

## Talking Sex, Making Love

### *P. Moe Nin and Intimate Modernity in Colonial Burma*

Chie Ikeya

#### Loss of Innocence Redux

On 27 November 2012, the sex education magazine-cum-erotica *Hnyou* (Enchant)<sup>1</sup> hit the stands in Burma (Myanmar). Heralded as the first of its kind, *Hnyou* featured photo spreads of scantily clad models, articles offering racy romance tips such as “Secrets of the bedroom”, as well as a question-and-answer sex column. Notwithstanding its relatively expensive price and despite, or perhaps due to, the red warning on its cover indicating that the magazine is suitable “for over 18s only”, *Hnyou* became an overnight success among the youth in the country. Just as instantly, the publication was banned, with the then Minister of Information denouncing the “almost pornographic” content of the magazine offensive to Burmese cultural sensibilities.<sup>2</sup> Oo Swe, the editor-in-chief of *Hnyou*, defended the magazine, insisting that it presented sex-related topics from a health or clinical point of view. Indeed, *Hnyou* has stirred heated debates about sex education and the need to tackle Burmese attitudes toward sex, which are widely perceived to be prudish, old-fashioned, and unscientific.<sup>3</sup>

In the wake of the *Hnyou* controversy, few in Burma appeared to know or remember that *Hnyou* was hardly the first Burmese publication to bemoan the putative primitiveness of sexual knowledge among the Burmese, summon public and ‘scientific’ discussion and management of ‘private’ matters, and be chastized for so doing. It has gone largely unnoticed that almost a century ago, the modernist writer, Catholic convert and apostate, journalist, educator, and Burma’s first sexologist, P. Moe Nin (1883–1940) produced a substantial body of popular literature on the ‘science of sex’ and the ‘psychology of love’.

1 All translations from Burmese are my own.

2 Reported by Oo Swe in an interview, in January 2013, with the *Irrawaddy Magazine*, <https://burma.irrawaddy.com/opinion/2013/01/19/31380.html> (accessed 19 January 2016).

3 Sat Su 2012; Shwe Yee Saw Myint 2013.

Venerated as one of the founding fathers of modern Burmese literature and considered to be the most prolific writer of the colonial period (1826–1947), Moe Nin is a towering historical figure in Burma. Outside of the country, however, he is all but unknown. And Burmese scholarship on Moe Nin has thoroughly neglected his sexological works, though this is not surprising given that the history of sexuality in Burma has yet to be written. It is also worth noting that historical studies of sexology in Southeast Asia, in general, are virtually non-existent despite the recent growth in the scholarship on sexuality in the region.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter, I explore the life story and writings of this pivotal yet forgotten figure in the history of vernacular sexual culture and modernity in Burma. I focus in particular on one of his numerous “treatises on love and matrimonial affairs”, as they were referred to by Burmese literary scholars: *Kāma theidi kyan* (Treatise on the perfection of desire, 1931). What do *Kāma theidi kyan* and other parts of his literary oeuvre—and their critical reception—reveal about how Burmese regimes of marriage, family, and sexuality were reconstituted in interwar British Burma? What do they suggest about the formation of modernity under conditions of colonial rule?

As I show in the following pages, Moe Nin, in his professed quest to free sex and love from ‘irrational’ customs, fashioned a new hegemonic family that revolved around the heterosexual, conjugal couple and that privileged emotion, choice, and individualism over social obligation. He positively affirmed sexuality and desire—among both women and men—as a hallmark of the modern subject. Moe Nin’s reformulation of the intimate, I argue, cannot be neatly explained as a story of the globalization of (Eurocentric) modern ideologies of love, marriage and family, or the scientization of sex, sexuality and reproduction. His writings furthermore complicate current understandings of the politics of the family in colonial Asia that have stressed the nationalist construction of the intimate domain as a site through which to safeguard tradition and nation from ‘Western’, colonial modernity. His critique of what he deemed ‘traditional’ Burmese marriage and family norms and forms, offered at the very height of anticolonial nationalism in Burma, confounds any attempt to frame Moe Nin as an agent of either colonialism or nationalism.

4 To my knowledge, Edwin Wieringa’s study (2002) of the *Sērat candraning wanita*, a voluminous Javanese manuscript on erotic love written in the 1930s, is the notable exception. In it, the author similarly notes that Javanese erotica have hitherto received little scholarly attention. In contrast, a voluminous historical literature on sexology and erotic love exists in East and South Asia. For a historiography of the scholarship on sexualities in Asia, see Loos 2009.

### Moe Nin, the Wandering Savant<sup>5</sup>

Born in Thonze just north of the colonial capital Rangoon to a once affluent family, P. Moe Nin (aka Maung Kyaw Nyun) grew up with an absent father and a hard-working mother who eked out a meager living by selling various goods in the market.<sup>6</sup> In his autobiography *P. moe nin e p. moe nin*, (P. Moe Nin's P. Moe Nin), Moe Nin claims that he viewed education as the key to escaping the hardship that he endured as a child.<sup>7</sup> At the tender age of 10, he ran away from his family to join the Roman Catholic Mission Normal School in Thonze where his half-sister was also a student, and was subsequently adopted by Father Félix Perroy (1866–1931). Three years later, Moe Nin began attending a seminary school in the southeastern port city of Moulmein where he was given the Christian name Philip. Having excelled in Latin, he was admitted into the seminary Collège général in Penang (then part of the British Straits Settlements) with a scholarship in 1899, and studied Latin, psychology, objectivity, logic and reason.<sup>8</sup> Unable to envisage himself making—or rather, keeping—a lifelong commitment to the priesthood, and particularly celibacy, which he would have been expected to do were he to complete his seminary degree and be ordained, Moe Nin discontinued his study and returned to Burma in 1902.<sup>9</sup>

For the next decade or so, Moe Nin led a peripatetic life, taking up a number of different jobs in the process and wandering from mission schools to monasteries to farmsteads and even to a home for vagrants. Upon returning to Burma, he first went to Father Perroy, who gave him a position as a teacher at the mission school in Thonze. He moved in with his mother who, as it so happened, had remarried an avid student of traditional Burmese literature. It was from his stepfather that Moe Nin, who had stopped formal instruction in Burmese language and literature since his seminary days, acquired his knowledge of and appreciation for the subject. Also at about this time, Moe Nin was ordained temporarily as a monk, marking his turn towards Buddhism and away from Christianity (although he maintained close

5 Biographical information on Moe Nin has been taken largely from the following: Moe Nin 2007; Gyi Khin and Myint Swe 1973; Moe Nin 2013a; “P. Moe Nin” 1966.

6 Moe Nin 2007:13.

7 Moe Nin 2007:14.

8 The Collège général, as with the schools in Thonze and Moulmein that Moe Nin attended, was founded and run by the *Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris* (Society of Foreign Missions of Paris).

9 Moe Nin 2007:21–2.

relations with Father Perroy and Roman Catholic mission schools, where he would continue to teach).<sup>10</sup>

In 1906, he was ordained again in order to escape an unhappy marriage into which he had reluctantly entered, just three months prior, with a young daughter of a wealthy neighbour.<sup>11</sup> Moe Nin devoted himself to the study of *vipassanā* (insight meditation) at the monastery of the eminent scholar-monk Ledi Sayadaw (1846–1923), whom he followed to Rangoon. There, he befriended Ananda Metteyya (Allan Bennett, 1872–1923)—Britain's first Buddhist monk and the founder of the International Buddhist Association—and helped the latter with the publication of *Buddhism: An Illustrated Quarterly Review* (1903–1908), the official organ of the association.<sup>12</sup> His second temporary ordination lasted approximately two years, after which he disrobed and married Ma Sein Tin.

Moe Nin remained unemployed for several years after this second marriage, relying on the support and generosity of his wife's family. Only in the mid 1910s did he begin to show promise as a writer. In 1914, Moe Nin published *Loki lan pya niti kyan* (Treatise on worldly affairs), the first of many 'treatises' that he would write. By 1916, he was working for the top two Burmese newspapers, *Myanmar Alin* (New Light of Myanmar) and *Thuriya* (The Sun), as translator of international news, war correspondent, and editor, all the while teaching Latin at the Ahlone Baptist school. Over the next 23 years, he wrote for virtually all of the major news outlets in Burma—including *Myanmar Alin*, *Thuriya*, *Pyinnya Alin* (Light of Knowledge), *Bandoola*, *Kawi Myak Hman* (Scholar's eyeglasses), *Dagon*, and *Toe Tet Yay* (Efficiency)—and served as an editor for a good number of them. Characteristic of Burma's modernist literary vanguard, he also translated and adapted English novels.<sup>13</sup> The two most famous, both

10 In his autobiography, Moe Nin explains that he had long harbored doubts in the Christian faith but, at the same time, was not inclined to apostasize. What occasioned his turn to Buddhism was his love affair with Ma Han, a young Buddhist woman. Their mutual affection went unacknowledged due to the fact that he was Christian and she was Buddhist. Eventually, an elder woman in his community instructed Moe Nin to *shin byu* (undertake temporary ordination). Ma Han, upon hearing of this, arranged for him to be ordained at a local monastery. He was ordained soon after.

11 The abandoned wife succumbed to plague shortly thereafter.

12 Bennett ordained in Burma in 1902. The following year, he established *Buddhism*, which he edited and printed in Rangoon. The precise nature of Moe Nin's contribution to the publication of the periodical is unclear; he does not provide specific details in his autobiography (Moe Nin 2007:44). Interestingly, Moe Nin also indicates that he learned "chemical analysis" from Bennett, who had formerly trained and worked as an analytical chemist in London.

13 Several other Burmese vanguard writers such as Shwe U Daung (1889–1973), Zeya (1900–1982), and Dagon Khin Khin Lay (1904–1981) entered the literary field by adapting foreign works.

published in 1920, were *Ne yi yi*, based on *Just a girl* (1898) by Charles Garvice, and *Ne nyo nyo*, an adaptation of Marie Corelli's *Innocent: Her fancy and his fact* (1914). In addition, he wrote screenplays and directed films. All told, Moe Nin published at least 232 short stories, 85 novels, 50 treatises and self-help books, and 15 study guides on English and Latin, establishing himself as a pioneering novelist, journalist, scriptwriter, and one of the most influential contributors to the development of modern Burmese literature. Besides his own literary production, his support and encouragement of Burma's first generation of college writers, the *Khitsan* (Testing the age) writers, helped usher in the country's 'modern literary renaissance' in the 1930s.<sup>14</sup>

The last decade of his life was perhaps the hardest Moe Nin had experienced, despite the extraordinary success he enjoyed as a writer. His eldest child Maung Kyaw Soe, a celebrated actor, was fatally stabbed by his alleged lover in 1930, when he was only 20 years old.<sup>15</sup> Three months after the murder of Maung Kyaw Soe, Ma Sein Tin passed away. Reeling from the sudden loss of his beloved son and wife, Moe Nin explains, he was unable to provide for his remaining son and daughter, and left them in the care of his wife's relatives in Thonze.<sup>16</sup> Moe Nin died in Rangoon in 1940 due to complications resulting from a combination of leg injuries sustained during a bicycle accident, diabetes, and, finally, pneumonia. The who's who of the literary and publishing scene in Burma eulogized Moe Nin as "the writer who opened Burma's eyes to a wide variety of novel literary forms",<sup>17</sup> and formed a committee to oversee the elaborate weeklong funeral ceremony.

### Treatises on Love and the Perfection of Desire

Although Moe Nin wrote non-fiction on a wide array of topics ranging from business, right conduct, and health and hygiene, a considerable number of

14 The *khitsan* writers were students of Rangoon University's first Burmese professor U Pe Maung Tin and the first graduates of the Burmese literature degree course at the university. The essence of the *khitsan* movement was the experimentation with novel literary techniques, and the principal goal of this experiment was to render Burmese literature more accessible to and inclusive of the everyday person. For more on the *khitsan* movement, see U Pe Maung Tin's foreword to the collection of *khitsan* short stories in Pe Maung Tin 1976. Also see Hla Pe 1968; Win Pe 2009.

15 She testified during her trial that they were never lovers, he was stalking her, and that she stabbed him in self-defense (Gyi Khin and Myint Swe 1973:234–5).

16 Gyi Khin and Myint Swe 1973:238–9.

17 Gyi Khin and Myint Swe 1973:156–7.

his publications were treatises (*kyan*) and guides (*lan hnyun*) on love, matrimony, and intimacy. These included: *A chit pyat lan* (Short-cut to love), *Kāma theidi kyan* (Treatise on the perfection of desire, 1931), *Thami gown yi* (A young woman's virtues), *Tha gown yi* (A young man's virtues), *A chit lan hnyun* (A lover's guide), *A pyo lan hnyun* (A maiden's guide, 1936), *Lu pyo lan hnyun* (A bachelor's guide), and *Mein ma seit kyan* (The psychology of women). While often addressed to young, *yaku khit* (present-day) men and women, who represented the first generation in Burma to benefit from mass literacy and formed the basis of an expanding—though primarily urban—reading public,<sup>18</sup> the intended audiences of these texts were both fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, and the young and the old. In the preface to *A chit lan hnyun* (A lover's guide), for example, Moe Nin maintained that the guide was meant not only for adolescents but also for their parents, who would be better equipped to give guidance to their children as a result of the text. As such, he hoped that the guide would be read by people of all ages, and “benefit intergenerational relations”.<sup>19</sup>

None of the above titles have entered the list of his literary masterpieces. Some critics dismissed his discussion of relations between the sexes as indecent and characteristic of the work of a waning literary genius. Yet, his treatises proved to be extremely popular and were regarded as essential reading on the subject matter several decades after his death. For example, a selection of his shorter commentaries on ‘*a chit yei*’ and ‘*ein daung yei*’ (love and matrimonial affairs) were posthumously republished as *A chit abhidhamma thit* (The new lover's Abhidhamma, 1961), *Chit hmu yei ya* (Matters of love, 1962), and *A chit atwin yei* (Intimate matters of love, 1962).<sup>20</sup>

Moe Nin also wrote shorter pieces, such as “A chit seik sai ko lo gyi” (Psychology of love), in which he emphasized the vital importance of distinguishing love from lust.<sup>21</sup> Moe Nin begins the piece as follows:

Love has a tendency to be tainted by *kilesa* (evil desire, defilements). The 1500 *kilesa* are often the root of love. These desires are not always evident in all instances of love. But even if *kilesa* do not manifest, they tend to exist hidden inside.<sup>22</sup>

18 For a detailed discussion of developments in literacy, print industry, and the popular press in interwar Burma, see Ikeya 2011:38–44, 55–9.

19 Moe Nin 2003:6.

20 Moe Nin 2003:155–7.

21 Moe Nin 2013b.

22 Moe Nin 2013b:152.

Moe Nin warns that even the 528 kinds of *mettā* (selfless loving kindness) among parents, children, and siblings are not free of *kilesa*. It is therefore to be expected, he claims, that all heterosexual relationships are tainted by *kilesa*.

He proceeds to compare and contrast relationships among adults and the youth. Having identified 14–15 year-old adolescents as clean and pure, he elaborates:

Young men and women are content to simply be in each other's presence; being able to talk to one another and look each other in the face is like attaining nirvana! They have no desire to play fast and loose with each other nor do they have any unwholesome intentions. While a man 20 years or younger falls in love upon seeing a pretty face, an older man falls for a woman based on her bust, waist, hips, height, and, well, basically, her buxom body.<sup>23</sup>

Moe Nin adds, however, that *kilesa* also exists among the youth and, in fact, from a very young age. He gives the example of prepubescent boys and girls who fall for women or men who are 20–25 years older. Though the sexual organs of such boys and girls may not have matured, nor are their *kilesa* apparent, they can nevertheless take heavenly ('nirvana-like') pleasure in a mere embrace or a caressing touch by the older party.

In closing, Moe Nin turns his attention to same-sex relations. He points out that while love develops only between a man and a woman, prisoners, young students, and young women who do not have occasion to meet men do sometimes become lovers. "Since we know that true love is only possible between a man and a woman", Moe Nin posits, "same-sex relations in the name of love are really relations kindled by *kilesa*".<sup>24</sup> In other words, no form of intimacy—whether it be heterosocial or homosocial, heterosexual or homosexual, between a parent and a child, or between friends or lovers—is free from *kilesa*. One must be ever vigilant against carnal desire—defiled, selfish, and unwholesome—and not mistake it for authentic love, which is pure, selfless, and unconditional.

However, in *Kāma theidi kyan* (Treatise on the perfection of desire, hereafter referred to as *Perfection of desire*), published three years later, Moe Nin presents carnal desire and sexual fulfillment as wholesome and conducive of physical, emotional, and psychological well-being.<sup>25</sup> In fact, sexual

<sup>23</sup> Moe Nin 2013b:153.

<sup>24</sup> Moe Nin 2013b:155.

<sup>25</sup> Moe Nin 1997.



enlightenment is presented as indispensable to lasting fulfillment in love and marriage.

In the preface, Moe Nin describes *Perfection of desire* as an objective, reasoned, and researched work based on his study of writings by European experts, thereby ensuring for himself an expert status. He does not specify to which 'European experts' he was referring. Yet, the content and form of the book make unavoidable the conclusion that he must have consulted, at the very least, Richard von Krafft-Ebing's best-selling *Psychopathia sexualis* (originally published in 1886 and in its twelfth edition by 1903)<sup>26</sup> and Havelock Ellis' multivolume *Studies in the psychology of sex* (1897–1910),<sup>27</sup> works that Moe Nin would have undoubtedly come across as a student of psychology. In all likelihood, he would have also drawn on Marie C. Stopes' *Married love: A new contribution to the solution of sex difficulties*, a bestseller that had sold more than half million copies by 1925.<sup>28</sup> In fact, *Perfection of desire* reads like a synthetic adaptation of these texts, combining insights, information, and styles of medico-scientific sexological works (Krafft-Ebing and Ellis) and the more populist genre of advice manuals (Stopes), and fusing 'the science of sex' with 'the art of love'.

As with these and other turn of the century sexological texts, *Perfection of desire* includes a description of: the male and female genital organs, 'erogenic zones', physiology of erection, ejaculation, orgasm, and impregnation; 'love-play' or foreplay, positions and attitudes during and after coitus; sexual cycles for men and women, sexual maturity, menstruation, impotence, frigidity, infertility, and menopause; sexuality in children, puberty, auto-erotism, and masturbation; the distinction between 'the sexual instinct' and 'the instinct of procreation'; how to choose a partner; how to control procreation; the causes and symptoms of premature labour, miscarriage, and venereal diseases, and how to prevent or treat these disorders (see Table 1 for the table of contents). What is missing, notably, is a discussion of 'sexual

26 Von Krafft-Ebing 1886.

27 The six-volume work, published between 1897 and 1910, included: *Sexual inversion* (1897); *The evolution of modesty: The phenomena of sexual periodicity: Auto-eroticism* (1900); *Analysis of the sexual impulse* (1903); *Sexual selection in man* (1905); *Erotic symbolism: The mechanism of detumescence: The psychic state of pregnancy* (1906); and *Sex in relation to society* (1910). As a side note, Moe Nin's discussion of *kilesa* among the youth in "The psychology of love" also bears close resemblance to Ellis' analysis of "precocious sexual impulses" in volume six of *Studies in the psychology of sex*.

28 Stopes 1918. Her *Enduring passion: Further new contributions to the solution of sex difficulties being the continuation of married love* (Stopes 1928) might also have served as a key source.



TABLE 7.1 Table of contents, Moe Nin, *Treatise on the perfection of desire* (1931)

Preface

- 1. A husband's prosperity
- 2. Diseases and treatments
- 3. Treatments for small penis
- 4. Low sexual drive
- 5. First sexual intercourse
- 6. Sexual dysfunction and disease
- 7. Gonorrhea
- 8. Syphilis
- 9. Fertility
- 10. Miscarriage
- 11. Contraception
- 12. Amenorrhea and menorrhagia
- 13. What turns women on
- 14. How to tell if a woman really loves you
- 15. The female hormone cycle
- 16. Special role of women's breasts
- 17. What turns men on
- 18. How to strengthen your marital bond
- 19. Age and sexual desire
- 20. Harmonious marriages
- 21. Four kinds of husbands
- 22. Menstruation
- 23. How to live a long life

Epilogue

abnormality' or 'aberrations', considered briefly in "Psychology of love"—a conspicuous omission in light of the fact that sexology in the 'West' (by which I mean Europe, the United States and Japan) developed primarily as a scientific study of sexual perversion that produced compendia of aberrant sexual typologies and classifications such as exhibitionism, sadism, masochism, homosexuality, sexual inversion, transvestism, voyeurism, narcissism, erotic fetishism, and nymphomania that, in turn, informed a larger 'invention of heterosexuality'.<sup>29</sup>

29 Katz 1991; Frühstück 2003.

Also mirroring contemporary sexological texts, *Perfection of desire* begins with a justification for its publication.<sup>30</sup> Anticipating, rightly, that the book would be criticized for its frank discussion of sex, Moe Nin clarified his motivation for writing it as follows:

Sexual fulfillment in marriage is not something that has received attention in discussions of the key ingredients for a happy and successful marriage. Yet, the most important thing in one's life is the question of *kāma* (carnal desire). This is a desire that no normal human being can be free of and thus is an essential question for one's psychological well-being. There is a popular misconception that sex is dirty; that ignorance of and disinterest in sexual matters is a virtue and signifies a pure and clean mind. There are those who, out of embarrassment, shun sexological (*pinnya* of *kāma*) writings. But carnal knowledge is not a sin. In fact, refusing knowledge and understanding of sex is the biggest sin.<sup>31</sup>

He concludes by indicating that he has written the treatise for the benefit of Burmese people who, like ships trying to navigate seas without a map or compass, are badly in need of guidance and direction. Like his contemporaries, Moe Nin forcefully proclaimed "the quest for truth" as his goal, and presented himself as a progressive reformer disabusing his people of unscientific, traditional, and unenlightened views and mentalities.<sup>32</sup>

In Chapter 1 ("A husband's prosperity"), Moe Nin fleshes out these points, elaborating on why marriage will last only when both man and wife are

30 Most pioneering sexological texts the world over were denounced as obscene and pornographic, despite the effort by their authors to justify their works as legitimate, scientific studies of human sexual behaviour. As Ellis (1905:vi–vii) explained in the preface to the first volume of *Studies in the psychology of sex*, the sexologist could: "take for granted that any serious and precise study of the sexual instinct will not meet with general approval; his work will be misunderstood; his motives will be called in question [...] indeed, the pioneer in this field may well count himself happy if he meets with nothing worse than indifference".

31 Moe Nin 1997:i–ii.

32 Take, for example, the best-selling *Encyclopaedia of sexual knowledge* by Arthur Koestler, Willy Aldor, and Levy-Lenz, published just two years after *Perfection of desire* under the pen name of Dr. A. Costler and "A. Willy", and under the editorship of Norman Haire, a member of the British Sexology Society. In his preface to the book, Haire explains that despite the large volume of popular books on sex that had been published recently in England, "sexual ignorance is still so general, and the mass of misery arising therefrom so enormous and so appalling, that I welcome all additions to the list of volumes offering a measure of sexual enlightenment": Costler, Willy, and others 1934:vii.

sexually fulfilled. He identifies the man as the active party—the ‘doer’—in a conjugal relationship but insists that the sexual desires of the wife must also be actively met:

If, during intercourse, the husband experiences an orgasm before the wife experiences hers, then not only will she sleep poorly but also begin to loathe him. When this feeling of dissatisfaction is extreme, it leads to adultery, which in turn leads to physical and psychological suffering. Symptoms can be as extreme as witchcraft or epilepsy. In most marriages I have encountered, husbands are selfish and inconsiderate in this manner; only his sexual needs matter and the wife lives in misery. Such unhappy marriages abound. In fact, there are many wives who die without ever having experienced conjugal bliss!<sup>33</sup>

In the pages that follow, Moe Nin explains that a wife should not assume that she won't get pregnant because she does not experience sexual pleasure; pregnancy occurs when the male sperm meets the female egg. He suggests that when a sexually dissatisfied wife endures the pain and labour of pregnancy and childbirth, she can become resentful of her husband. Yet, a wife does not know how to openly air her frustrations and unhappiness. The husband, mistaking her quiet suffering as a deliberate and undeserved attempt at annoying him, begins to resent her: “What reason does she have to be unhappy? I work hard all day to provide for her and buy her all the clothes and jewelry she could want”. He thus places all the blame on the wife, who finds herself disillusioned, Moe Nin indicates. She was raised to believe that a woman, upon marriage, will finally come to know conjugal bliss. But as it turns out, she not only experiences no sexual gratification but also finds herself with a husband increasingly frustrated with and prone to mistreating her. The result: “She feels like packing her bags and going home to her mother”.<sup>34</sup>

“This guide is written with the hope that it will help prevent such tragedies”, Moe Nin submits. He continues:

Marriage is the most important thing in life. But if you don't have the knowledge that you need to go on this important journey—like setting out on a journey into a mountainous jungle in the dark and without a map—then your life will come to resemble hell. Without this essential

33 Moe Nin 1997:2.

34 Moe Nin 1997:4.

knowledge, you will not only be prevented from indulging in conjugal pleasure but will have to suffer *dukkha* (unhappiness). I offer this book with the hope that it will serve as a guiding light, and hope that readers, for the sake of human prosperity, health, and happiness, will make use of it instead of denouncing it.<sup>35</sup>

In sum, enlightened knowledge and understanding of sex is essential to harmony, happiness, and lasting fulfillment in love and marriage. Passion alone cannot ground conjugal love. But a passionless marriage lacking in mutual sexual satisfaction is not true conjugal love.

In the following chapter on “Diseases and treatments”, Moe Nin gives a detailed description of the male and female anatomies, sexual organs, and reproductive cycles, pointing out what is normal and abnormal, and healthy and unhealthy. For example, Moe Nin discusses pre- and post-menstrual syndromes for women and, for men, spermatorrhea, impotence and premature ejaculation. As treatment, he strongly recommends Ayurvedic medicine, particularly asafetida; in addition to taking it orally, he advises the men to massage a mixture of powdered asafetida and ghee over the shaft of the penis and wrap the area with betel leaves.<sup>36</sup> He also expounds on the various ways in which a husband can help his wife achieve sexual pleasure and orgasm during intercourse, especially oral stimulation.

One aspect of this chapter is worth highlighting: Moe Nin’s emphasis on the importance of the sexual health of *both* husband and wife. In particular, he details the vital importance of foreplay, stressing, for instance, that a husband should not rush penetration and should stimulate his wife’s clitoris for several minutes before penetration. He insists that it is a myth that women should be passive during sex and encourages the wife to actively move her body in such a way that gives her pleasure. He is especially emphatic that husband and wife should either orgasm simultaneously or that the husband ensure that his wife does so before he orgasms. This, he states, is the secret to a happy and fulfilling marriage.<sup>37</sup>

Two other chapters of *Perfection of desire* stand out: Chapters 18 (“How to strengthen your marital bond”) and 20 (“Harmonious marriages”). Chapter 18 recommends that a couple not fixate on each other’s positive characteristics

35 Moe Nin 1997:4–5.

36 Moe Nin 1997:18–9. Moe Nin recommends other remedies, for instance, instructing husbands to show understanding for their ailing wives and suggesting phosphorous for men suffering from sexual dysfunction.

37 Moe Nin 1997:10–7.

but, instead, figure out each other's faults and weaknesses prior to marriage. He advises on the appropriate space that a husband and wife should give each other, noting that there can be such a thing as too much time together. Most striking is his position on female chastity. Moe Nin points out that most men assume that their wives are virgins at the time of marriage and take great pride in this. "But what if she turns out not to be a virgin? Can you accept it?", he asks.<sup>38</sup> He states that a husband should make acceptance his goal. Moe Nin proceeds to question the value of virginity, arguing that it is not an important factor in marriage. "A virgin wife is no guarantee that the marriage won't be unhappy", he states, adding: "there is no reason to believe that only a virgin wife makes for a happy marriage".<sup>39</sup> According to him, virginity neither makes nor breaks a marriage. Importantly, he posits that this is the case whether or not the wife has lost her virginity voluntarily or involuntarily. It does not matter if she lost her virginity knowingly or foolishly as a careless youth, or whether or not she regrets having lost her virginity. What really matters in a marriage, concludes Moe Nin, is mutual respect, understanding, and honesty.<sup>40</sup>

Chapter 20 reiterates and reinforces much of what Moe Nin puts forth in Chapter 18, that is, that the recipe for a successful marriage includes mutual respect, understanding, and honesty. He makes two interesting additions. First, the key to a harmonious marriage is to avoid living with one's parents. He identifies the presence of in-laws (whether they be mothers- or sisters-in-law) as one of the main causes of marital discord. Their proximity prevents a couple from freely and sufficiently indulging in the pleasures of conjugality. It hinders open and honest communication between husband and wife. The burden of having to please in-laws creates unnecessary stress for the wife. Moe Nin asserts that a man should marry only when he has achieved financial independence and is able to afford his own home.<sup>41</sup> Secondly, Moe Nin emphasizes the need for the husband to show appreciation for his wife's household work. He points out that Burmese society has, in the past, had a tendency to devalue domestic labour. But times have changed, he argues, and husbands and wives of modern times must give each other constant support, admiration, and appreciation.<sup>42</sup>

38 Moe Nin 1997:93.

39 Moe Nin 1997:94.

40 Moe Nin 1997:94–5.

41 Moe Nin 1997:98–100.

42 Moe Nin 1997:100–2.

### Family Romance: Sexual Pleasure, Female Desire, and Conjugal Intimacy

Moe Nin's treatises on love and matrimonial affairs were pioneering modern sexological texts, distinguished by their scientific approach, self-identification as 'objective' and 'expert', and medicalization of sex and affect. According to them, sexuality was constitutive of the self and frank discussion of sex was a sign of modern subjectivity.<sup>43</sup> They also represented formulations of the companionate marriage ideal, premised on personal desire and satisfaction, rather than duty, obligation, and a reproductive mandate. According to Moe Nin, the modern husband and wife enjoyed privacy, relative equality, and physical, sexual and emotional intimacy and companionship. Last but not least, Moe Nin fashioned new visions of the family that emphasized a bounded nuclear family that gave greater priority to the 'intimate couple' and challenged an extended or joint family composed of multigenerational kinship.

It is not only in *Perfection of desire* that the relationship between husband and wife figures as the central axis of affect within families. Many of his short stories likewise give primacy to the heterosexual, conjugal affective unit as the primary locus of family decision-making while devaluing other modalities of intimacy, signifying the emergence of what has been termed the 'conjugal family ideal'.<sup>44</sup> Take, for instance, "Yi zā dā mya" (Banditry of love),<sup>45</sup> a tale of love between a wealthy *dā mya* (bandit) Maung Ba Htun and Ma Thant Nyunt, a genteel daughter of a once well-to-do family in decline. Upon obtaining a college degree in agriculture in Western India, Maung Ba Htun returns to the lawless district of Tharawaddy and succeeds in gaining the respect and allegiance of local bandits and outlaws, becoming a powerful overlord. When he learns that Ma Thant Nyunt, who has just lost her father, and her widowed mother, Daw Hla, intend to visit him, he assumes that the women are in search of a rich husband or benefactor. He hatches up a plot to change place with his retainer, Maung Zaw, and observe the behaviour of the two women. Predictably, Daw Hla, convinced that Maung Zaw is the wealthy overlord, urges her

43 There were erotologic texts and sex manuals in early modern and pre-colonial Burma but they do not appear to have these characteristics associated with modern sexological texts. That said, almost no research has been conducted on erotic literature or sex manuals in premodern Burma. Such research may problematize the Foucauldian dichotomy of "*scientia sexualis*" and "*ars erotica*", that is, the Orientalist assumption that in Europe knowledge of the body was produced through scientific discourse, whereas in "the East" the body was experienced through pleasure as an erotic art.

44 Coontz 2006; Hirsch and Wardlow 2006; Sreenivas 2008; Cole and Thomas 2009.

45 Moe Nin 2010.

daughter to marry him, while Ma Thant Nyunt and Maung Ba Htun begin to fall for one another. At one point in the story, Ma Thant Nyunt declares defiantly to her mother that she does not care if Maung Ba Htun—or any man for that matter—is rich or poor; she is not in love with money, she is in love with the individual. In the end, Maung Ba Htun's true identity is revealed, Daw Hla agrees to her daughter's marriage to him, the couple have two children and live happily ever after in their flourishing village.

In “Banditry of love”, as in other love stories,<sup>46</sup> the modern love marriage epitomizes truth, freedom, agency, and progress; it is a model of relations untainted by economic and political interest, calculation, and exchange. It is pitted against and supersedes the family-negotiated or arranged marriage—with or without the consent of the individuals getting married—in which personal desire and fulfillment are subordinated to the material and financial concerns and demands of parents and relatives (often, though not exclusively, the matriarch). To be clear, it was not uncommon at the time that Moe Nin was writing for Burmese men and women to marry without the approval of their families and/or to set up independent households. Additionally, there is little evidence to suggest that Burmese society, long characterized by bilateral inheritance and both matrifocal and patrifocal practices and relations, was ever matriarchal.<sup>47</sup> The marital and familial arrangements that Moe Nin glorified—those governed by ideals of romantic companionship and the nuclear family and subverted, in particular, matriarchal authority—were therefore not unprecedented. They did, however, represent a new hegemonic family that privileged sentiment, choice, and individualism over social obligation, and the husband-wife bond over that of the mother-daughter. In other words, Moe Nin's love/sexual revolution may have promised liberation and progress. But it also served to discipline marriage, family, kinship, gender and sexuality, and stigmatize putatively

46 For other examples, see Moe Nin 2013c, 2013d.

47 A thorough historical study of marriage and family in early modern and colonial Burma has yet to be written, making impossible any secure claims about the prevalence or importance of (semi)arranged marriages and matriarchy in Burma prior to the twentieth century. My examination of nineteenth and twentieth century Burmese civil court records dealing with marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other family disputes—such as the Indian Law Reports (Rangoon Series) and Upper and Lower Burma Rulings—suggests that family-arranged marriages were no more nor less common than other forms of marriage, such as eloping. It also supports the emphasis that the current literature on the Burmese family has placed on bilateral inheritance and matrifocality. See Andaya 2006; Furnivall 1911; Maung Maung 1963; Mi Mi Khaing 1962; Nash and Nash 1963.



‘unenlightened’, ‘oppressive’, and ‘traditional’ modalities of intimacy in the name of emancipating love and sex.<sup>48</sup>

In some ways, these developments are not particularly unique. Elsewhere in the early twentieth century, “medical doctors, pedagogues, and sex educators invoked the (necessity of) the liberation of sex in order to shed oppressive traditional beliefs and to unburden sex of mystification”.<sup>49</sup> The growing body of mostly male ‘experts’ propagated various ‘truths’ about sex that they had uncovered, such as the sexual ignorance, insensitivity and ineptitude of men; unnaturalness of female frigidity (and the discovery of the desiring female); the necessity of foreplay and oral stimulation; and the vital importance of mutual—and preferably simultaneous!—sexual pleasure. They campaigned for the popularization, among the masses, of the knowledge of these sexual discoveries. At the same time that they advocated the scientific, biomedical management of intimate matters, they condemned sexual attitudes and behaviours, and reproductive methods—often feminized social practices centered around women elders, midwives, and healers—that were deemed indigenious and anti-modern.<sup>50</sup>

By the 1920s, the idea that neither love without sexuality, nor sexual pleasure without love was complete had become widespread among sexologists, signalling a shift from the procreative norm to the pleasure principle. As Ellis explained, a harmonious sexual relationship had “liberating and harmonising [sic] influences” on a marriage, allowing “a deeper spiritual unity [...] than can possibly be derived from continence in or out of marriage”.<sup>51</sup> This eroticization and sexualization of marriage and love was a trend that would continue, as evinced by the enduring popularity of Stopes’ *Married love* and similar advice manuals published subsequently by other authors.<sup>52</sup>

48 On the structuring of legitimate intimacy through the liberal, binary concepts of individual freedom and social constraint, see Elizabeth Povinelli’s analysis (2006) of the systematic relations between forms of love and forms of liberal governance in liberal settler colonies.

49 Frühstück 2003:5. Also see Ahluwalia 2008; Briggs 2002; Chiang 2010; Hansen 1992; Hunt 1999.

50 Marie Stopes was a notable exception. She was unsympathetic, even opposed, to the male-dominated medical profession, which she blamed for the widespread ignorance about love and sex, as the following excerpt from *Married love* shows: “so many distinguished medical men, gynecologists and physiologists, are either in ignorance or error regarding some of the profoundest facts of human sex-life, that it is not surprising that ordinary young couples, however hopeful, should break and destroy the joy that might have been their lifelong companion” (Stopes 1918:13).

51 Ellis 1922:68.

52 For example, Hannah and Abraham Stone’s *A marriage manual: A practical guide-book to sex and marriage* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1935), written and published by the

From the United States, England and South Africa to Japan, Siam, China, and Malaya, debates on ‘true’ versus ‘false’ love and marriage often turned on issues of companionship and gender equality as contemporaries tried to come to grips with new conceptions of romantic and conjugal love that prioritized sexual pleasure. In response to questions about what constituted authentic love, many theorists referred to the selfless and all-encompassing love of a mother for her children. Moe Nin, like many others, claimed that love could not be bought, and divorced it from consumerism and materialism. In general, medico-scientific and popular literature on love and sex shared the concern about how to build enduring and harmonious marriages, and claimed that affective ties between husbands and wives superseded those of multigenerational kin and relatives. In addition to the privileging of the ‘intimate couple’ and the private, conjugal family, Moe Nin shared with his contemporaries his decidedly middle-class, heterosexual focus. Like much of the populist sex and marriage advice literature of the time, his “reinforced the idea that heterosexual marriage, along middle-class lines, was and ought to be a central institution of society”.<sup>53</sup> By maligning matriarchal authority and emphasizing the commanding role of the husband (cast in the role of the ‘breadwinner’, while the ‘stay-at-home wife’ was relegated to the separate sphere of domesticity), Moe Nin, furthermore, elevated the status not only of middle-class, heteronormative marriage but also patriarchal family and masculine agency.<sup>54</sup>

Clearly, his study in psychology, a field then dominated by researchers of sex and sexuality, had left an indelible mark on his intellectual orientation and literary production. As a reader of English-language novels and advice literature—Moe Nin was, after all, Burma’s foremost translator and author of self-help books—he would presumably have developed a strong familiarity with emergent notions of heterosexual, conjugal love that recognized sex and romance as healthy and necessary components of marriage. It is entirely possible that texts such as *Perfection of desire* and “The psychology of love” were in large part translations and adaptations into Burmese of popular English-language sexological and marriage advice literature.

Moe Nin may also have been drawing on neo-Malthusian, ‘social hygiene’ and feminist eugenicist movements that viewed reproduction and conjugal sexuality as important public—and national—concerns. As the convening of

---

husband-and-wife physician team, had already gone through 29 printings and been translated into numerous foreign languages, according to the preface to the 1952 edition (Stone and Stone 1952).

53 Hall 1998.

54 For comparative cases, see Cole and Thomas 2009; Hirsch and Wardlow 2006; Sang 2003; Majumdar 2009; Sreenivas 2008.

the International Eugenics Congresses in 1912, 1921, and 1932 indicate, eugenics emerged globally as a scientific pursuit in the first decades of the twentieth century, as heated debates over degeneracy and population decline took place.<sup>55</sup> At the same time, campaigns to uplift the working class out of poverty and emancipate women from involuntary motherhood and social inequity expanded. In neighbouring British India, the first eugenics societies and birth control clinic were established by 1921; by the mid-1930s, Aliyappin Padmanabha Pillay, an influential Indian sexologist and birth control activist, had founded the Bombay based international journal *Marriage Hygiene*, judged by contemporaries such as Ellis as one of the leading English-language journals on sexology.<sup>56</sup> Although there is scant evidence of similar developments in Burma, we know that Burma was also part of the international birth control circuit. When the British and American feminist birth control advocates Edith How-Martyn and Margaret Sanger took their 'Oriental' tour in the winter of 1935–1936 to survey the state of contraception, they made a stop in Rangoon.<sup>57</sup> What impact, if any, did such social 'hygiene' movements have on Moe Nin?

Interestingly, Moe Nin does not exhibit Malthusian concerns with reproduction and overpopulation demonstrated by early male advocates of birth control and experts on sexual knowledge in, for example, neighbouring India and China.<sup>58</sup> He does not make overt gestures to tether sexuality to national well-being; nor does he call for surveillance of the reproductive behaviours of subaltern groups—working class, poor, the uneducated, or otherwise 'unfit' subjects—who tended to be stereotyped as sexually irresponsible. The noticeable absence of pronatalist propaganda and eugenicist agenda in Moe Nin's sexological writings is all the more conspicuous given the unmistakable ways that he had been influenced by the works of Ellis, a supporter of eugenics who served as the president of the Galton Institute and the vice president of the Eugenic Education Society.

Other aspects of Moe Nin's sexological turn stand out. Unlike most pioneering psychologists and sexologists of the time, including both 'amateur' and established experts with institutional affiliations, Moe Nin never undertook original research. He did not conduct surveys or establish question-and-answer

55 For a transnational history of eugenics, see Bashford and Levine 2010; Bashford 2014.

56 For eugenics and birth control movements in British India, see Ahluwalia 2008.

57 Edith How-Martyn, travel notes compiled during her visit to Burma with Margaret Sanger, 3–6 February 1936, in: British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections, Eileen Palmer Collection, MSS Eur D.1182/3; Edith How-Martyn, "Contraception in the Orient", written after the tour of India with Margaret Sanger in the winter of 1935–1936, in: British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections, Eileen Palmer Collection, MSS Eur D.1182/26.

58 Ahluwalia 2008; Dikötter 1998.

columns in papers he edited to solicit and respond to queries about sex or love. Nor did he found a sexological journal or magazine. He did not give lectures on love or sex, nor did he initiate or become involved in movements for sex education.

In fact, Moe Nin's work seems quite exceptional in many ways, especially in light of the colonial context in which he was writing. Indigenous intellectuals, writers and editors in turn-of-the-century colonial societies tended to avoid explicit descriptions of sex out of fear of harming their own respectability or that of their community. They were concerned, in particular, about reinforcing sexualized racist stereotypes of colonized men and women (as unchaste, immoral, and oversexed).<sup>59</sup> Moe Nin, despite his candid sex talk, may have shared this concern. As I indicated above, his discussion of sexual 'perversions' was relatively limited, possibly reflecting his reluctance to reify colonial discourses of colonized subjects as sexual others.

Yet, if this was the case, it makes all the more remarkable Moe Nin's invocation of female sexuality and desire. This is perhaps what is most striking about his writings: his insistence on making both affective and sexual experience the hallmark of an individualized *female* subjectivity, despite the social and political conservatism around female sexuality at this time.<sup>60</sup> Admittedly, special journal issues on female sexual desire were being produced in Japan by the early 1920s.<sup>61</sup> In China, the university professor, sex educator and China's 'Dr. Sex', Zhang Jingsheng (1888–1970), popularized the view of women as active sexual agents (in heterosexual intercourse). At the same time, May Fourth women writers such as Lu Yin challenged the dominant trend of pathologizing same-sex desire in Republican China and gave limited cultural legitimacy to female same-sex desire.<sup>62</sup> But these appear to have been exceptions in much of Asia and other colonized parts of the world where comparable invocations of the autonomous, desiring and self-achieving female subject were found only a decade or two later. For example, Sanjam Ahluwalia has shown in her pathbreaking historical study of birth control in British India that Indian middle-class men and women, even feminists, advocated a form of sexual puritanism that idealized a self-sacrificial, self-effacing femininity and foreclosed the possibility of female sexual expressions within

59 Thomas 2009; Levine 2004.

60 As I have shown in my analysis of critiques of the sexual and sartorial practices of modern Burmese women in literary, political and journalistic texts, the autonomous, desiring, and self-achieving female subject was widely criticized as frivolous, self-indulgent, and unpatriotic (Ikeya 2011).

61 Frühstück 2003:100–9.

62 Sang 2003; Chiang 2010.

or outside matrimony. Not until 1944—more than a decade after the publication of Moe Nin's *Perfection of desire*—did the aforementioned Indian sexologist A.P. Pillay publish a text that placed emphasis on mutual sexual fulfillment in marriage and “recognized that women were not merely passive objects of male desires within matrimony”.<sup>63</sup> Even then, Pillay limited women's sexuality to marriage and maternity.<sup>64</sup> It is not until the 1950s and 1960s in post-Independence India that we encounter portrayals of feminine desire and sexuality in the print media by women writers such as Chudamani Raghavan and Mannu Bhandari.<sup>65</sup>

To be sure, in *Perfection of desire*, too, marriage circumscribed women's—and men's—sexuality. It is not entirely implausible that Moe Nin, like many early male sexologists the world over, sought to enforce ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ under the guise of affirming female sexual desire. Yet, by keeping female sexuality within the bounds of marriage, Moe Nin may have hoped to make palatable to a wide audience the potentially controversial aspects of his book, such as his blunt critique of men's (husbands') tendency towards selfishness, ignorance and ineptitude in matters sexual; his decoupling of sex from reproduction; and his proposal for a novel paradigm of conjugal emotion that challenged existing norms of domestic and familial relations.<sup>66</sup>

It is also worth pointing out the double meaning of the Burmese words Moe Nin most frequently used to refer to husband (*yauk kya*) and wife (*mein ma*). Unlike terms such as *lin/maung hnan* (husband) and *mayā/zanī* (wife) that can only refer to husband or wife, and are often used as pairs (*lin mayā, zanī maung hnan*), the terms *yauk kya* and *mein ma* can also mean a male and female person, respectively, and are actually used most commonly in the latter sense.<sup>67</sup> Moe Nin's decision to employ *yauk kya* and *mein ma* far more regularly than the other unambiguous terms might signify an attempt to be inclusive of non-marital intimacies, rather than restrict sex to marriage. At the very least, it raises questions concerning his intentions and motivations. Was Moe Nin

63 Ahluwalia 2008:151.

64 Ahluwalia 2008:85–114, 151.

65 Mani 2016.

66 Porter and Hall argue for this interpretation. They suggest that authors of Victorian and post-Victorian marriage advice literature such as Marie Stopes and Isabel Hutton, “[by] being very careful to state that they were talking only about sex between persons of the opposite sex legitimately married to one another [...] were able to discuss such delicate topics as ‘the genital kiss’ and to give details for accomplishing variant sexual positions” (Porter and Hall 1995:217).

67 Accordingly, these words are defined in Burmese dictionaries as, first, man/male and woman/female. The second entries for these words are husband and wife.

trying to secure middle-class, heteronormative marriage as the only legitimate site of adult intimacy? What lay behind his effort to modernize existing regimes of sex, love, marriage and family in Burma?

### Psycho-Historicizing the Intimate Reformer

Scholarship on the 'hegemony of love' suggests that global shifts in marriage and family ideals and, specifically, the dominance of the ideology of marital love, were intimately tied to the Enlightenment project of contractual constitutional democracy, the emergence of new market relations in mercantile and industrial capitalism, and the rise of bourgeoisies.<sup>68</sup> One strand of this scholarship has emphasized the rise of market, wage-based economies and liberal forms of governance. It argues that the challenge to feudalism, family-based agricultural production and absolutist states made possible the forging of relationships based on non-instrumental, emotional attachments between autonomous self-making subjects. The feminist strand has analysed the romantic companionate ideal as an ideology that serves to reinforce another constructed ideology, that of separate spheres. The modern conjugal family thus masks the actual entanglement of the masculinized public world of productivity and politics with the feminized domestic realm of reproductive labour.<sup>69</sup>

As I have shown in my previous research, in Burma as elsewhere, the rise of novel domestic ideals intersected with the development of novel market economies.<sup>70</sup> The turn-of-the-century emergence of new patterns of consumption also helped to make iterations of the primacy of conjugal love and intimacy possible and acceptable. Consumer capitalism's emphasis on pleasure, self-actualization and self-gratification as markers of progress and success, promoted through the popular press and the cinema, helped to launch and promote reconfigurations of intimate relations.<sup>71</sup> In other words, love and sex articulated with the organization of both production and consumption. But 'the domestic domain' was—and is—neither a simple reflection nor an extension of economic structures and relations; it is reductive to simply link the development of particular marriage and family norms and practices to certain modes of production and consumption.

68 See, for example, Coontz 2006; Hirsch and Wardlow 2006; Povinelli 2006.

69 Kerber 1998.

70 Ikeya 2011.

71 Ikeya 2011:96–119.

Historians of marriage, family and intimacy in South and Southeast Asia have also asked, rightly, what difference the colonial context made.<sup>72</sup> They have made significant progress in analysing the ideological deployment of the family in anticolonial and nationalist politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the ineluctably intertwined process of 'imagining' women, domesticities and nations. The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were, of course, the height of the age of global empire and coincided with imperial states' intensifying policing of their subjects' sexual behaviour and health. In Burma as in other colonies, marriage and the family were targets for state regulation and sites for the exercise of colonial authority. In the memorable words of Ann Stoler, matters of intimacy were matters of state.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, for reformers, activists, politicians, and intellectuals, the home and the family became the grounds from which to defend native societies and cultures from colonial intervention as well as sites for defining and debating conceptions of the nation and national identity.<sup>74</sup> It is precisely this anticolonial/nationalist demarcation of the 'private sphere' as a sovereign domain—a repository of authentic tradition and nation—from which to resist and critique 'Western', colonial modernity, that makes intriguing Moe Nin's emphatic argument for reforming marital and domestic arrangements.

Here was an individual with no real interest in supporting the colonial state, mobilizing ideas about 'proper' affect, sociality and intimacy at odds with 1930s' nationalist political discourse on Westernization and colonial modernity. So what motivated him to produce reformist, modernist literature on sex and marriage, and desire and intimacy?

Any interpretation of Moe Nin's intentions and motivations must necessarily be somewhat speculative since he does not discuss his corpus on intimate modernity in his autobiography. It must also remain provisional until a comprehensive study of his entire oeuvre has been undertaken. However, it seems fairly safe to say that Moe Nin was a social reformer who identified marriage, family and relations between the sexes as targets of intervention. That one of his closest friends and mentors was the famed scholar-monk turned editor, writer and pioneering advocate of female education and authorship in Burma, Ledi Pandita U Maung Gyi (1878–1939), is probably no coincidence. He introduced the genre of the 'women's column' in Burma and was instrumental in

72 See, for example, Loos 2006; Majumdar 2009; Sreenivas 2008.

73 Stoler 2002.

74 Chatterjee 1993; Loos 2006; Sarkar 2001; Sreenivas 2008. In Burma, this dynamic played out most discernibly in the debate over intermarriage, especially between Burmese Buddhist women and non-Buddhists (Ikeya 2011:120–42).



facilitating discussions on the ‘woman question’, that is, whether and which conditions of women’s lives needed reform.<sup>75</sup> Both men envisioned a new egalitarian model of gender dynamics in a changing Burma. Both idealized the modern man/woman as a self-realizing, self-improving individual. Unlike Ledi Pandita U Maung Gyi, however, Moe Nin called attention to the intimate as a pivotal point of debate about society.

Given his seminary training, it is tempting to regard Moe Nin as a Christian reformer, molded fundamentally by missionary efforts to instill ‘Western’ family ideology, civilize gender and sexual norms and practices, and restructure native households in the colonies.<sup>76</sup> But his writings exhibit both Christian and Buddhist inflections. Take, for instance, his postulation of a dichotomy and tension between non-instrumental love and an instrumentalist love that is premised on the nonaffective, material and strategic interests of kinship. This idea might be attributed to the Christian, Eurocentric ideology of love that tends to ignore the ways that intimate social attachments, materiality and exchange are, in fact, deeply intertwined. Yet, such a view probably resonated with Buddhist ideologies and discourses, edified in narrative (*jataka*) and other normative literature (*vinaya*), that similarly expounded on the dangers of desire and worldly attachments, as his commentary on *kilesa* in “*A chit seik sai-ko-lo-gyi*” suggests. In fact, Moe Nin’s reformulation of the intimate defies any straightforward narrative of the globalization of (Eurocentric) modern ideologies of love, marriage and family. It likewise resists attempts to theorize intimate modernity as the (biomedical) colonization of sex and intimacy, whereby scientific authority and restraint replace religious command.

It seems only fitting to end an inquiry into the motivations of Burma’s literary sexologist/love psychologist extraordinaire by returning to his life story. Given his own struggle with celibacy, it is not hard to imagine that Moe Nin had a keen personal as well as intellectual interest in exploring ‘the psychology of sex’, and then making it accessible to Burmese society.<sup>77</sup> This would not have been unheard of. After all, what motivated Stopes to publish

75 Ikeya 2011:59–74. Incidentally, the erstwhile scholar-monk was, like Moe Nin, once a disciple of Ledi Sayadaw. Unlike Moe Nin, however, Ledi Pandita U Maung Gyi spent decades, not just a couple of years, in the sangha.

76 There now exists a voluminous literature that documents the ways that “the home” has functioned as a crucial site of missionization and colonization: see, for example, Clancy-Smith and Gouda 1998; Hansen 1992; Hunt 1999.

77 Ellis’ *Studies in the psychology of sex*—in which Ellis asserts that asceticism and chastity “demand our estimation, but not our over-estimation”—may very well have contributed to Moe Nin’s decision to abandon his seminary training. See Ellis 1910:177.

*Married love* was her firsthand experience of sexual problems in her first marriage, which ended in annulment due to non-consummation (her first husband turned out to be impotent). Moe Nin too may have been impelled by his own experiences, at the same time that he was inspired by works such as those by Stopes and Ellis. His autobiography is telling in this regard: there are multiple instances in which Moe Nin is unable to mobilize appropriate cultural scripts to express his frustrations with and anxieties about intimate relations, whether they were with his friends, lovers, wives or mother figures. In most of these cases, and as exemplified by his first marriage, his solution was to run away. He may have found in the modern episteme of love and sex a language with which to express in novel, 'rational', and socially acceptable terms his intimate sexual, affective, and familial experiences and struggles.

### Post-Colonial Postscript: The Afterlife of Moe Nin's Intimate Modernity

At the time of his death in 1940, Moe Nin was no longer a lonely pioneer in the field of literary sexology and love psychology in Burma. *A chit gan thi* (Glossary of love) by the novelist and journalist Dagon Nat Shin was published in 1934 (and reprinted in 1938).<sup>78</sup> Ko Than Maung's *Chit neibban tho* (To the nirvana of love) and Saya U Aye Maung's *Loki boun* (Sex life), published immediately after the end of World War Two in 1945, were both reprinted within a year. The latter was in its third edition by Burma's independence in 1948, with glowing reviews of the book published by the most influential Burmese newspapers, magazines and journals at the time.<sup>79</sup> Also in 1948, Thin Kar published both *Thin ein daung yei kyi pwa ni* (How to have a successful marriage) and *Seik pyinnya hnit kāma pyatthana* (Psychology and the problem of desire).<sup>80</sup>

Like Moe Nin, the authors of these various texts rendered sex a natural, essential and powerful part of human life. They preached the significance of sexuality to the health and well-being of the individual, family and society, and espoused conjugal intimacy and marital eroticism. Unlike Moe Nin, however, most of them claimed that their works were based on their own experience and firsthand knowledge. Only Saya U Aye Maung—the sole medical doctor

78 Nat Shin 1938.

79 Than Maung 1946; Aye Maung 1948.

80 Thin Kar 1948a, 1948b.

among these authors—based his book on the works of other experts such as Ellis, Stopes, Norman Haire (a protégé of Ellis and a prominent British sexologist) and M.N. Ganesa Aiyer (an Indian author who published several popular sexological books in the 1930s). His citation of foreign experts and professional sexologists might have distinguished the book from its competitors and contributed to its outstanding success.

In the preface to the third edition of Saya U Aye Maung's *Loki boun*, the former chief editor of *Mandalay Thuriya* (Mandalay Sun), Maung Tin, concludes his tribute to the book as follows:

I pray that not only will there be more writers of sex like U Aye Maung in the near future, but also that women writers like Marie Stopes, the authors of *Married love*, too, would appear in Burma soon.<sup>81</sup>

Women would eventually enter the field of literary sexology, though not until the 1960s, when Sayama Khin Myo Wei's *Lu a twin yay shou hwek chek mya* (Sexology 1) and Khin Khin Kyo's *Chit seik lein seik* (Sexology) appeared.<sup>82</sup> These, however, were readers of sorts, comprising selections of foreign sexological works, translated into Burmese, with introductions and notes. Even as Burma entered the twilight of its sexological turn, Maung Tin's prayer for Stopes-esque women sexologists appear to have gone unanswered.<sup>83</sup> Strangely, none of these texts referenced the works of Moe Nin.

In Burma today, however, Moe Nin is no unknown entity. Extensive parts of his oeuvre continue to be republished. That a kind of historical amnesia has overtaken Burmese society about his modern 'sex talk' suggests that his discourse on desire and intimacy has for long—if not always—inhabited the margins of literary and cultural orthodoxy. This situation may yet change. The *Hnyou* controversy of 2014, and the recent announcement by the Mandalay government that it will police the 'inappropriate behaviour' of gay men,<sup>84</sup> signal the Burmese state's and society's increasing preoccupation with the sexual, and expanding production of discourses about sex. Who knows what new light these developments may cast on *Perfection of desire* and Moe Nin's other works on intimate modernity?

81 Maung Tin 1948.

82 Both were published by the same press (Yangon: Tin win poun hneik taik) in 1964.

83 At some point in the late 1960s or 1970s, the era of "Burmese Way to Socialism" and Cold War politics, the production of popular literature on sexual matters appears to have come to a halt.

84 Watson 2015.

## Acknowledgements

The research for this chapter was funded by grants from Rutgers University. I gratefully acknowledge the insightful comments I received from the participants in the international workshop on Tracing Trajectories of Modernities in Southeast Asia, 1920s–1970s. I wish to thank Susie Protschky and Tom van den Berge, the convenors of the workshop, for their enthusiasm and support for my chapter. I wish to also thank D. Christian Lammerts and the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions and constructive criticisms. All errors and omissions are my own.

## References

### *Archives*

*British Library, London*

Oriental and India Office Collections, Eileen Palmer Collection.

### *Published Sources*

- Ahluwalia, Sanjam. 2008. *Reproductive restraints: Birth control in India, 1877–1947*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Andaya, Barbara Watson. 2006. *The flaming womb: Repositioning women in early modern Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Aye Maung, Saya U. 1948. *Loki boun*. Third edition. Mandalay: Thiha sa poun hneik taik.
- Bashford, Alison. 2014. *Global population: History, geopolitics, and life on earth*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bashford, Alison and Philippa Levine (eds). 2010. *The Oxford handbook of the history of eugenics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Briggs, Laura. 2002. *Reproducing empire: Race, sex, science, and U.S. imperialism in Puerto Rico*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Chatterjee, Partha. 1993. *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. [Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History.]
- Chiang, Howard H. 2010. "Epistemic modernity and the emergence of homosexuality in China", *Gender & History* 22(3):629–57.
- Clancy-Smith, Julia and Frances Gouda (eds). 1998. *Domesticating the empire: Race, gender, and family life in French and Dutch colonialism*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.
- Cole, Jennifer and Lynn M. Thomas (eds). 2009. *Love in Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Coontz, Stephanie. 2006. *Marriage, a history: From obedience to intimacy, or how love conquered marriage*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Costler, A., A. Willy, and others. 1934. *Encyclopædia of sexual knowledge*. London: Francis Aldor.
- Dikötter, Frank. 1998. *Imperfect conceptions: Medical knowledge, birth defects, and eugenics in China*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ellis, Havelock. 1905. *The evolution of modesty: The phenomena of sexual periodicity: Auto-erotism*. Philadelphia: Davis. [First edition 1900.]
- Ellis, Havelock 1910. *Sex in relation to society*. Vol. 6 of *Studies in the psychology of sex*. Philadelphia: Davis.
- Ellis, Havelock 1922. *Little essays of love and virtue*. London: Black.
- Frühstück, Sabine. 2003. *Colonizing sex: Sexology and social control in modern Japan*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Furnivall, J.S. 1911. "Matriarchal vestiges in Burma", *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 1(1):15–30.
- Gyi Khin, U and U Myint Swe. 1973. *Sayagyi p. Moe Nin nhin 20 ya zu sa yei saya mya* [P. Moe Nin and 20th century writers]. Yangon: Kyaw win swe poun hneik taik.
- Hall, Lesley A. 1998. "Feminist reconfigurations of heterosexuality in the 1920s", in: Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (eds), *Sexology in culture: Labelling bodies and desires*, pp. 135–49. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hansen, Karen Tranberg (ed.). 1992. *African encounters with domesticity*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Hirsch, Jennifer S. and Holly Wardlow (eds). 2006. *Modern loves: The anthropology of romantic courtship & companionate marriage*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Hla Pe, U. 1968. "The rise of popular literature in Burma", *Journal of Burma Research Society* 51(2):123–44.
- Hunt, Nancy Rose. 1999. *A colonial lexicon of birth ritual, medicalization, and mobility in the Congo*. Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press.
- Ikeya, Chie. 2011. *Refiguring women, colonialism, and modernity in Burma*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Katz, Jonathan. 1991. *The invention of heterosexuality*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Kerber, Linda K. 1998. "Separate spheres, female worlds, woman's place: The rhetoric of women's history", *Journal of American History* 75(1):9–39.
- Khin Kyo, Khin. 1964. *Chit seik lein seik* [Sexology]. Yangon: Tin win poun hneik taik.
- Khin Myo Wei, Sayama. 1964. *Lu a twin yay shou hwek chek mya* [Sexology 1]. Yangon: Tin win poun hneik taik.
- Krafft-Ebing, R. von. 1886. *Psychopathia sexualis: Eine klinisch-forensische Studie*. Stuttgart: Enke.
- Levine, Philippa. 2004. "A multitude of unchaste women': Prostitution in the British empire", *Journal of Women's History* 15(4):159–63.

- Loos, Tamara. 2006. *Subject Siam: Family, law, and colonial modernity in Thailand*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Loos, Tamara. 2009. "Transnational histories of sexualities in Asia", *American Historical Review* 114(5):1309–24.
- Majumdar, Rochona. 2009. *Marriage and modernity: Family values in colonial Bengal*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mani, Preetha. 2016. "Feminine desire is human desire: Women writing feminism in postindependence India", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 36(1):21–41.
- Maung Maung. 1963. *Law and custom in Burma and the Burmese family*. The Hague: Nijhoff.
- Maung Tin. 1948. "Preface", in: Saya U Aye Maung, *Loki boun*. Third edition, pp. 9–11. Mandalay: Thiha sa poun hneik taik.
- MiMi Khaing. 1962. *Burmese family*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- "P. Moe Nin". 1966. In: *Mran mā. cvay cūn kyam* [Myanmar Encyclopedia]. Volume 6, pp. 316–9. Yangon: Sape beikman.
- Moe Nin, P. 1997. *Kāma theidi kyan* [Treatise on the perfection of desire]. Reprint. Yangon: Sakya aye sape. [First edition 1931.]
- Moe Nin, P. 2003. *A chit lan hnuyn* [A lover's guide]. Reprint. Yangon: Mogyo sape. [First edition c. 1930s.]
- Moe Nin, P. 2007. *P. Moe Nin e p. moe nin* [P. Moe Nin's P. Moe Nin]. Second edition. Yangon: A mei oo jin sa oke taik.
- Moe Nin, P. 2010. "Yi zā dā mya" [Banditry of love], in: *P. moe nin wu htu dou 100* [100 Short stories by P. Moe Nin], pp. 51–65. Yangon: Du wun sa pe. [Originally published in *Dagon Magazine* 2.20 (April 1922).]
- Moe Nin, P. 2013a. "Saya p. moe nin e bawa nhin saya p. Moe Nin e sa" [P. Moe Nin's life and writings], in: *P. moe nin: Sa paung chou* [P. Moe Nin: An anthology]. Volume 1, pp. 5–16. Yangon: Seikku kyo kyo sa pe. [P. Moe Nin Anthology Committee.]
- Moe Nin, P. 2013b. "A chit seik sai ko lo gyi" [Psychology of love], in: *P. moe nin: Sa paung chou* [P. Moe Nin: An anthology]. Volume 2, pp. 152–5. Yangon: Seikku kyo kyo sa pe. [Originally published in *British bāmā magazin* [British Burma Magazine] 13 (January 1928).] [P. Moe Nin Anthology Committee.]
- Moe Nin, P. 2013c. "Bagyi nhit achit" [Of painting and love], in: *P. moe nin: Sa paung chou* [P. Moe Nin: An anthology]. Volume 2, pp. 221–30. Yangon: Seikku kyo kyo sa pe. [Originally published in *Kawi Myak Hman* [Scholar's Eyeglasses] 3.8 (November 1929).] [P. Moe Nin Anthology Committee.]
- Moe Nin, P. 2013d. "Min maya" [Your wife], in: *P. moe nin: Sa paung chou* [P. Moe Nin: An anthology]. Volume 2, pp. 231–43. [Originally published in *Kawi Myak Hman* [Scholar's Eyeglasses] 3.9 (December 1929).] [P. Moe Nin Anthology Committee.]

- Nash, Manning and June Nash. 1963. "Marriage, family, and population growth in Upper Burma", *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 18(3):251–66.
- Nat Shin, Dagon. 1938. *A chit gan thi* [Glossary of love]. Reprint. Yangon: Ma Khin Yi Book Store. [First edition 1934.]
- Pe Maung Tin, U. 1976. "Foreword", in: U Pe Maung Tin (eds), *Khitsan ponbyin mya* [Khitsan stories], pp. i–ii. Third edition. Yangon: Pagan Books.
- Porter, Roy and Lesley Hall. 1995. *The facts of life: The creation of sexual knowledge in Britain, 1650–1950*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Povinelli, Elizabeth. 2006. *The empire of love: Toward a theory of intimacy, genealogy, and carnality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Sang, Tze-lan D. 2003. *The emerging lesbian: Female same-sex desire in modern China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [Worlds of Desire: The Chicago Series on Sexuality, Gender, and Culture.]
- Sarkar, Tanika. 2001. *Hindu wife, Hindu nation: Community, religion, and cultural nationalism*. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Sat Su, Ma. 2012. "Hnyou te hnyou" [Alluring *Hnyou* magazine], *The Irrawaddy*, 1 December. <http://burma.irrawaddy.com/entertain/2012/12/01/26880.html> (accessed 19 January 2016).
- Yee Saw Myint, Shwe. 2013. "Hnyou maggazin kou hsek lek htout pei khwin ya yan kyou sa myi" [Publisher to fight for permission to continue to publish *Hnyou*], *Myanmar Times*, 16 January. <http://myanmar.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/3178-2013-01-16-08-11-19.html> (accessed 19 January 2016).
- Sreenivas, Mytheli. 2008. *Wives, widows, concubines: The conjugal family ideal in colonial India*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. [Contemporary Indian Studies.]
- Stoler, Ann Laura. 2002. *Carnal knowledge and imperial power: Race and the intimate in colonial rule*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Stone, Hannah and Abraham Stone. 1952. *A marriage manual: A practical guide-book to sex and marriage*. London: Gollancz. [First edition 1935.]
- Stopes, Marie C. 1918. *Married love: A new contribution to the solution of sex difficulties*. London: Fifeild.
- Stopes, Marie C. 1928. *Enduring passion: Further new contributions to the solution of sex difficulties being the continuation of married love*. London: Putnam.
- Than Maung, Ko. 1946. *Chit neibban tho* [To the nirvana of love]. Reprint. Mandalay: Mandalay thuriya da din sa taik. [First edition 1945.]
- Thin Kar. 1948a. *Thin ein daung yei kyi pwa ni* [How to have a successful marriage]. Yangon: Social sa poun hneik taik.
- Thin Kar. 1948b. *Seik pyinnya hnit kāma pyatthana* [Psychology and the problem of desire]. Yangon: Social sa poun hneik taik.



- Thomas, Lynn M. 2009. "Love, sex, and the modern girl in 1930s Southern Africa", in: Jennifer Cole and Lynn M. Thomas (eds), *Love in Africa*, pp. 31–57. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Watson, Angus. 2015. "Mandalay government vows crackdown on same-sex couples", *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 20 August. <http://www.dvb.no/news/mandalay-govt-vows-crackdown-on-same-sex-couples/56396> (accessed 31 August 2015).
- Wieringa, Edwin P. 2002. "A Javanese handbook for would-be husbands: The *Sěrat candraning wanita*", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33(3):431–49.
- Win Pe, U. 2009. "Burmese theatre and literature under Western influence", in: Doris Jedamski (ed.), *Chewing over the West: Occidental narratives in non-Western readings*, pp. 93–108. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi.