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978-1-107-11786-0 - The Female Voice of Myanmar Gregg E. Gardner: Khin Myo Chit to Aung San Suu Kyi

Nilanjana Sengupta

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## The Female Voice of Myanmar

This book offers a female perspective on the history and political evolution of Myanmar. It delves into the lives and works of four Myanmar authors – Khin Myo Chit, Ludu Daw Amar, Ma Thida and Aung San Suu Kyi. The first three, journalists by profession, commented extensively on the socio-political life of Myanmar while the fourth, Aung San Suu Kyi, embodies the future challenges and possibilities of the country.

It breaks new ground in exploring their writing, both published and hitherto unexamined, some in English and much of it in Burmese while the intimate biographical sketches offer a glimpse into the Burmese home and the shifting feminine image. It captures the historical transitions which moulded their lives and in some cases the roles they played as change agents and culture critics. If Khin Myo Chit, as the closet feminist wrote about latent sexual politics in pre-independent Burma, how did it help determine Aung San Suu Kyi's contemporary political image? If Daw Amar invoked traditional Bamar valour in her early writing then how did Daw Suu assimilate the martial image in her re-articulation of Burmese nationalism? As the editor of the leftist *Ludu Daily*, Daw Amar was deemed anti-establishment and was witness to the socialist government's abortive efforts at ethnic reconciliation. Could Aung San Suu Kyi construct and deploy her pacifist Gandhian discourse to counter such systemic failures? The book seeks to answer such questions, but more significantly, it tells the story of four remarkable women – eloquent, brave, determined – who set aside their lives to answer the call of their country.

**Nilanjana Sengupta** is Visiting Scholar at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. She is the author of *A Gentleman's Word: The Legacy of Subhas Chandra Bose in Southeast Asia*. Her research interests include feminist awakening in Southeast Asia, cultural exchanges between Asian nations and the Indian subcontinent and questions of integration, identity and hybridity of borrowed cultures.

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Painting of Tara by Aung San Suu Kyi

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*Daw Aung San Suu Kyi wrote of her father, "He was not infallible, as he freely acknowledged,  
but he had the kind of mind that did not cease expanding, a capacity for continuous  
development."*

*Baba, may you live on in me,*

*To the children in green and white  
and  
To Than Maung, this is as much yours as mine.*

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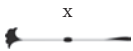


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# Glossary

To indicate a Pali or a Sanskrit word, a (P) or a (S) has been respectively inserted next to the word while the Burmese pronunciation of the same word is indicated by a (B). A word with no such indication is a Burmese word.

<i>Ama</i>	Elder sister
<i>Amay</i>	Mother
<i>Amyo-thami</i>	Polite word for woman, wife, literally daughter of the race
<i>Anicca (P), Aneit-sa (B)</i>	Impermanence
<i>Anyeint</i>	Non-dramatic performance where a female artiste dances and sings to the accompaniment of light music, usually supported by 2/3 comedians
<i>Arzarni (P)</i>	Person of courage, prepared to sacrifice his life for his convictions, martyr
<i>Awza (P)</i>	Power, authority, influence
<i>Bi-zadon</i>	Woman's hairstyle, fashionable in the first half of 20th century where hair is smoothly piled on top of head, held with a comb
<i>Bo</i>	1. A leader in some capacity, lower ranking military officer 2. European
<i>Bo-gyoke</i>	Major General, General
<i>Cakravartin (S), cakkavattin</i>	King
<i>Chin-lon</i>	A game played with a cane ball. Players keep the ball in the air using any part of the body except hands
<i>Dana (P)</i>	Charitable giving, donation
<i>Daw</i>	(Aunt), title that precedes the name of a mature female, not implying she is married
<i>Dharma (S), dhamma (P)</i>	Teachings of the Buddha, the Law
<i>Dobama Asi-ayone</i>	We Burmans' Association
<i>Dukkha (P)</i>	Suffering
<i>Eingyi</i>	Buttoned blouse or shirt, jacket
<i>Hpon, hpoun</i>	Power, glory, special aura
<i>Hpongyi, Pongyi</i>	Monk
<i>Hsaing waing</i>	Burmese ensemble of musical instruments

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<i>Hsayit waing</i>	A hairstyle worn by the very young girls
<i>Htamein</i>	Woman’s sarong-like lower garment
<i>Hti</i>	1. The lottery 2. Ornamental ‘umbrella’ at top of a pagoda
<i>Ka-bya</i>	Half-caste
<i>Kala</i>	Person of South Asian ethnic origin, more generally a foreigner from the west
<i>Khamauk</i>	Peasant bamboo hat with broad brim, adopted as symbol of NLD for the 1990 general election
<i>Karma (S), kamma (P)</i>	Deterministic philosophy of Buddhism: retribution for good or ill for past actions in previous reincarnations
<i>Kan (B)</i>	Fate
<i>Khit hmi thu</i>	Modern, contemporary women
<i>Kilesa</i>	Defilement
<i>Ko</i>	(Elder brother), title that precedes the name of a young, adult male
<i>Kumari (P), konmayi (B),</i>	Young woman, maiden
<i>Kusala (P), kutho (B)</i>	Virtuous act, merit
<i>Kyat</i>	Unit of Burmese currency
<i>Lay-gyo-gyi</i>	Traditional verse form of four stanzas
<i>Longyi</i>	Sarong-like ankle length lower garment, used of both men’s and women’s dress
<i>Ludu</i>	The masses, the people
<i>Ma</i>	(Younger sister), 1. Title that precedes name of a female younger than the speaker 2.as a suffix, a female as in <i>sayama</i> , <i>thakhinma</i>
<i>Majjhima patipada (P)</i>	Critical middle path advocated by the Buddha
<i>Maung</i>	(Younger brother), title that precedes the name of a male younger than speaker
<i>Mettā (P), myitta (B)</i>	Loving kindness
<i>Min</i>	King, ruler of a state, high government official
<i>Min-thami</i>	Female lead in a play (literally daughter of a king, princess)
<i>Min-tha</i>	Male lead in a play (literally son of a king, prince)
<i>Moha (P)</i>	Delusion



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<i>Myo</i>	1. Race, people 2. Town, city, district
<i>Myo chit</i>	Patriot, literally to love one's race
<i>Myo-thugyi</i>	Hereditary headman of a town
<i>Nat</i>	Guardian spirit
<i>Nibbana (P), neit-ban (B)</i>	Nirvana
<i>Nissaya (P)</i>	Word-by-word translation of a Pali text often with full vernacular glossary
<i>Paday-tha pin</i>	Tree-like structure on which are hung offerings for monks
<i>Pa-hso</i>	Sarong for men
<i>Paññā (P), pyinnya (B)</i>	Transcendental wisdom
<i>Parami (P)</i>	Moral qualities or perfections
<i>Pinni</i>	A light brown to reddish homespun cotton cloth, used to make jackets or shirts and regarded as nationalist dress
<i>Pyinkadoe</i>	Burmese hardwood
<i>Sacca (P), thitsa (B)</i>	Truth
<i>Sa-hso-daw</i>	Burmese court poet
<i>Samadhi (P)</i>	Concentration
<i>Sangha (P), than-ga (B)</i>	Buddhist order of monks
<i>Sasana (P), tha-thana (B)</i>	Teachings of the Buddha
<i>Saya, Saya-gyi.</i>	Teacher, senior teacher, used also for adult persons who because of their skill are deemed deserving of the title
<i>Saya-daw-gyi, Saya-daw</i>	Venerable teacher, senior monk, abbot
<i>Saya-ma</i>	Female teacher
<i>Shit lay lon</i>	Refers to the auspicious date of four 8s, ie., 8 August 1988 (literally four 8 numbers)
<i>Shramadana</i>	Self-transformation through work
<i>Sila(P), thi-la (B)</i>	Precept, moral principle
<i>Ta-hna</i>	Physical desire
<i>Taikpon eingyi</i>	Burmese style man's jacket, the two fronts meeting down the centre, not with overlapping button fastening
<i>Tat</i>	Armed forces, military, originally a stockade

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<i>Tatmadaw</i>	Myanmar national armed forces
<i>Thakin, thakkin</i>	Master, used by the British in colonial times, then adopted by Burmese nationalists as a title to denote the Burmese (and not the British) as the rightful owners of Burma
<i>Thakinma</i>	Mistress, female version of <i>Thakin</i>
<i>Thami</i>	Daughter
<i>Thanakka</i>	A cream made from grinding the bark of the <i>thanakka</i> tree, used by Burmese women as a cooling cosmetic and sunscreen, also on children
<i>Thila-shin</i>	Buddhist nun, literally ‘keeper of the precepts’
<i>Tika (P)</i>	Commentary
<i>U</i>	(Uncle), title that precedes the name of a mature male
<i>Viriya parami (P)</i>	The <i>parami</i> of energy, diligence and sustained effort
<i>Vamsanu rakkhita (P),</i>	
<i>Wuntha-nu (B)</i>	Protector of national interests or patriot
<i>Wunthanu Athin</i>	Local patriotic association
<i>Yebaw</i>	Male Comrade
<i>Yebawma</i>	Female Comrade
<i>Yuwadi (P)</i>	Young woman
<i>Zat, Zat-pwe</i>	Dramatic performance, or the troupe giving the performance, led by a male actor or dancer. They usually last all night and feature singing, dancing and dramatizations of classical Burmese stories, <i>jatakas</i> as well as modern plays. <i>Zat</i> is from <i>jataka</i>
<i>Zaw-gyi</i>	Alchemist
<i>Zayat</i>	Pilgrim’s shelter, rest house, usually at or near a pagoda





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## Preface

I received the picture of Tara which forms the frontispiece of this book from Anna (Allott) when I was a couple of months into my research on Myanmar. The picture had been drawn by Aung San Suu Kyi in the early 1980s and sent to Anna as a printed card on the occasion of the new year of 1993. It was accompanied by a poem extolling the beauty of Tara by the Fifth Dalai Lama and a touching message from Dr Michael Aris on behalf of Aung San Suu Kyi who was then serving a long sentence of house arrest. The picture took me by some surprise, not only at Aung San Suu Kyi's artistic skills of which I had been unaware but because the Tara I met here was nothing like the Hindu goddess I knew since a child. The Tara who adorned our family altar and in front of whom my father had been in the habit of saying a quick prayer for protection before he dashed off for his day's work had looked far more fierce. She wore a garland of severed heads and her unblinking third eye sent shivers down my spine. The Tara Aung San Suu Kyi had drawn formed the heart of Mahayana Buddhism. She was far gentler, her right hand lifted in a gesture of benevolence, her eyes bestowing encouragement and blessings on all sentient beings. She was obviously a part of the crucial process of adaption by which imported ideologies and deities were localised by the Buddhist societies of South and Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> Was she also a part of the gender sensitivity to which Andaya refers while writing of Hindu deities who had been subsequently divested of their androgyny and who were central to Southeast Asia's religious history?<sup>2</sup> Perhaps yes.

For me the new Tara I encountered was an embodiment of the centuries of cultural exchange between India and Southeast Asia on which was founded the early civilizations of the region. In equal measure she personified human virtues of compassion and courage which remained extremely relevant to the subject matter of this book. I had read of Sujata or Maddi but these images of virtue and kindness from Buddhist literature were more than countered by other *jataka* narratives which portrayed women as seductresses, hindering men's spiritual progress with their feminine wiles. The commentaries on Burmese women did not seem too encouraging either. One of the first descriptions I read of Burmese women was by Sir J G Scott, a westerner known for his intimate portrayal of Burma. He describes them thus:

“...the only accomplishments most Burmese girls know are how to dress neatly, do up their hair and powder their faces...It is therefore greatly to their credit that they manage not only house affairs, but their husband's

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business into the bargain. A farmer's wife will carry out the sale of the whole rice crop to the agent of an English rice firm in her husband's absence, and generally strikes a better bargain than he would have made himself. If the village constable is away, the wife will get together the policemen, stop a fight, arrest the offenders and send them off to the lock-up all on her own responsibility...in fact, she [the wife] is virtual master of the house and henpecked husbands are not by any means uncommon. The last king of Burma, Thibaw Min was a notable instance."<sup>3</sup>

And herein lay the dichotomy. The Burmese woman had a distinctive role to play in the country's commerce and consequently was far closer to the locus of social power, far more perhaps than her Indian contemporary. Mi Mi Khaing has written that when the Indians, particularly the Bengalis thronged Burma on the coattails of the British, more than the men, the Burmese women could hold their own in the *bazaar* activities of persuasion and bargaining.<sup>4</sup> Yet historically and barring some important exceptions, her portrayals seemed to be treated with some flippancy and the same influence in commerce and monetary affairs which was the source of her autonomy and power was deemed spiritually polluting, associating her with attachment to the realm of material desires.<sup>5</sup> And more disconcertingly, most of these oral or written records connected her in some way to the bloodthirsty, fabled to be excessively ambitious Supaya-lat, Thibaw Min's Queen.

*The Female Voice of Myanmar* is about four remarkable Burmese women. Their stories overlap and flow into each other as seamlessly as the four seasons of a year. Ludu Daw Amar and Khin Myo Chit shared the same birth year (1915) and went to the University of Rangoon a mere couple of years apart from each other. Yet they came away with very different learnings from their involvement in the anti-British student movement and this shaped their latter day perspectives. Khin Myo Chit would be one of the first Burmese authors to write about gender sensitivities. Ludu Daw Amar on the other hand, having been at the receiving end of the wrath of U Nu's socialist government because of the deemed leftist focus of the *Ludu* Press (the publishing house which she ran along with her husband), would be vocal about the post-1948 political scenario when the country was erupting in communist and ethnic insurgency. Ma Thida is of course contemporary. Born in 1966, a year before the state-enforced closure of the *Ludu* Paper, she writes most extensively about the symbolical and psychological impact of the regime. The democracy movement of 1988 (8-8-88 Movement) is the point where their stories coalesce. By then Daw Amar and Khin Myo Chit, each in their seventies, are at the zenith of their literary careers – their writing give people direction in the turbulent times. Ma Thida on the other hand decides to take up serious journalism



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while the democracy movement unravels around her and the same movement propels Aung San Suu Kyi, till then a keen observer and a reluctant participant in Burmese politics, into the limelight. In Aung San Suu Kyi's writing (subject of the last chapter) some of the questions raised during the earlier chapters find an answer and the book seems to reach a natural resolution. Yet there is a sense of completing a circle as she encounters much of the festering feminist and political issues that Daw Amar and Khin Myo Chit had brought to light.

The four women are also practising Theravada Buddhists. They grapple with religious ideas and practices and turn to Buddhism for sustenance at the most difficult junctures of their lives. Some of the most endearing images of this book are of an elderly Daw Amar standing at the doorway counting her beads while she waits for her sons or of Khin Myo Chit when she took up *Vipassana* practice following Sunlun Saya-daw's meditation method (when the crowd of artists and free thinkers around her exclaimed, "Of all people YOU!", since she was known to have gone through a period of agnosticism).<sup>6</sup> Spiro has written, seemingly in some exasperation, religion is used to provide hope, satisfy wishes, resolve conflict, cope with tragedy, rationalise failure, find meaning in suffering.<sup>7</sup> The Buddhist faith is an essential ingredient of the Burmese identity and has been deeply implicated in the rise of the Burmese nationalist and independence movements. Historians have contended that Buddhist scriptures have been used quite frequently as a political weapon and a cultural and moral arbiter. Thus, Prime Minister U Nu in defence of government policies of killing insurgents, executing criminals or granting licence for distilling liquor is known to have admitted, "Buddha would not like these, and personally I would never be able to do it." Yet, he argues, sometimes an undesirable act is necessary to achieve a higher end and recounts the story of the Buddha in a previous existence when he as a crab killed a crow and a snake to prevent them from taking out the eyes of a Brahmin.<sup>8</sup> It is fascinating to note how Daw Amar, as much a traditional Buddhist as U Nu, contended with such use of the faith or how Khin Myo Chit did when she noticed the underlying gender bias of her religion. On the other hand there is Ma Thida who cites the *Mettā Sutta* to justify her uncertainty in joining the democracy movement and yet is hard-pressed in contending with her guilt.

One of the most rewarding experiences of reading Khin Myo Chit is perhaps her tongue-in-cheek, delightfully ironical humour. While Daw Amar remains more strident and Ma Thida, self-admittedly, incorporated humour to get past censors, this is a quality which Khin Myo Chit shares with Suu Kyi. There is an ebullience in both these authors which bursts through the surface of their writing in bubbles of merriment. But while Suu Kyi's sense of humour remains infinitely gentler, Khin Myo Chit turns quite a jaundiced eye on society and more often, on herself. She is merciless in her self-portrayals: a "chattering shrew", bit too tall,



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often clumsy with flapping coat pockets, a woman with few feminine charms whose husband insists she is no “fool” only because she is already so “stupid” that there was no room for improvement! <sup>9</sup> In contrast is Aung San Suu Kyi’s more indulgent humour when she writes of the Burmese habit of waxing sentimental over smoky banks of massed rain clouds.<sup>10</sup>

Suu Kyi is perhaps closest in literary style to Daw Amar. Unlike the self-derisive humour of Khin Myo Chit or the rather obscure symbolism of Ma Thida, both Daw Amar and Aung San Suu Kyi are forthright and unflinchingly logical in their styles. Between the years 1948 to 1967 when U Hla was imprisoned as many as five times on various charges it was Daw Amar who assumed editorship and remained at the helm of affairs of the *Ludu Paper*. Her editorials from these times (for eg. 1956-57) or the daily column on international affairs which she ran for the *Ludu Paper* from 1960 to 1967 quickly became important influences in directing public opinion. Noted journalist and *Ludu* editor, Sein Win commented on this quality of her writing when he called Daw Amar’s daily column the bible of all youth.<sup>11</sup> And it was the same ability to build an irrefutable argument to which Dr Michael Aris referred when he said Suu Kyi, when she applied her “rigorous gift of logic” and her “sensitivity” to his arguments (in the context of his research and writing as a Tibetologist), it opened up new perspectives, invariably causing him to “rethink and reformulate”.<sup>12</sup>

While Daw Amar and Suu Kyi, even in their early writing, remain seemingly un-wavering in their beliefs, evidently Khin Myo Chit was repeatedly assailed by self-doubt. She was uncertain if she had done her country more harm than good by participating in the student movement of 1938. Later she expressed reservations about her role in the 1988 Movement as well, leading as it did eventually to more rigorous military controls. Ma Thida also faces self-doubt but in her case it is more of a complex psychological response to the world she lived in. Born of a Shan-Mon-Chinese ethnicity she grew up in military Burma where all racial plurality was submerged in a state-enforced “Bamar” (the ethnic majority) identity and the quest for an identity recurs in her writing. In her short story, *Soap Bubbles* for example, she writes of a young teenage boy called Thu Thu. Towards the end of the story he sits outside the family home blowing soap bubbles, the inanity of the action gives him pleasure: “The soap bubbles floated out of the solution, one after another, red, yellow, blue and green, all colours of the rainbow. Seeing them made me happy. One after the other they disappeared with a pop. I smiled and watched the bubbles and because I was in a good mood, I started singing my favourite song, ‘I’m not happy...’”<sup>13</sup> The boy’s choice of a sad song to express his happiness is indicative of some of the uncertainty and indecision of the time.



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Apart from Khin Myo Chit, none of the authors are inordinately preoccupied with gender issues. In fact, Daw Amar's tone in writing about the emerging *khit hmi thu* (contemporary women) of the colonial times or the modern-day *Zay Gyo* girls is quite censorious though she does not lose sight of the larger economic framework within which they function. Both Daw Amar and Khin Myo Chit were products of the relatively progressive education offered by the National Schools (which unfortunately did not make any remarkable efforts towards easing gender differences), yet it is only the latter who endeavoured to arm Burmese women with not only the language to speak about sexism but the tools to analyse and understand it. However, her Burmese book on international feminist movements was published as a standalone volume only in 2006 and Aung San Suu Kyi's references to women-centric issues are also but recent occurrences. If Ma Thida aspires to be held in the male ward of the Insein Prison it is only so she can continue with the underground democracy movement: according to her serious political engagement continues to be associated with men. Women's rights which had formed a part of nationalist as well as post-independence radical discourses were mostly used to lend legitimacy to alternate political perspectives and later marginalised as issues of national independence and the sanctity of the Burmese race and religion returned to centre stage. Interestingly, all three journalists Daw Amar, Khin Myo Chit and Ma Thida, at certain points in their lives were either given to masculine attire or kept their feminine indulgences to a minimum. This sartorial eccentricity is perhaps not so much related to a conscious urge to transcend gender to fulfil aspirations of gender equality but born of a far more intuitive need to gain acceptance in the male dominated worlds with which they were professionally associated. In this Aung San Suu Kyi remains an important exception. Significantly though, both Daw Amar and Suu Kyi, two of the strongest voices, continue to be addressed as *Amay* or mother, the traditional source of female authority.

If there is one point where all four authors coalesce, it is in their evident nationalism. Burma or Myanmar remains their focal point throughout their writing careers. Ludu Daw Amar and Khin Myo Chit after 1962 (or soon after), once censorship laws precluded any political commentaries, wrote of Burmese art forms and literary personalities. Ma Thida, on the other hand, though close to the symbolism and imagery of the post-modern literary movement, unlike other writers of the genre rarely indulges in personal themes unrelated to the political or social life of Myanmar. Here too Suu Kyi proves to be an important exception. While writing of Myanmar she is the only one who especially emphasises the individual as a clearly discernible entity within the Burmese national context. Whether in her acclaimed essay *Freedom from Fear* or in her reference to *Zaneka* while speaking of her father, her speeches during the election campaigns of 1988-89 or her public speeches after release from house arrest in 2010, she spends much time in profiling



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the distinctive Burmese nationalist.<sup>14</sup> For her the future of Myanmar lies with the individual – an individual who is not a divisive force but an empowered citizen conscious of their place in the social web of the nation and one who is willing to use that power to make a difference.

*The Female Voice of Myanmar* too traces individual journeys – the journeys of four women towards discovery of the self. Their character remains multi-dimensional, at times vulnerable, subsumed by the voices around them, while their thoughts and responses during the course of their journey provide important commentaries on the political, social or spiritual framework of their nation as it has evolved. But in essence it is a story of their transcending internal and external boundaries to discover an inner core of strength and compassion – two qualities embodied by Tara, whether in her Brahmanical or adapted manifestations.

A final note on my use of certain terms, forms of address and translated texts. First and foremost, I use “Myanmar” or “Burma” as the name of the country with no political intent or in any reference to the controversy that has raged over the name change by the military government since 1989. I have used Burma for the pre-1989 period and have switched to Myanmar (as well as altered names of cities, provinces and ethnic nationalities) for the subsequent period. In addition, since ethnicity continues to be a critical lens through which Myanmar is viewed, I need to clarify that I have used “Bamah”, “Bamar” (or previously “Burman”) while referring to the most populous Buddhist ethnic group in accordance with the official nomenclature instituted in 1989. The term “Burmese” when used in the context of language refers to the language of this majority group, while when used otherwise, (as in “the Burmese” or the “people of Myanmar”) is a generic term denoting the citizens of the country, irrespective of ethnicity.

Since there are no family names used in Myanmar, Burmese names mostly appear in full (eg. Khin Myo Chit or Ma Thida). It is only occasionally that I have shortened names to facilitate reading ease: thus Aung San Suu Kyi has been shortened to Suu Kyi or Ludu Daw Amar to Daw Amar. In the case of the four women authors I have used the most popular names they wrote or write under. With the important exception of Aung San Suu Kyi, all the authors have adopted pen names in their time. Thus, while Khin Myo Chit was an acquired nom de plume, Daw Amar wrote under various pseudonyms like Aung Naing, Mya Myint Zu and Khin Hla Win, just as Ma Thida has written under pen names Ma Thida (Sanchaung) and Suragamika. Where appropriate I have also used honorifics and Burmese courtesy terms of address (for eg. *Daw* for older women, *U* for older men, *Ma* for younger women, *Ko* for elder brother, *Saya-daw* for abbot etc), though these prefixes do not appear in the bibliography.

I have not always used first edition volumes for citations. While in Aung San Suu Kyi’s case I have mentioned as such in the endnotes, in the case of the other three authors I have added annexures indicating the year of first publications.





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Finally, I have distinguished between English and Burmese reference sources in the citations as well as mentioned the names of translators wherever I have used existing translated texts. Translations such as Khin Myo Chit’s *Ma*, much of Daw Amar’s writing and quotations from the *Ludu Paper*, Ma Thida’s *Sanchaung*, *Insein*, *Harvard* and her editorials from the *Teen Magazine* and *Myanmar Independent*, Aung San Suu Kyi’s Burmese speeches and her column from the *D-Hlaing Journal*, which are unattributed are of my own, done with the help of a dedicated team of translators without whom this book would have been impossible. For frequently used Pali or Burmese words I have included a glossary as well as an approximate English translation in parenthesis (for eg. *mettā* or loving kindness) in the main text. For Romanized versions of Burmese, and Pali words as pronounced in Burmese, I have tried to avoid the complexity of multiple systems of transliteration available and instead adhered to a simplified version (without tone mark) in prevalence at SOAS.

Endnotes

1. It needs to be noted here that the tradition of bodhisattvas, both male and female, is restricted to Mahayana Buddhism and does not form a part of Theravada beliefs.
2. Barbara Watson Andaya, 2006. *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 232.
3. Sir J G Scott (Shway Yoe), 1<sup>st</sup> pub. 1882, 1963. *The Burman: His Life and Notions*. NY: W.W. Norton & Co. Inc., 53.
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7. Melford E Spiro, 1970. *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and its Vicissitudes*. NY, London: Harper and Row, 6.
8. Spiro, 1970, 21. Quote from *The Rangoon Nation*, 24 May 1961.
9. Khin Myo Chit, 2005. *Stories and Sketches of Myanmar*. Yangon: Parami Sarpay, 48.
10. Aung San Suu Kyi, 1<sup>st</sup> pub. 1995, 1997. *Letters from Burma*. London, NY: Penguin Books, 115.
11. Burmese source: Sein Win, 2010. *Essays in Remembrance of Ludu Daw Amar*. Mandalay: Nyi Pu Lay ed, *Kyi-bwa-yay* Publication House, 33-37.
12. Aung San Suu Kyi, 1<sup>st</sup> pub. 1991, 2010. Introduction to *Freedom from Fear*. London, NY: Penguin Books, xxviii.
13. Burmese source: Ma Thida, 1989. ‘Hsap-pyar Bu-baung-lay mya’ (Soap Bubbles), *Youq-shin-amyu-te Magazine*, November, translated by *Ko Sein Kyaw Hlaing*.
14. Reference to *Zaneka*: Burmese source: Aung San Suu Kyi, *D-Hlaing Journal*, 2013, July 1.



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## Acknowledgements

This book happened quite by accident. Or should I call it an act of fate? It was the winter of 2012. I was engaged in some preliminary research on the migrant Indian population of Myanmar. My earlier book, *A Gentleman's Word: The Legacy of Subhas Chandra Bose in Southeast Asia* had sparked my interest in both the cultural awakening of the Indian female diaspora and in Myanmar and it was part of an attempt to integrate the two themes in a viable project idea. It was then that I stumbled on a profile of Khin Myo Chit – an author whose name means Lady Patriot in Burmese, yet who had failed to fulfil her nationalist aspirations or sustain a political career. Some of her anguish was evident in the bitter humour of her self-portrayals.

I met Ambassador K Kesavapany at a club in Singapore with the nascent idea and he pointed me in the direction of Aung San Suu Kyi. By then I considered the former Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore to be my literary mentor and took serious note of his advice. He also introduced me to eminent scholar of Burmese history, Dr Robert H Taylor, former professor, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. I am thankful to Dr Taylor for his initial guidance, particularly when I was struggling with the various shades of leftist ideology in pre- and post-independent Burma. It was also Dr Taylor who put me in touch with Anna Allott, Senior Research Associate in Burmese, SOAS, University of London. This proved to be the turning point of my research. I am sincerely thankful to Anna for the generosity with which she shared her formidable knowledge of Burmese literature with me. At regular intervals I received packets of research material from her personal collection which proved invaluable. I am also deeply grateful to Patricia Herbert, independent scholar and former Curator of Southeast Asia Collections, British Library who shared with me information on Burmese manuscripts archived at the library and crucial research sources. As I am thankful to Dr Matthew Walton, Aung San Suu Kyi Senior Research Fellow, St Antony's College, Oxford University: his critical marginal notes on my manuscript gave me new insight.

My first point of contact in Yangon was U Thaw Kaung, the former Chief Librarian from the Universities Central Library, University of Yangon and friend to many a researcher working on Myanmar. On my first visit and on every subsequent visit I would reach U Thaw Kaung's house at the end of a long, dusty day and find him at the door, warmly smiling, his dogs barking around him and the orange rays of the setting sun glinting off his spectacles. Our long discussions were accompanied by the Burmese sweetmeats served by Aunty and I would come away with my mind singing with new ideas. I have also received unstinted support

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from the families of Ludu Daw Amar and Khin Myo Chit. Daw Amar's elder daughter, Dr Than Yin Mar and younger son Nyi Pu Lay opened the doors of the *Ludu* Library to me and it proved to be a veritable treasure trove. But I would not have been able to navigate my way through the voluminous archives without the assistance of the *Ludu* librarian, Aung Myint Oo and the *Ludu* editor and author, Nyi Sae Min. It was an unforgettable experience stepping into the house where Khin Myo Chit had lived and walking through the garden she had so lovingly tended. I remain grateful to her son, Dr Khin Maung Win and granddaughter Junior Win for their support.

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I remain grateful to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi for allowing me to use her painting of Tara as the frontispiece of this book. Tara as a metaphor for empowered *mettā* (loving kindness) represented the theme of this book as no other image could have.

On two occasions I had the opportunity to meet Ambassador Robert Chua, Ambassador of the Republic of Singapore in Yangon. I was impressed by his incisive analysis as I was by his empathetic understanding of the contemporary political scene of Myanmar. Meeting Saya-daw-gyi U Panditarama was yet another special experience. I appeared without an appointment at his doorstep, at the meditation centre at Yangon. Yet Saya-daw-gyi spent an entire afternoon with me discussing the true nature of *paññā* (transcendental wisdom). I sat like a Burmese with my legs folded under me in an unaccustomed posture of a supplicant and felt a deep sense of peace settle over me.

In Singapore U Than Maung has been my constant comrade while I researched and wrote the book. In the little antechamber alongside his bookshop we have read, browsed, discussed over innumerable mugs of coffee. During these uninhibited exchanges inchoate ideas crowding my mind have coalesced and gained clarity. To him I dedicate this book.

I am also deeply grateful to Professor Prasenjit Duara, Director, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore (NUS) for allowing me an affiliation with the Institute for the duration of the project. The affiliation gave me access to the substantial archives of NUS while the contributions of senior librarians like Thavamani Prem Kumar further enriched my experience.



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My final gratitude is to the four ladies about whom I write. From Khin Myo Chit I learnt doubting is good for from doubt often springs the deepest faith, from Daw Amar the significance of social traditions as long as they are rooted in empathy and understanding, from Ma Thida the need to resolve inner conflicts before attempting to comprehend the outer, tactile world and from Aung San Suu Kyi three monosyllabic words which when strung together can change lives – I CAN TRY.

May the merits of this book be shared by those I have or have not mentioned above, while the inadvertent follies come to my share.

