

BOOK REVIEW

Women in Modern Burma

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Women in Modern Burma

Tharaphi Than

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Tharaphi Than –assistant professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Northern Illinois University, USA- writes the book “*Women in modern Burma*” which challenges the idea that Burmese women have power and are granted equal rights to men by society. Myanmar reality shows that there are really very few powerful women in the country. The book underlines the status of women in modern society in Myanmar and includes case studies about women and education, the current state of prostitution and women journalists, editors and writers in Myanmar, among others.

The book is structured into eight major sections: introduction section addresses the official narrative and popular images of women in Myanmar and presents a summary of the political and cultural outline of the twentieth-century in this country, from the ear of the Golden Press to transition to independence, Pyidawtha (Happy Land Years) (1952-1956),

The Years of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (1962-1988) and the years after 1988.

The chapter “Print media and women journalists, editors and writers” addresses the emergence of national newspapers (for example, *The Burman*, *Thuriya*, *Myanmar Allin*) and writers who participated in these newspapers. The chapter also addresses the role of women in the press. Daw Phwa Shin was the first woman newspapers editor of Tharawaddy (1919). However she did not use her own name as editor and publisher of the journal in order to avoid people thinking that the newspaper was inferior because it was run by a woman. Instead the newspaper Tharawaddy was published using the name of her husband as publisher, Maung Zan. Other female writers briefly commented are Khin Myo Chit, Dagon Khin Khin Lay, Khin Hnin Yu, Moe Moe and Ma Ma Lay. The works on some male writers such as U Maung Gyi is also mentioned.

The chapter “*Women’s education*” discusses the state of contemporary women’s education (through surveys) and the role of women in nation-building. According to the author, two sectors where women dominate is education and health sectors. Now Myanmar has one woman minister, Dr Myat Myat Ohn

Khin, Minister of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement.

Next chapter, “*The creation of the Burma Women’s Army*”, addresses the factors that could be involved in the converting of traditional women into fighters in Myanmar and the beginning of the Women’ Army, which was established in February 1945. The chapter briefly discusses the life of a woman soldier.

Next chapter, “*Disbanding the army and communist women*” discusses the role of women in the communist factions and political landscape of women’s groups during the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL).

The chapter “*Women and modernity*” introduces the topic of how the newly independently country Myanmar struggled to define and defend its identity. The chapter shows interesting examples of ideas published in newspapers like *Bamakhit* and *Hanthawaddy*, and also discusses attitudes towards inter-racial marriage and the

1954 Special Marriage and Succession Act which aim was to free Burmese Buddhist women from exploitation by foreigners.

Finally, the last chapter of the book, “*Marginalized women in the making of the “Burman” nation*” discusses the view on prostitutes during the colonial period, the Japanese occupation and after the independence and today. The chapter is illustrated with cartoons taken from newspapers published in the 1930’s and 1950’s.

The book *Women in Modern Burma* by Tharaphi Than offers very interesting insights on the status of women in Myanmar society. It fills a gap in literature on Myanmar and it should trigger the writing of more books on the status of women in Myanmar and other topics related to this emerging country. The book provides very useful references for those interested in deepen their knowledge on the role of women in the recent history of Myanmar.