

personal struggles involving constant negotiation, contestation, perseverance . . . that often go unnoticed or become glorified as important historical issues” (p. 146).

Chapter 6 compares and contrasts Samsui women with other groups of immigrants in Singapore, such as *Ma Cheh*, who were female domestic workers who, like Samsui women disappeared over time, and present-day workers, who are largely male and originate from South Asia and China. There are good reasons for this comparative study as it provides a better understanding of how the boundaries have been redrawn constantly to include or exclude certain groups and members in order to achieve national goals and social norms.

In fact, everything and everyone in history are subject to rewriting for a gamut of reasons. Thus, it is just appropriate when Low in his “conclusion” asserts that “the social memory and historiography of the Samsui women are social constructions of the past in which memory and history undergo alteration, reappropriation, and instrumentalization by different social actors through a variety of means and through different goals. Such constructions are forms of knowledge that serve as an anchor for both individual and group identities in shaping belonging” (p. 207).

In short, this book is empirically rich and theoretically intriguing. It is worth recommending to those who are interested in gendered migration and social memory in national history.

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### ***The Female Voice of Myanmar: Khin Myo Chit to Aung San Suu Kyi***

NILANJANA SENGUPTA

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The female voice of the title of Nilanjana Sengupta’s book belongs to four twentieth century women writers and activists: Khin Myo Chit, Ludu Daw Amar, Ma Thida, and Aung San Suu Kyi. *The Female Voice of Myanmar: Khin Myo Chit to Aung San Suu Kyi* traces the course of each of these women’s lives and works, identifying the democracy movement of 1988 as the point at which their four stories converge. Sengupta’s juxtaposition of these four narratives illuminates the changing political landscape of twentieth century Myanmar from a specifically female perspective.

Sengupta opens her analysis with the story of Supaya-Lat, the last queen of independent Burma. Supaya-Lat was villainized by the generations who came after her as an ambitious and ruthless woman, blamed for the British conquest. She became a frequently invoked example of the catastrophic consequences of undue female influence. By placing this story at the start of her analysis, Sengupta emphasizes the gendered challenges that have existed for any woman in Myanmar who chooses to work actively for political change. The recurring question of how women can

negotiate the fraught realm of politics is one of the threads that Sengupta uses to bind together her narrative.

Dividing her work into four main chapters, each devoted to one woman, Sengupta draws extensively on each of these women's published writings in English and Burmese. Writing about women whose life stories at times overlapped in time and space, she also identifies parallels and connections in the way that these women wrote about and experienced gender politics and national politics. This work is a hybrid: literary biography and political analysis. While the title may suggest that this work is a broad survey of twentieth century Burmese women's writing, this is not the case. Sengupta's exploration is finely focused and richly detailed.

The first chapter focuses on Khin Myo Chit, born in 1915 when Burma was still under British rule. In her description of Khin Myo Chit's childhood, Sengupta introduces one of the themes that will recur throughout the book: the challenges facing women who deviated from prescribed feminine expectations. Khin Myo Chit is described as a girl who "picked up boyish habits to survive in a male-dominated world" (p. 17). She was driven to seek a secondary education, leaving her family's home near Mandalay for Rangoon University in 1933. There she joined the emerging student nationalist movement, and carved out a niche for herself writing for various magazines and papers, though she found her choice of subject matter somewhat constrained by her gender. Khin Myo Chit's involvement with nationalist politics continued during the Second World War and the Japanese occupation of Burma. Her literary career straddled the colonial and postcolonial eras, and after the military coup of 1962, she wrote for the government paper *Working People's Daily*, walking what Sengupta describes as a "tightrope" in the face of enhanced government press scrutiny. Khin Myo Chit deployed wit and irony to indirectly express her criticism of an increasingly repressive government regime. When her association with *Working People's Daily* ended in 1968, she continued to write, exploring Burmese history and culture in fiction and non-fiction. She was particularly interested in the role of women in society: she translated a selection of English-language essays on the subject that would be published posthumously in 2006. Khin Myo Chit advocated for democracy in the revolution of 1988, and in the last decade of her life her path intersected with Aung San Suu Kyi, whom she hosted after her first release from house arrest.

Born in the same year as Khin Myo Chit, Ludu Daw Amar also attended Rangoon University, and joined the nationalist movement. Her husband, U Hlaw, founded the *Ludu Paper* in 1946 to represent the viewpoint of the unified voice of the Burmese nationalist movement—the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League. The paper survived the fracturing of the AFPFL, and would remain an independent, critical voice in the political tumult that succeeded independence. When her husband was imprisoned for sedition in 1953, Ludu Daw Amar kept the paper going, writing the editorials. She succeeded in keeping the paper alive until 1967, upon which time she was forced to write increasingly apolitical pieces in the face of government surveillance. Like Khin Myo Chit, Ludu Daw Amar addressed issues of gender in her later writings, grappling with the changes that

modernity was bringing to norms of feminine behavior in Myanmar. In 1988 she once again turned to political writing, founding the short-lived *8888 Paper*, to serve as the voice of the revitalized Burmese nationalist movement.

There is a generational gap between Khin Myo Chit and Ludu Daw Amar and the next subject of Sengupta's book, Ma Thida, who was born in 1966 after the military coup. From a family of mixed Chinese, Burman or Bamar, Mon, and Shan descent, Sengupta describes Ma Thida's life as being "a series of conscious and subliminal attempts at finding her true self" (p. 162). The sense of alienation that Ma Thida felt growing up "trapped in surroundings which induced ethical compromise" found at first oblique expression in her short fiction (p. 177), and direct expression in her political activism. Ma Thida participated in demonstrations for the democracy movement in 1988, and campaigned with Aung San Suu Kyi in the fall of that year. She was imprisoned for her political activism in 1993, and not released until 1999. She continues to work actively for democracy in Myanmar.

The last chapter of Sengupta's book is devoted to Aung San Suu Kyi. Sengupta frames the chapter by discussing Aung San Suu Kyi's controversial 2013 decision to support the Letpadaung copper mine, and uses it as the starting point for a portraying her as a pragmatic leader in many different ways. In this section, Sengupta interweaves the development of Aung San Suu Kyi's political thought, analyzing the importance of her connection to her father Aung San, with a biographical narrative. Sengupta is particularly interested in the parallels and connections between the political philosophies of Aung San Suu Kyi and Gandhi. As with each of the other women she writes about, Sengupta analyzes the significance of gender in delineating the territory of Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership. The opposition portrayed her as "a sort of new-age Supaya-Lat" (p. 323), while, Sengupta writes Aung San Suu Kyi's image is also "tethered to one of the most powerful female stereotypes of Burmese cultural tradition—*amay* or mother" (p. 324).

Sengupta's blend of literary, biographical, and political analysis is often fascinating, and the research that supports her analysis is thorough. If this book has a weakness, it is in the organization, which is not always clear. In the first chapter for example, Sengupta narrates Khin Myo Chit's youth in the 1920s and entrance into nationalist politics in the 1930s, setting her involvement in historical context. She brings the narrative up to the Second World War, and the abruptly returns to the 1920s in the next section, to discuss Gandhi's influence on Burmese politics. Overall, however, this is a minor flaw, and this book is a significant scholarly achievement that will be of interest to scholars of Myanmar and of gender in twentieth century Southeast Asia.

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