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Romancing Human Rights: Gender, Intimacy, and Power Between Burma and the West

This essay compares the politics of intimate labor and gendered violence in literary testimonies by Burmese women. Although valuable work is being done to document the ravages of human trafficking and military conflict in contemporary Myanmar, my project uses the analytic of intimate labor to examine issues of power in gendered and racialized discourse and representation. Comparing two works of literature written by women of Burmese descent, I offer perspectives on gendered subjectivity, human rights, and transnational ethical engagement from a Southeast Asian feminist perspective.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European travel accounts marveled at Burmese women's unconventional social autonomy, economic power, and visible participation in Burmese intellectual and public culture. By the late twentieth century, however, representations of Burma and Burmese women had virtually disappeared from the Western imagination, with the exceptions of Aung San Suu Kyi and horrific accounts of human rights abuses. What happened to Burmese women? How were they transformed from legendary figures of liberation to silent images of victimhood? This "absence" is easily attributed to the xenophobic isolationism cultivated by Burma's succession of postcolonial military governments since 1952. Yet I argue that a myopic focus on the masculinist violence of Burma's postcolonial military regimes misses the ways in which colonial legacies, Orientalism, and human rights discourses buttress the project of U.S. empire, the erasure of Burma in general, and the displacement of Burmese women specifically. Using the analytic of intimate labor, my comparative analysis endeavors to expand the field of vision to better conceptualize a feminist theory of ethical transnational engagement. By attending to how Burmese women negotiate uneven transnational power and testify to the limits of discourse and articulation, we can perhaps better see, to borrow the words of Leigh Gilmore, "that which is always on the verge of disappearing: the human subject of historical and intimate trauma" (116).

Ma Ma Lay's Not Out of Hate (first published in 1955) and Wendy Law-Yone's Irrawaddy Tango (1993) offer two literary representations of intimate labor, sexualized violence, and displacement. These novels situate sexualized and gendered conflicts being played out in intimate dyads of Burmese women and Burmese men, and Burmese women and Western(ized) men. These intimate relationships, which involve domestic labor, care work, sexualized labor, and representational work, illuminate the ongoing tension between the knowledge regimes of the West – British in Ma Ma Lay and American in Law-Yone – and the peoples and traditions of Burma. Ma Ma Lay and Law-Yone map military, geopolitical, and economic conflicts as being acutely and intimately played out upon the gendered bodies and voices of Burmese women. Though writing about different historical moments and zones of transnational conflict, Burmese writer Ma Ma Lay and Burmese American writer Wendy Law-Yone share the technique of braiding together Buddhism and writing to suggest a "flexible" practice of resistance – a situated, mobile response not tied to any set location per se, but available to any practitioner who seeks an escape from structures of confinement and subordination. In the literature and self-narration of

Burmese women, Buddhism becomes cultural paradigm and counter-hegemonic rhetorical structure that provides a space for women to reflect on institutions of power, to critique master narratives of Western supremacy and patriarchy, and to suggest a contingent, open-ended relationality. By mapping intimate and discursive relations within a matrix of overlapping masculinist heterosexual hegemonies, these literary critiques offer an alternative (feminist) perspective on relations of power and authority in the global economy.