



## Female Voices of Mynammar

**Dr Shehjad Sidiquii Mohd Vikaroddin**

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English,  
NKSPT's ASC College, Badnapur  
District Jalna (Maharashtra)

### Abstract

Myanmar has undergone a political upheaval since colonial times. The country suffers in every aspects of life due to the political situation. Religious teachings, social and cultural traditions prolong these difficulties. Therefore words such as authority, power and submission have gained important in Myanmar. Those in power employ these to reinforce their rule and control people. In this context, a question that arises is what is the role of Christianity in Myanmar? Therefore the specific question for Christianity is to address how the teachings of the New Testament contribute or hinder the pursuit of freedom by the powerless and how we apply the concepts of authority, power and submission focused in some New Testament letters.

### Introduction

This work looks at some New Testament texts which demand the authority, power and submission in people's social, political and religious life. The postcolonial feminist uses imperial studies, decolonising, depatriarchalising, decoding, and de-moding as tools to analyse how these texts came into being with the influences of Greco-Roman patriarchal, colonial and imperial systems. It also looks at how these texts were exegeted by mainstream scholarship, missionaries, Asian liberation theologians and Feminists and specifically by Myanmar Christians. This is in order to scrutinise if these interpretations reinforce or resist the authority and power. The postcolonial feminist resistant reading examines the texts from a Myanmar Buddhist context. It challenges all the colonial/imperial and patriarchal mentalities not only in the texts but also in parallel Buddhist teachings and Myanmar cultural traditions and tries to find out the unheard voices and hidden resistant materials respectively. This reading focuses on balancing power and submission. This work is a weapon to challenge the power, a voice to represent and a remedy for empowering 'the others' or the marginalised.



## **Historical Background**

Authority and submission are key themes in human history. This is obviously the case in traditional narratives of kings and battles, but equally true in Marxist analyses of the 'class struggle'. It persists even if in more subtle ways, in more recent forms of socio-cultural history. However, improper authority and the imposition of power over the powerless are problematic. Myanmar,<sup>2</sup> a Theravada<sup>3</sup> Buddhist country is a society where authority and power was unjustly enforced throughout its pre-colonial, colonial and neo-imperial periods in the political, social and religious lives of the people. In the political sphere, the concepts of authority and submission form the basis of relations between rulers and the ruled. In the social sphere, this dynamic operates between the male and the female, parents and children, masters and slaves; and in the religious sphere, it is present in the status of the monks and the church leaders over their congregations. The authority of one sphere is inter-related with that of another: for example, religious leaders in Myanmar directly or indirectly interfere in political affairs and political leaders in religious groups. The monarchy, colonial, and military systems of regime impact on people's social and religious lives in many ways. These abusive systems have left the country in a chaotic situation and created one of the poorest countries in the world.

## **Brief Political History of Myanmar**

A complete and definitive history of Myanmar, even it were possible, would be out of place here. However, it may be helpful to present an historical outline to which appropriate references can be made. What is offered here is a consensus history in the sense that it does not aim to advance theories which would be radically challenged by experts in the field. However, it is also a personal history in the sense that it addresses issues of particular relevance to the main arguments of this thesis.

## **Pre-colonial Era**

Myanmar is populated by many ethnic groups with the Barmars being the majority. This plurality of inhabitants makes the country an exciting mosaic but has also made its history complex and full of conflicts. Not much is known of this early history. However, by the beginning of the Common Era, the Mons were established in central Myanmar and then began moving down into their present locations in the Irrawaddy Delta and Tennesarim coastal areas. Another early group, the Pyus (100BC to 840AD), had principal cities at



Thayetittaya, Bekthano and Prome. The Burmese migrated into the country in the 9th century and overwhelmed the Pyus.

The Karens, Kachins, Shans, Chins and other ethnic groups migrated into the country over a number of different periods. The Karens, found in Tennesarim and along the Thai- Myanmar border, claim to be the earliest inhabitants. Martin Smith divides these ethnic peoples into two main groups; the first group, made up of Bamar, Shan, Rakhine and Mon located in the valleys and practising wet rice cultivation, were literate and practiced Theravada Buddhism; and the rest, being mountain-dwellers, practised 'slash-and-burn' agricultural methods, were non-literate with oral traditions. They worshipped ancestral spirits and the spirits of nature.

In this early period, city states, such as Wethali of the Arakan (now called Rakhine), Pegu and Thaton of the Mons, and Beikthano, Sriksetra and Hanlin of the Pyus, existed. In the Shan plateau, Shan chieftains were beginning to mark out their territories, whereas the many ethnic hill tribes were led by their village head men. The early Myanmar history can be divided into three periods: The Pagan period, the Toungoo dynasty and Konbaung dynasty.

### **The Colonial Era**

Myanmar was ruled as part of British India until separation in 1937. The British moved the capital to Yangon to make it more accessible to trade and commerce. They administered the country as two separate territories: 'Ministerial Burma,' where Burmese dominated in a form of parliamentary home rule, and the 'Frontier Areas,' where the ethnic minorities mostly lived controlled by traditional headmen and chiefs. This 'divide and rule' policy of the British extended to recruitment into the army where the minorities were favoured, these races being classed 'the martial races.' Religiously, the country was also divided into Christianity and Buddhism. U Ba Swe (a government minister in the 1950s) recounts that, "[i]n order to separate them culturally from the Burmese, they converted the Karens to their religion and also created a separate literature and privileges for them."

The Burmese's antipathy was expressed in the revolts of student strikes and political participation in government to agitate for reforms, including separation from India and later for independence. Student leaders, such as Aung San, organised student groups to call for independence. Finally Myanmar became independent on 4 January 1948.



## **Post-Colonial Era**

### **The Parliamentary Period**

By the constitution of 1947 Myanmar was formed as a quasi-federal Union made up of Arakan, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin and Kayah States with Chin Special Division. However, armed insurrection soon broke out which threatened the government. The government response was a strengthening of the Army which was assisted by western governments who were concerned about the spread of Communism in Asia.<sup>8</sup> In 1958, there was a split in the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) which led to the army's intervention and the imposition of a caretaker government for eighteen months. General Ne Win's government tightened administrative discipline to promote modernisation and curb separatist tendencies. In 1960, U Nu came back to power. His promotion of Buddhism as the state religion and his sympathies for ethnic minority rights led to the army coup of 2 March 1962 (under General Ne Win) which has led to 48 years of military government.

### **Military Rule**

Since 1962, the military has introduced three significant systems such as the Revolutionary Council, Burma Socialist Programme Party Government,<sup>10</sup> the State Law and Order Restoration Committee, and the State Peace and Development Committee for the good of the nation. Thus he had justification for violating the Buddhist doctrine about the evil of wars and killing. Through the system of yazawut (criminal law), crimes of theft, arson, murder and rebellion were judged and law and order maintained. As dhammarajah he also had the power to cleanse or crush the sangha, if they did not live according to vinaya. These are the rules of conduct for monks which included the prohibition against any form of participation in state and political affairs.<sup>15</sup> As dhammarajah he was the law's protector and had the unquestionable power. This was tested by the beginning of his rule and was the reason that it was necessary to eliminate all likely princely rivals (as King Thibaw did on his ascension to the throne). If the king himself was eliminated instead, it was thought that his karma was not strong enough to ensure his continued reign.

Fourth, as cakkavatti (universal monarch or world conqueror), the king claimed to be the supreme ruler and all humans were to obey him. The king's throne was regarded as the centre of the universe from which all power and authority flowed by which to control the world through establishing a patron-client relationship with a vow of allegiance (or



thitsa soh). As long as these kingdoms paid yearly tribute, and were faithful and loyal, the king allowed them to function and govern their territories without much interference. But if there were any sign of discontent or rebellion, the king would not hesitate to use his army against these kings.

### **British Colonial Authority**

The British ruled Myanmar as part of their imperial Indian Empire: a distant white queen (and then later white king) ruled through authorities such as the Indian junior staff and British District Commissioners and officials. With the exception of territorial areas like the Shan States, Karenni (Kayah) state and the hill regions, a new administrative pattern totally replaced the old lines of authority. For internal security, Indian soldiers were deployed alongside British officers. Later, these armed forces would recruit more ethnic nationalities other than the Barmars, leading to accusations of ‘divide and rule’ by the people.

In spite of these forces to control the populace, there were riots, disturbances, labour uprisings and student strikes at least once a year. During the peasant revolt of Saya San (1930 – 1932), not only these forces, but army troops from India were brought in to ruthlessly crush the mainly unarmed peasants. Karen battalions were also raised to fight against the Burmese ‘rebels’ in the delta areas. It was a great show of strength and demonstration of power. The Burmese would learn well from their British ‘masters’ and later use these same tactics on their own people.

The British colonial authorities felt that they had done their duty to the people by introducing western-style education. In pre-colonial times, the only form of education was monastic and this was based on the Buddhist scriptures and the teaching of morals and ethical living. In contrast, the British educational system was secular and its aim was to produce clerks and officials for the colonial administrative machine. The Burmese called it ‘slave education’ because it taught dependency and submission. F.S.V. Donnison, Chief Secretary of the Colonial government, noted that the education provided by the government “was an alien affair imposed from above, not an indigenous growth developed to meet modern needs.”



## **REFERENCES :**

- Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process. Women, Peace and Security Policymaking in Myanmar, Context Analysis and Recommendations. Yangon: AGIPP, 2015
- Gender Equality Network. Myanmar Laws and CEDAW: The Case for Anti-violence Against Women Laws. Yangon: GEN, 2013
- Than, T. Women in Modern Burma. New York: Routledge, 2014
- Sengupta, N. The Female Voice of Myanmar: From Khin Myo Chit to Aung San Suu Kyi. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015.