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Exploring the Burmese Socio-political Scenario through Wendy Law-Yonne's *A Daughter's Memoir of Burma*

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Abstract

Drawing from Wendy Law-Yone's memoir *A Daughter's Memoir of Burma*, this paper examines how life writing is crucial to understand the socio-political scenario under military rule in Burma. In particular, this work focuses on military history that gets contextualised in this memoir. Burma is plagued with marginalisation and subaltern voices attempt to narrativise the political space and depict the personal struggles during the military rule era. Clashes between the military and pro-democracy movements, various insurgencies, forced displacement and the refugee crisis are some of the major problematic areas that come to the forefront through such memoirs. Conflicts of ethnic minorities are some of the longstanding conundrums that can be highlighted. The politics of the colonial era, the nationalist political scene, the complex post-independence political dynamics, the beginning of military rule in Burma, along with Law-Yone's father's attempt to restore democracy and her own personal experiences from her visits to Burma in the later years, especially in 1989. These visits not only reveal the political affairs but also particular emphasis is drawn on individual experiences. These lived experiences are read with an approach to indicate and contextualise the complexities and understand the struggles people went through. The renewed interest in life writing enables the much-required attention to such otherwise silenced voices.

Keywords: life writing, marginalisation, lived experiences, Burmese military rule

Introduction

...sociologists have explored or implied another variety of reflection which has arisen evidently from accumulated sociological data and a

concern for social problems. Their basic assumption is that literature, mainly fiction and biography in “popular” forms, reflects social “facts.” (Albrecht 430)

Memory plays a huge role in every human being’s life. It becomes all the more pertinent after the world witnessed horrifying events and experienced brutal torture of many kinds. There is an undeniable and significant role of memory in a memoir. Scholars like Woolf and Sartre find a pejorative concern that retrospection can be illusionary, leaving room for invention. Adriana Cavarero, in her 1997 work, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, exclaims that, “memory can select, censure, forget, re-elaborate but rarely invents” (36). This can be seen as a response to the previous scholars. Further, often regarded as “the literature of survivors” (Buss 19), life writing as a genre is often questioned as it possesses the limitations of fragmentation. However fragmented memory and recollection of memory is, it does play a foundational role in recovering experiences of survivors, exiles and refugees – in all senses the marginalised. It enables the representation of lived experiences and draws attention to silenced voices. Life writing is a genre that is both objective and subjective, hence the confluence of both is dovetailed in such a way that the literary and non-literary constantly inform each other. The urge to keep collective experiences in mind can be seen in Wendy Law-Yone’s memoir *A Daughter’s Memoir of Burma* (2014). This probably inspired her to voice her individual perspectives and experiences, and her father’s contribution towards the political scene. Positing these into the broader scheme of subjugation, the focus of this paper would principally be to contextualise the socio-political events embellished in the texts. Memoirs, or life-writing in general, becomes extremely crucial in this context because, unlike other forms of literature, it does not merely ‘represent’ life or society, it essentially comprises real-life experiences and therein lies the relevance. Further, this memoir demonstrates a new body of understanding through reconfiguring historicity. Through this memoir, we can contextualise the turmoiled past into the ‘present’ of the texts.

Politics of the Colonial Era and the Nationalist Political Scene

Turning a few pages from the past, Law-Yone mentions King Narapatisithu and legendary stories about him. This can be looked at

as how the people of Burma hung on to the idea of a rich glorious and cultural heritage that provided them hope to combat the challenges they were compelled to face. Intertwining a personal incident of her grandmother reciting poems to her, she describes the valour of the king,

This great ruler, beloved by his subjects and venerated for his benevolence in building countless canals and reservoirs, pagodas and shrines, was blessed with a long life – a fate denied most Burmese sovereigns. (Law-Yone 59)

Law-Yone contextualises the politics of the colonial era through the lens of her father's recollections and thus a vivid Burmese scenario comes to the forefront. The experiences that Edward Law-Yone gathered must have been in his manuscript which opens up the memoir for an exploration of a different era altogether. The political scenario in the wake of the Japanese invasion in early 1941 gets contextualised with Edward Law-Yone's engagement with the air-defence unit as a volunteer air-raid warden. Wendy Law-Yone mentions her father's job at the Burma Railway in the memoir. Now, Burma Railway has a very perturbed history of marginalisation that rose from the political dynamics during the Second World War which both the Britishers and the Japanese were a part of. Describing the horrific subjugation, she writes, "The Japanese had begun conscripting labour for their notorious Death Railway" (Law-Yone 68).

The nationalist history of Burma particularly gets contextualised as she talks of her father's association with Aun San, the national hero of Burma. Describing Aun San's zeal for the independence of Burma, she also contextualises the legendary story of the 'thirty comrades'. Aun San and his comrades formed a group of thirty and went to Japan to gain military training. They came back with the knowledge of modern warfare and thus formed the military of the Burmese people, Tatmadaw (1941~). The Burmese men had initially sought help from Japan without understanding the hidden intentions of Japan. Burma was an altar of land politics in the wake of the Second World War since the English and the Japanese were combating each other. The global context of the Second World War and the devastating Hiroshima and Nagasaki bomb blasts also come to life in the memoir. Further, the Japanese invasion of the early 1940s was one

of the significant events in the history of Burma which is stated by Law-Yone in her memoir. She writes,

This select group, who called themselves the Thirty Comrades, were organised into the Burma Independence Army and would become the dominant military force in post-war Burma. In return for their support of Japan against the Allies, the Japanese agreed to a provisional Burmese government under their occupation, with the promise of full independence in the future. But when towards the war's end it became clear to Aung San and his comrades that not only was 'independence' under the Japanese illusory, but that a Japanese victory was far from assured, they switched their allegiance to the Allied war effort and fought alongside the British. (Law-Yone 79)

Law-Yone further describes the unfortunate event where Aun San was assassinated and how some of his close aides and elder brother passed away in the same incident in the most tragic manner. She also mentions that this incident took place on 19th July 1947. This event indicates the impending complexity on the national front.

The Complex Post-Independence Political Dynamics

The assassination of Aun San and world politics had somewhat paced up the momentum of Burmese independence. Law-Yone contextualises the entry of U Nu in the forefront of national politics as he took over the negotiating talks with the imperial powers as a leader of Burma. U Nu was the leader of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL). With these talks doing the round, Burma was declared independent and Law-Yone describes the event, "Six months later, at the astrologically determined time of twenty minutes past four on the morning of 4 January 1948, independence was declared" (52). She further describes the pandemonium Burma had unknowingly ushered and contextualises the entire situation post-independence,

The Union of Burma was finally free – free of the Japanese, free of the British, free to start tearing itself apart. Less than six months later, the country was in chaos, with the central government under attack from a multiplicity of insurgent groups: the 'Red Flag' and 'White Flag' Communists; the 'White Band' and 'Yellow Band' PVO (the People's Volunteer Organisation, formerly General Aung San's private army); the Union Military Police; rogue elements from the AFPFL; half a dozen ethnic armies, and marauding dacoits with no political affiliations. (Law-Yone 52)

Contextualising the unsettling situation post-independence, Law-Yone aptly describes that “life in the early 1950s was far from tranquil” (52). She talks about how the various insurgent groups were unhappy with the decisions and policies of the government. The country went through a tumultuous time as the Karen rebels threatened to take over the government at Rangoon. The civil wars that took place are also shown in the memoir. With the insurgency movements rising to the brim, Burma was under martial law for most of the following years after independence. Edward Law-Yone, as mentioned earlier was a well-known journalist. This gave him a ground to scrutinise the lives of the leaders with a very critical approach and needless to mention that his understanding of these people mostly revolved around a political situation and therefore the vivid contextualisation of the political scenario in the memoir! He personally knew prime minister U Nu and the chief of armed forces, General Ne Win. He unravelled the situation of Burma during the parliamentary period to be not quite stable and charges of corruption were brought against the government every now and then. It was believed by the opposition that the supporters were given political protection, even though they continued to murder, rape, and kill people (Law-Yone 122). His manuscripts reveal that “violence mounting in the run-up to the elections, with the murders of politicians from both Clean and Stable factions being reported in increasing numbers” (Law-Yone 125). U Nu won the elections of 1958 by a few votes but could not maintain law and order and therefore asked Ne Win to form a caretaker government and prepare the nation for elections. By 1960, U Nu again came back to power with a landslide victory. The taste of power and “fund of personal grudges and misgivings had been growing” (Law-Yone 136) in General Ne Win and he staged a coup on 6th March 1962. Interestingly, the era that gets portrayed adds up to the prolonged predicament of instability in the country.

The Beginning of Military Rule in Burma

‘Mum, what’s wrong?’

‘It’s Daddy.’ She took a ragged breath. ‘He’s been arrested.’

‘Arrested? For what?’

‘For political reasons, I suppose.’ Something in the pit of my stomach twisted. All the hundreds of prisoners taken in for political reasons since

Ne Win came to power were still in jail. Nobody ever seemed to come out of jail.

'But when did it happen?'

'In the middle of the night.'

'And you've been sitting here all by yourself? Why didn't you wake me?'

'There was nothing to be done,' Mum said, with a faraway look.

(Law-Yone 140-141)

An excerpt from the text reveals the harrowing condition of Wendy Law-Yone's family when her father Edward Law-Yone was arrested. Fear, anxiety and helplessness can be traced here in the conversation that Law-Yone had with her mother. The parliamentary government was overthrown, almost all-important leaders in position were seized of their power and some were even imprisoned after the coup in 1962. She remembers that U Nu was one of the first politicians to be arrested. Many people who protested against the wrong doings were taken as political prisoners especially students and so was her father. In the opening chapter of her book, titled "The Lost Nation," she describes the adverse socio-political situation of the country under the military regime in distressing words. Recalling how her father's newspaper *The Nation* was shut overnight, her father being imprisoned and the general political situation in Burma, she writes that the junta destroyed everything from politics to society to home. Struck by the severity of the frequent imprisonment of the people, Law-Yone describes in a very personal tone that the junta took away both peace and their homes; often with physical force by imprisoning family members from the households of Burma. This further affected the psychologically harmonical peaceful space of the structure of the 'home' as the incarceration disrupted family life altogether. Very significantly she points out that such situations would occur "by force if necessary, and also when not necessary" (Law-Yone 22).

His letters, though addressed to Mum, had to speak to all of us, his wife and children. And no matter how bland he tried to keep his messages, the pages would arrive with rectangular cavities where words like jail, or government, or plans, had been neatly excised by the censor's blade. (Law-Yone 149)

Edward Law-Yone wrote letters when he was imprisoned and some of those documents reveal the cruel surveillance. She writes that the letters went through censorship before reaching the family.

The harsh prison conditions also come to the forefront. Initially, Edward Law-Yone stayed in his 4' x 7' cell with rainwater dripping from the walls. The damp conditions even led to tuberculosis in some of the prisoners. Later he was transferred to the infamous Insein jail where he stayed in solitary confinement for two years. Bugs, rats, etc. would be all around the prison and he writes that the students were completely shaken by the torture. Some would stage subversive plays and that further “led to the main actors being beaten and placed in solitary” (Law-Yone 178-179). Law-Yone described these experiences when he was released in 1968.

Edward Law-Yone’s Attempt to Restore Democracy

Edward Law-Yone shifted with his family to Thailand shortly after being released from prison in 1968. With the initiative of fellow dissidents including ex-ministers from the parliamentary government, the Parliamentary Democratic Party was formed and Wendy Law-Yone notes,

In forming the PDP, the group was also declaring itself a government in exile, and in this capacity Nu, as the constitutionally elected prime minister, retained his office; Let Ya was appointed finance minister, Tommy Cliff defence minister and (Edward) Law-Yone foreign minister. (185)

This whole episode contextualises the indomitable spirit of the people to fight back against the military regime. Edward Law-Yone and U Nu travelled to distant lands to gather international support and attention and succeeded in doing so. Thereafter they strengthened the support from the ethnic minorities like the Kachin, Shan, and Chinese, etc. who were “linked only by a common hatred of the central military government” (Law-Yone 194). Very aptly the civil war and constant ethnic conflict in Burma can be contextualised here. The frequent insurgencies left many people homeless, dwelling in camps near the Thai-Burma border, and thus the aspect of forced displacement also gets surfaced. She writes about the jungles across the Thai-Burma border and the rebel camps which operated since the early days when the military junta took over. The ethnic minorities had their own insurgent organisations and armies. They came in support of the movement initially, however, the movement which was taken up couldn’t succeed due to many reasons. For instance, the

funds were not enough for them to sustain their rebellion for long, soon the ethnic minorities surfaced their separate agendas, and the camaraderie between the leaders somehow fell apart. As could be fathomed from the memoir, Edward Law-Yone himself was facing financial crunches (as he had given lumpsum from his own pocket for the cause of the democracy movement) and thought it better to move in with his family who had already left for America. The disillusionment had set in and the movement disintegrated soon after.

Wendy Law-Yone's Personal Experiences and her Visits to Burma in the Later Years

Wendy Law-Yone describes her lived experiences under military rule with utmost vividness and undaunted spirit. She narrates that she was expelled from Rangoon University on the pretext of being Edward Law-Yone's daughter. Recapitulating the time when her father was incarcerated, she divulges that a sense of fear had taken over. She was terrified and anxious about the question of her father's return from prison. She wrote numerous petitions to the military government for his release. Further, recalling her own brief prison experience, she describes that the cyclic long interrogation sessions had taken a toll on both her mental and physical health. Such gruelling experiences made her believe that escape is the only way out. This is rather a harrowing incident and indicates the large number of people who were forced to flee Burma. In particular, it raises and reiterates the issue of forced displacement. Law-Yone left Burma in 1967. Surfacing one of the many instances of her encounter with the junta, Law-Yone delineates,

For the next ten days, the routine was unvarying: every night, a few minutes before nine o'clock, a guard would unlock the door to lead me downstairs, where I sat across a table from my interrogators. Twelve hours later, I would be led back to the windowless room that was my cell, and locked in once more. (158)

In the last segment of the book, the series of student movements of the late 1980s that ultimately led to the 8-8-88 student movement in Rangoon can be contextualised. This movement took the shape of a mass movement against the regime. Even though she was not residing in Burma, she was stirred to visit Burma in 1989 and see the

deadly conditions herself. Through her experience, she could fathom that what she witnessed, depicted a clear call for the restoration of democracy through free and fair elections. The pro-democracy movement which began as a student movement was in full swing during the late 1980s. Aun San Suu Kyi, who came to Burma to care for her ailing mother was moved to join the movement and thus became the face of democracy in Burma. The whole nation learnt the language of protest and resistance. Depicting the national scene, Law-Yone writes,

Day by day thousands, then tens of thousands, and finally hundreds of thousands of students, schoolchildren, housewives, monks, government workers, doctors, lawyers and whole units of the armed forces had thronged the streets, chanting demands for democracy, free elections and an end to one-party rule. (257)

Law-Yone also visited refugee camps and depicts the pulse of the people. Young men and women talked of politics, democracy, Suu Kyi and the fair election that was promised to be held in 1990. Some even discussed ammunitions like M-16, AK-47, Howitzers, G-3 etc. and how they felt like blowing up military bases and assassinating military leaders. She further describes the tragic condition of people in the camps as they were “struck down by malaria and dengue fever slept on rickety bamboo platforms, protected from the elements only by canopies of plastic sheeting” (Law-Yone 259). During her short visit in 2001, she records that the terminal Mingaladon Airport was flooded with khaki men armed with machine guns. Her impression of Burma from sixteen days visit in 2012 seems less gruelling and the stark difference she noticed was that women were in various services. However, the explosion sounds at the backdrop made her think that probably nothing has changed as she exclaims, “the ground of the distant, past with its old certainties” (Law-Yone 3).

Conclusion

“...that speaking the ‘unspeakable’ factor...opens up scope to subvert the subjugation of the suppressed” (Bhaduri 96).

Law-Yone’s memoir contextualises contemporary politics and the effect it had on the people. This text is part her recollections and part her father’s reflections. Intertwining the struggle movements under military rule during the 1960s, with the reminiscence of British colonial rule and rebel movements against it, the Japanese invasions,

the nationalist and the brief parliamentary period, this memoir can be read as an attempt at subversion. In upholding the entire socio-political milieu of Burma, suppressed voices come to light as one can identify the plight and vulnerability of exiles, political prisoners, student activists and rebels in refugee camps. The recent military coup of January 2021 perhaps further harps on the immediacy of the representation of anxiety and fear-stricken generation against the backdrop of tumultuous social movements.

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