

Romancing human rights: Gender, intimacy, and power between Burma and the West

By TAMARA C. HO

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Tamara Ho's *Romancing human rights* is a welcome addition to the expanding and recent scholarship on women and gender in Burma. Ho herself offered the first gendered analysis of popular fictions by Burmese women writers and diasporic writers such as Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay and Wendy Law-Yone as well as non-fiction by Aung San Suu Kyi. In this book, she also offers alter/native (following her emphasis) reading of female protagonists in Western canons on Burma such as Ma Hla May in *Burmese Days* by George Orwell.

Her book is divided into six chapters; Chapter 1 is a survey of existing literature and films through which Western or non-Burmese (most often male) writers and Hollywood film-makers present images of Burmese women to the global audience; Chapter 2 offers a reading of how a Burmese woman writer, Ma Ma Lay, brings forth 'patriarchal violence, misogyny, sexism, and oppression' (pp. 50–51) through her male protagonist U Saw Han thereby causing the death of the female protagonist, Way Way, in her novel *Not out of hate*, and how this dyad augurs the Chapter 3 analysis of how the roles of Western women as champions of human rights undermines Burmese women and risks 'exacerbating the continued obliteration of Burmese female activism and collective forms of resistance' (p. 63); Chapter 4 analyses what she calls the performative politics of Aung San Suu Kyi in terms of how the scholar cum housewife turned politician makes use of both Western notions of democracy and Buddhist, Burmese, and Asian values to sustain her visibility; Chapter 5 examines the work of the first Burmese diasporic novelist, Wendy Law-Yone, and the final chapter is a summary of her analyses.

With this highly accessible book, Ho offers an alternative reading of the work and lives of both highly visible Burmese women such as Aung San Suu Kyi and less visible fictional characters such as Ma Hla May in Orwell's *Burmese days* and Way Way in Ma Ma Lay's *Not out of hate*. Her strength lies in her ability to debunk essentialist views of Burmese femininity that inform and construct the Western notion of Burmese women and Burma in particular, and Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian women in general. She offers ways to view a female sense of worth, dignity, and agency in fictional characters such as Way Way who could easily be read as feeble and lacking agency.

Ho uses Western feminism as a framework to analyse Burmese women, yet she brings forth intricacies and subtleties of home life for Burmese women as well as challenges they face as women, aspects that might have been invisible if other lenses, particularly nationalism, were used. For example, while home-making was viewed as a virtue of Victorian women, duties bound to a home life and household members trap Burmese women in a secular world. Four out of five aspects of female suffering, according to popular Burmese Buddhist ideology, are tied to marriage and childbearing; and unless

a woman, if she is a mother and housewife, can get out of the house, she will not achieve enlightenment. Such an ideology presents a challenge to an egalitarian notion of Burmese women, and Ho with her close reading of the texts outlines how Burmese women negotiate between the two worlds — the world of powerful women as they are often portrayed, and that of doomed, helpless creatures who cannot amass the highest form of merits through *Vawana* or practice in the confines of a house.

Chapter 4, 'The making of a modern Burmese wife', highlights Ho's strength as a writer who can help readers grasp the important cultural symbols of place and lexicon in *Not out of hate*, and how the male protagonist in the novel personifies the twin forces of colonialism and modernity that eventually kill the female protagonist. On the one hand, her feminist framework gives a refreshing, alternative reading of characters most Burmese readers and fans of Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay's works are familiar with. On the other hand, it could be a bit frustrating for a reader not to be able to see the contextualising of her characters in Burmese literature and, in particular, in Ma Ma Lay's fervent nationalism and life trajectory. One wonders if and how the reading of U Saw Han would change if one could assume that this character is in a way a partial reflection of Ma Ma Lay's previous self, i.e. the one who prefers modernity to tradition. Perhaps such a sense of frustration is misplaced if Ho's book only targets audiences who might not be familiar with the untranslated works of Ma Ma Lay.

Ho is critical of the United States' championing of human rights in Burma, and her accounts of the hypocrisies of American politicians are welcome additions to this already rich book. Yet she also provides an honest assessment of Aung San Suu Kyi's recent silence on human rights issues. Overall, this is a thoroughly researched, well-written, and highly accessible book not just for Burma studies but for women's and gender studies as well as Asian, Asian and American studies, and literature in general. The author has laid the foundation for further analyses of Burmese literature. It may be fruitful to juxtapose the study of Burmese novels with those of other Southeast Asian writers such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *This earth of mankind* as intertextual references, in addition to works by Western authors. After all, Ma Ma Lay's *Way Way* has a lot in common with Toer's *Anneliese*.

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As the Vietnamese economy further grows and the country pursues broader international integration, it becomes better known to the outside world, and academic