# 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]

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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]

* * *

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]

Khin Myo Chit's editorials in the *WPD* during the years 1965-68 are a study in derisive humour and implied irony. What she writes is interesting enough but what remains unsaid for the discerning reader to discover in between lines is perhaps far more significant. The year 1967 had not been a good year for the country with per capita income falling from Kyats 350 in 1964-65 to Kyats 313 in 1966-67 (approximately USD 66 as per 1967 exchange rates), a problem exacerbated by a thriving black market which had developed even as nationalized People's Cooperative Stores (*Pyei-thu thamawayama hsaing*) under the government's People's Stores Corporation failed to provide essential commodities at controlled prices.[11] As the country, once known for the richness of its natural resources, confronted the prospect of poverty and increasingly irrational government restrictions, Khin Myo Chit's ironical wit sparkled in the double and occasionally triple column editorials she wrote during the period.

She wrote quite a few editorials with titles like *Art – Not Trash – For People's Sake* and *Writers and Robots* on the topic of censorship and state-instituted literary awards.[12] Rather than deprecate the socialist government, she poured scorn on the "hopeful pen pushers" and "scribblers" who despite their pleas to *Thuyathadi* (goddess of wisdom and learning) and despite the wonderful opportunity provided by the government, were unable to take due advantage and produce works of lasting literary value. In the group of wretched Homo sapiens who ascribed to themselves the title of writers, she included herself and had no qualms in blaming herself squarely for the "university education" and slightly mature taste in literature which prevented her from perceiving the merits of the kind of writing the awards had inspired - which could only be labelled as "advertising copy". She turned the double-edged sword of her wit on the military regime which had (according to her) been benevolent in protecting the community of writers from wasting their creativity on the dreaded 'trade magazines' of the colonial times and instead provided them a lucrative playing field by instituting the literary awards. If the writers were not able to produce a piece with the *prescribed percentage* of patriotism or socialist ideology, surely they were to be blamed themselves? If authors were woolly headed enough to still believe in the bogey of *Art for Art's Sake* – a doctrine that had breathed its last at the altar of the Industrial Revolution, and insisted on not reducing themselves to "literary panders", they should surely also reconcile themselves to the thought of unfilled stomachs?[13] And surely the state was not to be blamed if the writers clung to their self-respect and refused to dance to the music of an empty drum or decline the "dunce caps" proffered to them in all benevolence by the powers that be? Here Khin Myo Chit takes her sarcastic humour a step further and mentions: "If he [the author] meant to win a prize offered by an institution, say for example the SPCAA (Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and Authors), he must write conforming to the rules

laid down by the same society." The only perhaps rather inconsequential aspect of the exercise both the "institution" and the author needed to remember was Shakespeare's *Hamlet* [or U Pon Nya's plays for that matter] "could not have won the prize offered by the society!"[14] The message could not have been clearer or more ironic – censorship, however agreeably presented by the military regime, could not inspire timeless art. It could only lead to a "nation of sheep" where wits were blunted and spirits dulled.

Most of Khin Myo Chit's editorials from this period are equally scathing in their social commentary, yet deliberately elusive in their references. In taking on the satirical voice of ridicule, Khin Myo Chit was close on the heels of her country's tradition. Tongue-in-cheek humour had been the trade mark of the *sa-hso-daw* or Burmese court poets who conveyed the common man's resentments to the king, despite the ever present threat of the imperial sword. In fact scribes at the king's courts had always lived by their wit, in turn adorned by honours and titles or threatened by solitary cells or the hangman's rope. Khin Myo Chit mentions the example of Ananda-Thuriya, the royal minister of the 12th century as an early example. Even as he approached the executioner's block he left four verses for his lord and master. The King was so greatly moved on reading the verses that he commanded the poet be pardoned forthwith, only to be told, "Oh, glorious King, the hand that wields the sword of power has gone too far." Centuries later yet another minister, Let We Thondara was more fortunate. Exiled to the malaria-infested jungles of North Burma for his candour he sent the King a verse and was called back to the court and restored to his former position.[15]

Flashes of dark humour are also an inherent part of the seditious verses aimed at those in power on the day of the *Thingyan* or Burmese water festival when the mocking *than-gyat* is chanted aloud. Yet, on this day marking the beginning of the Burmese New Year, the rhymesters go unscathed because their slogans are a part of the festive tradition and so cannot be condemned. Ironical humour was deeply embedded in the history of Burmese theatre as well, personified in the character of the clown or jester of the Burmese *zat-pwe* (a travelling theatre combining elements of opera, ballet and musicals) and the marionette theatre. The jester's role went often to the most mature actor or marionette handler. Dressed in matching checked *pa-hso* (sarong for men) and short jackets, with their hair tied in a 'chicken tail' atop their heads, the clowns of the Burmese stage were called *thancho* and *thanpyet*. They formed a couple, entertaining the audience for hours with their sharp wit and wicked puns.[16] Accompanied by the ominous notes of a cymbal they also uttered the omens and kept the plot running. The jesters of the Burmese stage were very similar to their counterparts from Elizabethan England and were often the voice of truth. They satirised society and ridiculed convention and yet eluded the wrath of the king because they veiled their barbs in clever

witticisms and perhaps because they were irresistible for the sheer entertainment they provided.[17]

Apparently, with each editorial as she pushed the envelope a bit more and inched closer to the tolerance limits of the powers that be, a close parallel emerged in Khin Myo Chit's mind between her own situation and that of the ever popular court jester of the Burmese opera who audaciously mouthed the ugly truth and then jumped off the stage and disappeared into the enveloping darkness. As the months of 1968 wore on, images of death and execution increasingly overshadowed her writing and the line spoken after Minister Ananda-Thuriya's execution ran like a reiterative refrain, "Oh, glorious king, the hand that wields the sword of power had gone too far!"

On 21 July 1968 Khin Myo Chit would write her last editorial for the *WPD*.[18] Titled, "Dandruff in My Halo" it is an unusually poignant piece with little of her earlier sense of mischief or irony. She writes of her eyes dimming with unaccustomed tears when she read of Bo Zeya's death in the papers. Bo Zeya had been one of the *Thirty Comrades,* a close friend from her college days who had later turned a communist and as such was deemed a political adversary and an interloper in the military-ruled socialist state. Khin Myo Chit wrote she wept for Bo Zeya not because she cared for his politics or ideology. She wept for a friend who was dead and gone, for the old times when they had fought together for independence first against the British and then the Japanese, for a dream which they had shared in their youth. But she knew in military Burma where one feared one's own shadow and friendships with the opposition camp could threaten lives, her tears would be misconstrued. She could be deemed a communist and by natural corollary a traitor to the socialist cause:

> "I wept for Bo Zeya though God knows that I could not care less for his politics or ideology. I wept for a friend dead and gone. But these days one cannot do a simple thing without getting dubbed a capitalist or communist…Surely, we can be human as well as Socialist (in the true Burmese way) at the same time, can't we?"[19]

The piece conveys the sense of fear and resulting hypocrisy which was fast enmeshing the Burmese society, the fear of the sword which curtailed spontaneity and betrayed long-standing human bonds, fear which degraded humanity and forced one to walk down the Valley of Humiliation. It was the same sense of an all-encompassing fear, a fear which stifled and slowly destroyed all sense of right and wrong of which Aung San Suu Kyi would write almost three decades later with touching eloquence in her essay, *Freedom from Fear.*

Expectedly in August 1968 Khin Myo Chit's husband U Khin Maung Latt would be summoned by General Ne Win and the couple would be told that they

were old and needed to retire. They were both 53. The *WPD* would continue on its journey as would Burmese socialism but the voice of the "irrepressible wit" would be silenced forever from the national newspaper.

## An arcadia called Sagaing and the land of Kings

Khin Myo Chit was born on 1 May 1915 in the Sagaing Division of British Burma which is a part of the dry zone of Upper Burma and according to H Fielding-Hall (who like some of the other colonial-era writers on Burma were given to such sweeping overstatements), the home, along with Pagan, Shwebo, Ava, Amarapura and Mandalay, of the true Burman.[20] Some 20km short of Mandalay, Sagaing faces Mandalay from the opposite banks of the Irrawaddy River and is joined to it by the Inwa Bridge, or according to the British the Ava Bridge because of its proximity to a former Burmese royal capital. The region is flanked by the rivers Chindwin and Irrawaddy and is a kaleidoscope of colours with long stretches of wooded hills, sandy banks of dried-up streams and undulating rice fields. From Sagaing a branch of the railway with its parallel bus route runs westward to Monywa, a busy trading town on the Chindwin River, while another line runs to Myitkyina in the far north, crossing on the way Shwebo, one of the old capitals of the Burmese royalty. Rich in history and folklore, Sagaing was significantly enough, home to some of the wittiest people of Burma who were famed for their picturesque speech. Their idiom came to be known as the *Hla-Daw Tha Sagar* and was a treasure trove of metaphors and parables often quoted by public speakers much to the mirth of the audience.[21]

Of course back in 1915 when Khin Myo Chit was born, the now famous Inwa Bridge had not been built. From Mandalay they took a motor launch over the foaming waters of the Irrawaddy to reach the home of her maternal grandparents in Sagaing. As the city of Mandalay faded away in the distance and she turned her gaze towards the wooded hills with their white-washed pagodas, Khin Myo Chit would feel the familiar stirrings of excitement. Around the launch small flat-bottomed sampans flitted over the blue water like birds and she nestled close to her grandfather, his patient replies keeping pace with her eager questions. As the pagoda-crested hills loomed closer, Ba Ba Gyi (grandfather) taught her to fold her palms like a lotus bud and directing her gaze to the pagodas, recite in Pali the lines:

"I take refuge in the Buddha
I take refuge in the *Dhamma*
I take refuge in the *Sangha*."[22]



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The prayer would be a happy prologue to the glorious days she was to spend at her grandparents' home, an old rambling house made of teak and *pyinkadoe* (Burmese hardwood) with a *wagat* roof, i.e. bamboo slats woven together into a thatch, which unlike the British-manufactured corrugated sheets, kept the house cool and let the natural light flood in.

Life in the house was peaceful and she would wake up with the early dawn light filtering in through the thatched roof and her Ba Ba Gyi's mellow voice reciting Pali *sutras*. Her May May Gyi (grandmother, here Khin Myo Chit's mother's stepmother) would be preparing the household shrine for the morning's prayers and Khin Myo Chit would happily roam the gardens and orchards with her grandfather, picking jasmines and roses to place before the Buddha. As they walked down the garden path she listened in awe to Ba Ba Gyis's invocations, "Those who stay on the trees and in the bushes, in the shrubs, those who stay in the ponds and in the well, may you all be blessed, may you have the best of everything and may you share the good deed I have done." The irrigation system for the estate had been cleverly devised by Ba Ba Gyi himself and as the gushing waters flowed through the network of canals and into the lime groves and flower beds, Khin Myo Chit would happily race alongside.

Later yellow robed monks from the nearby monastery arrived at their doorstep. May May Gyi had already prepared the morning's meal and would ladle steaming hot rice and boiled peas soaked in sesamum oil into the black lacquered alms-bowls which they carried, cradled in their arms. The monks would walk on in a solemn single file, with their eyes downcast and their feet bare. Very few households on the street wanted to miss the morning's alms-giving because such offerings were considered meritorious. As the morning wore on, May May Gyi sat with the young Khin Myo Chit to gently smooth *thanakha* paste on her face till she had a pale yellow sun on each cheek; and then she would style her hair into the *hsayit waing*, a hairstyle worn by the very young.[23] In the afternoons Ba Ba Gyi told her stories of King Nemi's chariot and of treasure-trove spirits and as Khin Myo Chit sat with her head on her grandfather's knee and closed her eyes she realised that each folktale and ritual served to emphasise the blessedness of human existence and that humans were different from all other sentient beings only because they had the chance to do deeds of merit.[24]

Khin Myo Chit's paternal grandfather, U Pe, on the other hand lived in Mandalay. A scholar, archaeologist and poet he instilled in her an enduring love for Burma and Burmese history. From the age of ten or so she accompanied him on his archaeological expeditions to Pagan and as he described historical characters with an easy familiarity, Khin Myo Chit felt history come alive. Much as Burmese puppeteers infuse life into their marionettes, her grandfather breathed life into the character of King Anawrahta of Pagan, whom he described as a *kalatha*

(dictionary meaning is a man about town, though Khin Myo Chit mentions shrewd, insightful, even boisterous) king, born with a wander-lust.[25] Even as she trudged through the hot dusty lanes of Pagan she forgot her discomfort as her grandfather's stories transported her to a bygone age when the great Burmese king had unified the whole of Burma and brought the scriptures of Theravada Buddhism to the Burmese people (a theory that has been subsequently challenged).[26] The very ground she stood on seemed to tremble with the heavy tread of elephants and the air around her came alive with the war cries of spear-slinging heroes. Khin Myo Chit listened enthralled.

The love for Pagan remained with Khin Myo Chit and her historical novel on King Anawrahta was first serialised in the *WPD* and in 1970 republished as *Anawrahta of Burma*. She wrote again and more poignantly about Pagan in 1975 when the temple complex was hit by a severe earthquake. Without doubt her writing on Pagan is an idealised version of Burmese history, coloured by the romanticism of her childhood when she first visited Pagan with her grandfather. Yet when she writes of Pagan where the teachings of the Buddha "found its first footing in Burma", when as followers of the Buddha "man became an exalted being" and for the first time in history the Burmese people "were freed from fear and superstition", it is apparent that to her Pagan had come to symbolise the triumph of the human spirit and it was for this that she held the Pagan era and King Anawrahta in high esteem. For her it was a time when human dignity was enhanced, men "became individuals each in his own right to seek strength and *Nibbana* (Nirvana) within his own self" and "did not have to grovel in fear of gods and spirits".[27] It was this vision of Pagan that Khin Myo Chit sought to recreate when she wrote of Anawrahta but with certain important adaptations in the popular portrayal which indicated her feminist leanings. And more than a decade later Aung San Suu Kyi while speaking of democracy and human rights would write of the same emphasis on man as an individual which underpins Buddhism: "… Buddhism, the foundation of traditional Burmese Culture, places the greatest value on man, who alone of all beings can achieve the supreme state of Buddhahood. Each man has in him the potential to realize the truth…"[28]

## Jo of *Little Women*: Makings of a rebel

Khin Myo Chit learnt the art of storytelling from her grandparents. From a young age she would imagine herself in a world where goblins and fairies wandered, and would be fascinated by the magic of the Buddhist folklore depicted on pagoda walls. Quite naturally one of the first things she did when she learnt to read the Burmese script was to reach for the gilt-edged, leather-bound *550 Jataka Tales* on

the family bookshelf.[29] And as she learnt English, her reading horizons opened up even further. English books were scarce in the dusty upcountry towns of Prome and Meiktila where her father, U Taw an officer of some considerable seniority with the British police, found himself posted. Her only source of reading matter was the shelves of her father's office club. She devoured the *Lamb's Tales of Shakespeare*, the novels of Dickens and Victor Hugo and the historical fiction of Sir Walter Scott: knights in shining armour made inroads into her heart and stayed enthroned there. She shared their adventures, grieved at their misfortunes and found it difficult to shake off their thoughts.[30]

But undertones of gloom were already marring her idyllic childhood.[31] Her police officer father did not take too kindly to this eldest daughter of his who was a bit too imaginative to fit into the real world, quite obstinate and disconcertingly clever for a girl. Khin Myo Chit could sense her mother's discomfort as she introduced her not-so-beautiful daughter (dark skin, high forehead and a snub nose) to the other ladies of the town who gathered often in her parlour. Her mother, Daw Than Tin, was a lady of some importance in the society because of her husband's position and one day Khin Myo Chit heard her tell the other ladies to come and have a look at her "Saturday-born" and so ill fated "ugly mite".[32] Things were never the same again. Her sensitive ears picked up scraps of conversations: her father saying she was a disappointment because she was not a boy, her mother's friends wondering how such a lovely mother could have such an ugly child? Khin Myo Chit felt happy and forgot her disgrace only in the company of her grandfather and prayed hard that the princesses and fairies who peopled her mind would make her if not a boy then at least beautiful. Soon she had a prettier and more favoured younger sister and in time three younger brothers. Her grandmother passed away when she was twelve, thus breaking the ties with the only happy times she had known in her childhood. Her parents seemed to comprehend even less her delight in an imaginary world – how she could lose her way while looking at the paintings on a pagoda wall, how she could misplace the heavy gold anklets that any respectable Burmese girl wore; her mother would pick up the stick in chastisement instead. As the lashes rained on her body, Khin Myo Chit fought her parents like a wild animal and strangers gathered to stare.[33]

To make matters worse, with her father being transferred from one township to another, Khin Myo Chit was compelled to frequently change schools. This meant by the time she finished school she had attended no less than fifteen institutions, majority of which were meant for boys since most upcountry towns did not have National Schools for girls.[34] Often she found herself a part of a minority and competed hard to outshine the boys in her class. Born a bit of a tomboy, she picked up boyish habits in order to survive in a male-dominated world and would always remain the proverbial 'Jo' to her future husband, Khin Maung Latt. Even in later

years she would feel ill-at-ease in the company of 'painted faces' and 'gaudy plumage' of society belles and fight hard to find a niche for herself.[35]

Predictably, her sense of alienation grew as she learnt to negotiate her way in this inimical world where she had few friends and still fewer loved ones. She could not reconcile the harshness of her own reality with the stories of soaring human attainment which her grandparents told her. As years passed, she turned increasingly to her first love – story telling. But whereas earlier she had regaled servant girls with her stories, in her teens she took to writing, much to the chagrin of her parents. Later she remarked that she wrote because she wanted to write, because she enjoyed, "…looking at life, listening to its throb, feeling its touch" against her heart.[36] But there were few to understand this strange longing in a girl's heart and it was rough sailing with her manuscripts confiscated and every scrap of paper taken from her possession.[37] As harsh recriminations with even harsher reprisals came her way, she wondered how it could be happening in a country where women and daughters were supposedly loved and cherished. But what Khin Myo Chit in her early youth perhaps did not realise, it was not entirely the fault of her police-officer father or an indifferent mother. Rather it had as much to do with some long held undercurrents of gender discriminating in her country as with the colonised Burmese society which in the 1920s was going through a not so happy phase of transition.

## A society in transition and a patriot

In 1818 John Stuart Mill's equally illustrious father, James Mill, wrote in his *History of British India* that the condition of women in a society is an index of its place in civilization. He was commenting on the abysmal condition of Indian women, oppressed as they were by the barbaric practices of *sati*, female infanticide and pre-pubertal marriage. He was of course yet to travel to the Indian sub-continent. Strangely in 1906 Fielding-Hall, one of the earliest and most popular writers on Burma, noticing the exceptional equality of the sexes in the country commented, "It is the mark of rising nations that men control and women are not seen… They [the Burmese] are very young. Their world is still a nursery, where the woman and the priest are strong."[38] Ironically enough, in both countries this attitude gained the British a moral high-ground of legitimate colonial control.

It is true that in Burma there were certain social practices in vogue which reflected the egalitarianism of Burmese society, particularly when compared to its immediate neighbour, India. In matters of marriage, divorce and inheritance laws – the three most contentious of feminist issues – Burmese women enjoyed a natural equality with men. Marriage was a partnership of two individuals, founded

on affection and no parent could choose a mate for a girl without offering her the right of refusal.[39] Girls did not change their names after marriage and usually young couples moved in with the wife's parents for a while till they had better control of their lives and resources. Marriages could be annulled by either of the partners and polygamy occurred, but not without the consent of the first wife.[40] Women enjoyed full inheritance rights and marriage did not confer on men any right to the wives' property, except what was acquired after marriage, which they held jointly. And women had no qualms in independently managing the property she called her own, freely appearing for legal cases, signing deeds, borrowing money on joint security and doing what was required for conducting her business.[41] Besides, she held a virtual monopoly over the petty trade of any town or village and because of the element of uncertainty in cultivation, often her trade earnings were considered more reliable than what the man earned from agriculture. Sir J G Scott, a British author who wrote one of the most colourful accounts of Burma, mentioned the ubiquitous small stalls under each house in the Burmese village with their colourful stock-in-trade: "…a few dried fish, betel-nut, with the fresh green leaves, lime, cardamoms and cutch, all ready for making up, half a dozen cocoa-nuts, or perhaps some twopenny-ha'penny knives, looking glasses,…paltry Manchester goods…a few home-made *longyi* and *paso*, waist-cloths, woven at odd times in the loom which stands in the yard." And when the lady of the house was earnest about trading, she started a stall in the bazaar, driving a hard bargain with her customers, her only "regrettable trait" being the "forcible nature of her language" when she was annoyed![42]

However, while colonial authors like Fielding-Hall or Scott (or even Burmese authors like Daw Mya Sein and Mi Mi Khaing) wrote with some eloquence of gender equality and the women's apparent economic emancipation in Burma, Khin Myo Chit, growing up in British Burma experienced a very different reality. Khin Myo Chit described the subtext of gender discrimination as an "undercurrent of male chauvinism" and remarked, "If Burmese women are equal in status as men, men certainly are more equal."[43] On closer inspection even the colonial sources reveal some of these trends. Thus, men were considered the head of the family and husbands and elder sons had the concluding word in family debates. Women, by dint of an innate understanding of marital law, scarcely took a lead in public life. In case she did so it was only in the absence of a male and returned to her household domain once the men of the family were back. Inherently men were considered wiser and better and the society functioned on this understanding: if women wove coarse cotton, men wove silk, if a female-hand worked at the field she was paid lesser than a male and if women ran the petty trade, men dealt in bigger merchandise like rice or teak. But this was so much a part of the natural process of socialization from early times that it was rarely considered a serious failing and

according to Fielding-Hall, if a Burman was asked why the law discriminated as such, he would merely shrug and reply, "It isn't the law, it is a fact."[44]

Education was yet another pivotal discriminant between these women, adept at the bazaar acts of persuasion and bargaining, and their men. Prior to British colonisation every six or seven year old boy in the village went to the nearest monastery where they were taught to read and write the Pali script, often accompanied by a *nissaya* version that interspersed a Burmese translation with each word of the Pali text.[45] Such training was in preparation for the boys' eventual ordination as novices and because of the primary education provided by the monasteries there was a relatively high degree of literacy among the male population when the Europeans arrived. In contrast, the girls at most times stayed home to learn housework and help their mothers. Some were sent to the lay-run schools which supplemented the monastery schools and offered similar training to girls and young boys.[46] Such schools were run as acts of merit by respected laymen or women and while teaching the same curriculum, avoided the rituals and restrictions of the monasteries that limited the girls' access. But all villages did not have such lay-run schools and to quote Fielding-Hall again, while every girl's bazaar arithmetic was as good as her brother's, it was an exception to find a girl who could read, as it was to find a boy who could not.[47]

According to J S Furnivall, the District Commissioner of Burma turned historian and anthropologist, in 1872 when the first census report was published with a considerably inflated female literacy figure tagged at an appalling 10%, the British decided to take the matter more seriously in hand.[48] They had been struggling with introducing the Western system of education in Burma for a while now, armed as they were with Macaulay's doctrines and their past experience in India where, though not completely successful, it had created a surplus of university and school graduates. In 1866 the British had tried to extend the curriculum of the monastic schools without much success in Burma and later when with the opening of the Suez Canal and increase in trade the need for secular education and a knowledge of English was felt, had concentrated on lay and Anglo-vernacular schools, many of the latter run by Christian missionary societies.[49] But progress had been slow and by 1918 Burma had produced only 400 graduates, including many non-Burmans.[50] And in the case of female literacy, though there was some headway, the number of girls studying beyond primary education remained substantially fewer than boys. According to reports on Public Instruction in 1885, the year of the British annexation, the number of boys attending recognised schools had been 133,408. It took the girls the next 50 years to reach the same number.[51] And in the academic year 1912-1913, i.e., just before Khin Myo Chit's birth, 20 female students entered the intermediate exam of which only 10 passed.[52] Though there were exceptions like Daw Saw Sa who was the first Burmese woman to

get a FRCS degree from London in 1912 and was later nominated to the senate or the barrister Daw Pwa Yin who returned from London in 1925 or Daw Mya Sein who returned from Oxford in 1930 and represented Burma at the League of Nations Conference the subsequent year and was also a delegation member of the Burma Round Table Conference in London, these achievements were largely the consequence of individual effort and did not change the gender literacy profile. The overall picture remained dismal. Between 1900 and 1940 the percentage of literate males rose from 37.6 to 56.0 and of females from 6.1 to a mere 16.5 and whereas in 1900 Burma had held a lead over its other Southeast Asian neighbours in the percentage of population at recognised schools, by 1940 it had sunk to a fifth position (after Formosa, the Philippines, Thailand and Malaya), just a little ahead of Netherlands India where public education had made a late start anyway.[53]

As J S Furnivall remarked, the real picture was even darker than what the figures indicated as the new system had failed to trigger any demand for education, primary or otherwise: "…formerly the people *wanted* to send their children to the monastic school, and for this and other purposes maintained at their own charge the monastery and its inmates; there was a social demand for education. If there is to be any great increase in primary instruction, it is not sufficient to supply schools and teachers; it is essential to cultivate a demand for them."[54] For most Burmese till the 1920s, (Khin Myo Chit passed her primary school from the Ingapore National School and her 7th standard in 1929 from the Government High School, Thayet) Western education proved to have no perceived cultural value and only a modicum of economic benefit. Reading English literature was not a popular pastime and subsequently, apart from a clutch of popular novels, not many translation works were undertaken. Frequently, learning English in school did not lead to permanent literacy (in the Western sense at least) as the skill fell rusty without use in everyday life. English, like light bouncing off a mirror, left the Burmese society largely unmoved. And because it failed to trigger off a cultural evolution, even as late as in 1923, in Rangoon, English bookshops, museums, art galleries, theatre or concert halls were rare – most cultural manifestations of the West, apart from Hollywood, stood largely rejected.

It is possible that Khin Myo Chit faced the last vestiges of some of this resistance in her household. For if she allowed Scottish knights to take up residence in her mind and if the cadences of Shakespeare's plays and Keats' poetry were music to her ears, she was an aberration. A daughter who was so different in her responses from not only the other girls but maybe even her own siblings must have been completely incomprehensible to her parents. And it was because of this cultural disengagement between the Burmese society and their colonial masters that English books were hard to find in the dusty towns of Prome or Meiktila or the other provincial towns where she spent her childhood. With female education not

being a priority she was often the only girl in her class at the National Schools she attended (she writes of her only other female class-mate, Ma Khin Yi in Meiktila) and had to endure considerable pigtail pulling and ribbon snatching. This was also the reason why her family later reacted so sharply to her aspiration to study medicine, for Western medicine had failed to wean the Burmese from their indigenous medical system or practitioners, and women studying medicine was not an acceptable social trend. This could also be the reason why she suggested a job in a post office as an alternate career option: because the postal system was one of the few Western institutions which had taken root in her country.[55]

Though in the years following British annexation and even as late as in the 1920s, Western influence failed to trigger an extensive cultural revolution, the young educated Burmese continued to secure adequate if not lucrative jobs with the British government or with foreign commercial firms while legal practitioners worked at the law courts and the Legislative Council where English was the accepted mode of communication. And though the administrative acme, the Burma Civil Service was formed only after the separation of Burma from India in 1937, by 1923 the Provincial Civil Service (Class II) was predominantly Burman and the Subordinate Civil Service (Class III) was almost exclusively Burman.[56] In the long run for the Burmese, the Services – whether Civil, Police or Forest, proved to be a window to the lifestyle and ethos of the British which was largely Victorian at that time. Not only British, for the emerging Burmese middle class an administrative job meant close contact with a large number of Indian clerks who came from a society with deeply entrenched patriarchal values. And with the opening of the Suez Canal, as an increasing number of English women arrived, endeavouring to build 'English' households for their menfolk, the forces of connected cultures worked in diverse ways on the lives of the Burmese women. Daw Mya Sein ascribed the gender divide and what was considered the acceptable refined life for the English women to "chivalry" which, according to her, dictated many of the "surface attitudes" of Westerners to women.[57] Perhaps it also had a relation to the aftermath of Victorian England when women were denied suffrage rights and were bound by marriage vows telling them to love, honour and obey their husbands. The early Burmese society where Daw Mya Sein during her research had found traces of a matriarchal society and instances where the inheritance of a village headman-ship was through the female line did not resonate well with the colonial concept of a modern masculine nation.[58] It was in the interest of the British expansionist state to organise the workforce based on gender and family roles and by early twentieth century women's exclusive domesticity became the most effective marker of middle class status in Burma.

In all probability this was also a reason for the hostility Khin Myo Chit encountered in her mother's 'parlour' where she rendezvoused with the other

'ladies' of the town. For by then, a genteel woman needed a university degree (if at all) only to "sell in the marriage fair" and unlike earlier times when the proceeds from a bazaar stall had supplemented a family's income, now a man of the fast emerging Burmese middle-class was apologetic in letting his womenfolk work – it reflected poorly on his masculinity.[59] Women were meant to stay home, raise children, follow her husband to the towns where he was transferred and in general add to his social prestige.

It was against this background that Khin Myo Chit matriculated in 1932 from the National High School, Meiktila and prepared to join university at Rangoon. In the same year her first writing was published in the Rangoon University's *Tekkatho Kyaung-daik Magazine's wasanta sazaung* or rainy season edition. It was a Burmese translation of Sir Walter Scott's poem, *The Patriot* and earned her a modicum of fame as not only a poet but also a nationalist. But even as she willed herself to break her emotional ties with her family, there was yet another socio-economic change underway which effectively further undermined women's status in Burmese society. Following the British annexation, came years of economic turbulence for the country. Burma, positioned as it was on the Indo-China trade route, had always played a role in the foreign trade passing through its borders, but now as a British colony it was thrown open to economic forces of the global market. During the aftermath of the First World War, cheaply made imported goods flooded the bazaars and impaired the local small-scale industries and petty trade channels of the country. With the new British rail routes through the Irrawaddy valley and the many steamboats launched by the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, the goods travelled to upcountry markets as well. The rapid development of the rice economy from around the 1870s under British auspices transformed the subsistence economy to one based on wage labour. This meant with the new currency there was enough demand for the free flow of the fancy imported goods.[60] This new market economy hit the women the hardest and though initially they held out against the onslaught of imported goods and competition from the large number of Indian migrant labourers (who came along with the large Indian migrant population which arrived to work in the railways, at government offices etc) who came on the coattails of the British, their virtual monopoly of local trade was gradually displaced by bigger business houses. Whereas earlier a woman could have earned enough to live on, now Manchester, Germany and Japan had altered all that. Fielding-Hall wrote in early twentieth century, "The old cottons were thick and warm and clumsy, the new are thin and fine and well finished. They are also cheaper…You hardly ever see a loom now or hear the 'click, click' that used to be so common."[61] And as the looms fell silent and the stalls presided over by women where they had bargained and laughed and gossiped, lost some of their business, particularly in

the bigger towns, the Burmese woman's economic independence and free-will were also curtailed. She was forced to recast herself and look for fresh avenues of growth. But such change would happen over time and in the meanwhile she had to contain herself, for, "When he feeds her, she is no longer able to make her voice as loud as his is."[62]

## Of youth, love and…folly: Early feminist awakenings

Khin Myo Chit decided to leave her uncongenial family home and move to Rangoon in 1933. She was 18 and keen to continue her romance with English literature and take up the degree course offered by the University of Rangoon. By now the skinny girl had matured into a willowy, dark beauty who wore her hair in the fashionable *bi-zadon* – a style similar to a clean-swept bouffant, entailing rather careful manipulation of the hair around combs set high on the crown of the head. Her literary tastes had also matured – she had left the adventures of Scott and Victor Hugo behind to begin a "grand flirtation" with ideas. She delved into the anti-institutional polemics of Voltaire and the other French grand master – Rousseau.[63] Bernard Shaw provided one of the first windows to the Socialist doctrine and from both Voltaire and Shaw she borrowed the skill of couching social edicts in mordant humour.

Rangoon at that time was the capital of British Burma, a city designed by a British superintendent surgeon, Dr William Montgomerie in 1852; he arrived in Rangoon with his British troops and some town-planning experience from Singapore where he had been a close associate of Sir Stamford Raffles. Montgomerie wanted to make most of the Rangoon River which flowed alongside the city and proposed a wide Strand on the river banks which would be kept clear of buildings and plotted a grid of streets leading off it at right angles.[64] It was because of Montgomerie's first sketches and then Alexander Fraser's expansion plans that the city which Khin Myo Chit encountered was extremely pleasant. Despite the rapid expansion the city had seen because of the three industries on which its wealth was built – paddy, oil and teak, there were open green spaces around the Royal (Kandawgyi) Lake, the zoological gardens and the Shwedagon Pagoda and a balmy river breeze blew in through the geometrically precise layout of roads. And there were just as many merchant houses, international banks, large departmental stores and bazaars as there were cinemas, clubs and night spots.

In deciding to move away from the cultural heartland of Upper Burma to Rangoon, Khin Myo Chit was consciously turning towards mainstream Burmese political aspirations. The capital in the 1930s was a ferment of partisan activities and before long Khin Myo Chit would take yet another defiant step into the bellicose waters of nationalist politics. It would start innocuously enough with

strident participations in debates and floor discussions at the Jubilee Hall of the university as she discovered the intellectual stimulants she had missed in her upcountry childhood.[65] Rangoon University at that time was held in high public esteem because of the "new writing" of young scholars and Khin Myo Chit, as she took up residence at the Inya Girls' Hostel, embraced all that was happening around her with uninhibited eagerness. Before long she was a part of the close community of students on campus, enjoying the girls' dance performances at the Jubilee Hall and the soccer matches of the Burma Athletic Society and the Walter-Locke Shield which the university team was famed for winning each year.

In Rangoon Khin Myo Chit scraped together a living writing freelance assignments and by 1933 she was writing for the *Dagon Magazine*, the first illustrated monthly of the country, established by yet another woman, Dagon Khin Khin Lay.[66] The *Dagon* had known such illustrious editors as Thakin Kodaw Hmaing and Ledi Pandita U Maung Gyi and was known for having brought the female voice into the world of popular literature. In fact Khin Myo Chit was fortunate because by the time she arrived in Rangoon, columns written by and for women were an established feature in many magazines of the day. The trend had started in the 1920s with the serialised column in the *Dagon* called *Yuwadi sekku* (Young Ladies' Viewpoint), an epistolary column featuring letters ostensibly written by young women though in all likelihood penned by U Maung Gyi under female pseudonyms. By 1925 yet another widely read periodical, *Deedok gya-ne* (*Deedok* Weekly) had replicated U Maung Gyi's column and started a column entitled *Yuwadi Kyei-mon* (Young Ladies' Mirror), this time the pseudonymous author being none other than the revered Kodaw Hmaing himself.[67] And over the next few years serialised *yuwadi* columns featuring the modern Burmese woman of the day who read newspapers and magazines and combined formal Anglicised education with a ready knowledge of Buddhist texts became an established feature of any paper or periodical. By the mid-1930s when Khin Myo Chit arrived on the literary scene, though such epistolary columns had become less prevalent, columns devoted to the opinion of female writers were popular and most publications had a prominent female editor (not a man writing under a nom de plume) and even those like *Myanma Alin* (Light of Burma, nationalised by the socialist government and subsequently revived by SLORC as *New Light of Burma* or *Myanma Alin Thit*), *Kyi-bwa-yay* (Prosperity, belonging to Daw Amar's husband U Hla) and *To-tet-yay* (Progress), that did not have women editors routinely featured columns written by women.

By 1937 Khin Myo Chit was not only writing for the *Dagon* and the *Thuriya* (Sun) but found herself a part of the editorial staff of the *Burma Journal* and *To-tet-yay* as well, positions she secured through the connections of her scholarly grandfather, U Pe. She was just 22 and had managed to secure a foothold in the

intellectual circles of Rangoon and yet surprisingly, she found little to gratify her literary instincts. It took her some time to realise that unwittingly she had stepped into a world which like her home was firmly divided on gender lines. There were virtually insurmountable walls dividing the literary world: while men (or women under male pseudonyms) were assigned the smart opinion pieces and political editorials, women (or men under female pseudonyms) wrote the low prestige popular romantic literature. The penny books and novels came their way while the world of politics was entrusted to those who understood it best – the men. Even while contributing columns for the *Dagon Magazine* or the *Myanma Alin* Khin Myo Chit found herself writing on topics like the role of mothers in educating children as the future citizens of Burma or articles counselling young wives to overcome animosities with a jealous mother-in-law – pieces which emphasised the modern woman's domesticity and endorsed traditional institutions of marriage and motherhood.[68] As she struggled to write pieces born of her own convictions, in 1936 yet another opportunity came her way. The *Thuriya Paper* (1911-1954), founded by the nationalists Hla Pe and Ba Pe of which the leading figure of Burmese literature and culture Thakin Kodaw Hmaing was the editor, requested her to write a novella for serialisation in the paper. The *Thuriya* was much more than a platform for voicing anti-British sentiments. It wielded considerable influence on the country's culture and was known to have established the writing careers of many a young, politically inspired, educated Burmese. At that time the well-known author, Zawana's *Kaw-leik-kyaung-tha* (The College Boy) had been published with great success in the *Thuriya* and the editors thought, "…it would be a good idea to follow it up with a girl's view of college life". Khin Myo Chit was approached to write the novel, *Kaw-leik-kyaung-thu* (The College Girl) and the success of the novel could well prove to be the turning point of her literary career. Yet she, who at home was eloquently articulate in the demand that she should not be treated as "only a girl" found herself *toeing the line* of editors to have her story accepted. Her heroines turned out to be "prim and proper" and the moment they exhibited the tempestuous traits of her favourite female protagonists, Maggie Tulliver (The Mill on the Floss) or Catherine Earnshaw (Wuthering Heights), she felt compelled to use her creator's prerogative to have them married off to a Price Charming and "of course they lived happily ever after."[69] Later in her life Khin Myo Chit would find it difficult to forgive herself for the novel ("…the language was not too bad. Unfortunately, it is about the only kind thing that can be said of the novel.") It would bring her the coveted fame but also the realisation that in her country women were encouraged to write or enter journalism not to add a new gendered perspective but only because they added colour to a male-dominated industry and made business sense - women writers were a news item and helped to cater to and mobilize the increasingly literate generation of young

female readers.[70] Unwritten laws of self-censorship remained in place and so it would not do to publish anything that was unbecoming of a "nice young lady" and incur the wrath of "strait-laced parents".[71]

Around the same time she also discovered the Burma Book Club which had been founded in Rangoon by the retired civil servant, J S Furnivall. Though by this time Furnivall had retired to England, students were allowed to read and discuss politics in the club and as the group of students congregating became larger some of the student leaders of the university union got together in the summer of 1937 and founded the *Nagani (Red Dragon) Book Club* on the model of Victor Gollancz's Left Book Club. At five annas per book, the club sold cheap paperback-newsprint editions of the best vernacular political writing and was located on the corner of Scott Market.[72] The young students of the university, actively on a search for fresh intellectual perspectives sufficiently disassociated from tradition, found themselves increasingly drawn to the radical ideology of Sun Yat-sen, Marx, Engels and the leaders of the Irish and Indian nationalist movements and it was but natural that Khin Myo Chit with her extraordinary English writing skills should join the *Nagani Book Club* as a translator, thus beginning what proved to be her life-time acquaintance with the *thakins* or young political leaders of the time.

The Rangoon University had spelt trouble for the British even before its foundation. Ironically the university was conceived at a meeting in the Jubilee Hall where the possibility of erecting a statue of King Edward was being deliberated.[73] The University Act of 1920 called for the establishment of an independent residential university on the model of Cambridge or Oxford. It would straddle the existing Rangoon College, Judson College and the network of hostels and admit only the best. But young students, already concerned at the erosion of traditional Burmese-Buddhist values and monastic schools being replaced by English and Anglo-Vernacular schools, had objected to the elitist University Act and called a strike on 4 December 1920. This strike had been remarkable: not only was it Burma's first but also entirely student led. The strikers had camped at the precincts of the Shwedagon Pagoda and won immediate sympathy of Burmese political leaders. As a follow-up to their demands, the students and academics had coalesced with politically inclined monks and created a network of National schools to teach the Burmese language and history. The strike had dragged on for nearly a year but at the end had won few concessions from the British. What it did achieve was a new political coalition of student leaders, monks and radical, professional politicians and a new found self-assurance among the students who had managed to pull-off the national level event.

A second university strike occurred in 1936 in which Ludu Daw Amar was an eager participant but by then the nationalist movement as well as student politics had undergone a sea-change. Following the financial and trade slump of 1930 and

the resulting peasant revolution led by Hsaya San, there had emerged yet another youth movement in May 1930, the *Dobama Asi-ayone* (We Burmans), which unlike the earlier Buddhist revivalist movement was secular, radical in its ideology and far more martial in spirit. The young activists ascribed to themselves the title *Thakin* (Master) and brought together not only students and radical politicians but also a vast number of industrial workers. Thus by 1936 when student activism stirred again on the university campus, the movement secured almost immediate sympathy of the *Dobama Asi-ayone* and easy access to the large support base which this entailed. The 1936 strikes were provoked by disciplinary action taken by the university authority against the RUSU (Rangoon University Students' Union) President Thakin Nu, Thakin Aung San and some other leaders and won for the strikers' major concessions including promises of student representation on the university council. Overnight the victorious student leaders became national icons.

Khin Myo Chit came to be associated with the student movement of 1938. By then student activism had reached a new watermark. Women like Than Than Myint and Khin Khin who were later to marry two of the most prominent leftist leaders, called themselves *Thakinmas* and were actively involved in the *Dobama Asi-ayone* and Gya-ne-gyaw Ma Ma Lay, journalist and author was the secretary of the *Dobama Asi-ayone* at Bogalay in Lower Burma. In 1936 many female students had marched to the Shwedagon Pagoda with the strikers while in the same year the All Burma Students' Union (ABSU) was formed after proposals from Ma Khin Mya, a woman activist.[74] In 1938 Aung San was the President of ABSU and RUSU and about him Khin Myo Chit later wrote that she never expected her "blunt, reserved" friend from the student union days who scarcely ever showed his "human side" to become Burma's man of destiny.[75] She also got to know Thakin Than Tun who had co-founded the *Nagani Club* with Thakin Nu and Tun Shwe, was a part of the *Dobama Asi-ayone* and was married to Aung San's sister-in-law. Of Thakin Than Tun , future founder-member of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) and his constant companion, Thakin Ba Hein (again a future communist) she wrote: "I was drawn to the vibrant personality of Thakin Than Tun and his crisp clear talk on political ideologies, one of his favourite subjects being the harm religion had done to Burma…".[76] At one point of time she shared residence with him and Thakin Nu (she called U Nu Ko Nu as a form of address for elder brother or Thakin Nu) who was to be Burma's first post-independence Prime Minister and the former encouraged her nationalism as he did her scepticism of Burma's unquestioning dependence on Buddhist beliefs.[77]

The year 1938 started ominously enough for the country with a dispute between Indian and Burmese labourers at the oilfields of Chauk and Yenangyaung.[78] Within a week the oilfield workers were on strike and by July trouble had spread to all oil producing areas. On 30 November the strikers decided to march to

Rangoon. Historical narratives of the time point to the stereotypical role women were expected to play in the political struggle: U Maung Maung in his *Burmese Nationalist Movements: 1940–1948*, writes of the *thakinmas* who gathered on the roadside to wish the *thakins* 'Victory' and baptised them with Eugenia leaves soaked in water even as the strikers marched four abreast to the beat of the victory drum.[79] The student union still labouring to have the amendment bill to the University Act passed, had had a change of management: Aung San and U Nu had resigned to join the *Dobama Asi-ayone* and Ba Hein was the new President with Ba Swe as General-Secretary of both unions. By December the marchers had decided to go on an indefinite hunger strike and the *thakins* sought the intervention of RUSU in the name of student-worker solidarity. Emotionally moved by the plight of the marchers and their remarkable spirit, Ba Hein and Ba Swe committed the students to the labour cause. They decided to take a more active part themselves but were soon arrested. Their moving speech and subsequent arrest made newspaper headlines: the *Dobama Asi-ayone* got the media attention it sought while student emotions ran high.

With Ba Hein and Ba Swe arrested, the Vice President Hla Shway was in the chair and on 14 December the unions decided to go on a three day demonstration strike demanding the release of their leaders and withdrawal of Section 144 which banned public meetings in Rangoon. For the next few days the demonstrations at Shwedagon Pagoda proceeded as planned with more arrests and the government making repeated offers that Ba Hein and Ba Swe would be released if the students promised not to intervene in politics and the on-going labour strife. But the students remained unmoved with U Nu and Hla Shway exhorting them to make even greater sacrifices.

20 December 1938 dawned: the atmosphere was as taut as a bowstring. Busloads of students arrived in front of the Secretariat Building. A spectacular Victorian structure with brickwork walls, a large central dome and turrets, the Secretariat was the seat of power from where virtually the entire Burmese colony was run and a decade later, on 19 July 1947 in a hall in the south-west corner of the same building, Aung San would be shot down with six of his ministerial colleagues. That morning in 1938 by 9 a.m. pickets were in place around it. Female students from the university, including Khin Myo Chit who was the second in command of the women's front, were stationed at the gates which guarded the busiest of the thoroughfares. Mounted police tried to storm the gates but the students held firm and it seemed the afternoon would end peacefully with the students maintaining their dignified stance despite provocations from the British police. By noon the leaders reassembled the picketers and the students formed a solid phalanx at the crossroad of Spark and Fraser Streets, ready to go back to campus. Hla Shway stood on a wayside cart to make a speech congratulating the students on their stoical

demeanour when the police armed with batons descended on the gathered crowd. The front rows, comprised almost entirely of girls from the university and various schools of Rangoon, collapsed at the onslaught and as they picked themselves up the police assaulted them again. Of her experience Khin Myo Chit wrote, "Three girls and I happened to be in the front line, right after the standard bearers. It was a rude shock when we found ourselves confronted by baton wielding policemen, some mounted on horseback. All of a sudden, like a sequence on a cinema screen, everything became a confusion of horses' legs and batons. To my horror, I saw girls falling in pools of blood. As I tried to pick them up, blows fell on me."[80] The incident, a major part of which was played out in front of the *Thuriya* office, received high profile coverage in the newspaper the next morning. U Saw who was later to be convicted on charges of planning the assassination of Aung Sang and his cabinet colleagues was then the proprietor of the paper and a part of the opposition to the Burmese Premier Ba Maw. He exploited the situation to the full to vent his belligerence against his political rival. In retaliation Ba Maw accused the *thakins* of colluding with U Saw and unnecessarily beguiling children and adolescents into politics.[81] As the students' nationalist ideals came up against the harsh reality of adult politics, the first seeds of doubt were sown in Khin Myo Chit's mind.

One of the students assaulted by the police, Aung Kyaw (Ma Thida would write of his tomb at the RUSU campus in her *Sanchaung, Insein, Harvard*) breathed his last on 25 December. Thousands thronged to the university lawns where his body was placed. According to *Thuriya* estimates there were at least 300,000 people at his funeral.[82] The University was on indefinite strike and everyday there were fresh reports in the papers of district schools and even village elementary schools and monastery schools closing down. Student unrest affected the Shan states as well as districts and upcountry towns. The RUSU and ABSU leaders met at the Myoma National High School to decide on the student volunteers who were to be sent to the districts to lead the movements which had so spontaneously developed there. Khin Myo Chit was one of the students chosen to tour the delta region.[83] But as she accompanied U Nu, an increasing sense of despondency assailed her. It was a feeling not unknown to her. She realised she spent more time running errands for the senior leader than addressing the public herself. Just as during the Rangoon strikes female picketers had been prominently stationed at the busiest thoroughfares, at the tour too she was merely an "added attraction", an embellishment to draw the crowds and strengthen the case for the *thakins*' cause.[84] As days passed, Khin Myo Chit was increasingly driven to the conclusion that in politics too, just as in the world of newspapers, the situation remained the same. The leadership of the students' movement would firmly remain in the hands of the men – the *thakins* and senior politicians while she or the other female participants had no control over either its outcome or the methods employed. They could only

be ardent, but submissive followers and their role, thus circumscribed, held out little fulfilment.

Even as Khin Myo Chit chased the falling curve of student activism, love was making new inroads in her heart. She had met Khin Maung Latt sometime back while staying at her family home in Pegu. He was the veritable boy next door, an undergraduate who had dropped out of college because of a decline in family fortunes. With their mutual love for English literature and a shared taste in books, it was an instantaneous coming together of minds. Of him she wrote, "We had a fine time talking of books. It seemed that we had launched on a long and timeless talk which could lead to one thing – a life – a long alliance."[85] The couple married in October 1939, a ceremony attended by Thakin Kodaw Hmaing and the senior political leader, U Ba Cho (later to be assassinated with Aung San) and had their only son in 1940. From the beginning the relationship had a mellow camaraderie to it and like the proverbial sheen of old Burmese teak, got richer with age. U Khin Maung Latt made numerous appearances in her writing as the perfect foil to her impetuosities, indulgently tolerant of her (at times) hare-brained schemes and kitchen misadventures.

Post-1939, life was never the same again for Khin Myo Chit and neither was it for the student movement of which she had been such a fervent participant. The 1938 strikes, known by its Burma era year as the 1300 movement, remained in history as the inflection point of student activism. Unlike 1920 or 1936, this was the first time when student strikes occurred in response to a non-student dispute – the oilfield strikes – a political issue with strong ethnic undertones and helped win a political victory. It served the *Dobama Asi-ayone* well in bolstering its declining image after a rather scandalous split earlier in the year. The press was utilised exceedingly well and successfully deflected popular attention from abject partisan politics. When Khin Myo Chit returned to campus after the war she found the university derelict and a mere shadow of its former self.[86] The downslide continued. The pattern of political manipulation and youthful impulse ending in violent suppression was repeated in sickeningly familiar and increasingly futile cycles. Since most adult politicians had a RUSU past, the national political parties remained in close nexus with the student bodies. In the post-war years the student unions were wooed by rival Communist and Socialist parties and following Aung San's assassination the students drifted away from the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), alleging their loyalty to the Communists instead. Subsequently, students played a major role in the post-independence Communist uprising and were driven underground by the AFPFL. The political parties and students' unions continued to feed off each other, vitiating the education system of the country. As history took its inscrutable turns, what for Khin Myo Chit had been a march for a glorious cause in 1938, had at the end of the trajectory the

tragic bombing of the RUSU headquarters in 1962: early in the morning of 8 July 1962, the military dynamited the historical building where Aung San and U Nu had once colluded against the British. It was not only a massacre of the innocent but the end of a dream for Burma. The 1300 movement had had an unexpectedly long and unforgivably violent afterlife.

## This is my own, my native land!

On 8 December 1941 Khin Myo Chit was reading Sir Philip Gibb's "Realities of War" when Pearl Harbour was bombed. The Japanese conquest of Burma would be one of the opening chapters in the Southeast Asian theatre of World War II and Rangoon would be repeatedly bombed during December 1941. Subsequent overland operations would stretch on till mid-1942, proving to be one of the longest land campaigns of the war. For the Burmese caught between the retreating Allied and advancing Axis armies, it meant being driven from homes and communities and everything that was familiar. Khin Myo Chit would never return to complete Gibb's tale of war-torn Europe as the horrors of real war knocked at her door.[87]

As the Japanese blitzing of Rangoon continued Khin Myo Chit's young family fled to the isolated San Chaung monastery near Monywa in the Sagaing region of her birth. In fact a large number of Burmese families took refuge in the monasteries dotting the Sagaing hills which were now functioning as veritable refugee camps and the district witnessed some of the worst clashes. The Japanese *Kempeitai* (military police) arrived hot-on-the-heels of pro-British civil servants and politicians who were in hiding.[88] Khin Myo Chit and her family crouched in a *zayat* (pilgrim's shelter) as explosions sounded all around them. One night Japanese troops burst into the monastery compound in pursuit of the fleeing British but they could only seize her mosquito net. The Japanese alliance sat uneasy on Burma right from the start despite the façade of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and talks of Asia for the Asians. And even as talks of independence were widely publicised over Tokyo radio, rumours were rife about the Japanese and uneasy whispers filtered through the monastery walls. During the summer of 1942 an old *thakin* friend, Tin Pe (later Brigadier Tin Pe) who had enlisted with the Burma Independence Army (BIA) appeared with news of the BIA's rivalry with the Japanese. It was increasingly apparent that the alliance had been an elaborately orchestrated decoy and Burma was in effect a pawn in Japan's expansionist plans. At this point Khin Myo Chit decided to forsake the dubious sanctuary of the monastery walls and travel back to Rangoon in search of old friends.[89]

She described the train journey to Rangoon she and her two year old child undertook along the war-shattered railway system; U Khin Maung Latt had decided to stay back and join the resistance with Tin Pe. The railways were still

not fully functional and man and luggage lay huddled in an untidy heap in the corner of a goods wagon. At the slightest provocation on the part of the passengers, Japanese soldiers descended on them armed with bamboo sticks. As the blows rained indiscriminately on the heads of men, women and children, Khin Myo Chit dared not look at the victims' faces, so distorted were they with humiliation. When the child in her arms woke up and squirmed, the soldiers turned on her with anger. But the once defiant Khin Myo Chit merely held her child closer to her chest and looked away.[90]

They returned to a greatly transformed Rangoon. Food and supplies ran short, essential services had collapsed, disease and an appalling air of squalor loomed over the metropolis. The colonialists' life of laidback elegance at the manicured lawns and expansive verandas of the Rangoon Gymkhana and Boat Club had ended. It was a society where the social order was curiously reversed: some had become rich overnight riding on the price control and rationing initiated by the Japanese while others like the professionals who were left without jobs and the pro-British Christians, Anglo-Burmese and Karens were pushed down the social ladder.[91] Khin Myo Chit herself, armed with a capital of Rs 10, set about finding a livelihood. She set up a stall near Scott Market selling slippers but soon realised the highways of commerce were not meant for her: her wares were pinched, the day's figures would not add up and when customers bargained with her she could manage only to blush and stammer.[92] She was rescued from the venture when Thakin Than Tun, whom she knew from the *Nagani Book Club* days, spotted them from his car and offered a clerical post to U Khin Maung Latt in Ba Maw's government. U Khin Maung Latt quit after one day when he realised the job had come to him at the cost of another's but in time Khin Myo Chit received an offer from the offices of the *Dobama Sinyetha Asi-ayone* (DSA) to join as the executive head of the women's section. She declined since memories of her recent foray into politics when she had ended up a mere frivolous appendage to the *thakins* were still fresh. She went to see the chief of the organisation, U Nu, and he understood and released her from any sense of obligation that old ties of friendship might have demanded. But the offer had come from the *thakins* and the next day she found herself in the presence of another *thakin* friend who was most compelling.[93] In fact, confronted by the joint front of the Japanese and Ba Maw, the young *thakins* were going through some political insecurity themselves and were keen to recruit back old supporters. And so in September 1942 against her better judgement, she found herself to be an office bearer of the DSA. She and U Khin Maung Latt settled down in a ramshackle shed near her office so she could work and keep tabs on her son. Every time the Allied air-raid signal sounded she would rush home and take him to a safe shelter before returning to work.[94]

The couple were introduced to the Ba Maw government by Thakin Than Tun. Earlier in the year Aung San's Burma Independence Army (BIA) had traced a trail of victories at the vanguard of the Japanese army. Ne Win, later Burma's military dictator, crossed the Thai borders, where the BIA had been gathering strength, as the commander of the Fourth Burma Rifles. At every town they entered, the BIA soldiers were greeted as heroes and they established independent administrative units either directly or with the assistance of local leaders: Burma's martial past had finally been vindicated and colonial rule was reckoned to be at an end. The Japanese, deeply suspicious of the BIA who seemed perilously popular, were on a search for a sufficiently heavyweight civilian politician who could counter the BIA and discovered Ba Maw, Burma's past premier who had recently escaped his prison cell at Mogok. The *Dobama Sinyetha Asi-ayone* was formed in 1942, in essence a coalition between the older, more experienced politicians of Ba Maw's *Sinyetha Party* and the young *thakins*, led by Aung San of the *Dobama Asi-ayone*.

Khin Myo Chit's initial misgivings about the job at the DSA were sharpened by its nature. As the head of the women's section she was required to hobnob with the very stately Mrs Ba Maw and other ladies of the society. A tomboy by nature she had never had too many girlfriends: women got on her nerves as much as she seemed to get on theirs. She was diffident in their company and the job offered little in terms of intellectual stimulation or the altruistic satisfaction she was looking for. Khin Myo Chit yearned to join the East Asiatic Youth League (EAYL), a youth organisation started by the Japanese in mid-1942 under the leadership of U Ba Gyan and some of the former student union leaders. The EAYL had both boys' and girls' sections and worked at the grass root level on rehabilitation projects for air raid victims and the spread of health, hygiene and education. But by end-1942 the Youth League's popularity was second only to Aung San's Burma Defence Army (BIA was renamed BDA in 1942 and in 1943 BNA or the Burma National Army) and Khin Myo Chit sensed implicit pressure from her leaders to stay away from potential competitors.[95] "The East Asiatic Youths' League" she wrote, "has in fact turned many a drawing-room favourite into an ardent social worker. But then many of us of the DSA were not prepared to view their activities with such approval. In this as in many others, I discovered that my views were not quite in line with the views of those who made the policy."[96]

For a while she settled down at the DSA. She remembered the sectarian politics between the political stalwarts Ba Maw and U Saw which had impaired the student movement of the 1930s. But now U Saw, who had been discovered liaising with the Japanese and had been sent by the British to East Africa for the duration of the war, was out of the way and Khin Myo Chit rather naively believed the DSA was truly an end to party cliques. She decided to acknowledge Ba Maw as the leader for she felt in serving him she was serving her country and

this would not be perceived as disloyalty to her *thakin* friends.[97] Indeed during this period the new DSA administration made serious attempts at correcting some of the earlier damage inflicted by the BDA. The BDA and some of the subsidiary groups loosely connected with it had used the opportunity of the victory march of 1942 to settle scores with the Christian Karen minority who they believed had enjoyed special privileges under the British. But now Ba Maw took care to appoint Karen administrators in the Karen regions and co-opted Karens to the central government as well. Aung San too incorporated a Karen battalion in his army.[98] But the period of diplomatic cooperation between the older politicians and the younger *thakins* proved to be short-lived and soon Khin Myo Chit realised that despite the DSA's slogan of "One Party, One Blood, One Voice", the fragile threads of Burmese nationalist unity were unravelling yet again.

Trouble between Ba Maw and the *thakins* had cropped up in the initial stages of the formation of the Central Executive Administration when the screening committee recruited pro-British civil servants against the wishes of the *thakins* and turned away prominent members of the *Dobama Asi-ayone*.[99] Ba Maw had wanted to impress the Japanese with his administrative skills while the *thakins* had countered his move by recruiting many members like Khin Myo Chit herself who they felt would remain loyal to them. Underlying power tussles continued as Ba Maw, like the Japanese, felt threatened by the BDA's popularity while the *thakins* resented the power he exercised through his Japanese connections and the coterie of seasoned politicians and civil servants. Tensions were sharpened with the increasing despotism of the *Kempeitai* (Japanese police) whose aggression and sudden bursts of violence were proving to be insufferable to the Burmese. Yet Aung San, aware of the critical need for a united front at that juncture, was not prepared to hear of any dissent. The pent up rage of the *thakins* found a vent in internal discord and the dissatisfaction was reflected not only among the *thakins* but their politically active support groups and the common populace. In the towns and villages where the *Sinyetha Party* was strong it retained its identity while the district leaders of the *Dobama Asi-ayone* continued to use their name as publicly as they dared.

Khin Myo Chit who was posted at the DSA headquarters and had a ring-side view of the increasing breach of trust between the two parties and the leaders' half-hearted attempts at rapprochement, finally bid adieu to the DSA in September 1943. She realised the frontiers of an ensuing turf war had been drawn and it was time she beat a hasty retreat before she fell victim to yet another political battle of wills. It was the end of a political career for her during which she had hankered to do much but in essence attained very little. It had been relatively easier for women like Daw Khin Khin who had later married the radical Thakin Ba Sein or the inscrutable and "Sphinx like" Mrs Ba Maw. As wives of political officials they could manage their husbands' affairs and readily fall in with their political

ideology when the need arose. But for a female lone ranger like Khin Myo Chit to build a political career without being drawn into partisan politics was in effect inconceivable and since she found little satisfaction in the kind of work that was offered to her anyway, the wrench was perhaps easier to bear.

Subsequently, her only interactions with the nationalist forces of her country would be through her brothers and nephews who were in active service in the Burmese Army and her *thakin* friends. There was a brief while towards the end of the war when she was employed at the BDA's War Office. As the clandestine resistance movement gathered force, the War Office began receiving secret telexes from Reuters. Khin Myo Chit made copies of them and delivered them to Thakin Than Tun and Thakin Kyaw Nyein at considerable risk of *Kempetai* arrest.[100] Both at the War Office and from members of the army she would hear first-hand narrations of Japanese torture at the Military Training School at Mingaladon and of numerous other incidents across Burma which reflected their sadism and inhumanity. The Japanese habit of indiscriminate face-slapping towards the beginning of the regime had obviously been just a start. As the detention camps echoed with the agonised shrieks of victims suspected to be in collusion with the British, like her countrymen she would be increasingly convinced that the salvation of Burma lay in the hands of the young soldiers of BDA who were already in talks with the Allies to stage a revolt. And as the BDA staged its first revolt in Central Burma in early 1945, women could only applaud from the wings or take charge of the household while they awaited their menfolk's return from the battlefield. Describing the mass rally at the foot of the Shwedagon Pagoda in late March 1945, as a send-off to the BDA men who were ostensibly leaving for Central Burma to suppress the uprising there but in truth were about to wage open war against the Japanese, she wrote of the exhilaration she experienced at the sight of the brave young men leaving to serve their country. At six o'clock that morning *Thabye* flowers had run out at the bazaar. So she could not carry them in her hands to bless the boys but nothing could stop her from waving her hands and shouting "*Dobama*" in honour of the brave.[101]

The name *Khin Myo Chit*, meaning *Ms Patriot*, was not the name Khin Myo Chit had been given at birth (she was called Ma Khin Mya). It was conferred on her by her editor when she translated Sir Walter Scott's poem and was rather ambitiously adopted by her as a nom de plume during the 1300 Movement. She was seventeen when she translated Scott's lines with the emotional exuberance of youth:

"Land of my sires! What mortal hand
Can e'er untie the filial band,
That knits me to thy rugged strand!
Still, as I view each well-known scene,



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Think what is now, and what hath been,
Seems as, to me, of all bereft,
Sole friends thy woods and streams were left;
And thus I love them better still,
Even in extremity of ill."[102]

As her countrymen got more stridently martial in their patriotism and the scope of any effective role women could have played in Burma's struggle for liberty seemed all but over, despite her best intentions and an inordinately obstinate sense of mission, it was a promise she could not keep.

## *Pinni*, parasols and pickets

### *The 1920s*

During the first years of the twentieth century Mahatma Gandhi paid three visits to Burma. The first was in 1902 when the Buddhist revivalist body, the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) was yet to be formed. Gandhi returned from this visit charmed by the freedom and energy of the Burmese women and urged them to discard foreign silks and English umbrellas for homespun *longyi* and paper parasols.[103] By the time of his second visit in 1915, the year of Khin Myo Chit's birth, the YMBA formed by Rangoon college graduates in 1906 had been hi-jacked by local Anglophones. It was tantamount in popularity to the British Pegu Club and a fashion statement for England returned barristers and British civil servants.[104] The YMBA was also significantly bolder than at the time of its inception in its tactical agitation for cultural and educational issues. Gandhi's last and longest visit was in 1929 by when the YMBA nesting within the GCBA (General Council of Burmese Associations), organised in 1920 for more explicitly political and nationalist ends, was visibly on the wane. During the fortnight of his last visit Gandhi toured Rangoon, Mandalay, Moulmein and Toungoo, addressing large public audiences of Burmese monks, laity and the Indian diaspora. In India non-cooperation as a Civil Disobedience Movement had emerged under the stewardship of Gandhi in the early 1920s and March 1930 would see him begin the second of his pan-India movements – the *Dandi March* – a non-violent protest against British salt laws. In Burma, on the other hand, the 1920s decade witnessed nationalist political action being pioneered and laid on firm foundations though the leaders did not look beyond dominion status. The Buddhist *sangha* (order of the monks) through its control of the GCBA seemed to have appropriated the nationalist leadership and there was a significant influence of Gandhi on Burmese nationalist thought.

Among the nationalist leaders of the 1920s, the trio who emerged as the most prominent with the largest support base were the two venerable monks – U Ottama (1879-1939) and U Wisara (1889-1929) and the civilian U Chit Hlaing (1879-1952).[105] All three helped foster a close nexus with India, believing that to be the fastest route to achieve Home Rule and all three were self-confessed adherents of Gandhian beliefs. U Ottama, the Arakanese monk emerged as the neo-Gandhi of Burma after his return from India where he was a reputed member of the Hindu Mahasabha and the Indian National Congress. Like Gandhi he shared an intuitive bond with his country people and founded nationalist societies or the *wunthanu athins* at the villages and towns he visited on behalf of the GCBA. In protesting against Governor Reginald Craddock who sought to insulate Burma from Indian nationalism, he adopted the Gandhian tactic of boycott of British goods and advocated the use of the *khadi* equivalent – *pinni* (a coarse red cotton cloth).[106] U Wisara was yet another monk who had studied in Calcutta and been exposed to the Indian National Congress under the tutelage of U Ottama. On his return he continued his involvement with the GCSS i.e., the *General Council of Sangha Sameggi* which had been formed by the monks in 1920 as a parallel to the lay GCBA. Imprisoned on charges of sedition, U Wisara, like Gandhi, engaged in a hunger strike and fasted to death in a British jail. British reprisal against the two monks, particularly the first incarceration of U Ottama in 1921 galvanised the Buddhist *sangha* into large-scale involvement in politics and more active organisation of the GCSS.[107] The third of the triad was U Chit Hlaing, who though not as financially scrupulous as the two monks, was just as convinced by Gandhi's belief that strength would come from unity and Burma needed to subordinate its fight to India's struggle for strategic advantage. It was on this issue and the consequent boycott of the diarchy elections that the GCBA was split in 1922. With the enormous backing of the *sangha* and U Ottama himself, U Chit Hlaing emerged as the uncrowned king of Burmese politics.[108] From a family of timber traders, he had familial and political connections with India, favoured boycott and in 1929 joined the throngs to welcome Gandhi at the Rangoon port.[109] Thus despite British reprisals, the Indian diaspora, nationalist leaders and itinerant monks formed conduits and the transnational exchange of political ideology and praxis between India and Burma continued.

In India, Gandhi had an undeniable role in pioneering women's participation in the nationalist struggle. The Non-Cooperation Movement of 1919-25 held out a carefully etched out role to the women and they took to it eagerly: spinning the *charkha*, wearing *khadi* and contributing their jewellery to the nationalist cause. In Calcutta, Basanti Devi, the wife of the veteran Congress leader was arrested on charges of hawking *khadi* and inciting a strike. The effect of this arrest was electrifying and unleashed a great wave of patriotism in response. A perceptible

influence of Gandhi and the Gandhian leaders is evident in the Burmese women's early participation in the country's nationalist agitation as well. While in Burma Gandhi, impressed by the ingenuity of the indigenous spinning wheel, made as it were of inexpensive bamboo, exhorted Burmese women to revive the lost art of hand-spinning.[110] Gandhi's message of *ahimsa* (nonviolence)found instant resonance in an essentially Buddhist land. Wearing *pinni*, spinning and the boycott of everything British were powerful metaphors of anti-colonial resistance and by 1921 these practices had reached the innermost villages of Burma through the intricate network of monasteries and the *Sangha Sammeggi Apwe* which had sprung up following U Ottama's trial.[111] *Pongyis* (Buddhist monks) from every village were pressed into the service of these associations and the more spirited and academically distinguished ones were selected as *dhammakatikas*. The latter, fed on the political philosophy of U Pu and U Thein Maung as well as translated articles from Gandhi's *Young India*, emerged as the political tutors and leaders of rural *wunthanu athins*. On a rough estimate the *dhammakatikas* numbered around 12,000 and they formed a well organised body carrying identity cards and systematically infiltrating villages and towns, organising *wunthanu athins* (*athin* or association) and linking the isolated centres with the regional ones at Rangoon or Mandalay. They were committed to U Ottama's leadership style which in turn was an adaptation of the Gandhian political ideal and by October 1921, the number of organisations affiliated to the GCBA had jumped from 5,000 to around 12,000 – the *pongyis* had emerged as an irrefutable force and their political opinion could be ignored only at a grave risk of jeopardising the nationalist struggle.[112]

The politicisation of the monks allowed for a repercussion which was perhaps not entirely foreseen – the politicisation of their most devout followers – the women. The relationship between the monkhood and women had been an ancient one. They had offered food to the monks as an act of meritorious charity, attended the sermons and sustained the monasteries after the patronage of the Burmese monarchy collapsed. And this association was largely unaffected by British rule since it was the men rather than the women who cut short their education at monastery schools and opted for Anglo-Vernacular schools instead. But while the Gandhian influence meant women-run nationalist organisations became more visible during this period, (the YWBA was formed around 1918 with roughly the same aims as the YMBA and the Burmese Women's Society in 1919, although the *Wunthanu Konmayi Athin*, the body most closely linked to U Ottama achieved the maximum in terms of nationalist politics) as a natural corollary it perhaps also determined the role they were to play in the political movement.[113] For Gandhi, women were the ideal *satyagrahis* (followers of Gandhi's form of civil resistance), perfectly suited for his campaigns of picketing, boycott and Civil Disobedience. As Geraldine Forbes remarked, Gandhi lauded the Indian women's capacity for

silent suffering and invoked the image of *Sita*, an embodiment of the Hindu ideal of a devoted wife and mother.[114] In Burma too as the connection between political monks, women and the Home Rule agitation became stronger, women activists wearing *pinni* jackets and Burma-woven *longyi* were ubiquitous at picketing sites (in both India and Burma women were useful at picketing lines and as demonstrators as their presence allowed greater immunity from law) but at the same time women scarcely took up leadership roles and instead were restricted to the feminist modes of participation at the peripherals of the nationalist space. Thus in 1919-20 the women of the *Wunthanu Konmayi Athin* (WKA) under the leadership of the Gandhians, U Ottama and U Chit Hlaing, raised funds for the YMBA delegations visiting London to discuss the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms which eventually resulted in the Whyte Committee being sent to Burma to investigate the diarchy proposals. They sold handkerchiefs embroidered with the peacock emblem of the nationalists in order to do so.[115] During the university strikes of 1920 the WKA supplied necessary provisions and established a fund for sustaining the movement.[116] Thus Burmese women were at the forefront, picketing with the monks against the Whyte Committee and the Rangoon Gazette reported a five hundred strong contingent of women protesting against the 1922 visit of the Prince of Wales and yet again in February 1929 when the Simon Commission arrived in Burma, the boycott was led by male flag bearers followed by the women and monks.[117]

In 1920 in his first article on women in *Young India*, Gandhi wrote that women should take their proper place beside men, but not with a 'vote for women' campaign since that would only detract from the fight for freedom. Rather they should focus their energies in "helping their men against the common foe." But while in India in the vanguard of the Civil Disobedience Movement an entire series of women-centric social reforms and legislative corrections had already been undertaken (abolition of *sati*, 1829; Widow Remarriage Act 1856), in Burma, where women prided themselves on their equal status and hereditary rights, there was little awareness of the need for social change. Thus, the first resolution by a woman's organisation to boycott foreign goods was passed in 1921 by the WKA of Bassein and at the conference at Thayetmyo in November 1922, the only conference to be organised exclusively for women, resolutions were passed which dealt almost entirely with political questions and not feminist ones. A resolution called for boycott of the diarchy council, while another objected to the split of the Shan States from the rest of Burma and a third called for everyone to set up machines for cotton ginning and weaving in their households.[118] In yet another step, at the Paungde conference of 1924 the women of the WKA decided to forego paying direct personal taxes.[119] Daw Mya Sein too wrote of this lack of feminist movements in Burma and recalled only the isolated occasion of 1927 when there was a "…little bit of a feminist movement to abolish the clause which

provided that women could not stand for election to the Legislative Council."[120] But before writing this she clarifies, "In politics we have never had much of a feminist movement because in our society the problem of equal rights had never arisen" and recounts the only opposition to their movement came from the British (and not from Burmese men) since they feared that women who sought election would eventually back the nationalists. As she concludes the section with, "…our feminist feeling lasted only two years. In 1929 a woman was elected for the first time to the Legislature. Since then we have had no trouble, and at the present moment we have six women members in parliament", it underlines the lack of awareness of the perils to the feminist cause inherent in the women's alliance with the nationalists.[121] Khin Myo Chit was perhaps one of the first female authors to have written about the 'supposed' parity with men and the consequent complacency of the Burmese society which could be as damaging "as any written law."[122]

There was yet another dimension of Gandhi's philosophy which perhaps had its own repercussions on the way the Burmese female activists were perceived by their male compatriots. As passive resistance evolved and women remained restricted to feminine roles of participation, a second perhaps less tangible trend was an obsessive preoccupation with female chastity and the purity of the female form. With the evolution of nationalist pride, not only were Western influences rejected, there was an increasing urge to conserve one's lineage and traditional values. Gandhi while addressing Burmese women at Moulmein had chastised them for smoking and in Rangoon advised students to protect the purity of every girl if they wanted to prove themselves to be true patriots.[123] Ironically enough, this obsession with feminine morality found voice in anti-Indian sentiments and during the 1930s the nationalists came down with a heavy hand on Indo-Burmese marriages (as well as alliances with the Chinese or other migrant communities) which they felt undermined the ethnic purity of the Burmese race. Though the influence of Gandhi and the non-violence movement waned, this image of the men as the protectors of feminine virtues continued through the *thakin* era. Public outcry against Indo-Burmese marriages which had surfaced first on 11 July 1921 at a WKA gathering protesting against the incarceration of U Ottama continued, leading to the *Buddhist Marriage and Divorce Bill* and the *Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act* of 1927. The bill was ultimately passed in 1939 but during the entire 1930s Muslim-Burmese marriage was an important part of the nationalist agenda. What was interesting about the on-going debate was that beyond the legislative protection of the Burmese women's traditional Buddhist inheritance and divorce rights, these alliances were portrayed as a physical violation of Burmese women which taken a step further could be transposed to symbolise a racial degeneration of the nation. The demand for a legal and ideological correction of the marriage system when interpreted in the moral framework of nationalist

Burma implied further restraints on women's emancipation and sexuality. The issue of inter-racial marriages, greatly compounded by the economic downturn of the 1930s, proved to be one of the sparks for the Indo-Burmese riots of 1930 and 1938 and eventually also one of the reasons leading to the mass exodus of Indians from Burma at the start of the Japanese occupation.[124]

Gandhi made a comeback on Burma's political stage in 1988 with Aung San Suu Kyi. Student activists of the democracy movement wore *pinni* and the *khamauk* (farmer's hat worn by Gandhi) with pride and yet the movement went beyond such physical symbolisation as Suu Kyi attempted a reinvention of the Gandhian concepts of *satyagraha* (quest for truth) and *shramadana* (communal work).

### *The 1930s and 1940s*

The *Dobama Asi-ayone* movement was founded on 30 May 1930 by a young tutor of the Rangoon University, Ba Thoung. The most apparent difference between the 1920s and 1930s decades was the economic situation of the country. The 1930s saw severe economic dislocation caused by the near-collapse in the price of rice – Burma's foremost export commodity. Much of the rural population was affected and their misery was aggravated by the ethnic competition for jobs and land. Falling prices were followed by a wave of credit failures and foreclosures leading to vast tracts of the Burmese delta passing into the hands of the dreaded *Chettiar* money lenders from India. Unlike the 1920s, at stake was much more than the Buddhist religious practices and the nationalist leaders were not ready to repeat the earlier pitfalls of the GCBA and the *wunthanu* movements and follow a passive means of resistance.

The *Dobama* movement right from the outset was young, radical and since it was a direct consequence of the Indo-Burmese riots of May 1930, more aggressive in protecting the purity of the Burmese race. No longer satisfied with diarchy or Home Rule, the *thakins* demanded undisputed independence and to achieve this they sought a new political structure and praxis. Leftist ideology emerged as an obvious and progressive alternative to imperialism and capitalism and the movement had an overt economic message which was far removed from the earlier Gandhian vision of a grassroots movement towards cottage industry.[125] But the *Thakin* movement right from its inception proposed a clear breach with this earlier tradition. Soon after its formation, Ba Thoung and his young associates published the *Reform Series No. II* - a thirty-six page booklet containing eight articles which had appeared formerly as editorials in the *Ganda Lawka Magazine* (The World of Books). The picture on the cover of the *Reform Series* was a clever adaptation of the cover of a book on the Russian Revolution. It depicted a young Burman, his hair in the traditional Burmese chignon, wearing a *pa-hso* (sarongs for men) and with flaming torch in hand striding purposefully towards a modern,

industrial cityscape. The *thakins* were obviously ready to borrow from the Western developmental paradigm and tread the path of industrial urbanisation en route to independence. The eight articles also spoke of change in diverse forms – one was a comparative study of Japan and Burma delineating the former's technological advances, another stated that the Buddhist *Lokaniti* was excellent as a didactic piece but unfortunately did not teach the art of manufacturing trains or aeroplanes, a third spoke of the wonders of science and scientific farming. One of the most evocative articles was about U Kyaw Yin, the young artist from Tavoy who had built a large, inflated balloon and attaching a basket chair to it, had taken flight. The overt message was one of daring – daring to dream, to venture forth and break barriers. The last of the essays entitled, *The Way To Success*, sought to dispel traditional acceptance of the word *kan* to mean fate and instead emphasised its Pali-Sanskrit derivation to mean work.[126] It was a conscious shift away from the determinism of Buddhism to a philosophy of activism and scientific thought.

As winds of change swept over Burma and the *thakins* consciously detached themselves from the Gandhian philosophy of U Ottama, the emphatically aggressive and martial spirit of the movement (precursor in spirit if not in praxis to Aung San's army) precluded any expansion of the female role. The Burmans, classified as "non-martial" by the British and forcibly excluded from the Indian Army or the military police since the 1886-87 rebellion in Lower Burma, hungered to re-connect with their martial past.[127] The *Ye Tat* founded almost simultaneously as the *Dobama Asi-ayone* in 1930 was a spontaneous expression of this need. It was a voluntary training corps for young men interested in a military career and had regimented schedules of drills, parades and weapon training. The *Ye Tat* movement caught the imagination of the Burmans and by the mid-thirties many rival political parties, including the *Dobama Asi-ayone*, organised their own *tats* or volunteer corps. U Saw organised the *Galon Tat* while Ba Maw his *Dahma Tat*.[128] The *Dobama Asi-ayon*, though it believed in constitutional means of achieving independence, was imbued with the martial spirit of the time and with time founded its own *Dobama Ye Tat*. The latter though not as organised as the original *Ye Tat*, had its own gatherings with the young men in uniform training with staves and wooden guns. The *Dobama Asi-ayon* made its debut in the violent racial riots and even as fighting broke out in the streets of Rangoon, "*Dobama*" emerged as the rallying war-cry. Slogans with the explicit purpose of inciting militancy were adopted. The old Burmese adage, "Non-aggression quells aggression" was altered to "Non-aggression breeds more aggression and only aggression quells aggression."[129] *Living dangerously* was the accepted maxim and the *Dobama* song which rapidly gained in popularity and was later accepted as the Burmese national anthem was appropriately martial in tune and content. And though women did participate in these gatherings and joined-in in the rousing renditions of the *Dobama* song, the mass assemblies of the *Dobama Ye Tat*

which gathered under the peacock flag, amidst cries of "*Dobama! Dobama! Dobama!*" and vows to defend the country from enemies were essentially male affairs.[130]

As war loomed large on the horizon, despite the increase in the number of educated and otherwise accomplished women, they continued in the peripheral roles scripted for them earlier. Like Khin Myo Chit they were either used as pickets at particularly sensitive junctions, or were part of the small nursing corps often attached to the *tats* which had become the rage of the 1930s, or placed in the women's section of Ba Maw's *Wundan Aphwe* which was established in January 1943 on an island of the Inya Lake and provided succour and sustenance to bomb victims.[131] As Khin Myo Chit personally experienced, in Burmese nationalist politics besieged by factionalism, the presence of women more often than not was used as an additional weight to turn the scales in favour of a particular political party.[132] She wrote, "…most of their organisations [speaking of the nationalist outfits for women] became more or less subsidiary forces for political parties. For one thing, politicians were spared of the task of making special promises to women, 'since they already enjoy equal status with men'. Political parties of the day made full use of women. They had more news value. The presence of women at meetings and conferences excited the interest of the populace, and a good public attendance was assured that way. But the number of women who rose to policy making and executive posts was almost nil."[133]

Against this background it becomes easier to comprehend why even women like Daw Mya Sein born into a powerful political family (she was daughter to U May Oung, a member of the Legislative Council and Minister of Home Affairs), felt compelled to conform to popular mythology and write regarding the 1927 debate on women's rights to sit on the Legislative Council, "We were amazed to discover that the British officials were not very keen about women getting into the Legislature" without delving into the details of the counter arguments.[134] She does not mention that during the debate Queen Supaya-lat's name emerged as a powerful deterrent to the women's cause: there were those who contended that women with excessive *awza* (influence), such as her could spell disaster for the country.[135] Or that council member, U San Pe argued that women on the Council would have part in making law, including those applied to monks, a state of affairs that was "intolerable".[136] Or why despite the university boycotts throwing up names of influential, educated women like Ludu Daw Amar, Khin Myo Chit, Ma Ma Gyi or Ma Ohn, none of them emerged as significant political leaders of independent Burma.[137] Instead, Khin Myo Chit would wrestle for most of her life with a deep-seated sense of guilt because she was unable to conform to a traditional gender role and find ultimate gratification in Buddhism while Daw Amar would begin her career at the *Ludu Paper* as a part of a traditionally acceptable husband-wife partnership (like yet another powerful writer of the time

Gya-ne-gyaw Ma Ma Lay married to U Chit Maung, together they founded and edited the *Gya-ne-gyaw Journal*) and even in later life while writing of the *Zay Gyo* girls, would find it difficult to overtly champion the women's cause.

## In search of the gender subtext

One day when Khin Myo Chit was yet to enter her teens, she found herself walking down the corridors of a pagoda in Rangoon.[138] She was accompanied by a young nurse maid, slightly older than herself who pushed her baby brother's pram and was part of an ever-willing audience to the stories Khin Myo Chit narrated. Since she was a child Khin Myo Chit had entertained herself and those around her with stories of the characters who peopled the pagoda walls and that day was no different. The celestial creatures and mythological characters of the *jatakas* sprang to life, invested with human virtues and vices. Soon they found themselves in front of a wall-painting which showed the deaf and mute Prince Temi surrounded by a bevy of girls. It was a story from one of the previous lives of Gautama Buddha. The young prince pretended to be mute because he was unwilling to ascend his father's throne and the father tested him in many ways as he grew up. When, at the age of sixteen, he still remained mute the King sent the young girls to tempt him into returning to a life of corporeal needs. As they looked at the prince, mute and unmoved surrounded by a frieze of girls in revealing dress (some "wore topless fashion"), the nurse maid asked her the reason for their presence. Khin Myo Chit was taken aback for a moment, but just a moment before her creative talent came to her rescue, "The prince would not speak – his father wanted him to speak. So he sent those girls, hoping that the prince would scold them for going about in such a state of undress. They might catch a cold, you know. But he would not speak a word. It was none of his business if the girls catch their death of cold."[139] The nurse maid nodded, apparently satisfied, but the vision remained with Khin Myo Chit through her life. Even as a young girl she had known there was something embarrassing and perhaps also demeaning in the reason for the presence of those girls. She had hastened to cover the truth and provide a story that was more acceptable. Yet the negativity of the women's image was somewhat internalised and would find an outlet later in Khin Myo Chit's self-derision. She would find little to celebrate in her own femininity, turning away with disdain at any sign of "feminine fripperies" and unable to indulge in a session of "what we shall wear" conference without a pang of conscience.[140]

Khin Myo Chit's last editorial assignment with the *Working People's Daily* would end in 1968 and it would mean her final parting with the country's politics in the capacity of an editor or journalist. Instead, as the military rule became more restrictive, she turned to writing one volume after another of well-researched prose

on the country's culture. Starting with Burmese history (*Heroes of Old Burma,* serialised in the WPD, 1963-68), she would write the fictional *13 Carat Diamond and Other Stories* in 1969, and then continue to write on the Burmese way of life (*Colourful Burma*, 1976), Burmese flowers and festivals (*Flowers and Festivals Round the Burmese Year*, 1980) and finally on Burmese pagodas (*A Wonderland of Burmese Legends*) in 1984. With each book the inherent social condition of male supremacy would become more apparent to her. She would discover that the same underlying thread of cultural contempt towards women ran through paintings, the *zat-pwe* and marionette theatre, popular riddles, limericks, songs and even pagoda legends. It was as if the more levels of consciousness she traversed she discovered the gender bias ran even deeper until she came up against the very bedrock of Burmese society - Buddhism. Her experience was not dissimilar to that of the western feminists of the 1960s who discovered that sex-class was not to be solved by a few superficial reforms or the full integration of women into the labour force: the yin and yang division pervaded everything and feminists needed to question not only history, culture and economics but the organisation of nature itself.

In Khin Myo Chit's anthology *13 Carat Diamond and Other Stories* is included a short story titled, *The Bearer of the Betel Casket*.[141] Apparently it centres on a theme common enough in Burma, the conflict between city-bred modernity and rural traditions. The two central protagonists are Ko Ko Tin, son of open-hearted folks of the soil who has recently returned as a newly qualified lawyer from Europe and his accomplished girlfriend, Maisie – a lawyer herself with a "saucy" red car and a cigarette dangling from her lips. The two visit Ko Ko Tin's parents' home in a small town surrounded by paddy fields and are quickly swept into the arrangements for the ordination ceremony being organised for him. The ordination ceremony, like the novitiation is an important part of Burmese religious life when young bachelors of twenty and above (unlike at the time of novitiation when the boy's age ranges between seven and twelve) are ordained as disciples of the Buddha. They enter the *sangha* and live like an ascetic, albeit for a short while and then return to lay life. Superficially the story runs its natural course as the two are initially estranged, with Ko Ko Tin indignant about what he assumes to be Maisie's contempt for the "moth-eaten" traditions followed by his family, and their final reconciliation once both perceive the beauty of simple country customs.

Yet as the story progresses what becomes apparent is the inherent dichotomy of Ko Ko Tin's convictions. Initially, while confronted with family traditions he reacts with vehemence, "Why must they make a fuss about this novitiation business, which is only a matter of religious duty concerned only with family?" Yet, when it is time for his city-bred girlfriend to arrive he stutters and stumbles, hard-pressed to cover his embarrassment, "…he tried to make clear that Maisie was a Myanmar girl alright..but young..a lawyer like him..no, not old, but young, no not married either..

coming alone..no chaperone." When she does arrive he is filled with misgiving at her "predatory nails" and permed hair and after she leaves (though that is a ruse and Maisie merely returns as the bearer of the betel casket and his prospective bride in the final scene) he wastes no time to feast his eyes on "fresh country girls" and vows to "show her [Maisie] how a sweet flower born to blush" in his hometown could grace the metropolis. And when she returns in the final scene dressed in traditional finery, Ko Ko Tin who is yet to recognise her, gazes at her in wonder thinking, "Such is the beauty of womanhood, inspiring and ennobling men, not challenging and defying like Maisie, a hard-boiled career woman." Like most stories of Khin Myo Chit this one too has a happy ending with the couple deciding to marry: tradition has triumphed and the author ensures the ending is acceptable even to those culturally sensitive. Yet what remains only implied in Ko Ko Tin's stereotypical perception of career women as well as initial misgivings and final acceptance of Maisie is the compulsions at work on a modern, educated girl to conform not only to a traditional and so legitimised gender role but also reflect the duality displayed by Ko Ko Tin as he vacillates between tradition and modernity. In describing this age-old ritual when the prospective bride of the young man walks at the head of the procession carrying the betel casket, Khin Myo Chit highlights the prevalence of a tradition which compels women to dress themselves in silk and gold and appear as a seductress who will tempt the man away from his chosen spiritual pursuit. In laughingly accepting the role of the bearer of the betel casket ("I've always wanted to walk in the procession like the beauties of my mother's day"), Maisie merely endorses the perpetuation of a tradition and condones its psychological ramifications which even her modern, lawyer's mind cannot or is unwilling to decipher.

As the story runs its course two powerful images emerge which finally the two central protagonists come to symbolise – that of a young man about to enter the monastic order and the beautiful bearer of the betel casket. Amidst all the singing and laughter and attendant *do-bat* music, the beauty dressed in silk and sequins and bedecked in jewellery who heads the procession leading to the monastery where the ordination is to be held, is apparently as much an important figure as the man to be ordained. She walks with downcast eyes, the subject of much laughter and singing. The music troupe throws broad hints her way, how would she survive the week that her sweetheart is to spend at the monastery, what if he intends to be away for the entire three months of the lent season? Even as the music bursts forth in a "terrifying boom, as if to match the turmoil in the girl's heart", what it actually camouflages is the gender roles being played by the two – the man symbolising the archetypal Buddhist male with his attendant "retinue of young men dressed in old time military grandeur", prepared to forego the attachments of material life and take up the path of *dhamma* as ordained by the Buddha and the female, the archetypal seductress who holds him back and ultimately compels

him to return to lay life. She awaits his return from the monastery and finally the temptation of the sky-hued *pa-hso* she has woven for him proves to be too strong, forcing him to relinquish the yellow robes of monkhood.

As it turns out the story enacted at the time of the ordination ceremony for the lay disciple (in Pali *Upasampada*, meaning approaching the ascetic tradition) is as old as the classical Biblical tale of the Fall. Kate Millet, the American feminist to whom Khin Myo Chit would refer in a later volume (*Ma*, 1st published 1975 and then 2006) while discussing the sex roles assigned by Western society, described the story of the Fall as a "highly influential ethical justification of things as they are."[142] According to Millet, the myth of the Fall, central to Judeo-Christian imagination, sought to condemn Eve (the female) for her sexuality which led to the primal sin and the fall of Adam (and so humanity). In one stroke not only were women associated with sex, ie, everything that was unclean, sinful and debilitating while man was associated with the broader identity of humanity, the woman was also blamed for that one act under the unfortunate consequences of which the human race yet labours. Similarly in the ordination ceremony which Khin Myo Chit describes with such eloquence. That the theme of the Burmese female image runs alongside the more apparent theme of tradition vs modernity is indicated in the author's choice of title for the piece. Submerged under the simplicities of rituals and long-held customs are the prickly issues of sexual ethics and gender roles which are not entirely favourable for women. The rituals merely emphasise her social and spiritual subordination – she is the one who waits while the man crosses the threshold to the monastery and she is the one who tempts him back. The monastery becomes symbolical of the path to higher learning and eventual *nibbana* while the female form waiting outside, of the world of material desires and the incumbent *dukkha* or suffering. Thus through the character of Maisie the story also indicates just how deeply entrenched gender discrimination is, whereby secondary positions assigned to females are accepted without any apprehension or conscious reservation, but as a part of the natural law.

References to similar cases of gender classification abound in Khin Myo Chit's writing. In yet another anthology, *Flowers and Festivals Round the Burmese Year*, she writes of the light-hearted love songs of May. The full moon of Kason, the second month in the Burmese calendar celebrates the Buddha's enlightenment. During the month pagodas are visited and respects paid at the sacred Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha gained enlightenment. Women carry earthen water pots to the local pagoda and the procession is attended by the usual musical troupe playing on drums, cymbals and bamboo clappers. Songs which accompany such processions are by "ardent swains":

"Come along my pretty maid
I'll take thee right to *Nibbana*

It's the goal I'll strive
For thee and me, for me and thee…"[143]

It is again the man's prerogative to lead the woman on the path of ultimate salvation but more importantly is the implied dichotomy of opinion on the ethicality of sex or amorous liaisons. In the context of women, romance is associated with the attendant evils of her sexuality which disrupts spiritual progress while in the context of men the same human failing becomes synonymous with the ultimate goal of *nibbana,* the cessation of all sufferings. Kate Millet refers to the same duality while speaking of Greek mythology, "The Greek example is interesting here: when it wishes to exalt sexuality it celebrates fertility through the phallus; when it wishes to denigrate sexuality, it cites Pandora (and her thievish curiosity)."[144] Khin Myo Chit merely ends with a not so caustic barb at the "idiosyncrasies" of Burmese ways and customs but simultaneously does not fail to point to a certain duality inherent in the Burmese society as well: "They stick to the principles of Buddhism and at the same time they are very much of the world" and though *nibbana* remains the goal, but then it is a long way away and "naturally one wishes to have a helpmate and companion for the long journey 'to warn, to comfort and command.'"[145]

Khin Myo Chit writes of other characters from the Burmese mythological canon that validates the secondary status of women in the spiritual hierarchy. In the same volume, *Flowers and Festivals Round the Burmese Year*, she writes of the month of Nayon (June) associated with Sujata, the chief consort of Thagyarmin, a Zeus-like figure of Theravada Buddhism.[146] Sujata, though apparently associated with the feminine virtues of a dutiful wife, on closer scrutiny appears in a less positive light. The story delves into her previous existences and discovers Sujata was a woman of considerable beauty, content to lead a life of ease and pleasure. Lacking in the strength to do meritorious deeds, she was re-born in the animal world as a crane while her doting husband, Magha, a doer of good deeds, was re-born as Thagyarmin in the celestial world. It was Thagyarmin who sought her out and helped her to practise self-denial and abstinence in life after life till she could be re-born as the daughter of the King of Asuras (demons) and Thagyarmin could claim her back as his wife. So in the final analysis Sujata appears as the perfect embodiment of female compliance, individually disempowered and helpful only in highlighting the moral and spiritual superiority of man. Here, like in the story of Ko Ko Tin or when she writes of the love songs of May, Khin Myo Chit's tone remains overtly celebratory of Burmese culture. She is careful in mentioning the magic of such mythological stories which hold children enthralled or the nobility of old rituals which steer the lay population towards acts of merit and only allows herself a few lines which reflect her own feminist concerns. Thus, in writing of

Sujata she mentions, "Thagyarmin made Sujata his Chief Queen and celebrated the happy event by taking the title *Sujapati* (the Lord and Husband of Sujata). It was his best loved and proudest title."[147] It was her own way of elevating Sujata to the position of a well-loved consort if not a spiritually evolved being.

In her *A Wonderland of Burmese Legends* published in 1984, Khin Myo Chit narrated legends associated with some of the important pagodas and antiquated cities of the country. Such stories, part of Burma's oral history traditions contributed to the subliminal process of socialization and were key indicators of the acceptable female identity in the realm of popular culture. The volume includes, for example the story of the brothers Byatwi and Byatta from Thaton, the ancient Mon city by the southern coast of Burma. The brothers partook of the leftover shell of a man who had transformed himself into a *zaw-gyi* or alchemist and came to possess super-normal powers. Thus transformed the brothers became the scourge of the land and people lived in mortal fear of them. It was then that King Manuha of Thaton devised a clever plan. He had Byatwi walk under the nether garments of a woman and thereafter Byatwi found himself powerless, unable to rise out of the reach of his captors.[148] Though not explicitly stated by Khin Myo Chit the story emphasises the defiling quality of women's sexuality: she belongs to the realm of material desires and so is capable of debasing a man's spirituality or what in Burmese is called "*hpon*". In writing of the same story in *Colourful Burma,* Khin Myo Chit was careful in translating *hpon* as the "human mystique" and mentioned that the Burmese believed all humans, male or female, were endowed with *hpon*. According to her it was the quality that distinguished humanity.[149] But as explained elsewhere by Mi Mi Khaing, across Theravada Buddhist societies of Southeast Asia it is a popularly belief that as the Buddha himself was a male, it is only the male who can attain the highest level of spirituality and consequently the *hpon* of the man is considered precious, valued by men and women alike. Utmost care is taken to preserve it and though women are not subservient, there is no doubt that "spiritually a man is higher than a woman."[150]

In the volumes mentioned above, Khin Myo Chit is rarely if ever openly confrontational about the underlying male chauvinism of Burmese society. Nesting within her celebratory accounts of Burmese culture are planted subtle comments about the dichotomy of traditional beliefs or her attempts at painting popular female characters in a more positive light. She knew in a country where culture and religion were protected with a rare sensitivity any denigration of Buddhism, particularly by a female author was inconceivable. She was aware of her contemporary, the leftist writer Thein Pe Myint who had been forced to apologise after his polemical novel, *The Modern Monk* and that when the author P Monin, educated by Catholic monks, criticised the Magadaewa Sayadaw he was attacked both by his peers and the readers. She voiced her personal opinion on feminism and the social status of Myanmar

women in a collection of English essays she wrote for the UN's International Women's Year (IWY) of 1975 and another anthology of essays in Burmese, called *Ma* (*Woman*, to be discussed in next section) written around the same time for a women's conference planned by the government to commemorate the International Women's Year. But the conference was ultimately called off though the essays were published in 1975 by author Maung Tha Ya as a collected volume with the writings of other women authors. Subsequently the volume was banned by the government and Khin Myo Chit's anthology *Ma,* as a stand-alone book was published only in 2006, nearly a decade after she passed away.

## The radical feminists, Thilashin Me Khin and others: *Ma (woman)*

*Ma* starts with a short introduction by Khin Myo Chit, followed by a collection of English essays translated by her. The first section of the book contains the New York based journalist Lucy Komisar's *A Feminist Manifesto,* published by *Reader's Digest* in September 1971 while the second section has extracts from the book *Liberation Now* (Dell Publishing, 1971) and includes essays by leading feminists of the time like Marlene Dixon, Gloria Steinem, Margaret Mead and Alice Rossi. Khin Myo Chit follows up each essay with a critique of her own and under the third section includes a translation of her IWY essays (with some changes) which were first published by the *Guardian Magazine* in 1975. At the end comes a medley of quotations on women, some Western and some by Burmese monks and writers which reflect the changing perspectives on the women's issue. This book is remarkable because unlike her other writing, here she is comparatively more direct and forthcoming in her feminist views. As she commented in her introduction to the English essays written for the International Women's Year, when the UN announced the IWY and the UN Secretary General commented that there was need to make it a year which would leave an imprint in history, perhaps it was the "shock of being taken seriously for the first time in many decades."[151]

Khin Myo Chit starts the introduction of *Ma* with the rather defensive line, *I am writing about what I believe is right* and it is signed, 13 April 1975, ironically the start of *Thingyan* or the Water Festival when traditionally a certain amount of criticism towards the authorities was tolerated in the name of the spirit of the season.[152] She also tries to demolish some of the commonly held myths about emancipated Western women. It is almost as if before she can begin to criticise her own country's perception of women, she needs to point a finger at the West where too women are not as liberated as they are believed to be. It is only towards the end of the introduction (after some advice to women that they would get only the rights they deserved, so there was need to edify themselves) that she mentions the fabled gender equality of her own country. According to her it *is* a myth.

Despite the legally sanctioned equality of the sexes, there *was* need for education on the concepts of feminism and a further change in mind-sets. The rationale she provides for the book is interesting - *if there was nothing further to do wouldn't we all be dead*? So she wisely positions the book: it is being written not in defence of women but for the overall progress of the nation and race!

A careful reading of the essays selected by Khin Myo Chit and her own comments very clearly suggest that there were certain aspects of the situation she wanted to highlight.

### *The culture of contempt*

In some of her other writing Khin Myo Chit described instances when women were the object of a certain risqué humour. Arguably such ribaldry was not meant to outrage femininity but to be treated with indulgence and passed off in the name of the spirit of the season. She has written about the rather indecorous riddles or the limericks which began innocently enough with a line about pots and baskets but what followed in rhyme "was so ribald that it had to be drowned in boisterous music."[153] She had also written of a single mother's discomfiture when such music was aimed at her during her son's novitiation: she forced herself to maintain her composure because it would not do to "attract attention".[154]

In *Ma* the ribaldry that Khin Myo Chit speaks of is different. It is more vicious but stems from the same source: the deep rooted social belief in women's biological inferiority. She translates Marlene Dixon's article, *Why Women's Liberation* written in May 1969 to illustrate the point.[155] Dixon speaks of the new feminist movement of the 1960s which rather than stressing male chauvinism tries to dig into the social roots of the malaise and finds that male supremacy is a form of racism which justifies itself by institutionalising women's biological inferiority. Yet while most find the theory of the genetic inferiority of the blacks to be absurd, the "social Darwinism" against women is still at work. According to social Darwinists it is in the natural course of things that the "unfit" sink to the bottom of the social ladder and if women are oppressed it only proves their inferiority. And it is because of this long-held belief that "empty and degrading" images of women flood the culture. It is this pervasive cultural contempt which makes it difficult for a woman to be perceived as a serious human being and the reason why any serious claims for recognition on her part is met with biting scorn (Dixon cites the classic words of the Berkeley male leader, 'Let them eat cock').

In the epilogue to Dixon's essay Khin Myo Chit adds her own comments on the Burmese context mentioning the rather scandalising exchange between the monk from the Kachin State, Bhamo Sayadaw and Thilashin Me Khin, a nun from a nunnery in the Sagaing Hills. But even here she mentions the names of Bhamo Sayadaw and Me Khin without delving into the details of the story. Perhaps she

feels as she is writing in Burmese the reference would be easily understood or perhaps it is her usual diplomacy at work.

As the story goes, Me Khin who had studied the scriptures from a young age and led a life of austerity happened to write some poems on the tediousness of material life and her yearning to follow the sacred *mega* (path) to *nibbana*. But it merely elicited poems from Bhamo Sayadaw lampooning the audacity of a woman's ambitions. To Me Khin's charges that the monk's robes were soiled and that his thinking was old-fashioned, the Sayadaw called her a *hpa me-thila* (a prostitute nun) and the exchange continued much to the amusement of the lay audience. The incident had a background to it: King Mindon, impressed with Me Khin's theological knowledge had appointed her as a teacher at the royal court where her brother and Bhamo Sayadaw's rival, Shanlay Kyun Sayadaw already enjoyed a certain amount of influence. On the other hand, the king had exiled Bhamo Sayadaw to the Kachin State in an attempt to discipline him. So not only was it an issue of a woman's temerity but his supremacy was also under threat.[156]

Khin Myo Chit, alluding to the above incident comments that *even when men have no other option they refuse to acknowledge women's equality to men.*[157] Her reference is clearly to the ideology of male supremacy which pervades society which makes a senior community leader hold up to ridicule the woman's sexuality rather than accept her justified parity (Bhamo Sayadaw allegedly scoffed at Me Khin's ambition to attain enlightenment by saying, for that to happen she would need to possess what he did between his thighs, indicating his genitals).

### *The pitfalls of praise*

Khin Myo Chit in trying to put across the point that chivalry did not automatically translate into liberation for women referred to Kate Millet's book *Sexual Politics* of 1970.[158] Kate Millet, again a second-wave American feminist, had defined traditional chivalrous behaviour as a "sporting kind of reparation to allow the subordinate female certain means of saving face."[159] Chivalry and its natural corollary, courtly love were ways to place the woman on a pedestal and so circumscribe her to living a life of goodness without actually any change in her economic or legal status. In elaborating the point Khin Myo Chit drew upon John Ruskin's essay of 1864, *The Queens' Garden* where he speaks of women's education only to add that the purpose of educating a woman is not to turn her into a *dictionary* but to enable her to understand and *even* aid man's work. If a woman was taught a foreign language it was only so she could "show kindness to a stranger", if she learnt science, it was only so she could appreciate the "loveliness of natural laws" and if no restraints were placed on her it was only so she remained happy and her beauty was not marred. In brief, the purpose of educating a woman was only so she could serve the man better, help him in his work and bring up accomplished children.[160]

Khin Myo Chit in discussing the education opportunities for Burmese girls which opened up during the colonial times wrote of the same thing: "Modern education was popularly considered a part of the grooming to be wife and mother…a final polish for potential husband-catchers."[161] At the time girls being sent for higher education had to work hard to outsmart the boys so as to justify the money being grudgingly spent on her only to find that afterwards she was married off into a suitably genteel family. "Modern education" was only to make a fine lady of her and it went against the average middle-class family's prestige to have a working girl in the family. Later during the Second World War when economic and political changes forced women out of their houses and they returned to trading and shop keeping, vocations that were traditionally associated with Burmese women, the example of Madi from the *jatakas* was cited.[162] Madi was the ideal wife who followed her husband (an embodiment of the *dana parami* or one who gave away in donation all his possessions) into exile and went out daily to collect fruits for him and their children. Thus Burmese wives were encouraged to follow her example and run a home snack kiosk so that their husband's meagre war-time salary could be supplemented. The men carried the "sumptuous" tiffin carriers their wives prepared for them without any apparent fear that a working wife might demean the family prestige. Thus whether Burmese women worked or were educated and then made to stay at home, it was merely so she could serve the men better and the traditional gender stereotypes could be maintained. Khin Myo Chit in some exasperation explains it as, "This attitude [of allowing women to work during war] also enhanced the man, as the one who might be a Buddha one day!"[163] And yet the Burmese women, tempted by that spot on the pedestal, took up their new war-time roles without complaints. Such were the pitfalls of praise!

### *If sexes were swapped*

Khin Myo Chit was obviously quite intrigued by the man-woman power dynamics in the workplace. Not only does she repeatedly refer to the issue in *Ma*, she also wrote a novella on the subject titled, *Maung-do-Yaukkya (Oh, You Men!)* earlier on in her career.[164] It has distinct biographical elements and is about Ko Maung Maung and his wife, Ma Khin May. In it she portrays the wife as an educated, confident woman who gradually loses self-esteem as she leaves her job and settles down to a domesticated married life. She gets increasingly suspicious of her husband's supposed extra-marital liaisons at work, viewing the girls in her husband's office with envy: they appear glamorous, independent, in touch with the modern world – in short everything she is not. When she accuses her husband of being a flirt he replies, the women in office like spending time with him though they know he is married. Both seem to assume a certain promiscuity in

the working women's behaviour as if since they are free and fashionable they are bound to be a bit adventurous in their sexual pursuits. But in so doing Ko Maung Maung manages to play off the insecurities of one woman against the other and maintains his supremacy, both at home and at work.

In *Ma* Khin Myo Chit, through both her own writing as well as translations of English essays, holds up vignettes portraying social responses to attempts at transgressing the assigned sex roles. She writes of the "modern educated" girls of Burma who went to work or took up sports during the colonial era. The *khit hmi thu* (modern contemporary woman) came under heavy censure because of her shorts or the transparency of her blouses. The national media ridiculed the working girls mercilessly and novels were written and movies made portraying them as short-tempered and arrogant. Yet Khin Myo Chit argues that neither did the new sartorial style detract from feminine charm nor was it in any way immodest.[165] And if the working woman happened to be married, her husband often cut a sorry figure – not only was he not man enough to provide for his wife, he was also henpecked who was never served a home-cooked square meal and whose buttons were not sewed etc. The woman in return, by now suffering from a "queen size guilt complex" tried to stave off the disapproval by labouring extra hard to care for the children and be a good wife ("as good as anyone who stays at home") and as a result by the time she reached office she was a spent force – a liability to her department.[166] But at work too she was confronted with the same gender barrier and needed to maintain a low profile and speak with suitably lowered eyes so that she did not disturb the male dominion.[167]

In this context Khin Myo Chit includes an essay by Alice Rossi entitled *Job Discrimination*, published in *The Atlantic* in March 1971. Rossi mentions that a compliant female stance at the work place is important to ensure acceptance: "Even the most insecure of males will not resent your [women's] achievements if you are quiet about them."[168] On the other hand if such coyness is not maintained and the woman actually appears to be taking her job as well as herself seriously, she is portrayed as a prig and a schoolmarm – ugly in her masculinity. Khin Myo Chit quotes a popular doggerel used to describe such women in Burma:

"Don't ever a schoolmarm adore,
Nor with finger tickle your sore.
If ever a schoolmarm you adore,
Henpecked you will ever be,
And if with finger you tickle the sore
Poison and infection will pursue thee."[169]

But in the case of a modern man the situation plays out quite differently. Either the idea of sharing the household chores appears preposterous to him ("So much as rinsing a saucer would tarnish his manly dignity") or the less old-fashioned merely proffer excuses.[170] Khin Myo Chit quotes an article by the radical feminist group, the Red Stockings (*The Politics of Housework*) in this context, providing a rather hilarious picture of what men actually mean when they say they want to share the housework. Thus when he says, "I don't mind sharing the housework, but I don't do it very well. We should each do the things we're best at" he actually means, "Historically the lower classes (black men and the women) have had hundreds of years' experience doing menial jobs. It would be a waste of manpower to train someone else to do them now".[171]

Though written in apparent jest it points at a deep seated social malaise, one that Khin Myo Chit personally experienced and Alice Rossi too wrote about: the biological hierarchy of jobs. Alice Rossi quotes case studies of a girl with an engineering degree who struggled to retain her interest in aeronautical engineering or a student of musicology who was pushed into being a music teacher or a college graduate who was offered a secretarial job and the same job was upgraded to that of an office executive when a man took over. Khin Myo Chit, on the other hand writes of her experiences first as a writer and then a political activist. According to her in the 1930s when the erudite monk and scholar Ledi Pandita U Maung Gyi who had been taught the *Tipitaka* (sacred Buddhist text) by Ledi Sayadaw himself, took on a female pseudonym and wrote short stories and novels while he used his original pen name, U Maung Gyi to translate Buddhist texts, he merely reinforced the gender divide in the literary world.[172] The "breezy, gossipy" letters he wrote for his epistolary *yuwadi* column as Khin Toke or Khin Swe as well as his short stories paved the path for future women writers but it also meant that women were associated with this kind of entertainment literature while the more serious political or religious writing remained the male domain.[173] Young girls at that time were not encouraged to read magazines like the *Dagon* or *Thuriya* and yet when it was discovered that the columns were being written by the "sedate scholar" U Maung Gyi, albeit under a pseudonym, parents encouraged their daughters to read his writing and the readership of such publications went up substantially. But in continuation of the tradition U Maung Gyi or Kodaw Hmaing had pioneered, when women ventured out of their assigned field and proved their talent in serious writing readers claimed they were being unnecessarily pompous in doing what was not expected of them.[174] Khin Myo Chit argues, so deep was the gender bias that readers (of both sexes) found it difficult to accept women writers as intellectuals and so not inferior. Yet ironically, when the same male authors wrote novels which did not portray women in a very positive light they commanded a large readership. Khin Myo Chit cites the example of the popular *The Beggar and the*

*Princess* by Hmawbi Saya Thein (in which a woman claimed females were worse than dogs) which was made into a movie and ran into its fourth edition in 1957. Similarly she writes about the much acclaimed Thakin Kodaw Hmaing who took his penname from the libertine character Mr Maung Hmaing whose exploits with young women on his travels up the Irrawaddy River were notorious. Yet readers decided to ignore this aspect of his character and the name Mr Maung Hmaing with its implied ridicule of the Burmese anglophiles became a national symbol of anticolonial protest. Khin Myo Chit also mentions Ledi Pandita's novel, *Khin Myint Gyi* with its implications of an educated modern woman being necessarily a flirt which was widely accepted by readers and concludes that the Burmese society at large could only accept women who were portrayed to be gullible and pliant enough to be men's playthings.[175]

Her comments are similar about the political landscape. After the war when the nationalist movement began to gather momentum women's organisations like the *Konmayi Athin* openly encouraged Burmese women to contribute towards the national cause. Unlike the ridicule that was poured on them for acquiring a Western education or taking up jobs, newspapers and magazines widely propagated that women should do their share of work in the political field. And yet later as it turned out, political parties were merely making use of the women's presence – they were pliant enough to take orders and yet made "news value", their presence at meetings excited popular interest and ensured a "good public attendance". Politicians, on the other hand, were "spared of the task of making special promises to women". National independence was a good enough "common cause".[176]

Like Alice Rossi, Khin Myo Chit too concludes that despite leaving their homes and crossing many boundaries, women failed to cross the final wall that separated them from the rest of humanity – one that was determined by biology and not merit. Whatever their role in life they remained a woman first – judged by the traditional notions of what a woman should be.

### *Biology is not destiny*

In the introduction to *Ma* Khin Myo Chit speaks of the need for education and effort as well as the development of a sense of judgement in women. She refers to the Noble Eightfold path preached by the Buddha of which *sammaditthi* or the right understanding of one's reality is an important edict. She hopes that the book will equip the women readers with knowledge that will facilitate a better understanding of their own reality. In the conclusion of the book too her message remains one of "dispersing the darkness yourself", of building a feminine identity which does not derive its legitimacy from a male.[177] It is because traditionally women's identity has been attached to a male one that Ma Khin May (of *Maung-do-Yaukkya* a novella discussed earlier) feels insecure when her husband expresses interest in other

women, why there was a mad scramble at the "matrimonial fair" where women were sold like commodities (*yaung kon*) and why Mr Maung Hmaing's dalliances were with unmarried maidens and not married ones because then he would be venturing into men's territory (Khin Myo Chit contrasts this with the picaresque novel of the west where the *picaro* has affairs with both married and unmarried women).[178] With this purpose in mind Khin Myo Chit translates Marlene Dixon's essay which mentions that the greatest stumbling block in women's progress were women themselves and their continued belief in their own inferiority. "From their earliest training to the grave" they were socialized to believe in the rightness of their own oppression, that biology was indeed their destiny.[179] With the same purpose she includes a medley of quotations at the end of *Ma,* including one from Ledi Pandita U Maung Gyi's book, *Theri Vadavian* where a nun tells the *nat* (spirit) from the mountains that a woman too can liberate herself from physical desires (*taṅha*) and attain the status of an *arahant* (one who has attained the state of *nibbana*).[180] There was need to vindicate Thilashin Me Khin's fate.

## Many a house of life hath held me

Daw Khin Myo Chit for most of her university and early married days found it difficult to be an unquestioning believer in her faith. As way of reason for her agnosticism she cited her reading of "provocative writers" like Shaw and Ibsen and her own curious mind which tried to "probe into things deeper than *Jataka* stories, rites and ceremonies."[181] Additionally, there was the new thinking of the *thakins,* chief among them the future communist, Thakin Than Tun, a close associate, whose "disquisitions fell on a fertile mind fermenting with non-conformist experience."[182] By then the nationalist movement was firmly divided into the old and the new and the movement led by the *thakins* was decisively reactionary in nature, defiant about the religious fervour of earlier nationalist bodies like the YMBA. They were restless to bring change. Later Khin Myo Chit's scepticism deepened when during the Japanese occupation she, U Khin Maung Latt and their small son escaped the bombings at Rangoon to take shelter in a monastery in the Sagaing Hills. As the weeks passed and the community of refugees clinging to the security of the monastery grew larger, she noticed the richer and more powerful among them buying special services and opportunities by making 'donations' to the monks. It infuriated her to see the basic teachings of the Buddha thus openly flouted.[183] Though the list of reasons for her disbelief was long, what perhaps remained unsaid was her distress at what she perceived to be the inherent gender bias of her religion. The sense of rejection ran deep and she chose to hide it under nonchalance.

In the early 1950s U Khin Maung Latt and she returned to Rangoon University to pick up the threads of their formal education which had been disrupted by war and

patriotism. She completed her degree course in literature and continued to write while her husband finished his post-graduation and took up a teaching job at the university. Yet by 1955 the steady flow of their life was again disrupted: U Khin Maung Latt resigned from the University because he did not want to go to the districts to teach as was expected by the university authorities and they found they needed to start afresh with only Kyats 1000 by way of capital. With the provident fund they paid off their loans and debts and built an extension to their house for conducting English lessons.[184] Yet internally Khin Myo Chit felt drained. It had been a long rough road spent under the constant threat of war when she had repeatedly searched for something to take refuge in, tried to reconcile the age-old faith with her modern thinking and way of life. She had continued to do what was expected of a good Buddhist yet with decreasing faith in what she did. Writing of this she commented:

> "It was a long rough road that we [she and her husband, U Khin Maung Latt] had travelled together searching for something to take refuge in, trying to reconcile the age-old faith with modern thought and way of life. I had gone on doing all that was expected of a good Buddhist but without faith, without emotion, as if I did it because I had nothing better to do. It no longer brought me the joy and satisfaction of my younger days. The war and the Japanese invasion did nothing to help me. These were the times when it looked as if the last shreds of faith would vanish altogether. The only reason why I did not throw out the little faith I had in my heart was that I had nothing else instead. It were better that I had something; to be empty in heart would have been worse"[185]

She felt Buddhism as a philosophy undermined human faculties and there was no way to achieve the level of perfection the Buddha had set out without renouncing worldly life altogether. Yet her honest questions were taken as effrontery and her eagerness as impertinence. Neither could she reconcile herself to the religion of bells and incense sticks, alms giving and keeping Sabbath days, nor sever her last ties with the faith she had grown up with. The sermons appeared excessively morbid to her, dwelling as they did on suffering and the sins of the flesh and she felt she was heading towards an emotional breakdown.[186]

It was at this time, during the course of 1955 that they heard of the Bauktaw Sun Lun Gu Kyaung monastery where both monks and laymen practised the method of *Vipassana* Meditation as taught by the late Sun Lun *Saya-daw* (venerable teacher). Once before Khin Myo Chit and her family had visited the Saya-daw's hometown, Myingyan where his body lay in state months after his death, undecomposed and un-coffined. She had hardly given it a glance, prejudiced as she was against

monasteries after her war-time experiences. What attracted her to the Bauktaw Sun Lun Gu Kyaung monastery now was the news that two of her earlier acquaintances were there as monks. Bo Thein Swe had been a comrade-in-arms during the resistance against the Japanese, an educated librarian and an ardent follower of Aung San while U Hla Pe was a cultured man of many interests who had been an adversary to Khin Myo Chit in many a public debate. Describing her response before her first visit to the monastery she writes, "I am afraid my feelings were not too reverent or too respectful – more of curiosity and surprise than reverence."[187]

Khin Myo Chit wrote two intimate accounts of her experiences in *Vipassana* Meditation which were to follow this first visit. One, a fuller autobiographical account of her life during and after war with a large section devoted to her spiritual quest, is archived at the British Library, yet to be published in its unabridged form. Written approximately around 1960-62, she ambitiously gave the manuscript the title, *Many a House of Life Doth Hold Me*, a line from the Pali anthology of verse aphorisms, the *Dhammapada* and used by Sir Edwin Arnold in his *Light of Asia*. Arnold attributes the line to the future Buddha at a climactic point just before he attains enlightenment. It is early dawn and the Prince Siddhartha rises after his years of austere meditation and declares in a voice that is radiant, rejoicing, victorious:

"Many a House of Life
Hath held me, seeking ever him who wrought
These prisons of the senses, sorrow fraught,
Sore was my ceaseless strife!
But now,
…I know thee! Never shalt thou build again
These walls of pain,
…Broken thy house and the ridge-pole split!
Delusion fashioned it!
Safe pass I thence, deliverance to obtain."[188]

It is a powerful metaphor for finally escaping the confines of delusion and the original Pali verse soars after this as the spiritual climb continues and moves to the imagery of a flock of geese rising from a lake to follow the path of the sun. It was quite intrepid of Khin Myo Chit, particularly as a female Buddhist devotee to have used the Buddha's words to describe her personal spiritual experience. It was obviously her final comment on feminism after a life-time of struggle against gender bias and it is significant that when she published it (though not in its entirety) for the Burmese audience she decided to go by the more docile title of "Quest for Peace". It was serialised in the government-owned *Working People's*

*Daily* during March-April 1964 and finally published in a further modified version as *A Buddhist Pilgrim's Progress* in 2013.

In describing her mindfulness practise under *Bikkhu* U Thathana (monastic name of Bo Thein Swe) as her meditation master, she writes of the mental blocks with which she started even as her friends, the motley crowd of artists and freethinkers around her exclaimed in disbelief, "Of all people YOU!"[189] She was told to sit in the meditation posture and focus on the fall of breath on her nostril or upper lip. But very soon her chest seemed to contract severely and her breathing sounded like a death-rattle even as her body trembled with the effort. But U Thathana exhorted her to continue and as days passed and her practise continued she discovered some unsavoury truths about herself. She found pinning her mind down was as impossible as trying to anchor a ship in the midst of a storm. Her mindfulness continuously wrestled with her mind like two men straining against each other in a battle for superiority.[190] As she tried to continue the practice at home she discovered she was quite capable of cheating herself, changing position and slackening her pace when tired.[191] But the greatest revelation came in the form of certain enticing visions. She had always prided herself on being a bit of a rebel but now realised her mind was capable of disobeying even her own commands: as she struggled like a trapped animal to continue her breathing at the behest of her master, she realised her mind had discovered a way around the crisis. When she was caught in the throes of pain and could not breathe even softly she found herself holding her breath and her mind fell into a trance-like state, colourful visions swirling around her. Despite her master, she repeatedly sought the protection of these beautiful visions which held off her pain.[192]

Each session of meditation seemed to bring her closer to herself and she started having troubled dreams at night. She dreamed of sailing in a ship with her family and friends. While the others sat placidly in the ship, she leaned out eager to reach her destination. She found herself alone on an isolated island where there were many shrines but she could not find the Buddha. Instead there were human forms sitting on the exalted seat. She looked out at the dark rolling sea, her eyes searching in vain for a sail and cried out in anguish, "Please, oh please come and save me!"[193] Khin Myo Chit claims the reason for these dreams was her own disobedience of her mediation master, because instead of continuing her search for truth she had digressed and tried to find an easy escape in her trance-like state.[194] Perhaps it also had its roots in her long-held guilt, guilt at having doubted the faith taught by her forefathers, at her own defiance of traditions which were enforced with such rigour in her time, at having taken refuge in a human rather than divine ideology. Perhaps it was this guilt which compelled her to turn on herself with such vicious humour in her self-portrayals strewn through her writing.

Yet Khin Myo Chit struggled on because for the first time at the Bauktaw monastery a religious practice appeared truly spiritual to her. Unlike at other

monasteries, the acts of *dana* (donation) were not glorified and no alms solicited. Neither was there any emphasis on past or future cycles of birth. The emphasis remained on focussing the mind on the present and the atmosphere cleansed of any threat or temptation.[195] But perhaps what attracted Khin Myo Chit the most was the implied egalitarianism of the practice. It was not an act of faith which could be undertaken by somebody else on her behalf but an experience to which anyone, irrespective of gender or class could apply his mind and body and achieve a degree of salvation. As she says, "This simple statement thrilled me and inspired me and gave me hope." And as 1955 passed into 1956 she knew a deep sense of peace. During her meditation her breathing became smooth and as she sat a vaporous mist seemed to envelop her and she floated, a tiny particle caught in an infinite beam of light.[196]

Both *Many a House of Life Doth Hold Me* and *A Quest for Peace* end with her paying yet another visit to where the body of the Sun Lun *Saya-daw* lay. Six years had passed since his death and yet there were no signs of decay. As she bent to pay her reverence to a monk who had been a peasant but risen to become an *arahant* by dint of his studies and meditation, she repeated the prayer her grandfather had taught while they gazed at the rolling hills of Sagaing with their crest of white-washed pagodas:

"I take refuge in the Buddha
I take refuge in the *Dhamma*
I take refuge in the *Sangha*."[197]

It was a prayer she had repeated often enough but now it flooded her with a new sense of gratitude.

She had found her true refuge.

## Home; sore; wore; work

In 1928 Virginia Woolf while delivering a lecture on "Women and Fiction" to the students of the women's colleges of Cambridge, read from her essay, *A Room of One's Own*: " When you asked me to speak about women and fiction I sat down on the banks of a river and began to wonder what the words meant. They might mean simply a few remarks about Fanny Burney; a few more about Jane Austen; a tribute to the Brontës… But at second sight the words seemed not so simple… All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point — a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved."

Exactly six decades later another author sitting in her home made of Burmese teak, surrounded by a garden in which grew a many-horned cactus played a game of four-letter words. She started with the word HOME and changed one letter at a time till she had a rather depressing chain of words which told their own story: *Home, Work, Hate, Fail*.[198] There are many similar giveaways in Khin Myo Chit's writing which tell of her tribulations as she endeavoured to balance her home life with her writing career. She learnt to live with the unflattering realisation that she was too much of a housewife to be a good writer and too much of a writer to be a good housewife which translated into a "substandard home" and a "half-crippled career".[199] It was particularly difficult for her because she started writing in the 1930s when the earlier *yuwadi* columns had given way to features on women's role as wives and mothers. The *To-tet-yay* ran a column called, *Women's Advancement* while in 1935 the *Young Ladies' Mirror* in the *Independent Weekly* was changed to *For the Housewives*.[200] Newspapers and journals were flooded with advice and guidelines on matrimony, childcare and housekeeping and as the image of the *amyo-thami* or the daughter of the nation who as a mother nurtures future generations of valiant patriots became increasingly popular, it was difficult for women like Khin Myo Chit to avoid a "queen-sized guilt complex". After independence in 1948 she found herself a member of the editorial board of the women's magazine, *Taing Yin Thu* which continued to publish tips for pregnant mothers and lessons in knitting and Burmese recipes while the government's mouthpiece, the *Bamakhit* newspaper published articles criticising women who entered male dominated fields like sports or politics.[201] Writing about her predicament in a time when housework was glorified as the "highest attainment of womanhood" and women who did not like housework threatened with dire fates in subsequent lives, she tried to make her home her "institution" and her kitchen her "laboratory". It was only after years of struggling with herself that she realised she did not need to feel "apologetic or guilty" for any success that she achieved outside her home.[202]

Khin Myo Chit could never be the woman contemporary Burmese society expected her to be. As a daughter she wanted to study, as a student she wanted to dabble in meaningful politics and during her brief political career she dashed the hopes of her male compatriots when she walked in, "harum-scarum, a tomboy with no make-up."[203] It was an obstinate pride in her own incorrigibility and a genuine love for her country imbibed since early childhood which compelled her to persist. Yet the culture of contempt for women of letters remained with her and she could not resist the occasional barb aimed at herself: she was always the "ugly chattering shrew" and her husband needed to be congratulated for enduring her for thirty years.

After her brief foray into the nationalist movement though she never returned to active politics, she continued to write and sought fulfilment in her career. Stories like *The 13 Carat Diamond* and *Her Infinite Variety* won her critical acclaim. One

of her most rewarding experiences was her re-discovery of the lost art of Burmese *zat-pwes*. It was Ludu Daw Amar's book on the three *min-thas* (male leads) of the *zat* stage, Aung ba-la, Sein Ga-done and Po Sein which reawakened nostalgic memories and she wrote extensively on this unique art form which combines elements from the opera, ballet and musical.[204] It was only occasionally that the old yearning to have played a more efficacious role in shaping her country's history resurfaced. Perhaps due to this, while writing about King Anawrahta, the founder of the Pagan dynasty, Khin Myo Chit invested his Queen Saw Mon Hla with a rare tragic dignity. The Queen, reduced to a helpless victim of feminine jealousy on the *zat-pwe* stage, emerged as a veritable force in her writing. She stood by the King and helped unite the people of Burma: a sad throwback of Khin Myo Chit's untimely aspirations that could be realised only in fiction.[205]

## 1988: Conclusion

The editorial assignment at the *Working People's Daily* from 1963 to 1968 was Khin Myo Chit's last opportunity to comment on the political downslide of the country following the military coup of 1962. In her editorials, though she retains a veneer of sarcastic humour as camouflage against censorship, with the passing months the humour runs thin and the underlying sadness becomes increasingly apparent. In one editorial for instance, entitled *Music, Songs and Broken Rice* written on 17 October 1967 her tone was one of almost unadulterated sadness as she described her travels to the dry, dusty countryside of Upper Burma. She came away with a first-hand view of the extent of poverty in the countryside. Despite the claims of the new socialist government and the cooperative shops which had been set up for essential commodities, the rice-growing community of Burma was living on a diet of dried beans and boiled maize. The rice ration from the cooperatives was an inedible brown powder and proper rice was selling in the black market for "one kyat for a condensed milk-tinful". Yet she found most accepted their lot as true Buddhists – without bitterness or resentment. They merely concluded it was the Law of Karma, their sufferings retribution for sins committed in the past and continued as best they were able to afford with alms giving and merit making rituals. But what was perhaps more touching was that even under such punishing circumstances the sense of fun and laughter, the hallmark of a true Burmese, had not deserted them. They pooled resources for music and dance performances during pagoda festivals even while joking about sleeping through lunch to save that extra penny. Khin Myo Chit ends with the lines, "All this [the spirit and fortitude] I have to beg from the old man puffing his cheroot at his wayside stall and from the unlettered woman boiling beans and maize for her morning meal in the toddy-palm-leaf hut. I know

that if only I could have a little of their qualities, I would venture to consider myself not too unworthy to belong to the happy breed of people, the Burmese."[206]

While writing these editorials, as mentioned in the first section, Khin Myo Chit was most vocal when discussing the socialist government's attempts at censorship and controlling the literary output of the time. She wanted to expose it for what it was – not an endeavour at nation building but at curbing the human intellect and spirit. It would rob the Burmese of the natural enthusiasm and sense of wonder that was required to build a new society. She would question the wisdom of treating authors as "robots" and fitting them with "dunce caps" while exactly two decades later, Aung San Suu Kyi in pleading for democracy would say the people of Burma had been reduced to "rice-eating robots" who wanted no more than a tranquil, dignified existence free from "want and fear".[207]

There were numerous other editorials in which Khin Myo Chit gave indications of a society in disorder. She built into her writing a deeply embedded layer of imagery to reflect a world where not only traditional Burmese values but humanity was at stake. In *King Lear and his Daughters* (26 December 1967) she alluded to the old king to indicate a kingdom where political authority was disintegrating and the accepted hierarchy of the universal order was in disarray. It was a delusory world where Goneril and Regan's hypocrisy was accepted but Cordelia's honest love for her father rejected. In this context she wrote that a student of hers who was reading *King Lear* with her was rather surprised by the King's behaviour and exclaimed that such things happened long ago, it can't happen in real life today. To this she replied,

> "My dear boy", I said rather sadly, "unfortunately, even today some misguided and ill-advised people still use the same methods to test people's sincerity. Whoever cannot mouth jaw-breaking words avowing love and devotion are supposed to be lacking in such sentiments. Sometimes people are required to out-do others in avowals and declarations of how much they love the country or how devoted they are to the cause."[208]

In *Alice in Wilderness* (25 January 1966) she described Alice's fall through the rabbit hole into a world not of magical wonders but of dark taboos where she must redefine her identity if she was to survive.[209] The sense of threatening doom is perhaps nowhere more evident than in *Round about the Cauldron go* (27 May 1966) where she evoked the image of Macbeth's witches in the context of two girls playing cooking with twigs and flowers. As the girls grind the blossoms and grate the leaves, Khin Myo Chit finds herself writing recipes for a new Burma where poverty and hunger will drive the people to desperation. The menace in the metaphor of Macbeth's witches leaves the reader with a sense of foreboding as they bend over their cauldron chanting,

"Round about the cauldron go;
In the poisoned entrails throw…"[210]

Daw Khin Myo Chit's editorials from this period make for an interesting read also for their remarkable similarity of thought to what Aung San Suu Kyi would write years later. The twin themes of fear and hypocrisy, at their most pronounced in *Dandruff in my Halo* and *The Witch-Doctor and the Patient* (where Khin Myo Chit has the patient saying that the witch-doctor lashes at him with his cane only because he is *afraid that one day truth might* triumph), would play out with poignant eloquence in Aung San Suu Kyi's essay, *Freedom from Fear.*[211] And if while writing about the state as an institution of authority Khin Myo Chit would refer to the *paritta* (Buddhist religious text) and explain that the king was not merely the one who wore crown and regalia but one who was the stay and refuge of the people, Aung San Suu Kyi would indicate much the same in quoting the eighteenth century courtier-poet, Let-We Thondora:

"How superior
The tactics of war
How potent
The weapons!
Without gathering in
The hearts of the people,
…The sword edge
Will shatter,
The spear
Will bend."[212]

In fact during the people's revolution of 1988 Khin Myo Chit and U Khin Maung Latt would come out strongly in favour of Suu Kyi and the cause of democracy. On 2 September 1988 Khin Myo Chit would write an impassioned open letter to Dr Maung Maung, a civilian and a scholarly lawyer who had recently been appointed President to give the military controlled BSPP a more acceptable face.[213] She would start the letter with the opening words from the *zat-pwe* artist Po Sein's song, "*Yadaw-le male…*" (Oh, Golden King! In all humble modesty I want to speak to you. Please consider what I say). The same words had been used by Thakin Ba Thoung, the founder of the *Dobama Asi-ayone,* to address the colonial government and four decades later Khin Myo Chit used them to convey the sufferings of the Burmese people to Dr Maung Maung. She is perhaps at her most vulnerable in the letter as she addresses the President as *Ko* Maung Maung to remind him of their long-standing friendship from Rangoon University days

and asks how as a Yale-returned lawyer he can accede to the lawlessness of their country? How he can still speak about a constitutional referendum when the people on the streets are demonstrating for a multi-party election? If according to him the government is chosen by constitutional law then under which law are they openly killing young students on the roads? And when Burma is labelled a "police state" doesn't it hurt him as much as it hurts her?

Khin Myo Chit had always been a patriot. The sights and sounds of her country, its colour and vibrancy and the simplicity of its ordinary people had always moved her and so she would remain till the very end. In 1995 when Aung San Suu Kyi was released from her first house arrest, Khin Myo Chit would be one of the few brave enough to play host to her and even during her last sickness in 1999 (she had been bedridden with crippling arthritis for several years) the fate of her country would add to her distress.[214]

## Epilogue

Burma gained independence on 4 January 1948 after one of the shortest colonial rules in Southeast Asia starting in 1885 (when, after the three Anglo-Burmese Wars of 1826, 1852-53 and 1885-86, the entire country was brought under colonial rule) and ending in 1948 with the Japanese interlude in between, second in duration only to the French rule at Laos. Aung San Suu Kyi in her essay entitled "Intellectual Life in Burma and India under Colonialism" writes,

"Looking from the Indian situation to that of Burma, there is the almost surreal impression of a time warp. Colonized at a much later date and for a much shorter period, the Burmese experience of British rule is in some ways a concertinaed version of developments in India."[215]

Like in India, in Burma too, western education and alien values were met with initial resistance. But in India the protracted period of colonialism implied an Indian Renaissance which stretched on for nearly two centuries (from 1780s to early twentieth century) and the existence of privileged castes meant an intellectual elite was readily born who led the movement which sought a harmonious union between western thought and Hindu philosophy in a search for nationalist ideals. While in Burma, though by the 1920s some of the resistance wore off, western education continued to be valued more for its utilitarian worth. In the words of J S Furnivall, "Government wanted schools to train clerks, and the people wanted schools to obtain clerkships."[216] The movement for National Schools which developed following the boycott of the Rangoon University Act of 1920 was a step towards an assimilation of the two cultures. Like Khin Myo Chit, there were quite a large number of her

contemporaries who gained from these schools which combined nationalist principles with western learning. And as Suu Kyi points out, from this generation towards the end of British rule there arose some leaders "who saw the need to adopt a broad assimilative approach and to develop a philosophy which could cope with modern developments". Yet the leaders who the people followed willingly were "those who could communicate with them in their own language." The leaders of *Dobama Asi-ayone* realised that the trio - language, race and religion gave the Burmese their unique identity and later even when the "revolutionary young politicians dropped the notions of race and religion from their concept of modern nationhood, the validity of the Burmese language as a unifying factor was tacitly retained."[217]

When seen against this background, Khin Myo Chit's greatest contribution appears to be the easy familiarity with which she explored western literature and culture in her writing. Whether writing in English or in Burmese, she continuously tried to juxtapose the local and the traditional with the western which was at times also the modern. Thus in *Colourful Burma* when writing of the pastoral love poems of Burma she could not resist referring to Marlowe. If the Burmese swain calls out to his lady love, "My dear little maid, beaten by her mother/Come now, my love come with me to my village," Marlowe's *Passionate Shepherd* mouths "Come live with me and be my love." She achieved the same feat, albeit on a much larger scale in *Ma* (1st published 1975) or in *Thadin-sar Lawka (Newspaper World*, 1st published 1952).[218] In the latter she juxtaposed the world of Cummings and Edgar Wallace with that of *Thuriya* and *Hanthawaddy, Punch* with the cartoons of U Ba Gyan and Pulitzer-winning editorials with the writings of Ledi Pandita U Maung Gyi. In a continuation of the same effort she and her husband conducted English coaching classes for Burmese student (Ma Thida read Shakespeare briefly at these classes). After 1988 when the tutorials at Aung Chan Thar Street were closed down by the government along with most Burmese universities, they moved the classes to their residence and continued to teach students. In her personal life too she remained as fond of Yul Brynner and Clark Gable as Po Sein and Shwe Man Tin Maung!

But Burma struggled through its post-independence period with a hastily patched together leadership, the ethnic minority groups at loggerheads and the threat of a communist revolt in the air and finally entered the military era in 1962. Unfortunately, particularly after the people's movement of 1988, the twin themes Khin Myo Chit was passionate about – a more transnational literary culture and feminism were relatively marginalised as struggles for democracy and basic human rights took up centre stage.

**Figure 1.1** Khin Myo Chit in 1970

**Figure 1.2** Khin Myo Chit in 1935, after moving to Rangoon



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**Figure 1.3** U Khin Maung Latt & Khin Myo Chit in 1937, before marriage, by then she was part of the *To-tet-yay* magazine's editorial board


**Figure 1.4** Wedding in October 1939



https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316342916.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

**Figure 1.5** A picture of the couple in 1985

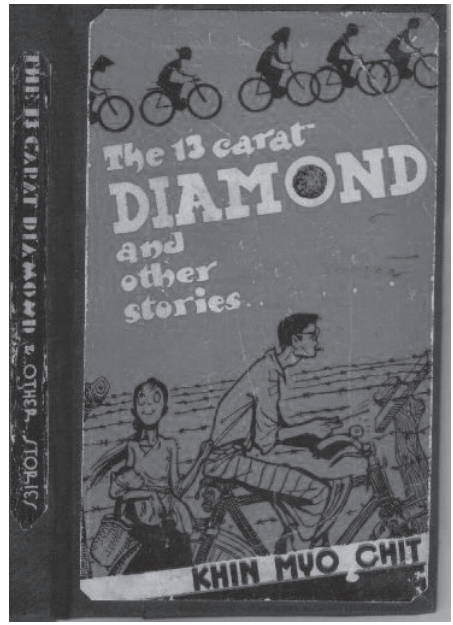


**Figure 1.6** *The 13 Carat Diamond and Other Stories*, 1969, 1st edition cover, cover illustration by famous artist U Ba Kyi



https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316342916.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

**Figure 1.7** *Pyaw Daw Hset*, (Family Clown), a magazine for children run by Khin Myo Chit and U Khin Maung Latt which attempted an amalgam of the east & west, 1971-72

**Figure 1.8** *Ma* (Woman), a collected volume, 1975



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**Figure 1.9** Khin Myo Chit's house at Yangon, 2012



https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316342916.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

## Endnotes

1. Khin Myo Chit, 1967. 'Writers and Awards', *Working People's Daily (WPD),* 21 November.
2. Adaptation by author of Bhamo Sayadaw's poem to Thilashin Me Khin. *Thilashin* is a Buddhist nun.
3. Quoted by Khin Myo Chit on more than one occasion.
4. Khin Myo Chit, 2005. *Stories and Sketches of Myanmar.* Yangon: Unity Publishing House, 65-69.
5. Ibid., 129.
6. Khin Myo Chit refers to her husband, U Khin Maung Latt as Ko Latt in her writing.
7. Khin Myo Chit, 1967. 'Writers and Awards'. *WPD,* 21 November.
8. Khin Myo Chit, 1952. 'The 13 Carat Diamond', first published in *The Guardian* and later included in the *50 Great Oriental Stories,* a Bantam Classic & the anthology *13 Carat Diamond and Other Stories*, 1969.
9. Anna Allott, 1999. 'Obituaries: Khin Myo Chit', *The Tuesday Review, The Independent*, 9 February.
10. Daw Khin Myo Chit's son, Dr Khin Maung Win revealed to the author in an interview in Yangon on 29 January 2013 of her dilemma before joining *WPD* and that once recruited she continued to express her reservations about the socialist government till she was asked to leave the paper in 1968.
11. Frank N. Trager, 1968. 'Burma: 1967- A Better Ending than Beginning', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 8, No. 2, February, 110-111.
12. Khin Myo Chit, 1967. 'Art – Not Trash – For People's Sake', *WPD*, 8 December, 'Writers and Robots', *WPD*, 28 November, 'Writers and Awards', *WPD*, 21 November.
13. Khin Myo Chit, 1967. 'That Bogey: Art for Art's Sake!', *WPD*, 19 December.
14. Khin Myo Chit, 1967. 'Writers and Awards', *WPD*, 21 November.
15. Khin Myo Chit, 1967. 'The Wits That Would Not Be Blunted', *WPD*, 2 December.
16. Ma Thanegi, 1994. *The Illusion of Life: Burmese Marionettes.* Thailand: White Orchid Press, 15-21.
17. J A Stewart, 1939. 'The Burmese Stage', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, Vol. 87, No. 4516, 9 June, 765-776.
18. Khin Myo Chit, 1968. 'Dandruff in My Halo', *WPD*, 21 July 1968.
19. Ibid.
20. H Fielding-Hall, 1906. *A People at School.* NY: MacMillan and Co. Ltd., 1906, p3.
21. Khin Myo Chit, 2011. *Gift of Laughter.* Yangon: Parami Sarpay, 7-10.
22. For details on the Buddhist influence in her childhood and grandparents, Khin Myo Chit, 1995. *Colourful Myanmar.* Yangon: Parami Sarpay, 30-35.
23. *Thanakha* is made from grinding the bark of the *thanakha* tree on a circular stone slab called the *kyaukypin* and is used to protect the skin from the hot Burmese sun. The *hsayit waing* means gathering the hair on the crown of the head and tying it into a knot, leaving a circular fringe called the *hsa-yit* around it.
24. Khin Myo Chit, 1995, 39.
25. Khin Myo Chit, 1996. *King among Men*. Yangon: Parami Sarpay, 10-11.

26. Michael Aung Thwin and Maitrii Aung Thwin, 2012. *A History of Myanmar since Ancient Times: Traditions and Transformations*. London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 80-83.
27. Writing on Pagan, Khin Myo Chit, 1995, 306-312. This particular quotation 309.
28. Aung San Suu Kyi, 1st pub. 1991, 2010. *Freedom from Fear.* London, NY: Penguin Books, 174.
29. Khin Myo Chit, 2005, *Stories and Sketches of Myanmar*, 132.
30. Ibid., 178-79.
31. Impressions of her parents and childhood are strewn in her writing, for eg. *Come Live with Me* (*Her Infinite Variety*, 2004, 21-35), *Bouquet of Wild Oats* (*Stories and Sketches of Myanmar,* 2005, 111-116), *The Golden Princess* (*The 13 Carat Diamond and Other Stories,* 2005, 28-35). That the descriptions correspond to her personal experiences was revealed to the author by Dr Khin Maung Win in interviews on 10 November 2012 and 29 January 2013. Biographical details also in Khin Myo Chit, *Many a House of Life Doth Hold Me*, (Unpublished manuscript, British Library: Eur MSS D 1066/1 from U Maung Maung collection of papers, written approximately 1960-62), 4-14.
32. Khin Myo Chit, 2005. *The 13 Carat Diamond and Other Stories.* Yangon: Parami Sarpay, 28
33. Ibid., 34-35.
34. Khin Myo Chit, 2005, *Stories and Sketches of Myanmar*, 20.
35. Khin Myo Chit, 2011. *Three Years under the Japs.* Yangon: Daung Publishing, 2011, 10-12.
36. Khin Myo Chit, 2005, *Stories and Sketches of Myanmar*, 120.
37. Ibid., 114.
38. H Fielding-Hall, 1906, 268.
39. Daw Mya Sein, 1958. 'The Women of Burma: A Tradition of Hard Work and Independence', *The Atlantic Magazine*, February.
40. Ibid.
41. H Fielding-Hall, 1902. *The Soul of a People.* NY: MacMillan & Co., Ltd., 1902, 193.
42. Sir J G Scott (Shway Yoe), 1st published 1882, 1963. *The Burman: His Life and Notions.* NY: W.W. Norton & Co. Inc. 1963, 68-69. *Longyi* is the lower garment or skirt while *pa-hso* is the lower garment specifically used by men.
43. Khin Myo Chit, 1995, 189.
44. H Fielding-Hall, 1902, 171.
45. For detailed account of monastery schools, U Kaung, 1963. "A Survey of the History of Education in Burma before the British Conquest and After" *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, vol. 46, no. 2, December, 1-124.
46. Markus Dressler & Arvind Mandair, 2011. *Secularism and Religion-making.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 240.
47. H Fielding-Hall, 1902, 175.
48. J S Furnivall, 1948. *Colonial Policy and Practice*. UK: Cambridge University Press, 128.
49. U Kaung's (U Kaung, 1963, JBRS) article estimates only 3/7 ths as Christian mission schools.

50. J S Furnivall, 1948, 126.
51. Mi Mi Khaing, 1984. *The World of Burmese Women*. London: Zed Books, 103.
52. Ni Ni Myint, 2002. *The Status of Myanmar Women*. Yangon: Universities Historical Research Centre, 12.
53. J. S. Furnivall, 1948, 211.
54. Ibid., 209.
55. References to medical school and postal careers in Khin Myo Chit, 2005, *Stories and Sketches of Myanmar*, 112-113.
56. J. S. Furnivall, 1960. *The Governance of Modern Burma.* NY: Institute of Pacific Relations, 6.
57. Daw Mya Sein, 1958, February.
58. Ibid.
59. Khin Myo Chit, 1995, 195.
60. Robert H Taylor, 1st published 1987, 2009. *The State in Myanmar.* Singapore: NUS Press, 155.
61. H Fielding-Hall, 1906, 265.
62. Ibid.
63. Khin Myo Chit, 2005, *Stories and Sketches of Myanmar*, 179.
64. Association of Myanmar Architects ed., 2012. *30 Heritage Buildings of Yangon*. Chicago: Serindia Publications, 12-13.
65. Khin Myo Chit writes of college debates with Thein Pe Myint as a participant, Khin Myo Chit, 2005, *Stories and Sketches of Myanmar*, 141.
66. Details of Khin Myo Chit's writing career from author's interviews with her family in January 2013, September 2013, February 2014 and emails dated 17 February and 12 March 2013.
67. Detail of women's writing and penny novels mentioned in next para from Chie Ikeya, 2012. *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, & Modernity in Burma*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 59-70; Tharaphi Than, 2014. *Women in Modern Burma.* London, NY: Routledge, 2014), 21-31; Khin Myo Chit, 1995, 190-191.
68. Khin Myo Chit's articles in the *Dagon* and *Myanmar Alin*, quoted in Chie Ikeya, 2012, 72 and 76.
69. Khin Myo Chit, 2005, *Stories and Sketches of Myanmar*, 111-116.
70. Burmese source: Khin Myo Chit, 2006. *Ma (Woman).* Rangoon: Zun Pwint Publishing, 123-124.
71. Khin Myo Chit, 2005, *Stories and Sketches of Myanmar*, 111-113.
72. U Maung Maung, 1980. *From Sangha To Laity: Nationalist Movements of Burma (1920-1940).* India: Australian National University Monographs on South Asia, Manohar, 138.
73. Aye Kyaw, 1993. *The Voice of Young Burma*. Ithaca: SEAP, Cornell, 10.
74. Ibid., 74.
75. Khin Myo Chit, 2011, *Three Years under the Japs*, 28.
76. Khin Myo Chit, 1960-62, unpublished, 23.
77. Anna Allott, 1999, 9 February.

78. For details on oil strikers' march and the subsequent student demonstrations see: Shelby Tucker, 2001. *Burma: The Curse of Independence*. London: Pluto Press; U Maung Maung, 1989. *Burmese Nationalist Movements: 1940-1948*. Edinburgh: Kiscadale; U Maung Maung, 1980; Khin Yi, 1988. *The Dobama Movement in Burma: 1930-1938*. Ithaca: SEAP, Cornell.
79. Shelby Tucker, 2001, 81. The women participants were called *Thakinma*.
80. Khin Myo Chit, 2005, *The 13 Carat Diamond and Other Stories*, 125.
81. U Maung Maung, 1980, 166.
82. *Thuriya*, 1938. 29 December.
83. Anna Allott, 1999, 9 February.
84. Khin Myo Chit, 1960-62, unpublished, 37.
85. Khin Myo Chit, 2005, *The 13 Carat Diamond and Other Stories*, 124.
86. Khin Myo Chit's son, Dr Khin Maung Win repeatedly spoke of her misgivings in later life regarding being a participant in the 1300 movement in his interviews with the author.
87. Khin Myo Chit, 2011, *Three Years under the Japs*, 2.
88. U Maung Maung, 1989, 43.
89. Khin Myo Chit, 1960-62, unpublished, 43-55.
90. Khin Myo Chit, 2011, *Three Years under the Japs*, 5-7.
91. Khin Myo Chit, 1960-62, unpublished, 66-68.
92. Khin Myo Chit, 2005, *The 13 Carat Diamond and Other Stories*, 7- 8.
93. Khin Myo Chit, 2011, *Three Years under the Japs*, 9.
94. Khin Myo Chit, 2005, *The 13 Carat Diamond and Other Stories*, 9.
95. Khin Myo Chit, 2011, *Three Years under the Japs*, 11. Popularity of Youth League: U Maung Maung, 1989, 52.
96. Khin Myo Chit, 2011, *Three Years under the Japs*, 11.
97. Ibid., 10.
98. Clive J. Christie, 1996. *A Modern History of Southeast Asia: Decolonisation, Nationalism and Separatism*. London; NY: Tauris Academic Studies; Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 63.
99. U Maung Maung, 1989, 46-47.
100. Khin Myo Chit, 1960-62, unpublished, 87-91.
101. Khin Myo Chit, 2011, *Three Years under the Japs*, 30-31.
102. Sir Walter Scott, *The Patriot*. Khin Myo Chit's Burmese translation was published by the *Tekkatho Kyaung-daik Magazine*, 1932, no. 2, Volume 22, rainy season edition.
103. Nalini Ranjan Chakravarti, 1971. *The Indian Minority in Burma: The Rise and Decline of an Immigrant Community*. London, NY and Bombay: Oxford University Press, 129-133.
104. U Maung Maung, 1980, 4.
105. U Chit Hlaing was a contemporary of the two monks and though he as Member of Parliament continued his political activity into the 1950s, from the early 1930s onwards his national prominence waned because he almost invariably sided with Indian financial interests: Robert H Taylor, 1st published 1987, 2009, 170.
106. U Maung Maung, 1980, 14-15.
107. Ibid.

108. Ibid., 19.
109. Ibid., 31. Robert H Taylor, 1st published 1987, 2009, 170.
110. A. N. Bose, 1979. *Gandhi in Burma*. Yangon: Information Service of India, 15-16.
111. Description of *wunthanu athins* from U Maung Maung, 1980, 24-26.
112. Ibid. Robert H Taylor, 1st published 1987, 2009, 183-184. According to U Maung Maung, though U Ottama was considered the Gandhi of Burma, his style of addressing the public was closer to the more militant Indian nationalist, Subhas Chandra Bose and as the tension between the government and the GCBA intensified, U Ottama's speeches became more inflammatory: U Maung Maung, 1980, 14-15.
113. Affiliated to the GCBA, it had nine branches in Ragoon alone and numerous others all over the country and worked for the GCBA goals of Home Rule and boycotts: Burmese source: Mi Mi Khaing, 1975. *Tet-katho Kyi Ma (World of Burmese Women).* Rangoon: Sabei Biman, 28.
114. Nilanjana Sengupta, 2012. *A Gentleman's Word: The Legacy of Subhas Chandra Bose in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: ISEAS, 201-202. Geraldine H. Forbes, 1980. 'The Women Revolutionaries of Bengal', *The Oracle*, Vol. II, No. 2, April, 2-3.
115. Burmese source: Saw Mon Nyin, 1976. *Bama Amyo-thami*, *(Burmese Women).* Yangon: Hlaing Sabei, 33.
116. Ibid.
117. *Rangoon Gazette*, 1921, 9 December.
118. Burmese source: Mi Mi Khaing, 1975, 31-32.
119. Ibid.
120. Daw Mya Sein, 1958, February.
121. Ibid. After 1927 there was another short spurt of discussions in 1931 for the political inclusion of women at the Round Table Conference.
122. Khin Myo Chit, 1995, 188.
123. A. N. Bose, 1979, 14.
124. The polemic against inter-racial marriages and miscegenation cannot of course be blamed in its entirety on Gandhi and his ideological followers. It had as much to do with the emasculating effect of the British: the colonial officers and Christian missionaries who viewed the ethnic-minority Karens, Chins and Kachins as belonging to the martial races while the ethnic-majority Burmans were typically portrayed as lazy, henpecked, lacking in discipline and unwarrior-like. In addition there were demographic changes brought about by immigration which transformed the urban ethnic makeup. The indigenous male population felt threatened in their jobs as much as they did at home. Besides, it was a time when issues of racial purity and the problem of half-castes plagued the colonised world, dependent as the colonialists were on racial hierarchies for their survival. The discourse against such marriages and the *ka-bya* (mixed breed) children born of such unions continued through the 1940s and the post-independence period. On 12 July 1957 the *Hanthawaddy* newspaper, founded by the premier U Nu, argued that there were clear roles for men and women to play in politics: while the men should concentrate on the main tasks of defence and protection, women were to safeguard religion and politics by procreating with a focus on "pure" blood so that the Burmese race remained untainted by

the *kala* or foreigner. The issue of marriage appears to have been even further politicised and as Tharaphi Than argues, public attention was increasingly diverted to marriage laws as the independent Burmese government failed in implementing successful economic programmes or satisfying native businessmen and traders: Tharaphi Than 2014. *Women in Modern Burma*. London, NY: Routledge, 117-118.

125. Debjani Ganguly & John Docker, ed., 2007. *Rethinking Gandhi and Non-violent Relationality: Global Perspectives*. London, NY: Rutledge, 228-229.
126. Early experiences of the *Dobama* movement from U Maung Maung, 1980, 69-82; Khin Yi, 1988, 3-15. It is important to note that while some of the *thakins* were agnostic, others were devout Buddhists, seeking to reinterpret Buddhist concepts like *kan* for a new political era.
127. Thant Myint U, 2011. *The Making of Modern Burma*. NY: Cambridge University Press, 211.
128. U Maung Maung, 1980, 76-77.
129. Khin Yi, 1988, 5.
130. Ibid., 13.
131. U Maung Maung, 1980, 76-77; U Maung Maung, 1989, 105-107.
132. Khin Myo Chit, 1995, 196.
133. Ibid., 198.
134. Daw Mya Sein, 1958, February.
135. Richard James Carlson, 1991. *Women, Gender and Politics in Burma's Nationalist Movement (1900-1911)*. Ithaca: SEAP, Cornell University, 95.
136. Ibid., 92-93.
137. Ni Ni Myint, 2002, 14.There were only a handful of women who emerged as politically significant and they were invariably either born into a political family or married to a senior politician: Daw Mya Sein and her mother, Daw Thein Mya, Vice-President of the NCWB (National Council of Women in Burma) who was married to U May Oung, a member of the Legislative Council and Minister of Home Affairs Ma Than Tin again married to a Legislative Council member, U (later Sir) Paw Tun, Mrs Ba Maw herself and U Chit Hlaing's sister, Daw Hnin Mya who was an elected member of the Council in 1932.
138. Khin Myo Chit, 2005, *Stories and Sketches of Myanmar*, 133-134.
139. Ibid.
140. Ibid., 40, 48.
141. Khin Myo Chit, 2005, 56-66.
142. Burmese source: Khin Myo Chit, 2006, 18; Kate Millet, *Theory of Sexual Politics;* Barbara A Crow, ed., 2000, *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*. NY & London: NY University Press, 142.
143. Khin Myo Chit, 2002. *Flowers and Festivals Round the Burmese Year*. Yangon: Sarpay Lawka, 13.
144. Kate Millet*;* Barbara A Crow, ed., 2000, 143.
145. Khin Myo Chit, 2002, 14.
146. Ibid., 18-21.

147. Ibid., 21.
148. Khin Myo Chit, 2010. *A Wonderland of Burmese Legends*. Yangon: Parami Sarpay, 2010, 136-139.
149. Khin Myo Chit, 1995, 83-84.
150. Mi Mi Khaing, 1984, 15-17.
151. Khin Myo Chit, 1995, 186.
152. Burmese source: Khin Myo Chit, 2006, 15-23.
153. Mention of riddles in *Colourful Myanmar,* 136, 144. Limericks in Khin Myo Chit, 2004. *Her Infinite Variety and Other Stories*. Yangon: Parami Sarpay , 38-39.
154. Ibid., 49.
155. Dixon's essay from Burmese source: Khin Myo Chit, 2006, 61-71; Marlene Dixon, *Why Women's Liberation?*; Barbara A Crow, ed., 2000, 71-89.
156. Me Khin's story from Burmese source: Maymyo Moe Kyi, 1970. *Myanmar Sarpay Taik-pwe (Battles in Old Burmese Literature)*. Yangon: Sun thit Sarpay, 102-110.
157. Burmese source: Khin Myo Chit, 2006, 71-74.
158. Ibid., 18.
159. Kate Millet; Barbara A Crow, ed., 2000, ed., 132.
160. Burmese source: Khin Myo Chit, 2006, 44-48 and John Ruskin's lecture, *Of Queens' Gardens*, delivered 14 December 1864.
161. Khin Myo Chit, 1995, 192.
162. Ibid., 201.
163. Ibid., 200-201.
164. Burmese source: Khin Myo Chit, 2003. *Maung-do-Yaukkya (Oh! You Men)*. Yangon: Chit Saya Sarpay.
165. Khin Myo Chit, 1995, 197. The modern women's fashion discussed in detail in Chie Ikeya, 2012.
166. Burmese source: Khin Myo Chit, 2006, 24-38; *Colourful Myanmar*, 195.
167. Ibid., 197.
168. Burmese source: Khin Myo Chit, 2006, 85-92.
169. Khin Myo Chit, 1995, 194.
170. Ibid., 203.
171. Burmese source: Khin Myo Chit, 2006, 101-104; Pat Mainardi, *The Politics of Housework*; Barbara A Crow, ed., 2000, 526.
172. Burmese source: Khin Myo Chit, 2006, 124.
173. Khin Myo Chit, 1995, 191. She also mentions the Buddhist content of the columns which made them popular.
174. Burmese source: Khin Myo Chit, 2006, 124.
175. Ibid., 118.
176. Ibid., 138-146 and *Colourful Myanmar*, 198.
177. Burmese source: Khin Myo Chit, 2006, 15-23 and 158-163.
178. Ibid., 117-118.
179. Ibid., 61-7; Marlene Dixon; Barbara A Crow, ed., 2000, 74.
180. Burmese source: Khin Myo Chit, 2006, 190.

181. Khin Myo Chit, 1960-62, unpublished, 24.
182. Ibid.
183. Ibid., 43-45.
184. Khin Myo Chit, 2005, *Stories and Sketches of Myanmar*, 139; *WPD* 1964 Vol. 1, No. 80, 3 April.
185. Khin Myo Chit, 1960-62, unpublished, Prologue, iv-v.
186. Khin Myo Chit, 1964, *WPD,* Vol. 1, No. 80, 3 April; Khin Myo Chit, 2013, *A Buddhist Pilgrim's Progress*. Yangon: Colour Zone Press, 9-13.
187. Ibid., 26-28.
188. Sir Edwin Arnold, 2007. *Light of Asia*. Sri Lanka: Buddhist Cultural Centre, 115.
189. Khin Myo Chit, 2005, *Stories and Sketches of Myanmar*, 81.
190. Khin Myo Chit, 1964, *WPD,* Vol. 1, No. 79, 2 April.
191. Khin Myo Chit, 2013, 44-45.
192. Ibid., 57.
193. Khin Myo Chit, 1964, *WPD,* Vol. 1, No. 82, 5 April.
194. Ibid., 1964, Vol. 1, No. 83, 6 April.
195. Ibid., 1964, Vol. 1, No. 78, 3 April.
196. Quoted from her diary of 1 January 1956 from Ibid., Vol. 1, No. 83, 8 April 1964.
197. Ibid., 1964, Vol. 1, No. 92, 18 April, concluding instalment of *The Quest for Peace*.
198. Khin Myo Chit, 2005, *Stories and Sketches of Myanmar*, 185.
199. Ibid., 51-52.
200. Chie Ikeya, 2012, 74.
201. Tharaphi Than, 2014, 29-30.
202. Khin Myo Chit, 2005, *Stories and Sketches of Myanmar,* 180-181.
203. Ibid., 164.
204. Khin Myo Chit, 1995, 220-223.
205. Khin Myo Chit, 1996, 11.
206. Khin Myo Chit, 1967. 'Music, Songs and Broken Rice', *WPD*, 17 October.
207. Khin Myo Chit, 1967. 'Writers and Robots', *WPD*, 28 November; Aung San Suu Kyi, 1st pub. 1991, 2010, 174.
208. Khin Myo Chit, 1967. 'King Lear and his Daughters', *WPD*, 26 December.
209. Khin Myo Chit, 1966. 'Alice in Wilderness', *WPD*, 25 January.
210. Khin Myo Chit, 1966. 'Round about the Cauldron Go', *WPD*, 27 May.
211. Khin Myo Chit, 1968. 'Dandruff in my Halo', *WPD*, 21 July; 1969, 'The Witch-Doctor and the Patient', *WPD*, 15 December.
212. Khin Myo Chit, 1965. 'Serviceman's Conduct Rules, *Jataka* Style', *WPD*, 3 December; 1967, 'The Wits that would not be Blunted', *WPD*, 2 December; Aung San Suu Kyi, 1st pub. 1991, 2010, 189.
213. Details of letter: http://moemaka.com/?s=khin+myo+chit. Accessed 19 March 2014.
214. Anna Allott, 1999, 9 February.
215. Aung San Suu Kyi, 1st pub. 1991, 2010, 134.
216. J. S. Furnivall, 1948, 123.
217. Aung San Suu Kyi, 1st pub. 1991, 2010, 134-35.

218. Burmese source: Khin Myo Chit, 2012. *Tha-din sar Lawka, (Newspaper World)*. Yangon: Yan Aung Sarpay.

219. Chronological list of Khin Myo Chit's publications included as Annexure I. The year provided in the citations correspond to the reprinted editions used by the author in her research and might not correspond to the first edition.