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Book Review: Refiguring women, colonialism, and modernity in Burma

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***Refiguring women, colonialism, and modernity in Burma.* 2011. Chie Ikeya.
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 239pp ISBN 96822-1888 (hbk) \$45.00**

Reviewed by Maurice Oscar Dassah¹

Chie Ikeya's *Refiguring women, colonialism, and modernity in Burma* is a gendered rendition of women's experience of modernity in colonial Burma. In her Introduction, Ikeya pits her social historical masterpiece antithetically to Ma Ma Lay's 1955 *Mon ywe mahu* (Not out of hate). The latter portrayed the incompatibility, irreconcilable confrontation and impossibility of coexistence between Burmese tradition and Western modernity. The book reflects on the relationships among gender, colonialism, and modernity and examines how early twentieth-century transformations in colonial society, education, literary culture, politics, and the marketplace gave rise to new discourses about and practices related to women" (p ix). The author primes the reader to the contrary position she takes in portraying the hidden side of Burmese society, a society that "actively engaged with new and foreign identities, ideas, practices, and institutions whose thoughts and actions crossed religious, racial, and cultural boundaries", one open to influences from beyond and accommodated both westernisation and ethno nationalism (p 2). At the centre of the "modern woman" and colonialism-modernity discourse is feminism. Ubiquitous in various colonial media, the Burmese woman is an embodiment of dualisms: homemaker and public figure, earner and consumer, patriot and defector, pious and infidel, Burmese/Westernised. In particular, her modernity is conveyed in various terms, some with derogatory connotations: *khit kala* ("women of the times"), *khit hmi thu* (up-to-date woman), *ya khu khit amyothami* (present-day women), *khit hsan thu* (trendy woman), *khit thit amyothami* (woman of the new era) and *tet khit thami* (girl/daughter of the era of advancement).

Chapter 1 takes the reader into the colonial period, from the British attempt at colonising Burma in 1826 to the emerging postcolonial state. Between the beginning and end of colonialism, socioeconomic, political and cultural transformations that gave rise to the emerging discourse on the "modern woman" play out. The role of migrating colonists, immigrants and migrant workers in creating a racially diverse urban society with mixed values through intermarriages and 'loose liaisons' is highlighted. The chapter also highlights the introduction of secular education, different from that provided by of the Buddhist monasteries (sangha), and the emergence of mass print and visual media, which played an important role in projecting the Burmese woman onto the colonial milieu.

The notion that Burmese women were as powerful, if not more, than their western counterparts is explored in chapter 2. Traditionally, gender equality in marriage, inheritance and ownership has always existed in Burmese society. First, according to tradition, women retained their maiden names in marriage. Secondly, backed by Buddhist or customary law, women enjoyed equal property and inheritance rights before, during and after marriage and divorce. Burmese women were also powerful within and outside the family. In addition to being silent rulers by virtue of controlling finances, Burmese women were independent business owners in their own right and worked away from home. Further, the absence of inhumane female-directed traditional customs in Burma

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enhanced women's liberation, independence and equality with men. Socially, spiritually and politically, Burmese women were subordinated to men as education and literacy was denied to most women (p 52). Monasteries provided education for males only, with limited education available to women from nunneries run by Buddhist nuns and informal religious instruction by monks. However, women from royal or wealthy backgrounds were generally literate. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, literacy among women was widespread and in the early twentieth century when missionaries expanded coeducational public instruction (p 55) female education took a dramatic turn. Following secularisation of education, the 1920s saw the rise of an educated class of Burmese women. Introduction of the first women's column, "Yuwadi sekku" (*Young ladies' eyes*) in *Dagon Magazine*, which projected the image of the iconic young modern woman and her appropriation of knowledge work, a previously men-only domain and use of biographies of Burmese female intellectuals, historical figures and women's portraits helped stimulate female readership (p 69).

Owing to cost and cultural constraints, a small but important number of Burmese women received tertiary education in the 1920s, adding to the ranks of the medical, legal, educational, journalistic professions and, much later, the civil service. Increased access to education led to a wider reading public essential for promoting the image of the *khit kala* in yuwadi columns, with didactic instruments for inculcating readers with new *khit kala* sensibilities (p 69). Well-known publications such as *Dagon*, *Thuriya*, *Deedok gyanay* (*Deedok weekly*), *Independent weekly* and *Kavi myak mhan* (scholars' eyeglasses) used authorial impersonation, but women replaced male impersonators in the 1930s.

Increasing politicisation of women fueled by nationalist discourse in the 1920s and 1930s is the focus of chapter 3. Women of the *khit kala* were expected to play two key roles. In the rising tide of modernisation, domesticity was, nevertheless, expected of Burmese women. Domesticity was promoted as laudable and a woman's beauty and character were thought to be enhanced through marriage and caring for her family.

At the domestic level, women were housewives-and-mothers, dutifully caring for their husbands and children. In fact, the discourse of the *ya khu khit amyothami* (present-day women) not only drove home the imperative of domesticity for women, but also provided consolation for those doubtful about marriage and motherhood (p 76). The character of an *amyothami* was one of "her love of her country and her ability to reform herself in such a way that benefits and dignifies her country" by nurturing her children (p 78) and carefully cultivating a respectable family. The family being a microcosmic functional unit of society, absence of servants from Burmese households implied women's total devotion and their role in guarding the security, morality and well-being of family members and the nation at large.

Nationally, Burmese women were expected to be patriotic and self-sacrificial protectors of the nation privately and publicly in the simmering nationalistic 1920s and 1930s. The image of the *myo chit may* (female patriot), epitomised by Joan of Arc, became prominent in the press, not only to edify the concept of patriotism, but to indicate patriotism could be demonstrated outside the home. As part of the drive for patriotism, women were urged to take up professions contributing to public life and become visible by participating in organised political agitation. Involvement of school girls, college and university students in strikes and formation of the Burmese Women's Association, Young Women's Buddhist Association, *Wunthanu Konmaryi Athin* (Patriotic Women's

Association) and the militant *Dobama Asiayone* (our Burmese Association), signalled women's involvement in nationalist agitation for change.

Chapter 4 discusses what it meant to be an up-to-date or modern woman (*khit hmi thu*) in Burma in the light of the rising culture of consumerism. In colonial Burma, fashion served as a powerful trope for modernity and dress codes were seen as embodying "larger social and cultural ethics and norms and make powerful statements about identity" (p 97). The chapter dissects the image of the *khit kala*, creating a dichotomy that emphasises different approaches to bodily practices relating to health, hygiene, and beauty, self-improvement and self-fulfilment women adopted.

On the one hand was the fashionista, the epitome of the *khit hmu thu* as consumer, referred to as a girl/daughter of the advancement era (*tet khit thami*) or fashionable woman (*khit hsan thu*), who was pre-occupied with self-indulgent consumption (p 96). *Khith hsan* fashion or intermixed and multi-valent outfits of uncertain origin was a hybrid of local and foreign understandings of femininity and defied fixed interpretations. It appealed to Burmese women (and men) wishing to 'modernize their image without imitating their colonizers' (p 104) and became popular with the ubiquitous *khith khu thu* image in films and advertising, but caused disquiet in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s because it was seen as conspicuous consumption, frivolous and decadent, and involved sacrificing the pure and authentic self for imitation of the foreign, thus a betrayal of the *amyo*. These critiques are the essence of Chapter 6.

On the other hand was the less glamorous housewife-and-mother (*ein shin ma*), an "adult and a thoroughly domesticated woman" associated with wise and dutiful consumption. The *khith hmi* housewife-and-mother became a target of fashion as the need arose to modernise the home and use technologies and commodities for sanitation, family health and conjugal bliss (p 113). Modern education system and notions of scientific progress made medicalisation and sanitisation of pregnancy, childbirth and child upbringing, contraceptives, baby products, children's clothing, furniture and household goods, hygienic products and medicines important issues for women. Western-hygienic and health-related products served as dominant markers of modernity and development (p 116). However, the housewife-and-mother could modernize her home without necessarily Westernizing it. Advertisements invariably triangulated consumption, modernity and fulfillment, and consumption was typically portrayed as leading to self-actualization and instant gratification.

As representations, the fashionista and housewife-and-mother were two opposite figures. The former was fresh, youthful, unattached and associated with frivolous consumption and "technologies of the self". She "appeared on the covers of magazines and journals, as leading characters in short stories, novels and films, and in sensationalist discussions in the press on the merits and demerits of women's fashion". The housewife-and-mother, an older and more mature version of the fashionista, was associated with wise consumption and dutiful care of her family, "never in the limelight and was relegated to women's sections of periodicals" (p 96). In spite of these differences, the fashionista and housewife-and-mother were closely linked to conspicuous consumerism, which both saw as a way of being *khith kala*.

Racism, particularly that involving restrictions or frowning upon marital and/or sexual relations across the 'colour bar', is a sensitive issue in colonial and postcolonial discourse, as the case of apartheid South Africa amply demonstrated. In chapter 5, Ikeya

examines the increasing outcry in colonial Burma against intermarriages and miscegenation between local women and non-Burmese men, involving colonists themselves, immigrants and migrant workers. In fact, the intermarriage issue was one of the major causes of the 1938 Burma Riots because it reflected nationalists' need for a stable and "easily identifiable" community of *bama* people bounded by "one blood, one soul" (p 141).

Criticisms of Indo-Burmese marriage indicated co-existence of biological and cultural racism based on class, manners and behavior, social customs, and religious beliefs and practices. Anglo-Burmese marriages were considered beneficial and acceptable because the women were "marrying up the social and class hierarchy", whereas Indo-Burmese marriages were frowned upon as demeaning relationships. In the latter case, the women were commonly referred to as *kala ma* and their children constituted the "*kabya* problem". Particularly repugnant to Burmese men, because it was perceived as threatening "a spiraling destruction of Burmese race, culture, and society" (p 121), were Indo-Burmese marriages and continued immigration of Indians to Burma, dubbed the "Indian menace", which ultimately assumed nationalist overtones.

A number of factors were implicated in men's problematisation of wives, mistresses and mixed race children of foreign men, namely: intensified nationalist appeal for women as keepers of tradition to safeguard the purity of Burmese (Buddhist) culture, codification of religion and race, entrenchment of cultural racism and growing indebtedness and poverty of Burmese men as a result of the Depression of the 1930s. Also, influx of single male immigrants from England and British India displaced Burmese men from influential political and socioeconomic positions. As a result, they could not meaningfully advance Burmese women socioeconomically through marriage (p 122). However, it was not only Burmese men who viewed foreign intermarriages with distaste. Colonial authorities themselves, for a number of reasons, including payment of higher salaries to married officers, increased cost of housing, travel and education, favoured cohabitation and did encourage illicit connections and prostitution. In the climate of the 1920s and 1930s, a Burmese woman's personal choice of whom to marry was inextricably linked to political and national affiliations and became an indicator of her patriotism. Sex and subversion converged on her body, which became the battleground for fueling or resisting colonialism (pp 140-141).

The self-indulgent, frivolous fashionista who, like the wives and mistresses of foreigners, was represented as unpatriotic and subjected to vitriolic press diatribe is the focus of chapter 6. In the Burma of 1930s, *khit hsan thu* fashion was an object of derision and women wearing them were harassed. Although Burmese men also embraced *khit san* fashion, the brunt of media criticism was directed solely at *khit hsan thu*, conveniently leaving out the *khit hsan tha* (fashionable lad). The deliberate choice of *khit hsan thu* for derision was not driven by purely nationalistic sentiment. The humiliating experiences of colonialism had robbed Burmese men of their manhood and virility in several ways: defeat, continued subjugation, economic marginalization worsened by the Depression and easy access of Burmese women's bodies to foreign men. Lambasting the *khit hsan thu* reflected Burmese men's need to control, stabilize and discipline women in an attempt to remasculinize themselves by circumscribing women's political, social and cultural roles since denouncing them amounted to denouncing their mobility and self-actualization (p 162).

For one thing, given the mobilisation of women by the liberation movements (*wunthanu*), Burma was not short of patriotic women in the 1920s and 1930s. As such, analysis of focused criticism of *khin hsan thu* at the time is interesting. It has been suggested the *khin hsan thu* image readily lent itself to bastardisation by Burmese nationalists not only because women had been long associated with attachment to the realm of desire, but also for their key role in commerce, profit-making and monetary affairs - thought to be spiritually polluting - and the influence of advertising (p 149). In fact, it is contended the *khin hsan thu* was fictional!

Although the politics of dress is said to point to “the “binary division of men/modernity/political power/Western dress versus women/tradition/no political power/national dress” (p 145), it was not necessarily so in Burma and elsewhere. To illustrate with an example outside South East Asia, irrespective of educational level and social standing, male and female Ghanaians’ preference for traditional clothing since the days of colonialism is legendary. Kwame Nkrumah and five political leaders wore smocks and matching caps to signify resilience of the African personality when they declared Ghana’s independence from Britain in 1957.

Refiguring Women contributes to our understanding of the dynamics of colonialism and nationalism in Burma. Ikeya integrates various previously unused historical Burmese-language primary sources from the 1900s to the 1940s and colonial-era archival English-language documents to explore the linkages among gender, colonialism and modernity. The interaction of these forces in shaping “the modern day Burmese woman” offers an interesting historiography. Use of original Burmese sources provides authenticity and depth, raising hope that perhaps part of Africa’s colonial history could be rewritten to include verifiable oral historical sources. The comparative analysis technique used to draw on other Asian contexts to illustrate similarities and differences with Burma is also laudable. The language used is fairly accessible. Burmese terms enhance originality, but the foreign reader is hard-pressed to remember the meanings of numerous liberally-used terms in order to stay on course. All said, *Refiguring women* deeply immerses the reader in Burmese society and is a welcome addition to the libraries of scholars with specific interest in Burma and South East Asia, British colonial and postcolonial studies, race relations, feminism and gender studies.