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IN NEED OF *DAUGHTERS OF GOOD LINEAGE*: PLACING GENDER IN MYANMAR'S BUDDHIST NATIONALIST DISCOURSE

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Abstract
On August 26, 2015, the Myanmar government passed *the Race and Religion Protection Laws* or *myosaun ubade* proposed by Wirathu, founder of The Patriotic Association of Myanmar (*Mabatha*). This paper analyzes the gender ideologies embedded in the choice of High and Low reference register in Burmese language for women in the Myanmar-Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Law as part of *myosaun ubade*. The choice of High register reference term *amyothamee* (daughter of lineage) in the rhetoric of *myosaun ubade* evokes a shared anxiety among the public and recruits other ethnic and religious minorities to join in the Burman Buddhist nationalistic agenda. By putting gender at the center of a linguistic analysis, I argue that Burman Buddhist nationalist discourses downplay ethnoreligious diversity and attempt to create a sense of alliance among the citizens of Myanmar.

Keywords: gender, religion, register, law, rhetoric
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1 Introduction: A Lineage at Risk

On an early evening in May in 2012, the body of a Rakhine[1] Buddhist girl, Ma[2] Thida Htwe, was found on an embarkment road near Kyauknimaw village in Yanbye township in Myanmar's northwest state of Rakhine, raped and stabbed to death. On June 5, 2012, the government-owned national newspaper *The New Light of Myanmar* published a story stating that local police had identified "three murderers" of Ma Thida Htwe; their names, their fathers' names, and the village they were from were announced alongside their ethnoreligious identities as "Bengali/Islam." According to the story, approximately 100 Rakhine nationals demanded that local police release the suspects to them. In order to avoid potential racial riots, the local police transferred the suspects to Kyaukphyu[3] city jail. Conflicts between Myanmar's majority religious group, Buddhists, and others, especially those of Islamic faith, existed prior to the death of Ma Thida Htwe. However, the ethnoracial and religious identification of Ma Thida Htwe's three alleged murderers has backdropped the ongoing ethnic cleansing of the *Rohingya* population, a primarily Islamic ethnic minority residing in Rakhine state. The case has also played a fundamental role in Myanmar's 2015 implementation of the Interfaith Marriage law, prohibiting Buddhist women of Myanmar from marrying men of other faiths. The following question is necessary: What role do women, as the gender inferior, play in Burman Buddhist nationalist anti-Muslim discourse?

The nature of Ma Thida Htwe's crime sensationalized the public discourse around race, ethnicity, gender, and religion in Myanmar. One of the prominent voices was *Ashin*[4] *Wirathu,* a Buddhist monk from Mandalay. Wirathu has been active in the anti-Muslim movement in the country, long before Ma Thida Htwe's death. He was born in 1968 in Kyaukse, a town 25 miles south of Mandalay, and at the age of 14, he left school and entered monkhood. Because of his involvement in the extreme Buddhist nationalist movement,[5] he was

[1] Rakhine is the northwestern state of Myanmar bordering Bangladesh. It is recognized as one of the eight major ethnic groups in Myanmar.
[2] *Ma* is an honorific term as used here for young women in Burmese.
[3] A major town in Rakhine state.
[4] An honorific title for Buddhist monks in Burmese, similar to the English term *Venerable.*
[5] The movement is known as the "969" movement. The numbers represent the virtues of the Buddha. The first denotes the nine attributes of the Buddha; the 6 signifies the six attributes of the *dhamma*; and the last 9 symbolizes the nine attributes of the *sangha* (monks).

imprisoned in 2003 (Hodal April 2013). In 2012, he was released under the presidential pardon for political prisoners. Since his release, he has continued to offer sermons and public speeches that promote anti-Muslim sentiments. His sociopolitical involvement as a Buddhist monk led him to be featured on the *Time Magazine* cover in 2013 as the "Buddhist Face of Terror." The alleged rape crime of Ma Thida Htwe, a Rakhine Buddhist girl, by a group of Muslim Bengali men became a persuasive fact for Wirathu, which he used not only to support his anti-Muslim sermons and public speeches, but also to reinforce the sentiment through legal measures at a national level. Wirathu and his public discourses have done much to normalize anti-Muslim rhetoric.

The regulation of Buddhist female bodies has become part of this rhetoric, and Wirathu's plans to police and legalize Buddhist women's forms of intimacy are attempts to deal with anti-Muslim anxieties in Myanmar. In 2013, together with nationalist Buddhist monks across the country, Wirathu formed *The Patriotic Association of Myanmar,* later renamed the *Buddha Dhamma Charity Foundation.*[6] In the same year, Wirathu drafted the Interfaith Marriage Law, known formally as the Myanmar Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Law.[7] He later drafted and added three laws on population control, religious conversion, and monogamy. Wirathu referred to the set of four laws as *myosaun ubade* (lit: The Keep the Lineage laws) or, more formally, as the Race and Religion Laws of Myanmar. On August 26, 2015, the Myanmar Parliament passed *myosaun ubade*. Since its passing, various non-profit organizations and scholars have denounced the content and intention of the laws as being in defiance of the United Nation's Convention on the Elimination on All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (Barrow 2015). Burman nationalist ethnoracial and gender ideologies however helped achieve the drafting and the passing of these laws. Much of the scholarship on anti-Muslim ethnic violence in contemporary Myanmar correctly argues that in the nation's public discourse, ethnic diversity has been framed in terms of religion (see Turner 2014; Gravers 2015; Holt 2019). Here, I argue that while ethnic minorities may be spared violence if they are Buddhist, this process rests on a far less analyzed feature: its patriarchal foundations. By putting gender at the center of a linguistic analysis, I find that Burman Buddhist nationalist discourses are able to evoke a shared anxiety among the public and to recruit other ethnic and religious minorities of the nation.

2 Marking Difference

Myanmar's nationwide anti-Muslim sentiments are disseminated and perpetuated through a variety of semiotic systems. We must first understand the process of marking ethnoracial and gender difference in Myanmar. The social categories such as ethnoraciality,[8] religion, and gender are (re)produced through their representations in everyday life. Those representations are not merely extensions of their pre-existence, but they are also perpetuated in certain societal norms. The process of differentiation is performed either through language or metapragmatic discussion of language use of the targeted Other. Linguistic anthropologists have theorized this phenomenon as *language ideologies,* analyzing the mapping of people, events, or activities onto certain linguistic varieties and their characteristic linguistic features (Woolard & Schieffelin 1994; Irvine & Gal 2000). These ideologies are never purely about language, but deeply intertwined with moral and political interests (Irvine & Gal 2000).

Marking the *Rohingya* as ethno-racially different has been effective. In fueling a genocide, their linguistic differentiation is reinforced by other forms of social differentiation.[9] As Kathryn Woolard and Bambi Schieffelin (1994) argue, language ideologies are at times not concerned with the linguistic structure of the language itself but manifested in a variety of sociocultural semiotic devices associating with the language such

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6 The headquarters of the association is in *Ma Soe Yein* (lit: 'Do not worry'), a Buddhist monastery in Inn Sein township, Yangon. *Ma Soe Yein* is a branch of the monastery, originally from Mandalay that trains monks to enter sermonizing career and they are recognized as the best and the most restrictive and productive of sermonizing Buddhist monks in Myanmar. See Keeler (2017).

7 I refer to this as the "interfaith marriage law" throughout this paper.

8 I use the term *ethnoraciality* here to hint at ways in which the concept of ethnicity functions as race as understood in the west. That is, ethnicity in the Myanmar context does not just denote cultural distinctiveness but also biological or genetic difference among groups.

9 As of January of 2020, after the International Criminal Court at the Hague ruled that Myanmar must implement provisional measures to protect the Rohingya Muslims from violence and possible genocide. See https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/international-court-of-justice-orders-myanmar-to-prevent-genocide-against-the-rohingya/2020/01/23/ff383ff4-3d29-11ea-afe2-090eb37b60b1_story.html.

as aesthetics, morality, and epistemology. It is therefore useful to think Myanmar's anti-*Rohingya* crisis through Webb Keane's (2003:419) theorization of *semiotic ideologies*— "basic assumption about what signs are and how they function in the world." The concept of semiotic ideologies broadens that of language ideology. Keane calls the interrelationship between multiple semiotic devices a *representational economy* where semiotic ideologies are ways in which those devices are rationalized or represented. The ethnoraciality of the *Rohingya* as the Other on the grounds of language semiotically interacts with other social categories such as religion and gender.

The status of the *Rohingya* as the ethnoracial Other is thus marked both by language and by religion. Buddhist nationalists like Wirathu use gender to address those differences. Legal discourses like the Interfaith Marriage Law are sites through which those semiotic variables marking an ethnoreligious Other come together. Ethnoracial difference is usually a driving force behind the legal rhetoric, but religion is cleverly chosen as an appropriate vehicle to highlight the difference between mainstream Buddhists and *Rohingya*. Meanwhile, gender is put forth as a means to strengthen the alliance among Buddhists.

3 Legalizing Intimacy

The 2015 passage of *myosaun ubade* coincided with the systematic targeting of the *Rohingya* population by the Myanmar government, but the ways in which the set of laws in *myosaun ubade* were drafted and implemented were not new in Myanmar legal discourse. The Myanmar Buddhist Women's Special Marriage law was a revamped version of the 1939 Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Succession Act, which was later updated in 1954 (Couch 2016). In 1938, the race riots broke out in colonial Burma and resulted in the death of over 200 people and 1,000 injured, most of them Muslims. The interfaith marriages between Buddhist women and men of other faiths were perceived as threats and a betrayal to anti-colonial nationalism at the time. As a result, the *Thathana Mamaka Young Sanghas Association* suggested the implementation of an interfaith marriage law to resolve racial tensions.

With this suggestion, the colonial authorities implemented the 1939 Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Succession Act into the *Myanmar dale thontan ubade,* or the Myanmar Customary Laws. The Act mandated the registration of these interfaith marriages and ruled to override laws of other faiths on the issues of property rights, guardianship, and divorce concerning such marriages.[10] The anxieties and the rhetoric around the 1939 Interfaith Marriage Law bear a striking resemblance to the 2015 passage of *myosaun ubade.* The anti-Muslim sentiments foreground the emergence the 1939 and 2015 laws. These laws came about both as vehicles through which the nation articulates its anxieties towards ethnoreligious Others, especially Muslims, and as attempts to resolve these anxieties.

4 Forming a Lineage Alliance

The conceptualization of ethnoraciality and citizenship in the Myanmar context has always been "emergent."[11] During the colonial period, the ethnoracial diversity allowed the British to instill a sense of differentiation among ethnic groups (see Ikeya 2011).[12] In the post-colonial era after 1948, the military regime attempted to revert that colonial discourse on ethnoraciality. The regime granted citizenship to those who claimed indigenous ties to the precolonial land.[13] In 1989, the military regime changed its name from *Burma* to *Myanmar* on the grounds that the former name was tied to the colonial past.[14] The state claims to include all citizens of different ethnic backgrounds with the name change, and not just of ethnic-majority, Burman, from which the old name appeared to have derived during the colonial time. The new name Myanmar literally means

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[10] See Couch (2016) for detail discussion on historical narrative of the emergence of the 1939 Special Marriage Succession Act.

[11] Here, I reference the theorization of identity as emergent in interaction and performance rather than fixed (cf., for example, Hymes 1975).

[12] See the memoir *Miss Burma* by novelist Charmaine Craig for the account on Karen-Burman ethnic tensions during the colonial times.

[13] See the 1982 Burma Citizenship Law.

[14] The final *r* is a phonological representation of long vowel in Burmese and not actually pronounced in speech. So, the actual pronunciation is *Myanma* or in *mjəŋma:* in International Phonetic Alphabet transcription. There have been popular rumors among the public that the military generals worked with a psychic medium in choosing the new name.

fast and strong (*myaŋ*: fast and *ma*: strong). The regime hoped for a fresh start in its post-colonial nation-building process with the change in all English proper names into modern literary Burmese pronunciation.

However, the new name has not always been well-received among the public. Each name for the country became socioculturally charged among the citizens by their experience of the regime that supported it. Some still resent the old name Burma due to its association with the country's colonial past. Some reject the new name Myanmar, as it was reinforced by the authoritative regime and a reminisce of public fear and anxieties (see Skidmore 2004).[15] The adjectival reference, Burmese, which is a polysemous term used to refer to both someone from Myanmar and of Burman descent, has also begun to be contested.[16] As a result, the country is still referred to as both Burma and Myanmar. These terminologies are emblematic examples of the fusion of ethnoracial and language ideologies in Myanmar sociopolitical discourse. Each citizen can choose either term according to their sociopolitical stance towards Myanmar. On the other hand, the state instills its own sociopolitical "imaginary" (Appadurai 1996) through the choice of the new term in formal settings as in legal documents and in selective languages (such as English and Burmese, but not ethnic minority languages of Myanmar or other Western languages).[17]

The country's name(s) were nowhere to be found in the 1939 and 1954 Interfaith Marriage Laws, which concerned the religious faith of its female citizens. However, in the 2015 law, the religious faith is further complicated by ethnoraciality with the use of the term Myanmar. One could argue that the country's name was not used in either 1939 or 1954 laws because they were written prior to the formal declaration of the 1989 name change. While this argument is plausible, Couch (2016) calls Myanmar legal rhetoric the "Burmese Buddhist laws" due to their specific subjection onto the Buddhist citizens of Myanmar. The 1939 and 1954 Interfaith Marriage laws joined the rhetoric of the Burmese Buddhist laws and colonial era's focus on Burman Buddhist women of Myanmar. Women of other religions were not subjected to these laws but rather by the laws of their respective faiths. Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall's relationality principle through which identities are intersubjectively created or reinforced is illuminating here. Bucholtz and Hall (2005:598) discuss that people or entities like the Myanmar state construct identities by contrasting similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice, and authority/delegitimacy. By using the term Myanmar both in its official name, *Myanmar Buddhist Women's Special Marriage law*, and throughout the content of the law, the state reconstructs ethnoracial identities based on similarity, i.e., a shared religion, and lessens ethnoracial difference. As a result, the 2015 law, together with other sets of *myosaun ubade,* "alter[s] Burmese Buddhist laws" (Couch 2016:86) and extends its applicability to non-Buddhist citizens of Myanmar.

The use of the new name Myanmar in *myosaun ubade* is indicative of the laws' mandating of not just Buddhist women but also women of other ethnoracial identities of the Buddhist faith. Religion is presented as an umbrella identifier for the subjects of the law. Ethnoracial difference within those who share the same religion is downplayed. Wirathu claims that *myosaun ubade* promises to "protect not just Myanmar women, but any women," including Christian and Hindu women (2015). Despite this claim, he synonymizes *Myanmar* with mainstream Burman Buddhism. Wirathu attempts to include women of other ethonoracialities indexed by religious faiths (Christianity and Hinduism) in his discourse. The rhetoric of ethnoracial inclusion is a subtle but direct reference to the rape and murder of Ma Thida Htwe, who was Buddhist but not Burman. Usually, it is not the case to prioritize one's religious faith over her ethnoracial identity. It is in fact the other way around.[18] However, in the case of a legal document like *myosaun ubade,* ethnoracial and religious differences among the citizens are downplayed, and differences between the indigenous citizens and those who considered as immigrants are heightened. The legal rhetoric prioritizes the shared grounds of religion to form a lineage

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[15] I observe these claims among my own community of Burman ethnic Burmese speakers, both in the diaspora and within the country.

[16] I have written an op-ed article in Burmese on the potential adjectival terms in place of Burmese such as Myanmar, Myanmarian, or Myanmarese in Los Angeles-based Burmese language newspaper *Myanmar Gazette* catering to the immigrants from Myanmar and publishing monthly in Burmese.

[17] McCormick (2016) says, "the change from Burma to Myanmar affects only English, and no other languages (French, Thai, or the indigenous languages of Burma other than Burmese) have been forced to modify their usage." Both the change in English and in Burmese are enough in appealing to national and global language ideology denoting the ethnoraciality of the country.

[18] I have demonstrated elsewhere that the question of one's ethnoracial identity, even among the citizens, is always interrogated (Chu May Paing forthcoming).

alliance among its own diverse ethnoreligious citizens. Only by addressing the gendered features of this shifting rhetoric does it become clear that the burden to maintain a *pure* ethnoreligious population falls more heavily on female subjects.[19] Indeed, it is only when considering this gendered framework that the nature of the violence against *Rohingya* is clear.

5 Keep the Lineage, but Whose Job Is It?

For the Myanmar state, a shared Buddhist identity highlights the collective or at least similar lineage among its ethnolinguistically diverse citizens. But when the risk of that lineage arises, the question of *responsibility* and *authority* to handle such risk follows. Gender is put forth as a solution. The focus on gender as a strategy in political domination can appear to advocate equality between men and women, but also as a point for political differentiation. For example, the appraisal for gender equality was used to differentiate Burman culture from its neighboring cultures.[20] Mi Mi Khaing (1984:13) claims,

> while Mohammedan and Hindu women are shut up in harems and senanas, the Burmese women walk the streets with heads erect, puffing their huge cheroots without the slightest thought of being the 'weaker vessel.'

Colonial missionaries, however, viewed this perceived gender equality among Burman people as a sign of backwardness and primitivism (see Trager 1966). They focused on recruiting ethnic minorities like Karen, whom they considered to bear a greater gender inequality, for religious conversion. Gender became "a site at which 'civilization'/ethnicity/religious identity were encoded and contested" in colonial discourses (Tinzar Lwyn 1994:64). Scholars have, however, pointed out the limits of Burman gender equality, and argued that it was only ever observable among elites, not the general population (see Tharaphi Than 2011 and Ikeya 2011).

Colonial gender ideology has been repurposed among post-colonial mainstream Burman society. During the immediate post-colonial period, men were tasked with duties to reform the nation, whereas female bodies became a source of fuel for reclaiming Burman masculinity,[21] both among laymen and even *sangha*. The colonial view on non-Burman ethnic men as belonging to "martial races," who were then recruited into British militarization diminished the status of Burman men, consequentially challenging their sense of masculinity (Ikeya 2011). In one of his public speeches promoting *myosaun ubade*, Wirathu exclaims the lack of eligible bachelors because of their commitment to monkhood as a primary reason why Buddhist women entered interfaith marriages. Although Wirathu did not offer a solution to this reason, his anxiety around policing interfaith marriages seems to stem from the need to rescue Burman Buddhist masculinity, even threatening celibate monks. For Burman men, including *sangha,* women are safeguard through which they portray their manliness and virility. Women are therefore *responsible* for post-colonial Burman re-masculation. Their *authority* and *agency* are left to question.

Buddhist women's agency is entangled in Burman nationalist discourse. The sentiments about women's political role as responsible, but not dominant, bearers of lineage, influence the attitudes towards women's sociocultural role as wives and mothers. Stoljar (2000) theorizes such understanding of covert feminine power as *substantive autonomy,* the agency to participate in traditional sociocultural gender roles, without necessarily having full consciousness of the agency inherent in that participation. Women in or seen as prone to interfaith marriages are painted as "honest, naive, dumb, friendly, gullible, affectionate, and ashamed" (Wirathu 2015).[22] In their anti-Muslim agenda, nationalists like Wirathu discursively play with elevating women as *powerful queens* whose hands hold the future of Burman Buddhist lineage while reminding them of the legs that hold up such a throne, the men. Burman Buddhist nationalist discourses on female agency are narrated from the standpoints of substantive autonomy.

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[19] See Douglas's (1966) seminal theorization of symbolic purity and pollution in *Purity and Danger.*

[20] Interestingly, I observed such gender ideologies even among Burmese Muslim women in the refugee community in Colorado attempting to differentiate themselves from their female *Rohingya* Muslim neighbors. The statements such as "her husband is more restrictive than mine because they are *Rohingya*" were expressed to me. I suspect that this is the mirroring of the discussion on ethnoracial difference among Myanmar citizens, but further ethnographic data is needed to make such a conclusion.

[21] See Ikeya's (2011) discussion on policing the fashion and style of *khit hsan thu* (modern women) in colonial nationalist discourses to reclaim Burman masculinity.

[22] See Wirathu's public speech at an unknown village in Myanmar promoting *myosaun ubade* at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ESiPocP5e7E

The role and existence of a woman is always represented dyadically: woman-man, mother-child, wife-husband, daughter-parent, and so forth. Even *powerful queens* are deferential to *their kings.* I want to highlight two reference terms for *queen* in Burmese language here: *bayinma* (lit: female king) and *miphaya* (lit: female god). The former is used for a queen who rules a kingdom without a male spouse and the latter refers to a king's spouse. *Bayinma* therefore denotes the sole autonomous role of a ruling queen and *miphaya* is a relational and deferential role to the ruling king. Wirathu and nationalist discourses do not employ such terms, but the gender ideology embedded in them does emerge from ideas about *miphaya,* a woman at a position of power but still subservient and deferential to a man. This gender ideology is espoused in the language of the 2015 Interfaith Marriage law. For instance, even non-Burman Buddhist men still hold authority to *allow* (*kwinphyu,* lit: let an opportunity) or *disallow* the Buddhist women to practice Buddhist religion as seen in Chapter 3 of the law below:

> [A man of other faiths] is to *allow* the Buddhist woman to donate according to religion, to worship, to recite to ward off evil (payeik), to tell (one's) beads, to listen to religious sermons, to practice religious meditations, to visit Pagodas and Monasteries, to fast, to read and study literature relating to Buddhism (Chapter 3, Part 24, Myanmar Women's Special Marriage law).[23]

6 Women in the Words

Upon the 2015 passage of *myosaun ubade*, local activists and organizations working on gender issues were quick to point out the discriminatory undertone towards women in the laws. One salient example through which such gender ideologies are manifested is in the choice of reference terms towards women in the discourses *of* and *about* the Interfaith Marriage law. Burmese, a language reflective of its hierarchical social structure, is a two-register language: formal literary (High) and informal spoken (Low) (Bradley 2011). Most lexical terms therefore have alternative forms one might use in different social encounters. The High reference term for woman in Burmese is *amyothamee* (lit: daughter of lineage) and its male counterpart reference is *amyotha* (lit: son of lineage). The use of these register terms "socially enregister" the relationship by establishing or evoking certain stereotypes about the person addressed (Agha 2007). For instance, a person usually refers to a person whom they just met by the High term rather than Low term and this use denotes a sense of social distance between the two persons. The terms can also refer to a husband or wife.[24] In the case of Burmese, these register terms not only establish a social relationship between one another but also their gendered roles as citizens are "iconized" (Irvine & Gal 2000) in the eye of the nation-state. For instance, both High references denote citizens' relationship to their lineages. In addition, the High male reference term *amyotha* is the default for concepts of nationality and patriotism as in *amyotha nae* (son of lineage.day); *amyotha thachin* (son of lineage.anthem); *amyotha yeya* (son of lineage.affairs); and so on.

The Low register term for woman is *mainma* and for man is *youkkya*. They are also used to mean husband and wife, but in spoken and informal contexts. For instance, a boyfriend refers to his girlfriend as *kò mainma* (my wife or my woman) and vice versa to denote the nature of closer intimacy (perhaps sexual) between them although they are not legally married. The Low register term for 'woman' is also widely found in sexualized contexts such as *mainmasha* (gay or sissy, lit: woman's tongue); *mainmapyat* (prostitute, lit: damaged woman); *mainmashwin* (prostitute, lit: happy woman); *mainmako* (vagina, lit: woman body); *mainmapó* (morally loose woman, lit: light woman); and more. It is also found in derogatory descriptions of femininity or effeminacy such as *mainmalomainmaya* (narrow-minded or womanish, only used to describe effeminate men); *mainmanyan* (womanish artifice, lit: woman's knowledge).

The Low register term for man is, however, non-existent in those contexts. Some of the terms found with the Low register male reference are *youkkya batha* (strong man, used as an exclamatory cry in rallying sports); *minhka youkkya* (man in a royal entourage, lit: man who serves the King). In these ways, and like many honorific registers found cross-linguistically, these terms reference a person and the user's social stance towards the referenced person. Gender ideologies towards men and women are asymmetrical even in the same

[23] All English translation of the Interfaith Marriage law is an unofficial English translation published by the Congress and is available on the Online Burma Library.

[24] There has been a diachronic change in the use of the High register male reference term. In literature written in the 1940s, *amyotha* was used to refer to boyfriends and husbands, whereas nowadays, the term is only used exclusively to refer to husbands.

register. The Low register term for man does not indicate pejorative connotation and yet it is not the case for woman as seen in Burmese lexicon above. For instance, popular Burman song entitled "Minkha Youkkya" (lit: the man who serves the King), by Shan male singer Sai Htee Saing and recorded in the 1970s, laments the lovesickness of a modern-day soldier in a battlefield far away from the city.[25] In contrast, another popular song entitled "Dathà lo Mainma" (a woman like dathà) by Burman female singer May Sweet, evokes the character *Ravana belu*[26] or widely known in Myanmar as *dathà,* a man-eating humanoid with ten heads, from the Myanmar's epic *Yama Zatdaw*[27] to denote a wicked woman who attempts to destroy a love affair, nonetheless left heartbroken at the end.[28] Although registers are designated for formal vs. informal settings, the choice of the terms still rests in the tongue of the speakers and indexes a wide array of social positionalities towards the referenced person. As a result, gendered deference and respect towards the men is grammaticalized in those terms (see Irvine 1992). Therefore, it is noteworthy to pay attention to the choice of reference terms in and about the laws as it provides a stance taken by the lawmakers' gender ideologies masked by seemingly equal reference terms for both men and women.

In the 1939, 1954, and 2015 Laws, both men and women were referenced in the Low register. The nature of social intimacy concerned in the Laws perhaps favored the Low register lexical terms. Wirathu regularly uses the High register term *amyothamee* in his public speeches and sermons promoting *myosaun ubade*. As a celibate Buddhist monk, he must remain distant from women, their dangerous and alluring bodies capable of decreasing his *hpoun* or "male superiority" as Spiro (1993) calls it. *Hpoun* can be translated as "glory" or "charisma" (Winterberger 2017:436) and is a personal essence only attainable by men. Buddhist monks are considered to possess even higher *hpoun* than men in Myanmar Buddhist society. One of the ways in which Buddhist monks and men can lose their *hpoun* is through women. For instance, a subconscious contact or passage underneath the cloth line with a woman's *longyi* or skirt or the washing of his clothes with *longyi* can endanger a man's *hpoun*.[29] The Myanmar Buddhist concept of "dangerous women" bears a resemblance to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's philosophical construction of women as sexed citizens of the state whose existence and reproductive capacity contributes to the mortality and civilization of men. "The woman has the special role of not only introducing men to forms of sociality but also teaching him how to renounce his attachment to her in order to give life to the political community" (Das 2007:43). For celibate Buddhist monks in the Myanmar context, their commitment to the sovereignty and their *hpoun* are achieved and elevated above laymen due to their ability or responsibility to detach from women, among other Theravada monastic codes to which they must adhere.[30] As responsible *amyotha* (a son of lineage or a nationalist), Wirathu feels obligated to continue to regulate female bodies and police bodily choices of women in order to keep ahold of their status as moral citizens.[31]

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25 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Y9i1PLqPSI

26 *Ravana Belu* in the *Yama Zatdaw* is however a male commander of the *Rakhashasa* army, the enemy of the *Rama*, Hindu incarnation of the Buddha. In the story, he kidnapped the *Rama*'s wife, *Sita*, with an attempt to win the Battle of Lanka.

27 *Yama Zatdaw* is a Myanmar version of the Sanskrit epic from India called *Ramayana.* The play was known to be introduced to and orally performed in the court of the Burman King Anawrahta (reigning from 1014 to 1077).

28 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6OcNapJFnHw

29 In early 2019, a Burmese artist Htein Lin launched a special exhibition on *longyi* and their relationship to *hpoun* in Yangon in which he uses various commonly used fabric of *longyi* as canvases. The pictures of this exhibition and his paintings can be seen at https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=2284376314951574&id=166580710064489

30 See The Buddhist Monastic Code at https://web.archive.org/web/20050411235902/http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/bmc1/index.html *Sanghadiesa,* the 13 codes required for the initial meeting of the sangha, are mostly concerned with sexual, bodily, and linguistic interaction of the sangha with a woman. If broken, the sangha is to be put under probation until he is repented.

31 See the news report on nationalist Buddhist monks across Myanmar supporting Wirathu and his proposal for Interfaith Marriage law at https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/monk-conference-backs-bills-restrict-interfaith-marriage-*Rohingya*-voting.html

Theravada monastic codes restrict *sangha* from contact with women. However, there is no explicit linguistic guidelines by which the monks should interact with women.[32] Other Buddhist nationalist monks make no reference to women in said register terms in their sermons although they share anti-Muslim sentiments with Wirathu.[33] In addition to his use of High register reference, Wirathu at times refers to women as *tainyinthu*[34] (ethnic girl, lit: a female person who is indigenous to the land). The term *tainyinthu* in popular discourse is usually used to refer to non-Burman women of Myanmar. This term suggests Wirathu's belief that the problem of interfaith marriages rests not only in the hands of Buddhist women but also indigenous women "who have been seduced by those who pretend as a Buddhist and a Burman without being either" (Wirathu 2015). It is important here to remember that not all ethnoracial groups in Myanmar are of Buddhist faith; many "majority ethnic groups" like Karen, Chin, and Kachin are Christians. Wirathu's rhetorical stance however proposes that interfaith marriages of all ethnic women with men of non-Buddhist faith are to be restricted unless those marriages are between an ethnic woman and a Burman Buddhist man. Nationalist concerns about interfaith marriages come about from seeming lack of women as properties for Burman Buddhist men to perform their responsibility as moral citizens. By using the term like *tainyinthu,* Wirathu reminds all women of Myanmar of their responsibility to uphold the nation's lineage. This reminder extends beyond Burman Buddhist women. In the quest for the nationalists' rite of passage as masculine citizens of the state, women of both Burman Buddhist group and other ethnoreligious groups are called in to perform their duties as female citizens. Their duty as female citizens is equated to "a duty to [Burman Buddhist] husband" (Das 2007).

Wirathu's gender ideologies are deeply interlaced with issues of ethnoraciality and citizenship. His use of seemingly non-sexist reference terms for women in Myanmar are not to be taken for granted and his gender ideology towards women is to be questioned. The need for such questions becomes clear in one of his rally speeches protesting the United Nations' inquiry of potential human rights issues in Myanmar in 2015. In the video shared by the Democratic Voices of Burma (DVB) on YouTube,[35] Wirathu was seen delivering a vehement speech on a stage surrounded by nationalist men and Buddhist monks. In the speech, he referred to the U.N. special rapporteur on Myanmar, Ms. Yanghee Lee, as *kaunma* (bitch, lit: female animal) and *hpathema* (prostitute).[36] The audience was heard passionately agreeing with Wirathu's statement about Ms. Lee. In the same speech, he referred to those who reported about Ms. Lee *myosaun ubade* as *swakyalma* (loudmouthed women). For Wirathu, both Ms. Lee and the women who are against *myosaun ubade* are not *amyokaunthamee* (daughters of good lineage). He cried, Ms. Lee "may give her ass to *kala* (derogatory term referencing dark-skinned people of South Asian descent, especially *Rohingya* and Muslims in the country) but may not give away my country to *kala*." This inflammatory and sexist speech offers an insight into Wirathu's gender ideology in which women are only good when they uphold the nation's lineage and consequentially the lineage of Burman Buddhist men; if refused, they are spoiled, damaged, and only as good as *phathema* or prostitutes. Wirathu's rationality behind deciding between "a daughter of good lineage" or "a loudmouthed woman" rests not on the woman's ethnoraciality, but on her intimate choices and behaviors as female citizens.[37] In addition, gender ideology and social stance towards women are prevailing through the choices of reference terms in his nationalist discourse.

7 Conclusion: Women at Disposal

I opened this paper by asking what role women as the gender inferior in Burman society play in Buddhist nationalist discourse. To answer this question, I first explored historical representation and role of women in mainstream Burman Buddhist society. The issues of gender equality and gender discrimination during the colonial and post-colonial times were complex. During the colonial times, Burmans saw themselves as having

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[32] Monks in Myanmar usually refer to laypeople in conversational settings as *dayaka* (mas) or *dayakama* (fem) meaning "the donor" or "the person responsible for my wellbeing." See the relationship between the *sangha* and the laity in Myanmar in Keeler (2017).

[33] See anti-Muslim sentiments expressed by Myanmar's most revered Buddhist monk *Sitagu Sayadaw* at https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/08/world/asia/buddhism-militant-rise.html

[34] A masculine counterpart word for this is *tainyintha* (lit: a male person who is indigenous to the land).

[35] https://globalvoices.org/2015/01/22/myanmars-nationalist-monk-attacks-un-envoy-in-his-speech/

[36] The word *hpathe* already refers to "female prostitute," but here, Wirathu adds suffix *ma* (female) to intensify the feminine nature of the prostitute.

[37] I am currently working on a paper on the discursive strategies such as repetition, negative interrogatives, phonemic wordplay, by which Wirathu transforms the acts of unthinkable to the thinkable and the rational.

gender equality, and colonial discourses treated this equality as symptomatic of backwardness. Scholars have challenged and dismantled the apparent gender equality during the post-colonial period as only pertaining to the elites. The class division was offered as an important factor in claiming gender equality across layers of society. However, gender remains a vehicle through which Burman society deals with the affairs of ethnoraciality, citizenship, religiosity, and modernity in democratic era.

In the chess game of Myanmar's post-colonial project, women are at nationalists' disposal to be employed either as pawns or queens. They are weak because of their emotional state as "affectionate, naïve, dumb, and gullible." They are powerful because of their physical function as wombs for the nation's next generation. Embedded in the rhetoric is the dilemma of where and how to task women in its nationalistic project. Nationalist men rely on women in order to perform their role as moral and political citizens. At the same time, it would diminish their role if women were to be put on the throne of power without any restrictions. As a Burman proverb goes, *maphyatma pyipyat* (only women or femininity can destroy the nation),[38] men find themselves at an impasse in their position against women. Considering the complexities of ethnoreligiosity in Myanmar, which they believed to be threatening to their project, nationalists do not have a choice but to recruit women to join alliance although they would rather maintain the overt narrative of women as the gender inferior.

Nationalists like Wirathu therefore place women in the nationalist project that polices and regulates their intimate and sexual choices. The laws like *myosaun ubade* are not new in Burman nationalist discourse. Regardless of its claim for perceived gender equality during colonial times, laws like the 1939, 1954, and 2015 Interfaith Marriage laws regulating women's marriages are rhetorical and legal efforts through which nationalists find escape for their anxieties about women as the powerful gender in the nation-state building project. At the same time, the lawmakers behind those laws carefully select certain discursive strategies to target women as primary subjects of the laws and consequentially making them the weak gender even compared to men of the othered ethnoreligious groups. In these ways, the Burman Buddhist nationalist discourses push and pull women as both "daughters of good lineage" and "loudmouthed women" responsible for and threatening to the nation's future. Why can we not be honest, affectionate, friendly, responsible, but also autonomous, powerful, and influential? That is the question left to ask.

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[38] A famous Buddhist monk *Ashin Nanda Mala Biwontha* however claims that this proverb does not denote women or femininity. He is able to make this argument because in Burmese, *ma* denotes both negative particle and femininity. Out of context, the meaning of this proverb can be ambiguous, as it can also mean that if violate the commands, the nation will be ruined. However, growing up, I only observed people use the proverb in the meaning I describe here. See the news article of *Ashin Nanda Mala Biwontha*'s claim in Burmese here https://realthadin.com/archives/20711

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