CHAPTER 1

The Life and Writings of a Patriotic Feminist: Independent Daw San of Burma

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Introduction

Throughout Southeast Asia, the 1920s and 1930s witnessed a marked intensification in reformist, anti-colonial and nationalist activities. In Burmese history this period of late colonialism marks a watershed, when disparate political developments — party politics, university boycotts, labour strikes and nonviolent protests — emerged to signify a new kind of nain ngan yay (politics) and the birth of the wunthanu (protector of national interests) movement. In 1920, a faction led by young members of the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA), the most famous and influential lay Buddhist organisation in colonial Burma, formed the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), the first organisation with explicitly political goals that focused on securing representative political rights. Within a few years, the GCBA had 12,000 branches throughout Burma. Buddhist monks also involved themselves in political activity and played a key role in the formation of wunthanu athin or village-level “patriotic associations” that advocated non-cooperation with the British government in various forms, such as refusal to pay taxes, defiance of orders of the village headmen, boycott of foreign goods, and use of indigenous goods. Despite government attempts to suppress the activities of political monks throughout the 1920s, wunthanu athin developed into influential political institutions in the countryside, as demonstrated by
the central role they played in the Saya San Rebellion of 1930–32, the largest peasant uprising in Burmese history. The Dobama Asiayone (Our Burma/Burmese Association), modelled after the Sinn Féin Party in Ireland. The Dobama Asiayone was known popularly as the Thakin Party, and members titled themselves thakin (master) as a symbol of the idea that the Burmese people, not the British, were the rightful masters of Burma and as an expression of their goal to transform Burma into a classless society of only masters. Dobama Asiayone served as the umbrella organisation that linked the rapidly expanding number of nationalist youth groups in urban and rural Burma.

The 1920s and 1930s also saw growing participation of Burmese women, for the first time, in organised politics, university boycotts, labour strikes and anti-colonial protests. Yet, the nationalist meta-narrative in Burma, written by and about leading nationalists (all men) who became elite political figures in independent Burma, has either ignored this or relegated the historical past of women to a footnote. While some accounts mention the participation of women in nationalist movements, they merely “insert” women into the national epic for the purpose of glorifying the anti-colonial struggle led by the Burma Independence Army, the predecessor of the current military regime. Such narrow analyses offer little, if any, insight into how women themselves experienced, perceived and shaped the political landscape of colonial Burma.
This chapter begins to fill this gap in the historiography of colonial Burma by examining the relationship of one particular woman, Independent Daw San (1887–1950), to the Burmese nationalist movement. The founder and editor of the popular weekly newspaper *Independent Weekly*, published during the 1920s and 1930s, Daw San was a prolific writer known for political and social commentary. She was also a leading member of the Burmese Women’s Association, an elite women’s organisation established to reinforce the activities of the GCBA as well as to protect and advance the intellectual and spiritual growth and well-being of Burmese women. Through an analysis of her writings and her involvement in the Burmese nationalist and women’s movements, I explore how she viewed, experienced, and articulated the complex relationship between feminism and nationalism. The mounting nationalist efforts in the 1920s urged the participation of women in the anti-colonial movement, albeit in supporting roles. Women’s associations were not autonomous but were subsidiary branches of the main political organisations under male leadership. Yet, the subsidiary position of a women’s group in a male-dominated nationalist movement should not lead us to underestimate the feminist content of the women’s movement. In her examination of the relationship between nationalism and female subjectivities in early 20th-century China, Joan Judge has shown that the conjoined nature of “the national question” and “the woman question” “enabled women to reposition themselves (or to be repositioned) in pre-existing webs of cultural relations”, even as this existing cultural matrix informed national feminine identities that were subsequently fashioned. For Daw San, also, the project of “protecting the interests of the nation” was inextricably intertwined with the “woman question”: her emancipation from subordination within the patriarchal structure of family and society. The inseparability of the *wunthanu* and women’s movements necessitated and facilitated her role simultaneously as a nationalist and a feminist.

**Early Childhood and Education**

“Daw San” was the pen name of Ma San Youn, who was born in February 1887 in Mandalay, just two years after the third and final Anglo-Burmese War (1885) ended with the defeat of the last Burmese dynasty (Konbaung dynasty, 1752–1885), the exile of the last Burmese
Map 1. Burma
monarch and his immediate family to the western coast of India, the
desertion and desecration of the royal palace in Mandalay, and the
beginning of British colonial rule over Burma.¹¹ (See map 1 for places
mentioned in this chapter and in chapter 10.) The oldest of five chil-
dren, Ma San Youn was born into a well-to-do family that specialised
in the craft of shwe chi hto or gold thread embroidery: tapestry fea-
turing gold, silver and coloured threads; sequins; semi-precious gems;
and colourful cut glass. For generations, the family had produced
intricate embroidered works including clothing and regalia for mem-
ers of the royal family, ministers and high-ranking officials. Daw
San’s mother, Daw Shu, grew up socialising with the children of the
chief queen, which contributed significantly to her knowledge and
appreciation of Burmese and Buddhist literature. Wanting to raise her
children to be similarly learned, Daw Shu instructed them extensively
in grammar, traditional Burmese metaphysics, history, poetry and
Buddhist scriptures since their early childhood. Daw Shu probably
saw this Burmese Buddhist education as a necessary supplement and
corrective to the formal education her children were receiving under
the British.

Over the course of the 19th century, Buddhist monastic schools
gradually lost their prerogative as the chief providers of education;
privately and governmentally supported lay and mission schools that
offered a vernacular, Anglo-vernacular and English co-educational
system of public instruction increased in number.¹² With the support
of grants-in-aid administered by the colonial administration, Christian
missionaries made headway especially in the area of female education,
which Buddhist monastic schools in Burma did not provide.¹³ As a
result, an unprecedented number of women gained access to educa-
tion, leading to a rise in female employment. Women employed in
the professions of public administration, law, medicine, education and
journalism increased by 33 per cent (from 17,760 to 23,588) during the
1920s, with a notable 96 per cent increase (from 3,332 to 6,540) in the
field of medicine and 64 per cent increase (from 2,955 to 4,857) in the
field of education.¹⁴

Ma San Youn belonged to this rapidly expanding generation of
educated women. She was enrolled in a vernacular school; and in
1900, the year her father — U Pein — passed away from illness, she
completed the seventh grade with honours. She was 15 years of age
when she received a state scholar prize to attend the Morlan Lane
Normal School in Moulmein and began her training to be a teacher at the Christian school. Upon passing the teachers’ exam, she was assigned to a Normal school in Toungoo to be a teacher of Burmese bādā (language and literature), a subject in which she excelled.

**Becoming “Daw San”**

Ma San Youn’s life in Toungoo had a promising start. Though she received a meagre salary, teaching was clearly her passion and a source of joy. When she was approximately 20 years old, and after teaching at the primary level for three years, she was promoted to teach in the secondary grades. Ma San Youn met and married U Kywet, a fellow secondary grade teacher. By all accounts, the marriage was a happy one and the couple had one daughter and three sons. But the happy marriage was tragically cut short. After the last child was born, U Kywet was transferred to administer a school in Singu. Not long after his move, he contracted malaria and passed away at the young age of 26. Ma San Youn’s grief over the loss of her husband was soon compounded by the death of her two younger sons barely a year after she was widowed. While mourning the death of her loved ones, Ma San Youn sought solace in writing, which led to her first major publication, *Khin Aye Kyi*.

The story, which was published in 1918 in *Thuriya Magazine* as the winner of the monthly’s short fiction competition, is titled after its Buddhist heroine. In this semi-autobiographical story, Khin Aye Kyi is born to a wealthy Buddhist couple in Moulmein. When Khin Aye Kyi comes of age, the couple reluctantly enrol her in an American Baptist mission school, fearful on the one hand that their daughter will be converted to Christianity, but anxious on the other that she obtain an education. Fortunately, due to her Buddhist upraising by her devout parents, the girl is not swayed by the proselytising efforts of her missionary teachers. As in the case of Ma San Youn, Khin Aye Kyi completes the seventh grade shortly after her father, U Ee, passes away and goes on to attend a teachers’ training school where she specialises in Burmese bādā. She grows into a beautiful woman and a learned teacher single-mindedly committed to the teaching of bādā, the propagation of sāsana (teachings of the Buddha), and the education of women. She remains utterly uninterested in love and marriage, until one day she narrowly escapes abduction by a lecherous man named Maung Pe Nyun thanks to her friend Maung Thein Pe, who
has been courting Khin Aye Kyi unsuccessfully. The story concludes with Khin Aye Kyi’s happy marriage to Maung Thein Pe, her saviour, with the blessings of her mother, Daw Kyi.15

This story, published under the pseudonym Buddha bādā myanmar ma (a Buddhist Burmese woman), encapsulates what turned out to be an important and lifelong cause for Ma San Youn: feminist nationalism. The story is about a “protectress of national interests” who believes that all Burmese people should respect and honour their bādā and sāsana as she does. It is no coincidence that at about this
time, organised politics in Burma and the wunthanu movement were beginning to take shape, as in colonial Lanka, in the form of Buddhist revivalist movements and the related campaign for Buddhist education.\textsuperscript{16} Just one year before the publication of Khin Aye Kyi, the YMBA passed resolutions of a political and anti-colonial nature that included, most famously, a strong protest against Europeans’ wearing shoes in pagoda precincts, contrary to Burmese custom.\textsuperscript{17} And only a few years thereafter, the GCBA and its affiliated women’s organisations urged women in Burma to defend the sāsana by abstaining from marrying non-Buddhist men. The wunthanu movement in Burma was formulated from the beginning for the protection and revival of Buddhism.

\textit{Bādā} also served as a rallying point for the “national education movement”—an outcome of the 1920 student strike at Rangoon University—to establish “national schools” as alternative and independent educational institutions where “love of country and love of nation are no less assiduously cultivated and nurtured” through “the invaluable services of Burmese literature and Burmese history”.\textsuperscript{18} As the motto of the Dobama Asiayone shows, bādā continued to be a pillar of the wunthanu movement in the 1930s:

\begin{itemize}
\item Burma Is Our Country
\item Burmese Is Our Literature
\item Burmese Is Our Language
\item Love Our Country
\item Cherish Our Literature
\item Uphold Our Language\textsuperscript{19}
\end{itemize}

Khin Aye Kyi was an early—perhaps the earliest—feminine model of wunthanu and dobama. It was not until the 1930s that the thakin articulated a coherent notion of the dobama; nor did discussions of the myo chit may (female patriot) become popular in the Burmese media until the late 1920s. Long before such feminine representations of patriotism emerged, Ma San Youn fashioned a “Buddhist Burmese woman” who cherished and loved the language, literature and religion of the Burmese people.

It is worth stressing that in Khin Aye Kyi, Ma San Youn goes to great lengths to emphasise the necessary relationship between “the national” and “the woman’s” question. Accordingly, Khin Aye Kyi proposes: “if women could contribute alongside men, but in their own and separate way, ideas, suggestions, and plans on how to make the
"a myo (nation), bādā and sāsana prosper, then I don't think Burmese men would be oppressed and subjugated by the British." The importance of female education to the nationalist struggle of colonial Burma was repeated again through Khin Aye Kyi's father, U Ee, during a conversation with his wife about whether or not to enrol Khin Aye Kyi in the American Baptist mission school: "It's because young women have little education that we Burmese people find ourselves under colonial rule. Future generations of Burmese will be able to better govern society and the country if young girls like Khin Aye Kyi are given an education. You know very well why women are so important right now." Ma San Youn offered the colonial experience of humiliation and subjugation as a painful but edifying lesson in the indispensability of female education, framing the issue of female education in nationalist discourse. In this instance, the experience of colonisation was perceived to "enable women to doubt the hegemonic patriarchal discourse of their own society" and "lead to a desire to develop new possibilities".

To the extent that the "conditions of women" had become the scale for measuring the readiness of a country for national self-determination, the gender disparity in literacy and education represented a national problem. Yet, to argue in 1918 that women needed to not only get educated but also educate others for the sake of the a myo was to take a radical stance. Here, the descriptive "a Buddhist Burmese woman" that Ma San Youn used to publish Khin Aye Kyi is instructive. Was the self-identification as "a Buddhist Burmese woman" a strategy to deflect criticism of the story — specifically, its determined promotion of the intellectual and vocational aspirations of young Burmese women — as the work of a Westernised woman who had been indoctrinated by a Christian and colonial modern education? Ma San Youn must have anticipated that her support for female education might be construed as support for the Christian missionary and/or the colonial project. In all likelihood, she positioned herself as Buddhist and Burmese to contend with the question of whether she would be rendered a collaborator with the colonial project. The consequence of this strategy, however, was the conjuring up of a limited community of "Buddhist Burmese" compatriots, which rendered the identification by minority groups, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, problematic.

Khin Aye Kyi was nothing short of groundbreaking. The acclaimed "patriot-writer" Saya Lun (1876–1964), for instance, wrote a lay gyo
(four-stanza poem) praising Ma San Youn as a rare literary genius who surpassed some of the most celebrated women court poets from the Toungoo and Konbaung periods. Such recognition by a man described as “the single most revered literary figure in modern Burma” no doubt boosted Ma San Youn’s reputation as a woman of letters. Ma San Youn soon found herself writing short stories and essays regularly for Thuriya Magazine under the name “Daw San.”

From Daw San to Independent Daw San

Daw San’s entry into Burmese literary circles resulted in her second marriage — to a fellow widower, U Ba Than, then an editor for Thuriya Magazine. In 1922, Daw San resigned from her teaching position in Toungoo and joined U Ba Than in Rangoon (Yangon). Her decision to resign, remarry and relocate may have been facilitated by the fact that at around this time, the British administration issued a decree that all schoolteachers must apply for permission from the commissioner of education to write in newspapers and magazines. She chose to resign and to start a new life in Rangoon.

Her second marriage lasted only a few years, due apparently to U Ba Than’s alcohol addiction, and Daw San made yet another attempt at a fresh start. In 1925 she divorced U Ba Than, moved with her children to a new home, and set up her own paper, tellingly named Independent Weekly. Daw San explains that the name of the paper, which was inspired by the Irish nationalist paper the Irish Independent, signified her desire for Burma’s freedom but also her “determination to never return to the shackled life of a salaried worker or a married woman.” This rejection of colonisation, wage labour and matrimony as analogous forms of subjugation and exploitation presented a radical critique of marriage — which functioned in this context as a metaphor for gender norms and relations — at a time when the family and the home were still very much defined and naturalised as the primary responsibilities of a woman. Independent Weekly symbolised Daw San’s conjoined nationalist and feminist aspirations. Mirroring her endeavour to be independent, Daw San single-handedly ran the paper, not only authoring the editorials, headline news and all of its various columns, such as “Kwa Si e mhattan” (Mr Kwa Si’s Journal), “Ma Shwe e diary” (Miss Parrot’s Diary) and the ladies’ column “Yuwadi kye hmoun” (Young Ladies’ Mirror), but also managing the day-to-day operations of the press.
At about this time, Daw San also emerged as a leader of the first women’s organisation in Burma, the Burmese Women’s Association (BWA), established in 1919. The BWA played a supporting role to the anti-colonial struggle of the GCBA. Critical of the British government’s economic policy for undermining local industries and impoverishing the Burmese common folk, the GCBA advocated the use of local goods, the boycott of imported products, and the picketing of stores that sold imported items. Accordingly, the BWA condemned the use of imported goods and promoted wearing blouses made of pinni (light brown, homespun cotton) and longyi with local yaw designs originating in the western hill tracts of Burma.

In addition to discouraging Burmese women from marrying men of religious faiths other than Buddhism in the name of sāsana, the group campaigned assiduously for legislative reforms to ensure that a Burmese woman who married a non-Buddhist did not lose her Buddhist spousal rights. Though the Special Marriage Act of 1872 provided the forms and procedures for Buddhists and non-Buddhists to contract valid marriages, women of such marriages were not protected under Burmese Buddhist law. As a result of the persistent lobbying by the BWA, the colonial government drafted the Buddhist Marriage and Divorce Bill in 1927; and the BWA continued to push for the bill until it finally went into effect in 1939. The BWA was thus a protector not only of Buddhism but also of Burmese tradition. To signify their role as bearers and wearers of tradition, members of the BWA, including Daw San, wore scarves woven with a design of a peacock, the symbol of the last Burmese dynasty, on top of pinni and yaw longyi.

The association was also an advocate of female education, believing that “women’s rights” had less to do with suffrage and more to do with education. In support of its educational mission the BWA had opened a library — one of the few in the country — for its members immediately upon its inception. Aware of the reluctance of Burmese parents to send their adolescent daughters to school unaccompanied, the association advocated successfully for women-only sections in city trams for the transportation of female students to school. Daw San and other members of the BWA chaperoned young women to and from school in their endeavour to reassure wary parents and encourage them to allow their daughters to pursue higher education.
That the feminist struggle was no less pressing than that of *wunthanu* for Daw San is also clear from a 1927 demonstration in support of women’s rights to vote and to stand for parliamentary elections that she led with Daw Mya Sein (1904–88), another prominent member of the BWA. On the morning of 3 February 1927, Daw San and Daw Mya Sein led a demonstration by more than 100 women on the premises of the Rangoon Municipal Hall and the legislative council to show support for a proposal — scheduled to be debated in the council the same morning — to abolish “the sex-disqualification clause” that prohibited women from running for parliamentary posts. The demonstrators shouted out the following chant:

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Burmese women, don’t be afraid
Wait and see what will become of the act
Banning us women from ministerial positions
Burmese women, be watchful and active
In Britain, women have attained seats in the parliament.
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This endeavour to engender legislative reforms might be attributed to similar initiatives of Burmese male politicians to establish a firm footing in electoral politics and to obtain greater Burmese representation in the legislative council. According to Daw Mya Sein, the women demonstrators were well aware that any attempt by Burmese women to be elected to the council would be construed as nationalist, but she stressed that the demonstrators objected to the sex-disqualification clause primarily as feminists. As the protesters’ chant suggests, what prompted the demonstration were the concurrent struggles in England and India by women to remove sex disqualification on voting and to attain posts in supreme legislative bodies. The demonstrators strove in unison with international feminist associations such as the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship and the British Commonwealth League, which urged the British government “on behalf of the women of the Empire” to grant Burmese women the right to run in elections for the legislative council.

The connection between these early women’s movements in Burma and similarly urban, elite and middle-class international feminist movements is not surprising given that the 1920s and 1930s represented “the high tide of internationalism” for the women’s movement. In fact, the 1927 demonstration was featured in *Stri Dharma* (Woman’s Duty), a well-known women-run journal in India.
that had emerged in the 1920s and 1930s as "an international feminist news medium targeted at Anglo-Indian, Indian, and British women readers".35 And, according to Daw Mya Sein, the 1927 demonstration had been sponsored by the National Council of Women in Burma (NCWB),36 which had a mixed membership of British, Indian, Anglo-Indian, Anglo-Burmese and Burmese women, of which Daw San was also a member. Established in 1926 and led by mostly British women, the NCWB was an affiliate of the National Council of Women in India and a local branch of the International Council of Women, which claimed to represent 36 million women by 1925.37 What little documentation exists on the NCWB indicates that it was concerned with improving the lives of women and child labourers in Burma in 1929, well before thakin and other politicians turned their attention to the plight of the working class.38

Subsequently, in 1931, Daw San along with other Burmese members of the NCWB formed the Myanmar Amyothami National Council (Burmese Women’s National Council), described by some scholars as a splinter organisation established by those who had “come to feel that the NCWB was too international in outlook, and did not adequately address the nationalist aspirations of its Burmese members”.39 Again, little is known about the goals and activities of the Myanmar Amyothami National Council apart from the fact that it contested writings on Burmese women in foreign newspapers that the council deemed harmful to Burmese women.40 According to Ba Khaing, the author of one of the earliest Burmese-language books to chronicle the history of nationalist movements in Burma, the members of the group were “wives of government officers or wealthy men”, “out of touch with the ordinary women”, who refrained from political activities because they “could not afford to oppose the government”.41

Many aspects of Daw San’s involvement in local and translocal women’s movements would suggest that she was a conservative and elitist feminist. As the examples discussed above illustrate, Daw San’s role and authority as a pioneering leader of women’s movements seems to have rested on the suffering and then salvation of exploited and “helpless” women, not unlike British imperialist-feminists and Indian nationalist-feminists who endeavoured to rescue their powerless — and mostly non-Western — sisters who suffered from various forms of “enslavement” such as lack of education, employment in prostitution, polygamy, and child marriage.42 Yet, her writings in Independently Weekly, which she continued to use throughout the 1930s as a platform for participating
in and supporting anti-colonial and nationalist movements, demonstrate that she was a vociferous critic of both the “pro-government” and anti-government political elites in Burma.

The editorial for the 29 June 1935 issue, for instance, discusses the well-known political feud among three prominent members of the legislative council and chastises council members for allowing political infighting to hinder them from fulfilling their duty to safeguard the welfare of their country and to assist the poor and the needy. The column “Mr Kwa Si’s Journal” in the same issue of *Independent Weekly* similarly reinforced Daw San’s critique of the political elites, rebuking Burmese ministerial officials for not giving “a damn about their poverty-stricken country men and women and their hardships. Instead, they are demanding a raise.” Mr Kwa Si compares the Burmese ministers to Mahatma Gandhi, describing the latter as “a true national leader” who does not spend more than 10 pya a day on himself and dedicates himself to the affairs of his country, and concludes: “When people who emulate the likes of Gandhi appear in Burma, only then will our ministers feel ashamed of their own behavior.”

In the editorial of 26 March 1938, devoted to a discussion of the Burma oilfield strike, Daw San again lambasted the ministers for their hypocrisy and lack of patriotism. The oilfield workers’ strike was the pivotal event in the “1300 Revolution”, the final act in the political upheavals in pre-war Burma. It began in January 1938 with a strike by workers from the Burma Oil Company in Chauk who were protesting low wages and other oppressive measures taken by the oil companies. It culminated in a countrywide general strike by the entire workforce in Burma, with 34 concurrent strikes involving an estimated 17,645 workers in foundries; dockyards; public transportation; civil service; and the oil, rice, cotton, match, rope and rubber industries. The editorial sharply criticises the political leadership: “The ministers claim to sympathize with the plight of the oil field workers as they [ministers] take their 15 kyat daily stipend, sit in cool meeting rooms under fans, and accuse the supporters of the strike for embezzling money that they collected on behalf of the poor strikers.”

The articles express Daw San’s frustration with the political elites, a feeling shared by many members of the Burmese public. As Robert Taylor points out, the majority of Burmese peasantry and youth became increasingly disillusioned with and suspicious of the political elites and “did not look to the elected legislators as their leaders,
spokesmen or protectors". The articles also show that far from being absorbed in elite and legislative politics that had little connection with — or significance for — popular nationalist and labour movements, Daw San sought to make the government and the political elites accountable to the masses.

**More Trials and Tribulations**

Daw San worked hard to keep *Independent Weekly* running. Initially, she insisted on managing the paper on her own. Her children recalled that they were basically raised by their maternal aunts while Daw San devoted herself to her paper and political activism. That *Independent Weekly* lasted for over a decade — a remarkable feat considering the speed and frequency with which papers came and went at the time — attests to Daw San’s abilities both as an editor and a writer. Ill fortune struck, however, and her printing press was destroyed in the three-month-long anti-Indian riots of 1938. *Independent Weekly* never recovered.

It was not until after World War II that Daw San resumed writing. *Yuwadi Journal* (Young Women’s Journal), a journal written, edited and managed entirely by women, was founded in 1946 by Dagon Khin Khin Lay (1904–81), a literary prodigy. Daw San was a founding member of the editorial board of *Yuwadi Journal*. She revived the “Kwa Si” column for the journal, except she wrote as Daw Kwa Si or “Auntie Kwa Si” whereas she had previously written as Mr Kwa Si. Her continued dedication to the promotion of female education, authorship and readership is evinced not only by her contributions to *Yuwadi Journal*, but also by her role as the vice-president of the Burmese Women Writers Association, another brainchild of Dagon Khin Khin Lay, established in 1947.

Her writings in *Yuwadi Journal* show that Daw San remained deeply concerned about the fate of her country in the post-war years. She frequently urged the people of Burma to rally behind the cause of nation building and to *ā masho*, or “don’t let up”, so that “it shan’t be long before Burma gains independence”.

Another recurrent theme in the “Auntie Kwa Si” column was that of national unity, the subject of the column published in the 18 May 1947 issue. Daw San begins by referring to the looming partition of India. She explains that Mohammad Ali Jinnah and the Muslim League are talking of creating a Muslim nation called Pakistan because
they cannot agree with the visions and policies of the Indian National Congress, led by Jawaharlal Nehru, adding that “princes and rajas have joined the bandwagon and are asking for their own independent nation called Rajasthan”. Daw San notes that such talks of partition are not taking place in India alone:

In Kwa Si’s Burma as well, the Rakhines are saying that they don’t want to live alongside Burmans and are demanding an Arakanistan. Chins, Kachins, and Shans are already asking for the right to one day secede from an independent Burma and form their own states. And don’t even talk about the Karens. The Karens have already gone to Britain to ask for their own sovereign nation, Karennistan. The kabya (mixed population) too. They cooperated with Burmans for independence, but on the eve of independence, they say they can’t mingle with Burmans, that they will live separately. They have apparently already mapped out their own sovereign territory.55

Ironically, the Panglong Agreement of 1947, which secured, in principle, the allegiance of the leaders of the “hill tribes” and the Shan states to the Union of Burma and the Rangoon-based government led by the predominantly Burman Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL) under the leadership of Aung San, had been reached only a few months prior — in February. Nonetheless, and for reasons discussed in the chapter on the Karen nationalist Zipporah Sein in this volume (chapter 10), there was, on the one hand, enduring mistrust of minority ethnic groups as untrustworthy British collaborators and, on the other, a growing perception that the AFPFL had neither the willingness nor the capability to address the concerns of the ethnic minorities, particularly the Karen Christian community. Concurrently, the rivalry between the Communist and non-Communist leaders of the AFPFL only intensified on the eve of independence. Not surprisingly, Daw San warned that Burma was on the brink of disintegration: “If people here secede and people there secede, leaving Burma a tiny entity, and if that tiny Burma splinters into many separate associations and societies that follow disparate goals and ideologies, then how can Burma have any strength left?” According to her, the solution to political discord was not separation but cooperation; she was evidently reluctant or unable to envision a Burmese nation without the Shans, Karens and other indigenous ethnic groups.56 She reminisced about times past when people in Burma “worked together in unison” to empower the nationalist movement. Having reminded her
readers of the political efficacy of unity and cooperation, she suggested that people in Burma would be better off “splitting the gold instead of the land”.\textsuperscript{57} As it turned out, these were prescient warnings. Barely half a year after independence, the Burmese government was facing armed insurrections by the Communist Party of Burma and Karen separatist groups. (For a more extended discussion of the armed ethnic struggle in Burma, see chapter 10 by Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung and Violet Cho in this volume.) By 1949, more than half of the army had mutinied.

Through the column “Auntie Kwa Si”, Daw San sought to impress upon her readers the exigency of nation-building efforts and to edify the public on how to serve their country and fulfil their patriotic duties. She likewise utilised her weekly talks on Burma Broadcasting Services — which she started in the late 1940s — to expound on urgent political and social issues raised by Burma’s independence. No doubt she would have carried on her lifelong endeavour to advance and “protect the interests of the nation” and her countrymen and women, had she not discovered that she had cancer. She was only 62 years of age when she succumbed to the illness.

\textbf{Reflections on the Life of a Forgotten Heroine}

The prominent writer Daw Khin Myo Chit has argued that it was due to the growth of nationalist movements “that women were encouraged to come out from the narrow precincts of their homes and contribute towards the national cause”.\textsuperscript{58} Nationalists in colonial Burma certainly encouraged Burmese women to contribute actively to public life, and many Burmese women did in fact do so, particularly through their participation in organised politics. Yet the growing visibility of politicised and organised women in colonial Burma must be understood as having been shaped by both \textit{wunthanu} and feminist efforts to mobilise women. There is widespread belief even today that Burma has simply never needed feminism and that “no legislation in modern times has been considered necessary, as customary laws ensure for women a position suitable to present-day concepts of equality”.\textsuperscript{59} As this brief biographical account of Daw San has shown, contrary to such views, some people in Burma perceived the need to mobilise against gender discrimination and took organised action to intervene in the sufferings of Burmese women.

Moreover, there is little evidence to suggest that the \textit{wunthanu} movement itself sought to alter the position of women. Scholarship
on Third World feminism has suggested that nationalism thwarted the feminist aspirations of women's movements in the Third World and that although women's movements in many Asian countries achieved official political and legal equality, they were unable to alter women's subordination within the patriarchal structure of family and society.\(^{60}\) The case of Burma reinforces this argument. Nevertheless, the task of spreading a feminist nationalist programme was paramount to many patriotic women such as Daw San. Members of the early women's associations promoted liberal reforms such as female education and suffrage alongside political tactics that relegated women's activism to morally bound and symbolic critiques of colonialism. Under the nationalist banner, they pursued agendas that benefited Burmese women — especially their less privileged Burmese sisters — and confirmed their feminist identity. Daw San was a patriot and a feminist, jointly and simultaneously, and articulated her critiques of political, social and economic inequities and oppressions from the location of a feminist nationalist.

Despite her stature as one of the pioneering and leading women nationalists and rare women editors, and the staunch political and nationalist stance of her paper, barely a few references are made to Daw San in nationalist histories of Burma; and only a fraction of her voluminous writings has been preserved for posterity. The obvious explanation for this historical amnesia is what Barbara Andaya has described as the “hegemony of the national epic in Southeast Asian historiography”, a phenomenon that has privileged the writing of metanarratives that are centred around the lives of male individuals “to whom evolution or liberation from foreign control is attributed”.\(^{61}\) Historians of Burma have accorded little importance to accounts by or about women, or to women's and gender issues. I also suspect, however, that the reason behind the forgetting of Daw San concerns the fact that she was an unconventional woman who challenged existing gender norms and expectations and flouted in many ways normative notions of femininity. She aspired to be an independent and autonomous woman, to such a degree that she renounced marriage. A single widow and divorcée without a college degree, and yet she dared to publicly criticise the exclusively male political elite.

I have elsewhere critiqued the notion of the “traditional” high status of women in Southeast Asia and the prevalent representations of Burmese women as historically independent and equal to men.\(^{62}\) What claims about the freedom and independence of Burmese women
disregard is that the active role of women as economic agents — the very attribute that gave women their autonomy and power — had paradoxically subordinated them to men socially, spiritually and politically. As in other Buddhist societies in the region, literati and experts on medicine, arithmetic and astrology were traditionally monks or former monks. Administrators and communal authorities were principally men. Female authority and leadership in the sphere of administration and governance were virtually unknown until the late colonial period.

The posthumous treatment of Daw San belies the frequent evocations of the image of the unfettered and independent Burmese woman. It points to the uneasy relationship that women in Burma have had — and continue to have — with authority and autonomy in the religious, political and cultural spheres. In life and afterlife, the patriotic and feminist Daw San sheds light on the difficulties that women have faced in struggling to become producers, arbiters and transmitters of knowledge, and to increase their presence and influence in the political arena.

Notes

1. The YMBA was originally a non-political group established by middle-class, educated Burmese elites to organise conferences on social and religious issues and serve as the nodal point connecting disparate lay organisations in Burma.
4. Dobama Asiayone has also been translated as “We Burman Association”. *Do* means either “our” or “we”, and *bama* can be used as a designation for the Burman ethnic majority. *Bama* also refers, however, to all the people in Burma, irrespective of their ethnicity.

6. The prefixing of the title of newspapers and periodicals to the names of editors and columnists is a practice that remains common to this day. The practice appears to have sprung from the absence of surnames in Burma. In order to distinguish famous or public figures, who often possess matching names, an identifier of some sort is prefixed to their names.


8. Not all women and men involved in women's movements can be considered feminists. In this paper, I use the term “feminist” to refer to Daw San because her political activism was oriented not only towards addressing “the conditions of women” and mobilising “women” as a constituency, but also towards challenging certain systemic gender inequalities in Burma. For a useful discussion of the distinctions between women's and feminist movements, see P. Dufour, D. Masson and D. Caouette, “Introduction”, in Solidarities beyond Borders: Transnationalizing Women's Movements, ed. P. Dufour, D. Masson and D. Caouette (Vancouver and Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 2010), pp. 13–5.


10. There are no surnames in Burma, and therefore Burmese names appear in their full form at every occurrence in the chapter. Where appropriate, honorifics such as Daw and Ma — rough equivalents of “Ms” and honorifics for older and younger women respectively — have been added to names, but these prefixes do not appear in the bibliography.


12. Each type of education was distinguished by the language of instruction and examination.


18. Aye Kyaw, *The Voice of Young Burma* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1993), p. 36. What distinguished the “national schools” from the public schools was not so much the curricula or even the language of instruction (since vernacular schools all taught in Burmese) but the rules regulating student conduct. National school students were allowed to read any newspapers, for example, whereas public school students were not permitted to read any, and they were not required to wear European-type shoes. Instead of observing British Empire Day, the King’s Birthday, and Saturday and Sunday as holidays, national schools designated as holidays the Buddhist pre-Sabbath and Sabbath days and the anniversary of the student boycott day (Aye Kyaw, *The Voice of Young Burma*, 36–7).


20. The term *a myo* actually refers variously to race, kin, breed, lineage, family, rank, caste, kind, sort and species. In colonial Burma, however, *a myo* took on the meaning of “a nation or ethnic group”.


23. She is known to have also written for the political column “Matali and Wee Takyoun Talk Politics” in Pinnya alin (Knowledge Magazine). According to Daw Kyan, Daw San voiced her criticism of the British colonial administration through this political column, for which she drew frequent warnings against sedition from the British administration (Kyan, “Amyothami mya ne sanezin lawka”, pp. 282–93). Unfortunately, I have not come across this column in my examination of Pinnya alin and have been unable to locate any copies of Daw San’s writings for the column.


25. When the BWA was formed in 1919, it was an elite women’s organisation with approximately 300 members, mostly educated women, wives of officials, and prosperous women entrepreneurs. Also in 1919, the Young Women’s Buddhist Association (YWBA) and Wunthanu Konmaryi Athin (Patriotic Women’s Association) were formed as subsidiary branches of the YMBA and wunthau athin.

26. The benefits of the status of a married woman under Burmese Buddhist law included, but were not limited to, an equal share in the property acquired by the couple during the marriage, and joint custody of all the children, whom the husband had to support through their years as minors in the event of divorce (Maung Maung, From Sangha to Laity, pp. 61–72).


29. Ibid., p. 41.

30. The superintendent of a national girls’ high school at the time of the conference, Daw Mya Sein was the daughter of U May Oung, a well-known barrister and Indian Civil Service officer who served as home member on the legislative council, one of the highest government positions open to Burmese people in colonial Burma, from 1924 until his death in 1926. Daw Mya Sein had graduated from secondary school as well as university with distinction, earned a master’s degree from St. Hugh’s College, Oxford University, in 1927 and a diploma in education in 1928, and continued to have a successful career in education.


38. The NCWB investigated the labour conditions of women and children in Rangoon and its vicinity in 1929 and submitted a report to the Royal Commission on Labour in India (National Council of Women in Burma, 1929). This is the only such documentation that I have come across. While the government made an inquiry into the standard of living of the working class in Rangoon at around the same time, the brief paragraph on “employment of women and children” states merely: “there are not many women and children employed in factories in Rangoon” (Government of Burma, Report of an Enquiry into the Standard and Cost of Living of the Working Classes in Rangoon, Rangoon: Labour Statistics Bureau, 1928, p. 89).


45. There are 100 pyas to 1 kyat.
47. The event is named after the Burmese calendar year, which is lunisolar. There have been a number of eras in Burmese chronology, the current era having commenced in 639 CE.
48. Khin Yi, *Dobama Movement in Burma*; Maung Maung, *From Sangha to Laity*, p. 177; Taylor, *State in Myanmar*, pp. 214–5. Women members of the Dobama Asiayone, known as *thakinma*, also joined in the strike, leading the effort to collect donations for striking Burmah Oil Company workers, about 100 to 150 of whom were women. Also among the workers who joined the 1300 Revolution were 200 women from Yaykyaw Ma Sein Nyunt’s cheroot factory and approximately 1,000 more from rope and match factories in Rangoon. For details of the strike, see Burma Socialist Programme Party, *Mran mā nuin ńaṃ anyui: sa mī: myā: e* nuin ńaṃ re: lhup rhā: mhu*, pp. 101–23; Maung Maung *From Sangha to Laity*, pp. 171–94.
51. Daw San later recruited her two sisters to write for the paper.
52. The riots were occasioned by a mass meeting of Burmese Buddhist monks and laymen at the Shwedagon Pagoda on 26 July 1938. The meeting had been organised to protest an anti-Buddhist book first published seven years earlier and republished a few months prior to the riots. Those gathered for the meeting marched to the Soortee Bara Bazaar and, upon arrival there, began throwing stones and attacking Indians. Looting and damaging of Indian mosques, shops and homes spread throughout Burma immediately following the unrest at the bazaar, extending into September 1938 (*Riot Inquiry Committee, Interim Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee*, Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1939).
53. I have not been able to find any information on Daw San’s role in the association.
56. It is unclear, however, to what extent she objected to or, conversely, sympathised with the nationalist and separatist claims of the minority ethnic groups. Likewise, I am unable to determine, from the writings of Daw San that I have come across or discussion with her family and relatives, how precisely she envisioned the position of ethnic minorities in an independent Burma.
63. Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma*.

64. Though village headmanships as well as chieftainships in the Shan hill states have been known to descend in the female line, hereditary lineages of female headmanship were rare. Richard James Carlson, who has examined in some detail the evidence for female hereditary lineage in his dissertation on women, gender and nationalist politics in Burma, concludes that by the 18th century at least “such lines were, with one recorded exception, non-existent above the village level and outside of the Pagan area” (Carlson, “Women, Gender, and Politics”, p. 15).