist intent (the signifier) and colonialist effect (the signified). Interpretation and re-interpretation of colonialist discourses continually displace the 'original meaning', and at this complex point of reception, resistance is possible. Thus the 'indigenous' is not a passive sponge, but rather an active agent in the colonial encounter.[33] The utilization of particular objects or discourses is a productive space (de Certeau [1984]1988).

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32. In early 1991, I visited Thailand and some of the camps of the All Burma Student Democratic Front (ABSDF), and the villages of the Karen National Union (KNU) on the Burma-Thai border. I also visited Manerplaw which is the headquarters of the KNU and the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB) - an umbrella group of the revolutionary forces including the KNU, ABSDF and other revolutionary groups. Whilst on the border and in Thailand, I spoke with members of different women's organizations from Burma and collected and recorded women's stories. The information on the KWO was conveyed to me by the Karen women of the KWO in Manerplaw (KWO headquarter) and the KWO branch at Htee Hkee in early 1991. The KWO was first established by the Karen leader Saw Ba U Gyi in 1949; his wife acted as the head of the organization (Pippa Curwen, 1989:32). The group, however, did not become active until 1985.

33. For an interesting analysis of the way that working class women in the Lady Gowrie Centre in Erskineville (a Sydney suburb), negotiated for power through re-interpretation of prevailing discourses, see Jenny Bray (1991). And for a complex account of spectatorship as a 'performative, not merely a passive, practice' (1991b:32), see Chow.

The resistance of the KWO is tactical rather than strategic, to use de Certeau's terminology. Michel de Certeau suggests that the 'tactic' (as opposed to 'strategy') is used by the Other, who does not possess space but only time. Because the Other lacks spatial or institutional localization (the 'proper'), it thus depends on time '- it is always on the watch for opportunities that might be seized "on the wings"' (de Certeau ibid.:xix). The KWO is an example of tactical resistance in its reading of colonialist discourses against the grain. The KWO holds a contradictory position in that, on the one hand, it could be regarded as perpetuating colonialist discourses on women, but on the other hand, it exemplifies the agency of the 'indigenous', in its re-reading of colonialist discourses.

The Christianity inherited from the missionaries is reinterpreted and re-inscribed by the KWO to suit its own needs. There exist differences between the Christianity of the aid agencies active on the Burma-Thai border[34] and the Christianity of the Karen. Whilst the Christian aid organisations refuse to condone armed struggle, Karen Christianity not only concurs with their struggle but also suggests that their victory is immanent, because 'God is on (their) side'.

Pippa Curwen (1989:32) argues that the Baptist missionaries set a precedent for the establishment of women's groups amongst the Karen, suggesting that where the Baptist women's groups had been active it was easier to establish the KWO. Whilst on the one hand the KWO appears to be adopting missionary methods of organizing women's groups, on the other hand, their organizations depart from missionary aims. Whereas the women's groups were used by the missionaries as a method of conversion to Christianity, the KWO are using women's groups to further not only their revolution but also women's rights. Within the KWO, prayers have been eliminated to 'avoid misunderstandings' between the Christian Karen and the non-Christian Karen (ibid.:32). The lack of prayers within the women's groups heralds a huge departure from missionary rituals, as are the objectives of the groups themselves, which are to contribute to winning the revolution.

Motherhood is another area where the women read colonialist discourses against the grain. Whilst in missionary discourse Christian versus Buddhist motherhood acted to divide ethnic groups, in the contemporary context, women of different ethnic groups are uniting on the basis of a shared experience of the maternal body. The maternal body once encoded with ethnic difference, now acts as a bridge across ethnic boundaries.[35] The women in the KWO stated that they are excited about the prospects of joining forces with women from other ethnic groups in order to further the revolution. They regard all nationalities as the same, only the names are different they say. A sense of union with the Burman women is forming, because they share a common enemy.

34. All Christian and non-Christian, international and Thai humanitarian relief and aid agencies are co-ordinated under the umbrella group, the Burma Border Consortium. All of the aid donor groups in the BBC do not support armed struggle.

35. Lyndal Barry also noted this phenomenon. Motherhood as a political tool in either uniting or dividing groups is not only common to Burma. Gaitskell & Unterhalter (1989) suggests that in the context of South Africa, the discourse of Afrikaner Nationalism used the notion of motherhood to uphold apartheid, while the discourse of the African National Congress promoted motherhood as a point of contact between vastly different groups, including blacks and whites.

The KWO have re-territorialized the category of gender to effectively mobilize women as an organized unit (or identity), thus establishing collective strength in controlling the daily conditions of their lives. The KWO gives Karen women enormous realized power as moral guardians, and potential power as an organized network.

Women's Stories, Women's Voices

Fear is a habit, I am not afraid. (Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, 1991:3)

The stories that follow are from interviews/conversations I had with various women involved in the political struggles of contemporary Burma. The voices of the women are in italic print. In giving bibliographic details of the women speaking I remain cautious of privileging my own systems of classifying identity, therefore I am only able to reflect their identity as they chose to encode it.

The story began long ago . . . [36] *Of course you come back. Your blood calls you back.* The dry season is in full swing. We go bumping down red dirt roads on the back of a Ute. Coughing. Bruised. Passing men riding elephants. *Because we ride elephants, the Burmans call us owners of scabies.* I tell them we should be proud to be owners of scabies. We're on our way to Kawthoolei ('land without darkness') - the Karen's liberated zone. **Daw X.**[37] says: *don't bother taping my story, just listen and work out for yourself what's real and what I have made up.* It seems to me that all of it is real because the real is made up. Our voices interwoven, remain separate threads. Our texts take different paths. We meet at the point of intent. My intention like theirs, is to further the liberation struggle of Burma.

Daw X. presents and I re-present her story. She says she wanted to fight since her high school days, because *people without a country are dead people*. So she walked to the border: to Kawthoolei. I'm told that the Karen army laughed; they told her if she wanted to fight she'd have to steal her own gun. She went back to Rangoon and stole a gun. As it turned out, her gun was the best: better than the guns of the Karen soldiers. She's been fighting on the front line for many years. **Daw X.** says she will get married when we win the war; she says she'll go to the altar in crutches and he'll be in a wheel-chair without limbs. *Haaaaaa Ha Ha Ha Haaaaaaaaaa* . . . . **Daw X.** smokes a pipe and wears 'men's' *longyis*, tied like a man's, knotted at the front, not wrapped around. She can stride in her *longyi*. She defies the boundaries of gendered behaviour - and she defies the constructed image of the passive, smiling 'Oriental' woman.

The contradiction of revolutionary lives - they are both victim and agent. If these women's' agency is not recognized, they simply become a bloodied backdrop rather than subjects of action, and if they are only viewed as agents, then their suffering becomes invisible. To maintain the dichotomy between agent and victim is to trap ourselves in an

36. Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989:1).

37. Daw X. is an older Karen woman who has been fighting on the front line for 20 years.

unpalatable either-or choice.[38] Their tales destabilize the victim-agent dichotomy. Their stories are of suffering, painful separation from family and country, but also of fighting and learning and surviving. The women continually re-negotiate 'appropriate' gender behaviour in order to fight. Their stories displace the 'truth' of contemporary colonial discourses that attempt to locate agency only in the camp of the 'Western' subject.

Ma Y.[39]

Ma Y. sits cross-legged opposite me on the floor of the women's dorm. Surrounded by jungle stillness. The students constructed these buildings, they're made of split bamboo. The elevated floor allows the breeze to pass through, everything is open. Open to mosquitoes like stars littering the night sky. *100% of the students have malaria.*

Many die. The temperature in the jungle is fist hot, suffocating, and it's not even the hot season yet. **Ma Y.** wears her *longyi* wrapped around her. When the *longyi* is wrapped around, our steps are restricted. But, she too can stride. **Ma Y.** was 16 years old when she came to the border, now she is 18 . . . As I leave she holds my hand, she calls me '. . . *sister. I'll never forget you.*' My grief is dusty. We laughed about eating breakfast together at home - one day soon - when the military government finally falls . . . Beside her space on the bamboo floor is a box full of books, she reads everything she can get her hands on; her formal education has been drastically cut short. Her father is in the army, so one day she may have to face him in battle. Burmese families are very close. Living and fighting on the border is not a choice, it is a necessity. She walked days to get to the border camps. In her high school she had helped organize and participated in demonstrations. **Ma Y.** says *we are not refugees, we are revolutionaries.*

Greeting to friends around the world.

We believe that in order to remove the present regime, the only means is by armed resistance. It may not be the normal thing for women to take up arms and fight, but this power hungry army group is clinging to power so much all women and even children will have to take up arms against them.

Our desire for democracy and human rights will certainly be fulfilled.[40]

38. For an interesting paper which deconstructs the dichotomy between victim and agent in the context of women as the subjects of *sati*, see Rajeswari Suder Rajan (1990).

39. Ma Y. is an 18 year old student who is a member of the All Burma Student Democratic Front (ABSDF). She lives and fights in one of the rebel student camps in the jungle on the Thai-Burma border.

40. This piece which Ma Y. wrote for me to pass on to a Western audience was translated from the written Burmese.

Ma O.[41]

I participated in the popular demonstrations staged by the students and citizens on 8/8/88. Even though it is not natural for women to take up arms, we have joined this armed resistance for the sake of the people because of the brutality of the army. Women have been active in resistance movements in Burma. Students and citizens have had to suffer the inhumane and dishonest policies of Ne Win. That was why women joined the strikes and boycott movement on the 8/8/88. This was something that evolved. It was something that could not be borne any more. So we decided that we would fight dah for dah, spear for spear, and join the resistance and demonstrations - students and citizens all. In 1988, the demonstrations in Burma were peaceful. We wanted democracy and human rights. The army just reacted with arms. Because of their brutality, the citizen's and student's blood was shed. In Burma all were engaged in the big demonstrations, and this resulted in our being able to bring down three successive governments. We have had many encounters. We had to go through many jungles and climb many mountains. We soldiers, men and women have had to suffer the perils of malaria. We have not met the enemy face to face, but malaria has faced us many times. This is not all. Sometimes our relations with the other armed resistance groups have been full of problems. We soldiers, men and women have received the full support of the people of Burma. This is all I have to say very briefly.

Ma R.[42]

Ma R. is a Mon woman, who was in the eighth grade when she came to the border. She is now 17 years old. In Burma she participated in setting up a demonstration site in her home town. After demonstrating peacefully and the government responding with guns, she decided that 'arm struggle is the only solution', so she left for the border.

I did not think of myself, it was an adventure, I thought of myself that I was not an ordinary girl, I am the saviour of this Nation. I encouraged by myself and took pride of myself in doing so . . . Although I am Mon, I not only struggle for Mon, my struggle is also for all nationalities in Burma. That is my concept of coming here . . .

41. Ma O. is a young Burmese student who is a member of the ABSDF, and lives and fights in one of the rebel student camps in the jungle on the Thai-Burma border. This piece which Ma O. wrote for me to pass on to a Western audience was translated from the written Burmese.

42. This spoken interview with Ma R. was conducted in English by Lyndal and Sophie Barry. Ma R.'s comments were transcribed by Barry and Barry. Lyndal and Sophie Barry are independent documentary makers who conducted interviews with revolutionaries on the Burma/Thai border during 1990. These interviews have since been used as part of a documentary for the ABC ('Barefoot Soldiers'). I wish to thank Lyndal and Sophie for access to parts of their material. It is expressly not tidied up.

Ma T.A.K.[43]

In the 1988 demonstrations I was involved in ----, ---- Division. I was a student in the 8th standard (14 years old) and participated in the boycott and demonstrations.

If you consider all the events that took place all over Burma, you will understand why women have now joined the armed struggle.

The reason why women have had to take up arms is because we want to remove this despicable and brutal Ne Win and Saw Maung. In order to relieve our fellow citizens, monks, brothers and sisters and relatives from having to endure the cruel policies of this dog army regime, we have formed the ABSDF students' democratic front. I am determined and made up my mind, though my strength as a woman is little, to fight the dog army regime until my blood drops to the earth for my mother country and the people.

In Burma now there is the Women's underground which is working at the risk of their lives in co-operation with us. I have many friends amongst them. It makes my heart ache when I think of them.

I became politically active since 8/8/88. From then on I have been overcome by sadness when I look at my fellow citizens and monks. In my mind and also in the minds of the soldiers, men and women of this organisation who have come to this jungle where there are many hills and forests and malaria rampant, the one aim is for freedom for our countrymen.

I rejoice because so many of our people abroad have come here to support us. I pray that in the future too they will be able to come to us. I believe that we will succeed in our cause and struggle. I am always sending good thoughts and wishes to our benefactors and friends. Our resistance movement is gaining strength because all of us in the ABSDF are working together for it. We are grateful to our friends, countrymen and foreigners who have come to our aid.

May all the beings on this earth enjoy health and happiness both in mind and body. I, TAK, who loves her parents, countrymen and her country writes this article. If there are any mistakes, I ask to be forgiven. I am young and in this big jungle, and though I long for my country, to save my country, I have to be strong in mind and carry on for the success of the resistance movement.

One who loves those who have come to give us support.

Myochit[44] *Resistance woman*
T A K 30/3/91.

43. Ma T.A.K. is a 17 year old student who is a member of the ABSDF, and lives and fights in one of the rebel camps in the jungle on the Thai-Burma border. This piece which Ma O. wrote for me to pass on to a Western audience was translated from the written Burmese.

44. *Myochit* translates to mean 'love of country'.

Daw G.[45]

Daw G. is a 66 year old Karen woman whose village has been burnt down by Burmese government troops.

Barry: *If you happened to have any descendants such as* son *or a* grandson, *would you let them go to the war against the government troops?* [emphases mine].

Daw G.: *Don't say on that matter. I would join our defence force by myself if I am young enough to do so. I am very angry at them and besides I am old right now.*

Ma N.B.[46]

Ma N.B. states:

Women took part in every demonstration, some of them had given up their lives without being famous.

The most significant women took part in demonstration was in 1988 with high risk. Because some are at my same age, some are older than me, and some are younger than me had given up their lives with their blood and passed away by upholding our Peacock Revolutionary Flag. Such happenings were occurred in front of our eyes.

Well to tell you frankly, we are engaging in politics is not because of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Our national concern is the concern for all individuals of our country. Don't think that we want to be popular taking part in political activities as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi does. Our concept is that our Burma is in darkness, we have to give light to Burma, have to enlighten Burma? In the concept of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi she is trying to obtain democracy in peaceful means, but in our case our strong concept is to gain democracy by arm struggle. Don't think we are in politics is because of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, we participate in politics with our own belief and concepts.

Ma K.[47]

Ma K. is a 24 year old Burman student who actively organized demonstrations in 1988.

. . . Many people who fond of democracy, has supported and encouraged Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. People all over Burma, respect her as the daughter of our leader. So, we think, the more women joined the more successful we can make in the political role in the future . . . Women achievement is not only happened in our country, women have achieved at different sectors all around the world. In our country women struggle for democracy is

45. This spoken interview with Daw G. was conducted in English, and transcribed by Barry & Barry (1990).

46. This spoken interview with Ma N.B. was conducted in English, and transcribed by Barry & Barry (1990).

47. This spoken interview with Ma K. was conducted in English, and transcribed by Barry & Barry (1990).

not because of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, their struggle is because they love their mother country.

The stories of women on the border act as an antidote against the 'truth' of the colonial voice. Their absent voices counter the dichotomy between victim and agent in explaining issues of women's subjectivity and the notion of the 'West' as Burma's saviour. The women see themselves as saviours of the nation. Whilst contemporary colonialist discourse interprets Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (symbol of Western influence) as the motivating force behind the struggle, many of these women problematize such a notion.

Ma S.[48]

Ma S. is on the Central Committee of ABSDF. During 1988 she had organized demonstrations. Because of her activities she was arrested and eventually released on the condition that she would leave particular areas of Burma. **Ma S.** left for the border and met up with the Pa-O revolutionaries; she joined with eight other women, seven of whom went home because the environment was so inhospitable. The Pa-O are fighting a guerrilla war, so they were constantly on the move. With the Pa-O revolutionaries she experienced combat.

Her job in ABSDF means she must move around to the many different camps and go back and forth to Bangkok. Such journeys are dangerous, there's always the possibility of being caught by the Thai police. **Ma S.** is the only woman on the Central Committee and is encouraging other women to join, by creating an environment for more women to become active. She said that the students on the border and their families were suffering, but that they were not all the families in Burma. Their sacrifice was for the good of many:

We must sacrifice some.

Her eyes betray her intelligence and resistance. She watches interactions with a tactical eye. She is very conscious of the colonial nature of the interaction between the students and aid organizations. I speak of colonial and 'post' colonial discourses, she knowingly nods - grinning. The students are not just victims of the 'post' colonial discourse of aid agencies: they resist and navigate around dependency.

48. Ma S. is an older Burmese woman who is a central committee member of the ABSDF; her story she conveyed to me at Manerplaw (jungle headquarters of the resistance movements). She organizes student rebel camps in the jungles on the Thai-Burma border.

Ma J.[49]

Ma J. negotiates the dangerous terrain that accompanies the label of 'refugee'. She uses the label to the advantage of her country's struggle, resisting enforced dependency:

. . . I am a refugee. I applied for refugee status because I thought that would be the best way to help those people in the camps (ABSDF). *I give them as much as I can from what I receive. I have a lot of friends in the camps. We have formed the ---- in which I am the treasurer. All the money and funds that we get for this organisation is used for the people living in the camps. As much clothes as we can collect we take to the camps and distribute them there. We have met many reporters on this side and we have told them about the life and the existence of these Burmese students in the camps . . . Presently I am taking some responsibility in the ---- organisation. . . . To get funds for our organisation we sell Pepsi. Sometimes we even joke and say 'wish our parents at home, our people, could see us having to sell drinks to survive'. All of us are doing our very best to help those people in the camps in whatever way we can . . . Though this organisation, the ----, are not really engaged in armed struggle; in a way we are, because we are helping those who are engaged in this armed struggle, those who are in the camps. We have to say that we are not engaged in armed struggle because we would not get assistance from certain organisations . . .*

As for me, I will carry on the fight. I will not go back home until democracy has been obtained. I will carry on the fight that my parents and my brother have started. That is my aim. I would like to ask all the Burmese people who are now living in foreign countries to please help us students who are now having to struggle here at this side of the border.

Daw D.[50]

Daw D. is an older Shan woman who worked in the Shan State Army (SSA) as a Cipher clerk for six years. **Daw D.** was part of the 'ethnic struggles' before the 1988 massacre which mobilized the whole of the Burmese populace. Although she is no longer in the SSA, **Daw D.** remains politically active at a 'more personal level'. She does what she can for the revolutionary forces, and spends a lot of time disseminating information about the struggle in Burma.

. . . But here my people we heard things like, like at sixteen years old, you know, heard that there are women soldiers there and they're fighting and this and that. I thought people, people can't be mad to stay in the jungle, it must be something . . . Maybe I include one . . . Then we went, to find out. Although my education never, you know get anywhere, but ah I had, didn't regret that, I've learnt more about other things, in the

49. Ma J. is a younger Burmese woman who was once a member of the ABSDF, but had to relinquish membership in order to be recognized as 'a person of concern' and therefore receive support from UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) whilst living in Bangkok. The interview was conducted in English and her speech was directly transcribed by myself. I chose not to 'tidy up' her English grammar, as I did not wish to lose the essence of her meaning and style of her talking.

50. Daw D. lives in Bangkok. The interview was conducted in English and her speech was directly transcribed by myself. Once again I chose not to 'tidy up' her English grammar, for similar reasons.

jungle, things like life, and how difference between the people in the city and the countrysides . . . I met lots of kids in the army, that they have seen with their own eyes their parents or their sisters or very close relatives being tortured to death and that sort of thing . . . Hope it ends one day. I mean that's also the reason you know . . . I never regret that I left my parents, say in 1977 up till now, so its quite a long years. I never met them again and I never contact them. You know why, the reason is very simple, I don't want to get them into trouble. I never do that. I never write and I never, I never talk about it, ok just stay themselves, and I don't want to make them hurt . . . . . Sometimes (in the army) *we really scared, we hear all like rape cases, and the girls, and that sort of thing. Usually what we do is we have a couple of friends working the same kind of job, some are ciphers, some are interceptors, some are radio operators, so we are all in the same group. So if you been, you know caught, by the Burmese government soldiers, very unthinkable, terrible. So what we do . . . we always have a little petrol or something and lighter. Wrap it in a plastic bag, in case something happens. You know we burn all of them and then either bullet or hand grenade would do . . . . . See for me is, I'm a Shan of course I've always been Shan and I'm proud of it, mean right I mean being Shan but I understand that we have to stay living together . . . I'm saying for as a Shan how I feel. It's very difficult, I don't think there are many Burmese who understand what a young boy, young girl in the village know about . . . I would tell whoever wants to know what I think what I been through and what I see. Of course I would tell people. What I see may not be the same as other people, even from Burma. Maybe different or maybe same, but I would say what I been through and what I've seen . . . . . I never regret that I left home. So if I stayed on without joining the Underground, I don't think I can say for sure that I wouldn't know what I know now . . . I wouldn't see some very large parts of Shan State and how people live and how suffer and how people think and how people enjoy their life and how people live together in hard conditions.*

The Last Hour

Ma Yi Yi Tun

. . . With revolution in mind,
I left my loved ones,
all the people I care,
for a foreign land.

My dreams remain unattained.

This strange disease
prevents me from reaching
that goal of democracy.

No longer can I continue
that revolutionary march.

Soon, I'll keep
my appointment
with death.
No remorse, worry or fear.
A female revolutionary am I
not.

But one regret is that I have
not been able to press ahead
for my goal.

Listen my comrades,
this is my last request.
Pray continue the struggle,
one more step forward
on my behalf.

Finally . . .

. . . I would say knowledge for knowledge's sake is sickness. Let her who is sick of sickness pass on the story, a gift unasked for like a huge bag of moonlight.

Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989:2)

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