



## Gendered Spaces: Women in Burmese<sup>1</sup> Society

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**Abstract:** In many ways, historically and today, women of Burma hold a unique and enviable position. At home and in business activities, women in Burmese society compared to women in its two historically powerful neighbours, India and China, have greater legal rights (traditionally, equal to that of men) and enjoy a high degree of tolerance and independence. Yet, on the other hand, there is strong evidence of gender-specific cultural practices that undermine this apparent equality. This is sanctioned by the Buddhist religion, of which the paper provides an insightful view of; of Theravada Buddhism's influence on gender divisions and how these divisions are expressed and the boundaries defined in private and public spaces.

**Key terms:** Juxtaposition of equity and inequity, Geographic space, Theravada Buddhist societies, concept of *hpon*, Spatial division, Spiritual hierarchy.

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Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize, has succeeded in no small way in drawing Burma into the limelight of world attention. Suu Kyi is the most prominent woman in Burmese society today and has become a symbol of strength and dignity. She acts as a world symbol for the Burmese democratic. Su Kyi's national role calls to mind the status and role of women in Burmese society. In many ways, Burmese women enjoy a unique position. In both the domestic and economic spheres, women in Burmese society compared to women in its two historically powerful neighbours, India and China, have greater legal rights (traditionally, equal to that of men) and less restrictive social practices. Yet, on the other hand, there is strong evidence of gender-specific cultural practices that undermine this apparent equality. Interestingly, some of these practices can be traced back to Buddhism, which originated in India (Sardesai 1989), and to its cultural influences, which have exerted strong and powerful overlays and overshadowed native culture but have not extinguished it.



Three Burmese women, 1956. (personal collection)

In this paper I would like to determine the extent of inequality, if any, in the Burmese context, and explore the myths and realities regarding Burmese women. The emphasis will be essentially on the Burmese Buddhist women. With around 90% of the total population being Buddhists and the pervasiveness of the religion in all spheres of society, the focus is not only relevant but is crucial to fully appreciate the significance of religion in the examination of gender relations in Burma. From a spatial perspective, I will look at the ways gender divisions are expressed in imagined and real space to argue that the boundaries of real space strengthen and reaffirm social and cultural distinctions, that the existing set of spatial relations maintains gender divisions and that rapid economic changes continue to produce 'difference' and 'otherness'. I will argue that the acceptance of existing socio-religious positions between males and females is reinforced by spatial divisions which are devised and retained to perpetuate male dominance. The spatial dimension of gender relations in Burmese society is deconstructed to give an added appreciation of gender inequality.

### The significance of space

The concentration on space and spatial relations pose a challenge to an area of study on which very little research has been undertaken. Studies on Burmese women are few and far between. Authors such as Shway Yoe (1963) in his delightful book *The Burman* wrote on ear-boring<sup>2</sup> and marriage.



Ear-boring ceremony of two sisters; in the middle on cushions flanked by maids of honour (personal collection)

Mi Mi Khaing's *Burmese Family* (1946) and the more recent *The World of Burmese Women* (1984) explore in much greater depth and detail women's roles and rights in Burmese society. My review of literature on Burmese women shows the number of works to be negligible. Penny Van Esterik (1996) maintains that women are not invisible in research on Southeast Asia and draws attention to a number of notable publications on Southeast Asian women. While Van Esterik's claim is not unfounded, there is also a need to recognise the paucity in writings and research on specific geographic areas of Southeast Asia including Burma, especially in meaningful explorations of the spatial dimension.

The interpretation and evaluation of 'what is given' or 'what is observed' against theoretical perspectives on space and identity is necessary to appreciate better the extent of gender divisions in Burma. Despite the Eurocentric bias of existing literature, they provide useful and highly important theoretical frameworks for existing social conditions, even in a non-Western context. The works of Harvey (1969, 1973, 1989, 1993) and Soja (1989, 1997), for example, emphasise critical interpretations of space in the light of the transition taking place from modernity to postmodernity in the contemporary world (Soja 1997, p. 236). Harvey writes that 'the dimensions of space and time matter and that there are real differences of social action, real as well as metaphorical territories and spaces of power that are the sites of numerous differences...' (Harvey 1993, p. 3).

### **Theoretical aspects of women's space**

Evaluating and interpreting social relationships is a complex task for any society. My argument is that it becomes even more complex and difficult when theories currently in existence developed from within a Western viewpoint. The attempt is then made to apply them to a non-Western society in which the cultural background, the race, language, religion, the histories and geographies are profoundly different. The state of the economy, especially for a country such as Burma, is a further point of difference, as is colonial experience and demographic and cultural changes that took place as a result of that experience. Soja (1997, p. 238) noted the world as an 'increasingly postmodern world'. To me it is arguable whether Burma can even be referred to as 'modern', let alone 'postmodern' however the term is defined or whatever criteria is used to determine modernity. Nonetheless, while Burma's condition must remain at the bottom of the continuum in the social transformation that the countries of the developed world have experienced or are experiencing, the theoretical framework that is being applied is certainly postmodern. The landscape or geographic space is deconstructed with the focus on the 'many layers of meaning in and the multiple uses of cultural landscapes' (Winchester 1992, p.141). While Burmese society as it exists at present is pre-modern, pre-industrial and conservative, the approach draws upon existing discourses and 'ways of seeing' in the western world. Homi Bhabha (1994, p. 171) argues that 'postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of the Third World countries...within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South', that they 'intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic 'normality' to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples' and that they 'formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference'. My view is that existing theories and approaches are certainly 'translational' and 'transnational', to use Homi Bhabha's words, that they transgress the boundaries of different cultural realms and may be applied, while recognising their limitations, to different cultural situations.

The paper sets out by reviewing existing literature on Burmese women and examining evidences of equality and/or inequality from historical records and from personal observations and experience. Drawing on new approaches in cultural geography (see for example, Duncan 1992) my view is of culture as an active agent, constantly changing, shaping and re-shaping and in the process re-affirming, strengthening or weakening existing social relations. Culture is also seen as providing the means for control and as being used to deny equal access to shared symbols (Anderson & Gale 1992). Culture is also translated into geographic space. The visible imprint or the cultural landscape is clearly shown to represent contesting gender relations in both public and private space. In aspatial relationships the

juxtaposition of equity and inequity in Burmese society is subsumed. They become more pronounced however, when boundaries in real space based on gender are drawn. Clearly, my approach is feminist and geographic. More specifically, I am addressing the subject of Burmese women from a cultural geography viewpoint. Mainstream theories of social justice are concerned with egalitarianism and address problems of inequality while feminists are concerned 'with the different and unequal experiences of women, including the fact that women are treated unjustly by virtue of their gender' (Smith 1994, p.108). In the course of this paper, I will argue that the inequalities that exist are based on gender and reinforced by cultural beliefs and traditions, and that geographic space 'is deeply implicated in social exclusion' (Smith 1994, p.45). This is not to suggest that I agree with the view of geographers who argue in the early 1980s that 'space was a universal feature of all social relations' (Rose 1993, p.19). My contention is that the spatial component is an important part and should be included for a more meaningful interpretation and visual representation of social relationships. As Harvey (1993, p. 15) notes 'what goes on in a place cannot be understood outside of the space relations that support that place any more than the space relations can be understood independently of what goes on in particular places.'

### **Burmese women's status and role: an enviable record**

Much work on women from a feminist viewpoint sees women as subordinate to men in varying degrees. Sexual inequities are found in diverse spheres ranging from economic activity to political participation to the domestic sphere. On the other hand there is much evidence of Burmese women in positions of egalitarianism that are clearly distinguishable in several major ways. The status of women throughout history has been high. Inscriptions in Bagan tell of women in high positions and women dedicating land and slaves to pagodas and monasteries, evidence that suggests women could own property and dispose of them as they wished (Khin Aye Win 1997). Burmese women's 'right to own property had never been challenged. In fact, they control the family finances' (Khin Myo Chit 1995, p.188). Edwards (2000, p.2) wrote:

women were the legal equals of their spouses and male dependents, enjoyed equal property rights, and had easy access to divorce. The breadth, depth and visibility of female activity and the style of female dress and department-split skirts, fat cheroots, quick wits and sharp tongues-elicited an often shocked response from British expeditionaries and missionaries.

There are several important indicators that testify to the special position that Burmese women enjoy in society. The very essence of a person's identity, the name, does not change when a Burmese woman marries. A Burmese woman's name is a cradle-to-grave name (see Shway Yoe 1963 for an explanation of Burmese names). A Burmese woman's name, as with all Burmese names is an individual name which neither takes the father's name, nor the mother's for that matter, nor the husband's at marriage. There is no surname to Burmese names, hence a name change at marriage is not something that one even contemplates. There is no question at all as to whether a woman should change her name to her husband's, a consideration reserved for the modern woman in Western society. As the continued use of the maiden name signals to the modern woman in the West an assertion of her independence, so to the Burmese woman, her own individual name ensures her a continuity of place and status that she has known before marriage.



Young woman (personal collection)

A second feature signalling equality concerns titles. *Ma* is used for young girls or woman. As a woman grows older or has assumed a position of respect, the title *daw* is used. The terms *Me* and *Mi* and some of the other titles given in Shway Yoe (1963, p. 7) are no longer used in modern Burma. Both *ma* and *daw* closely approximate to the English equivalents 'Miss' and 'Ms'. There is no approximate word in the Burmese language for 'Mrs'. As it is not possible to tell from a man's title of 'Mr' his marital status, so it is not possible from a Burmese woman's title to tell whether she is married. Further, the woman wears no wedding ring to symbolise her union with a man. Thus the symbols of woman's subjugation and insubordination found in patriarchal and other male dominated societies are absent in Burma.

The terminology used to describe relationships indicates significant gender roles. Within the nuclear family, the importance of the mother's role and status is displayed in the terms used with the mother placed first in the term for family "*mi-tha-su*, meaning 'mother-offspring-group' or *tha-mi-tha-hpa*, meaning 'offspring-mother-offspring-father', and for the parents, *mi-hpa*, meaning 'mother-father' (Khaing, 1984, p.15). Khaing continues to define the husband and wife relationship as based on the 'perceived differences between the spiritual, physiological and psychological natures of the two sexes' and identifies the higher spiritual plane on which the man as *ain-oo-nat* or spirit of the house is placed (Khaing 1984, p. 16).

Marriage also does not require a change of residence for the woman. The Burmese kinship system is completely bilateral – in terminology as in practice (Khaing 1984, p. 21). Depending on the circumstances of the parents, financial, family size, the number of siblings, and so on, or that of the newly weds, flexibility and fluidity of spatial relationships are the norm rather than the exception. It is equally acceptable for the newly weds to live with the bride's parents, the groom's parents or on their own. The horror attached to the bride being dislocated from the home she has lived in all her life to a life with her husband and his family, subjugated to a lowly position in the family hierarchy does not take place in Burma.



Burmese bride in formal wedding dress, 1970s (personal collection)

In both the domestic and in the economic sphere, women's status and role have been on par with men. Early European observers noted this (Khaing 1984, p. 13). Shway Yoe (1963, p. 53) writes:

It is greatly to their (women's) credit that they manage not only house affairs, but their husband's business into the bargain. A farmer's wife will carry out the sale of the whole rice crop to the agent of the English rice firm in her husband's absence, and generally strikes a better bargain than he would have made himself. If the village head constable is away, the wife will get together the policemen, stop a fight, arrest the offenders, and send them off on a lock-up all on her own responsibility.

The Burmese woman lives and works alongside her husband, and plays a leading role in many business activities. While Hindu and Mohamedan (Muslim) women are shut within their homes, Burmese women are active in the market, as customers and stallholders. The position of women in Southeast Asia is generally better than women in India or China. But Burmese women's status within Southeast Asia is noted to fare even better. Burmese women enjoy 'sexual egalitarianism in social and economic affairs that may be unique in the Southeast Asian region' (Muller 1994). The market place or *bazaar* is women's space in a way that it is men's space on the Indian Subcontinent. The higher status of Burmese women, by comparison with Indian and Chinese women, became more apparent when vast numbers of Indian immigrants, and to a lesser extent Chinese immigrants, entered Burma under British rule. The freedom and equality that Burmese women have in the home, for example, and which is taken for granted, her legal status with regard to property, as well as control of financial matters equal inheritance rights with men, contrast sharply with that of Indian women. When a Burmese woman marries an Indian man, her position and status is changed. Eventually, conflicts arising from mixed marriages led to new laws being passed to protect the Burmese woman. The Special Marriage Acts of 1872 and 1923, the Buddhist Woman's Special Marriage and Succession Act of 1940 and its amendment in 1954 ensure for Buddhist Burmese women protection under the customary Burmese Buddhist Law (Khaing 1984; Kyaw 1988). According to Kyaw

(1988, p.104), the Buddhist Women's Special marriage and Succession Act of 1954 is 'the only Special Act in Theravada Southeast Asia (which) provides the status of a Burmese woman with more rights than ever before when she has a matrimonial alliance with a non-Buddhist man'. Mueller (1994, p. 613) notes the significance of these laws as evidence of 'Burmese cultural resistance to the imposition of nonegalitarian gender practices'.

### **Gendered spaces: visions of inequality**

Despite the favourable position that Burmese women generally enjoy in society, male chauvinism is the rule rather than the exception. Women are expected to do housework and in Khin Myo Chit's (1995) words 'wait hand and foot' on men. The argument used if objections are made is that 'Myanmar (Burmese) women are free...no purdah, no bound feet' (Khin Myo Chit 1995, p. 189).

Central to the notion of male superiority is the concept of *hpon*. *Hpon* strengthens the spiritual elevation that men enjoy in Burmese society, which is essentially a Buddhist society. All males have *hpon*, an intrinsic quality that is accorded to few females, and even if it were, less than that accorded to a male. *Hpon* is hard to define. It is a highly abstract quality that has no practical relevance. It gives men the advantage of a special status, higher than that of women. Having *hpon* is having *hpon*, not much else. But losing *hpon* is wrought with unknown dangers. Thus, at the spiritual level, the position of Burmese women fares badly. The belief in the attainment of Buddhahood as possible only for a male and the pollutive effects of women on men's *hpon* is a subject on which little research has been undertaken, if at all.

The spatial connotations of spiritual inequality reinforce and determine women's position. This is maintained and enforced by society's traditions and religion which pervades life in Buddhist Burma. Representations of geographic space are often ignored by non-geographers and although representations of space are embedded in all social sciences they 'are intertwined in complex ways with representations of scale and culture' (Agnew 1993, p. 251). The meanings attached to place strengthened inequalities in gender relationships in an otherwise egalitarian society. This paper argues that spiritual hierarchy between men and women, sanctioned by the Buddhist religion is expressed in geographic space. The spatial division is a constant reminder of women's inferiority and a clear demarcation of what is not a woman's place.



A couple, late 1940s (personal collection)

Women's space within the home is clearly defined. The kitchen is primarily the woman's domain. Traditionally, and continuing to the present, women cook and sew, care for and nurture the family. The woman also looks after the family expenses and

in most cases is the business partner to her husband. As the kitchen, or the back of the house, is women's space, certain parts of the house, the room or even wardrobe space are assigned according to sex. While the boundaries are neither formal nor fixed, there are general rules which are followed by most people. The woman's clothes, especially the *htamein* or *longyi* (skirt), are never placed on the upper shelves of the wardrobe, nor thrown carelessly about the house. Nor should they be in the front room where guests come. More particularly, they should never be near the Buddhist altar. On the other hand, it is acceptable for a man's *longyi* to be anywhere. Similarly, the woman's skirt is not mixed with the men's clothes in a wash. The special clothesline for women's *htamein* or *longyi* (the skirt) is shunned by males, a *taboo* space. From a very young age males are told not to go under the *htamein* clothesline or their *hpon* will be lowered or diminished. By instilling fear in the abstract and unknown, the ideas and practices regarding male *hpon* are perpetuated. Women have no choice but to accept this although many writers, including women writers claim that it 'comes easily for women' (Khaing 1984, p.16) or that women accept their position with good humour and respect (Muller 1994).



Burmese couple in traditional dress

Women's space then is imposed by society (male), but accepted by females without question. The separation of male and female spaces is linked to ideas of contamination and pollution. The supposedly polluting effects of women are observed and accepted in many other societies as well; for example, the belief can be found in many Pacific islands including Papua New Guinea. In Japan, the native Shinto religion emphasises purity and cleanliness, shuns death and defilement to the extent that people who work in such 'unclean' professions are often forced to live in separate communities. Kristeva (1982) notes the strong ritualisation of defilement within the castes of India which, according to Kristeva (1982, p. 79), is 'the most complex and striking instance of a social, moral and religious system based on pollution and purification, on the pure and impure.'

Religious prohibitions are thus used to separate groups of people or to separate the sexes. Kristeva's (1982) concept of abjection attempts to provide a theoretical basis for this. Kristeva (1982, p.70) writes:



...ritualization of defilement is accompanied by a strong concern for separating the sexes, and this means giving men rights over women. The latter, apparently put in the power of passive objects, are none the less felt to be wily powers, "baleful schemer" from which rightful beneficiaries must protect themselves....It is as if, ... two powers attempted to share out society. One of them, the masculine, apparently victorious, confesses through its very relentlessness against the other, the feminine, that it is threatened by an asymmetrical, irrational, wily, uncontrollable power.

Throughout the essay, Kristeva (1982) raises interesting relationships between filth and defilement, of the horror within, of the border between the body's inside and outside. For her, 'polluting objects fall, schematically, into two types: excremental and menstrual' (Kristeva 1982, p. 71). The latter threatens the relationship between the sexes. Kristeva (1982, p. 68) sees abjection as a universal phenomenon, but which assumes specific shapes and different codings according to various symbolic systems.

Kristeva's ideas of religious taboo help towards explaining the separation of male/female spaces. However, defilement and pollution do not adequately account for other factors such as the deeply-ingrained cultural practices of respect for the Buddha, the *Sangha* (Buddhist monkhood), parents and teachers and all persons older than ego. These again are expressed in space in several ways. The Buddha must literally occupy the highest or tallest geographic position. As in a series of steps, others less worthy are delegated to lower and lower positions. This is not to deny the significance of gendered space, merely to point to the complexities and layers of meaning in the divisions that exist.

Thus in Theravada Buddhist societies, women are inferior to men in religious status. "Men, unlike women, are born with the karmic possibility of becoming members of the Sangha" (Keyes, 1995, p. 160). Burma, one of the Indianised States of Southeast Asia (Coedes 1968; Keyes 1995) has many cultural features that demonstrate Indian influence. While many of these have been modified and adapted, and a strong indigenous culture is retained resulting in a uniquely cultural entity, including the very significant gender equality present in Burmese society, the overwhelming embrace of Buddhism has resulted in acceptance of female inferiority in religious matters. Only a man can become a monk, to which is attached a high merit value. All Buddhist males in Burma go through a period of monkhood in the monastery. A woman can never be a monk. The best she can hope for is to be reborn a male in her next life, and, in this life, the best she can do is to gain merit by consenting to her son's ordination as a novice monk.

The spatial division is observed in pagodas and monasteries which dot the Burmese landscape. There are tens of thousands of pagodas all over the country. In a deeply devout Buddhist society, pagodas are centres for prayers and festivities and for commercial activities at pagoda festivals. Constructing new pagodas and/or renovating existing ones earned for donors a great deal of merit. Gilding takes place on a continual basis especially in the more important and sacred pagodas. In all pagodas, women are generally not permitted to climb the higher platforms. As well, women cannot go to certain parts of the monastery, or to have physical contact with a monk, or sit on a monk's bed, even if the monk were the woman's son or husband. These acts would be considered highly sacrilegious. On the other hand, this does not imply women are less involved in merit-making. What Kirsch (1996) has observed for Buddhist Thailand is true for Burma as well. It is not that 'men are more active in

merit-making. Actually, women are consistently more diligent in performing routine merit-making' (Kirsch 1996, p. 21).

Religion and religious institutions are inextricably linked to Burmese Buddhist life. Burma is not a secular Buddhist society, but one in which religion is a part of daily life. Within the spatial realms of home and family among which the woman moves, her space is defined and delimited by her sex. This extends to outside the home, to religious buildings and in public gatherings. In public gatherings of a religious nature, there is again a gendered division of space. The boundaries cannot be transgressed, but remain to reaffirm woman's lower status level.

## Conclusion

This paper began by outlining and presenting by way of examples the extent to which Burmese women hold equitable positions within the society. Burmese women exert considerable influence in domestic life and are legally and socially not restricted to participate as entrepreneurs and professionals and in the political arena. The bilateral kinship system, the right to own property, equal inheritance rights, the uniqueness of the naming system, absence of body ornaments to indicate marital status, flexible arrangements with regard to choice of residence upon marriage; all these show clearly the high degree of equality and independence that women enjoy.



Woman in the 1950s (personal collection)

A brief comparison was made with the position of women in India and China. The comparison is considered very relevant due to a number of reasons, including that of close geographic proximity to these two large neighbours, the cultural influence of India from the early centuries of the Christian era for over a thousand years, and the influx of large numbers of Indians and Chinese during the colonial period. Thus, there has been over a long period of time, a closer contact. Stemming from this, there has been a greater awareness of gender inequalities in these two societies when compared to that of Burmese society.

Having established the very strong position of women, the paper next attempted to identify inequalities. Male chauvinism was found to exist and women had generally less choice in lifestyles, in dress, choice of careers and so on. Most importantly, however, the greatest inequality and one virtually impossible to surmount was in the area of Burmese Buddhist life. In religion, women had been and continue to be in a

subordinate position. In the multiplicity of social spaces that women are identified with and which reflect existing social conditions, it is in the realm of religious space that women's subordination is magnified. One could say such spaces are regulated and perpetuated by dominant discourses which favour men and over which women have little real power to effect change.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Burma is now officially called Myanmar. However, Burma and Burmese continue to be used and are more familiar to people living outside Burma. This paper will use the word 'Burma' in referring to the country and 'Burmese' in referring to the people of Burma/Myanmar.

<sup>2</sup> Ear-boring is piercing of the ears for young girls. This can often be performed in an elaborate ceremony with invitations sent out to friends and relatives. Shwe Yoe (1963, pp. 48-51) has devoted a chapter to ear-boring.

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