Introduction

Queen Supaya-Lat

"And the queen was bloodthirsty. Then was she very different from the women of her nation?"

-Fielding-Hall[1]

"…all this talk of defeat is the talk of the old man and cowards."

- Ni Ni Myint[2]

The young Queen Supaya-lat and King Thibaw lived within the walled citadel of Mandalay. Their fabled palace with its tinkling fountains and moats of floating water lilies could have with ease belonged to Scheherazade's tales. And within the charmed walls of the palace, life was very pleasant indeed – pink-cheeked handmaidens from the Shan state played hide and seek with the Queen, their pretty feet showing just a little from under the shimmering pink silk skirts. Burmese rubies glowed on their ear lobes and strings of pearls around their necks – against the dark teak of the palace walls they made a very fetching picture indeed.

Sometimes a bird from a foreign sky flew into the Queen's quarters and the Queen – no, no she did not kill the poor creature. Instead she soothed it, gave it some water to drink, placed perhaps a gold leaf on its beak.[3] And her handmaidens laughed in merriment at their Queen's act of clemency, reminiscent of the young Prince Siddhartha's tenderness for the stricken swan:

"Sitting with knees crossed, as Lord Buddha sits-
And, soothing with a touch the wild thing's fright,
…And while the left hand held, the right hand drew
The cruel steel forth from the wound, and laid

Cool leaves and healing honey on the smart.
Yet all so little knew the boy of pain
That curiously into his wrist he pressed
The arrow's barb, and winced to feel it sting.
And turned with tears to soothe his bird again."[4]

But ominous clouds were darkening the horizons of this Eden. For it was said that the young Queen Supaya-lat was as ambitious and as strong willed as her mother, the Dowager Queen Hsinbyumya-shin, King Thibaw's stepmother and the Middle Palace Queen of his father, the late King Mindon.[5] Like her mother she plotted and conspired to protect the sovereignty of her husband's throne and what she conceived to be the purity of the royal lineage. And on a dark night in February 1879, when a "great hush" lay over the town of Mandalay and while bands played at the palace gates to drown the cries, thirty-one of the royal princes, King Mindon's sons, were slain.[6] King Thibaw allegedly shed tears of remorse when he heard his supremacy over the kingdom had been bought at a bitter price. Khin Myo Chit in an article published by the *Working People's Daily* wrote of Princess Mindat, the only surviving daughter of King Mindon who lost her brothers in the massacre. The princess remembered her mother who took the death of her sons with stoic calm and lay silent in a thickly curtained room – solitary in her sorrow.[7]

But no *compunctious visitings of nature* were said to have bothered the young Queen Supaya-lat as she steadily removed all opposing voices from the royal court. Her luminous brown eyes glinted with a deep fire and she did not stop at that but instead went on to impose a moral binding on her husband too – he was to be monogamous. Unlike all other Burmese kings before him, King Thibaw decided to take only one wife, much to the chagrin of the many clan chiefs and members of the extended family who nurtured royal aspirations for their daughters. Years of precedence were broken and the young King and Queen remained within the palace walls – alone. And Queen Supaya-lat was the unquestioned empress of all she surveyed. Life was very pleasant indeed!

But ironically, Queen Supaya-lat in her machinations to ensure the authority of her husband within Burma seemed to have left the glorious Konbaung dynasty vulnerable to the much greater evil of external invasion. There remained few members of the clan who were still loyal to the king. And when the British steamships came up the misty Irrawaddy in the early winter days of 1885, apart from the initial skirmishes, they barely faced any resistance at all.[8] George Orwell in his *Burmese Days* described the reaction of the local folks who gathered on the banks of the river to gaze in wonder. It struck terror in the young protagonist, U Po Kyin's heart, as he, a naked, pot-bellied child watched the columns of the victorious British troops march into Mandalay, "great beef-fed men, red-faced and

red-coated."[9] Queen Supaya-lat wore her imperial jewels so that she appeared the queen she was to her captors even as King Thibaw's retinue was led away from Mandalay, never to return.

King Thibaw's exile to the far away shores of India meant the passing of an age for Myanmar. The seismic waves of the upheaval travelled far beyond the royal palace walls and life in the towns and countryside of Burma was never the same again. Ruptures appeared in the centuries old systems and indigenous community networks associated with the monarchy. As the nation became a British colony to be ruled as an Indian province for the first four decades, the first organization to crumble was perhaps the administrative hierarchy. Rather than create an administration specifically for Burma, the British opted to transfer an administrative system they had developed for British India. Subsequently, on the coattails of the British arrived a large, predominantly male Indian migrant population which changed the demographic pattern and affected the delicate interethnic balance of the country in many ways and for many years to come. Under the Burmese monarch the normal unit of administration had been the *myo* or township, governed by a *myo-thugyi* (hereditary headman of a town) – a man of considerable influence who headed the police, the judiciary as well as the revenue department for the district. Under him were the village headmen or the *ywa-thugyi*. Both these positions were hereditary, and the *myo-thugyi* normally hailed from a family with which the district people shared an almost familial bond for generations.[10] Though many of the townships constituted by the English in both Upper and Lower Burma bore the same name and roughly corresponded with the earlier boundaries, the meticulously designed administrative hierarchy which had evolved over the years, with the *myowun* as the governor of the whole province, the *yewun* as the 'lord of the waters', managing the war-boats, the *akunwun* as the collector of land revenue and the *akaukwun* the collector of sea customs, gradually dissolved and old lines of authority unravelled.[11] The old *myo-thugi* circles which appeared administratively too large to the British were gradually diluted in a bid to decentralise power and a headman was assigned to each village. A salaried position, the headman never enjoyed the old world dignity of the *myo-thugi* or the *ywa-thugyi* or their seamless partnership with the Burmese society. The traditional village headmen under British rule were little more than revenue collectors for the state, their position having lost much of the power and respect as their function as intermediaries between the village and central government was no longer viable.[12] Instead the district officers who were appointed were British and a stranger to the people and their customs. They were feared and maybe even respected but had no access to the real ebb and flow of community life.[13] The colonial government remained distant while the local population chafed under an indifferent if coercive administration. The elaborate monastic order which had for centuries

been inextricably linked to the royal court also suddenly found itself divested of its earlier sanctity and support and took its early step towards politicisation. The monastic brotherhood found new benefactors in the civilian population and thus was added a new dimension to the nexus between the *sangha* and laity. Numerous other groups of court entertainers were without royal patronage and artistes who roamed the villages painted nostalgic scenes of the royal court around the funeral pyres of famous monks. Gradually images of steamships or clock towers appeared in their paintings of the Ava palace – indelible imprints of the changing times.

Years went by; Myanmar passed from colonialism to independence and to a state with a socialist ideology but the nostalgia for their lost monarch remained in the Burmese heart. Because he was their own, they felt a sense of kinship to their Thibaw Min and because the Konbaung dynasty had led their country to glory. And what happened to the strong-willed, brave-heart Queen Supaya-lat? Well, she was remembered as well. But at times as the mere meddling woman who had played favourites in the royal court and led her kingdom to disaster. Some laid the cause of the country's defeat squarely at her doorstep, entirely overlooking how unprepared King Thibaw's army, with its long Enfield muskets and a cavalry which had seen no action in years, had been.[14] Much of what had been adverse was forgotten including the *hti* or the lottery houses initiated by King Thibaw to supplement the state's revenue which eventually led many families to utter ruination. Queen Supaya-lat's role in history cast a long shadow on women's position in national politics: her name emerged as a powerful deterrent to the women's cause during the 1927 campaign for women's rights to sit on the Legislative Council and even as late as in 1992, Khin Nyunt, later to be Myanmar's Prime Minister, was quoted to have said in the context of Aung San Suu Kyi, according to an old treatise if a female was to take power, "the country will be in ruins."[15] As Khin Myo Chit wrote, the Queen's example would be cited and the admonition doled out "whenever a woman tried to come to her own as an individual, 'A woman will destroy a kingdom'…to prove that women could not be trusted with tasks that needed wisdom."[16]

But some would remember the Queen for her flashing eyes and the courage she had shown in the face of the British onslaught. She was the only one who had doggedly insisted on a counter attack when senior courtiers and even the Dowager Queen, Hsinbyumya-shin advised surrender to the superior might of the conquerors. She was the one who flung herself on the ground and wept bitter tears of remorse when all was lost.[17] Her unbending, if ill-fated defiance against the colonialists drew admiration from the young nationalists of Burma in the later years.[18] So much so that in 1919 her return to Rangoon was resisted by the British: the officials were hard pressed to handle it so that it would cause no public protest. Despite repeated requests, Queen Supaya-lat was never allowed to return to the palace of Mandalay with its moats of floating water lilies. Six years

after her return to Rangoon, in 1925, she died a quiet death in Rangoon and was buried at the base of the golden Shwedagon Pagoda, just short of her sixty-sixth birthday, surrounded by a few family members.

The Burmese never forgot or forgave themselves this humiliating episode of their history when alien invaders caught them unprepared for combat. It was the reason why Khin Myo Chit grew up hearing stories from her grandmother who had been a maid of honour at King Mindon's court, of the fatal night when King Mindon's sons were slain. On being asked if Upper Burma would have fallen to the British if the warrior princes had survived, her grandmother replied: "No, we would still lose …but, at least 'The Battle of Upper Burma' could have earned a place in the annals of war like Hannibal's fight against Rome, or King Arthur's fight against the Saxons, or King Harold's fight against the invading Normans."[19] It was the reason why Ludu Daw Amar grew up in a Mandalay where the past had been lovingly preserved – not only the pagodas and monasteries but the many festivals and the open air *zat pwes* by the roving bands of theatre performers. It was also one of the reasons why in 1942 Aung San's Burma Independence Army was so joyously received by the common populace. Young men thronged to join its ranks because to the average Burman (the ethnic majority) it was a celebration of their proud martial past and a bolt in the door against future subjugation. And it is a reason why even today the Mandalay palace is a bastion of the *tatmadaw* (Myanmar military) and prominent signs displayed on the vermillion ramparts read: "The *tatmadaw* will never betray the nationalist cause"; and why President Thein Sein in his inaugural presidential speech of 30 March 2011 mentioned, if national defences were not taken seriously, Myanmar would again fall prey to neo-colonialists.[20]

Despite 1948 and independence the colonial bogey continued to ride on the shoulders of Myanmar. The days of pre-colonial imperial glory were repeatedly evoked and statues of the kings Anawrahta, Bayinnaung and Alaungpaya were erected. History books described their exploits when their kingdom extended to the borders of British Bengal and all powers were invested with the king. And as the years rolled by the unity of the Union of Myanmar became of paramount importance and internal peace a vindication of a rigorously imposed state control.

And unfortunately, many continued to contend that the young Queen's excessive *awza* (influence) had cost her nation dearly indeed!

Figure 1 Writing on the wall, *Tatmadaw* signboards on the walls of the Mandalay Palace, 2012

Figure 2 Writing on the wall, *Tatmadaw* signboards on the walls of the Mandalay Palace, 2012

Endnotes

1. H Fielding-Hall, 1899. *Thibaw's Queen*. London, New York: Harper & Brothers, 9.
2. Ni Ni Myint, 2004. *Selected Writings of Ni Ni Myint*. Yangon: Myanmar History Commission, 80.
3. Fielding-Hall, 1899, 67. Descriptions of the palace from Fielding-Hall, Ni Ni Myint and Pe Maung Tin and G H Luce trans. 1960. *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma*. Yangon: Burma Research Society, Rangoon University Press.
4. Sir Edwin Arnold, 2007. *Light of Asia*. Sri Lanka: Buddhist Cultural Centre, 11.
5. King Mindon's chief queen had died early and Queen Hsinbyumya-shin who was his Middle Palace Queen was the highest ranking among the royal women. She had plotted for Thibaw to be king because she knew him to be her daughter, Supaya-lat's childhood sweetheart.
6. The massacre began on 14 February 1979 and over the next few days thirty-one of King Mindon's forty-eight sons were killed.
7. Khin Myo Chit, 1966. 'The Late Princess Mindat', *The Working People's Daily*, June 13.
8. The end of the monarchy in 1885 was followed by a period of intense if scattered rebellion and robbery by armed bands of indigenous dacoits. It took the British the next ten years to pacify the country.
9. George Orwell, 1934. *Burmese Days*. London, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1.
10. Daw Mya Sein, 1973. *The Administration of Burma*. London: Oxford University Press, 31.
11. Daw Mya Sein, 1973, 32-37.
12. Michael Aung-Thwin & Maitrii Aung-Thwin, 2012. *A History of Myanmar since Ancient Times: Traditions and Transformations*. London: Reaktion Books, 187.
13. H Fielding-Hall, 1906. *A People at School*. New York: MacMillan & Co., 162-163.
14. Sir J G Scott (Shway Yoe), 1st pub. 1882, 1963. *The Burman: His Life and Notions*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co. Inc., 498-508. Mention of lotteries in Fielding-Hall, 1899, 174-182.
15. Cited in Peter Popham, 2011. *The Lady and the Peacock: The Life of Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma*. UK: Rider, Random House, 316. From BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 1992 February 3.
16. Khin Myo Chit, 1995. *Colourful Myanmar*. Yangon: Parami Sarpay, 189-190.
17. Ni Ni Myint, 2004, 89. Fielding-Hall, 1899, 286-287.
18. Sudha Shah, 2012. *The King in Exile: The Fall of the Royal Family of Burma*. New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers India, 218.
19. Khin Myo Chit, 2005. *Stories and Sketches of Myanmar*. Yangon: Unity Publishing House, 8.
20. President Thein Sein, 2011. 'President U Thein Sein Delivers Inaugural Address to Pyidaungsu Hluttaw', March 30. Accessed 2012 November 24. http://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/briefing-room/speeches-and-remarks/2011/03/30/id-195

1

Khin Myo Chit

The Voice of a Closet Feminist

"Oh, glorious King, the hand that wields the sword of power has gone too far."
On the execution of Ananda-Thuriya, the minister at the royal court[1]

"There she sits, rosary in hand,
She shuns company, avoids temptation
It looks like the lady will soon rise into the clouds!"
Bhamo Sayadaw to Thilashin Me Khin[2]

'And if I laugh at any mortal thing,
'Tis that I may not weep; and if I weep,
'Tis that our nature cannot always bring
itself to apathy…"
Don Juan, Canto IV, Lord Byron[3]

The irrepressible wit

November 1967, Rangoon

Khin Myo Chit was writing an editorial for the *Working People's Daily*. She hoped it would be her last piece for the government-sponsored paper. She strongly willed it to be so. Outside her window, she noted with some satisfaction, Saladin, her many-horned cactus was in bloom. The King of the Desert looked regal standing atop the rock garden she had had constructed from some ancient grindstones she discovered in a corner of their plot of land.[4]

But it would not do to get distracted. Her fingers flew over the keys of her old trusty Remington, a name so glamorous that it could be paired with ease with an Olivetti or a Marilyn, she thought.[5]

As she wrote she could not suppress a chuckle. Ko Latt (U Khin Maung Latt), her husband of many years and party to many of her hare-brained schemes, cocked an enquiring eyebrow from across the room where he sat reading on a deckchair.[6] She noticed he looked faintly worried and returned to his book with a slight frown creasing his forehead.

Khin Myo Chit was writing an editorial she had titled *Writers and Awards*. It was a time when authors and poets were called literary workers and encouraged to write extolling the socialist state. Of late the Ne Win government had announced national literary prizes for writing *taing-pyu pyei-pyu* or "nation-building" literature. As it turned out, it was an ambitious euphemism for propaganda literature, inspiring some worthwhile literature but also a spurt of unctuous if poor quality writing.

Khin Myo Chit, aware that it would not do to blatantly condemn the Ne Win government, instead turned a jaundiced eye on the earlier colonial regime. In British Burma trade magazines sponsored by important commercial enterprises like the Whiteaway Laidlaw had been in prevalence, and many aspiring Burmese writers had to be content using their literary talent to write stories endorsing the silk socks or the English Rose smelling salts sold by *Whiteway & Co.* She concocted a boy-meets-girl story and imagined how a tale of youthful love would read if the purpose was only to sell a bottle of *Dah Balm:*

> "Maung Zaw Win instantly rushed to the girl as she fell in a heap on the kerb. Nwe Nwe, for it was the girl's name, writhed with pain, as she rubbed her ankle. Maung Zaw Win, saying, 'May I?', took out the *Dah Balm* from his pocket and applied it on the sprained ankle and massaged it tenderly, their hands touching, their eyes meeting, love light flashing, Nwe Nwe shyly lowering her lashes, etc., etc.
>
> A ghost of a smile hung on her lips as she said, 'Thank you'. Zaw Win helped her to her feet and said: "Lucky, I have *Dah Balm* in my pocket. I never go out without one in my pocket. You can get it for eight annas per jar at E.M. De Souza's (Pharmacists and Druggists), corner of Sule Pagoda Road and Dalhousie Street."
>
> And of course they fell in love and got married and lived happily ever after. Trust Castoria, Gripe Water and such others to keep their bonny baby bouncing."[7]

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Khin Myo Chit had joined the *Working People's Daily* soon after the military coup d'etat in Myanmar in 1962. It was the same year when NASA deployed Ranger 3

on its ill-conceived voyage to the moon, the Aurora 7 made three orbits of the earth, piloted by the American, Scott Carpenter and the *Rolling Stones* made their debut at the Marquee Club of London. Unknown to Khin Myo Chit at that point of time, after a period of independence and parliamentary democracy from 1948 to 1958 and again for a brief while from 1960 to early 1962, it was the beginning of a new era for Burma – an era which would see the dominance of the army for many years to come. By 1963 she had already completed her stint as features editor of the *Guardian* and was an established author, in name if not in monetary emoluments, with the widely acclaimed short story *The 13 Carat Diamond* to her credit.[8] *The Working People's Daily (WPD)*, which continues to be published under the name *The New Light of Myanmar* (incidentally Aung San Suu Kyi called it *The New Blight of Burma*), was government-owned, a nationalised propaganda outlet for the new military administration. She joined the *WPD* at the invitation of General Ne Win, who had not too long ago master-minded the military coup and whom Khin Myo Chit had personally known during the heady anti-colonial days along with *Bogyoke* (Burmese equivalent of General) Aung San, U Nu, Bo Zeya and the other members of the *Thirty Comrades*[9] (nucleus of Aung San's Burma Independence Army).

It was unknown to her that in joining the *WPD* she was taking it on herself to do a tightrope walk for the next few years. The Press Scrutiny Board (PSB) was formed in August 1962 under the Printers' and Publishers' Registration Act and by the mid-1960s had been enlarged to a thirty member team, responsible for monitoring the ideological content of all published material. In later years of course there would be separate censor boards for film scripts and popular songs, for paintings and book covers and as the grip tightened, Burmese writers and cartoonists would grow more adept at camouflage techniques. They would learn to use tell-tale metaphors, play cleverly with words and symbols and adopt nom de plumes so that some protection from censorship could be attempted. But in the mid-1960s censorship was still fairly new and what Khin Myo Chit faced was a strange dilemma. On one hand it was difficult to ignore her one time friend and comrade, General Ne Win's offer. On the other, as a thinker and a humanist who had grown up reading Elizabethan and Jacobean literature, she faced the proverbial *to-be-or-not-to-be* predicament. She realised the path on which her country had embarked did not auger well for the future and her conscience did not allow her the luxury of a Faustian understanding with the new regime. Yet she was not at liberty to throw caution to the winds and write as she pleased. If she was too abrasive she ran the risk of having the voice of reason silenced in a world which seemed to be rapidly spinning out of control. Faced with this no mean feat of writing something worthwhile as it was meaningful for publication in the government-owned *WPD*, Khin Myo Chit took recourse to a quality which she shared as much with Shakespeare as with her fellow countrymen – wit.[10]