

Reviews

From Battlefields to Homes

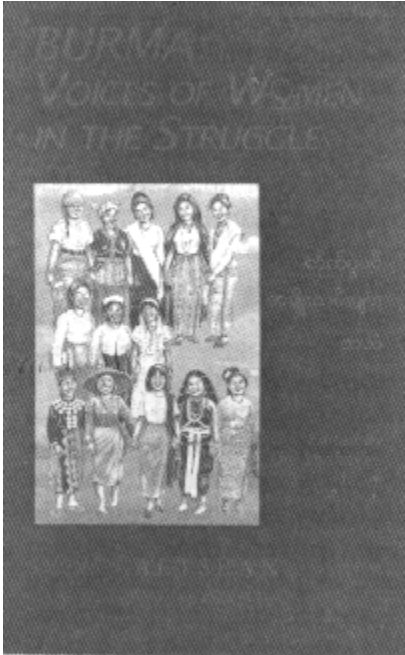
A review of *Burma: Voices of Women in the Struggle* by Lilian Mercado Carreon

Whenever there is a news report on the people's struggle in Burma, often, the image that accompanies the reportage is that of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the highly respected leader of the resistance movement against the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) that governs Burma with an iron fist. But what is seldom mentioned, if at all, is the vast number of other Burmese women who have organised themselves to provide strength to the anti-SLORC movement from wherever they may find themselves to be—either living furtively in Burma or in refugee camps or exiled somewhere else. But now, finally, this ignorance of the role and contributions of innumerable other Burmese women can be shattered with the publication of the book *Burma: Voices of Women in the Struggle* by the Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (ALTSEAN).

Burma: Voices of Women in the Struggle is a collection of writings by Burmese women, ranging from political essays to short biographies to anecdotes to poetry. It is commendable for several reasons. One, it enabled twenty-four Burmese women to claim their space

in literature, a field that has been traditionally dominated by males; thus resonating a distinct women's voice in the movement for a free Burma. Two, the book consciously gathered a diverse group of women to represent the different strands Burmese society. The writers included women of the Mon, Karen, Chin, Burman, Karenni, and Shan nationalities that live in Burma, Asia, Europe, and North America. Third, the book is a simple yet eloquent testament to the courage of these women writers who, by publishing their pieces, have perhaps once again put their safety and very lives at risk from possible retaliation from the SLORC. As such, it is easy to imagine the difficulty in putting the book together. The editors point out that *Burma: Voices of Women in the Struggle* took a long time to make and that it is, in fact, a "culmination of decades of women's experiences and struggle."

Many, if not all, of the women who contributed their stories to the collection are vulnerable, but most especially those women who wrote from refugee camps along the border of Thailand and Burma that up to now are still under threat of



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attack from the Burmese military. Their stories, written in a prose that is sometimes simple and straightforward, sometimes with many asides and resembling Burmese epics, are fresh insights into the resistance that has become a characteristic of everyday Burmese life. In the "A Jungle Flower," written by Maw Mie Mar, a Karenni girl living along the Thai-Burma border, she tells of how their houses were surrounded by mountains and how the weather was "nice." But their peace was broken by the arrival of Burmese soldiers who burned down the village. Maw Mie Mar ran away with her family to the Thai border from where, she says, they watched the huge flames engulf their homes and rise over their village. The Karenni would wait until the Burmese had gone, after which they would return and rebuild their huts. But the cycle of terror repeated itself every two years.

Readers of *Burma: Voices of Women in the Struggle* also get to know about the struggles that women have to wage within the Burmese resistance movement. In the "A Woman's Struggle" a story about a woman resistance fighter, writer Ngu Wa tells of how a young woman marched towards the jungle. This woman, along with other students, made the climb at the height of a monsoon. Heavy rains caused rivers to swell and the currents unpredictable and strong such that crossing the rivers was dangerous. The mountain slopes were full of slippery mud. The journey tired the young woman but her spirits were buoyed when she found hundreds of other young people at the camp. But even then, the young woman fighter had already noticed that the number of women could be counted on one's hand. At the training camp, the women realized that what seemed,

at the beginning, as "consideration" towards them was essentially discrimination against women who were being regarded as weaker persons. Eventually, the women demanded to be treated equally, and began by demanding that the sign "women not allowed", written on boards in charcoal, be erased. At the same time, the women asserted themselves. But because of their situation, the women felt that the pressure was on them to prove that they were able fighters through their display of bravery and strength.

But while she exalts the courage and sacrifices that women are willing to make to realise a free Burma, Ngu Wa points out that her fellow countrywomen "want to live peacefully and with dignity, following a path of their choosing." She reiterates what we all know: Women do not create wars. To emphasise this, while Ngu Wa begins her piece with the story of a woman fighter, she closes with a tribute to women who raise children as they wait for their husbands to return from the civil war. She describes them as providers of "new strength, instilling the cool waters of the spring from their dreams in their children's minds."

Women, either in the battlefields or in the families, provide the chain of continuity of the resistance. Ngu Wa describes it with the knowledge that only a woman who has built the chain can. She says that when women are forced to defend their children, sisters, and brothers, "they are ready to face dangers, holding their babies in their arms and clutching the hands of their grandmothers." ↻

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