

The Women's Review of Books

Vol. XIX, No. 7

April 2002

74035 US \$4.00/Canada \$5.00

☞ In This Issue

☞ Bringing the arts to women in prison is a brave venture, but it won't remove all the burden of social and personal disaster that the convicted have to bear, writes Susan Rosenberg in a reading of Rena Fraden's *Imagining Medea: Rhodessa Jones and Theater for Incarcerated Women* and Jean Trounstein's *Shakespeare Behind Bars: The Power of Drama in a Women's Prison*, p. 15.

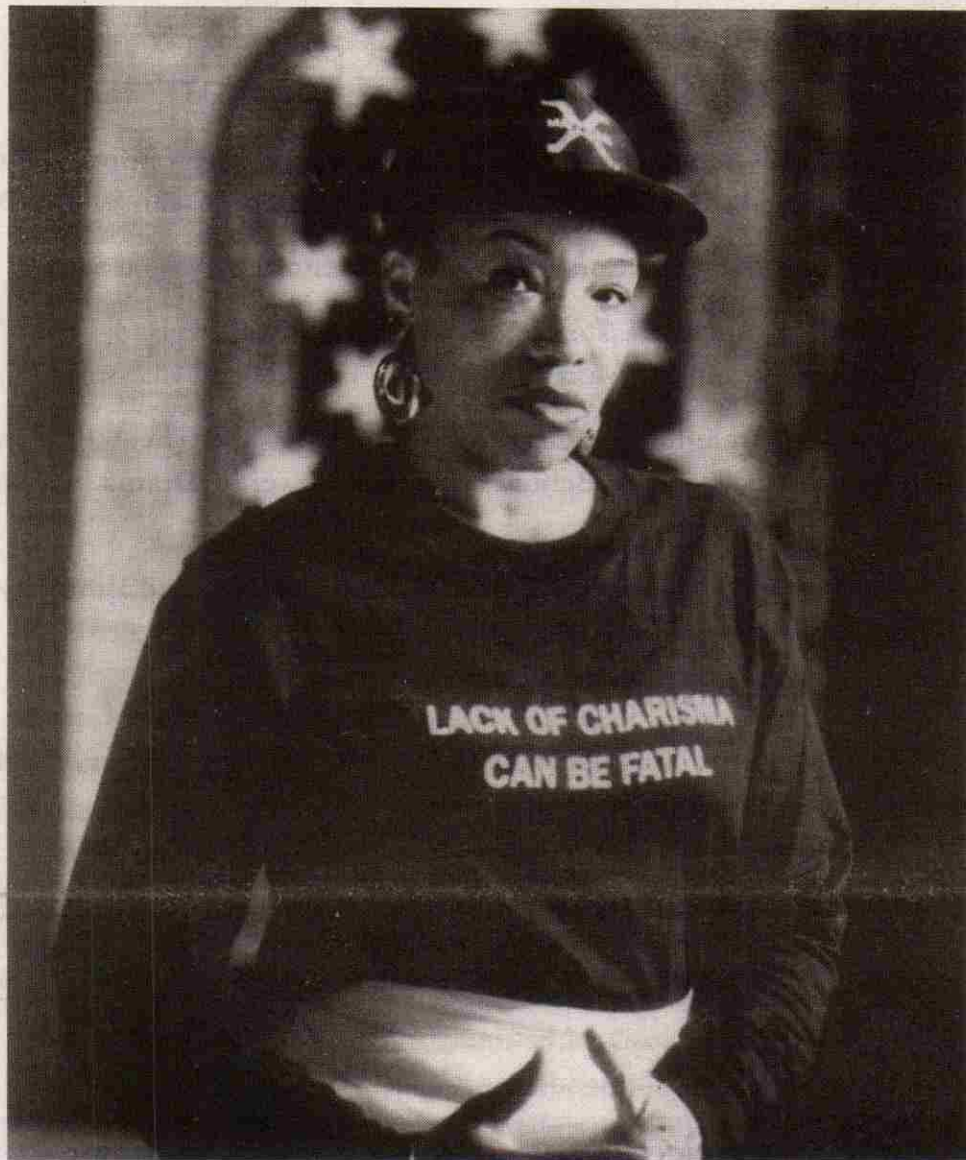
☞ In *Heartbreak*, Andrea Dworkin looks back in anger, while in *Sleeping with Cats*, Marge Piercy recollects in tranquillity: Meryl Altman reads the life stories of two very different feminists, p. 6.

☞ Rosellen Brown admires the "solid writing, efficient, elegant and poignant" of Sue Monk Kidd's first novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*, p. 11.

☞ Ingrid Betancourt, running in Colombia's presidential race, was kidnapped by guerrillas in February: now Margaret Randall reviews *Until Death Do Us Part*, the autobiography of a tireless, and fearless, campaigner for a Colombia free of corruption, p. 9.

☞ Denounced by doctors, dress reformers and feminists for centuries, it continues to outlive its critics: Suzanne Kammlott reads Valerie Steele's illustrated history of *The Corset*, p. 13.

☞ and more...



Rhodessa Jones of *Imagining Medea*

History lessons

by Christine Noelle-Karimi

In Afghanistan's decades of confrontation with modernity, women have always been the focus of conflict.

Afghanistan is a harsh country that has seen nothing but the bitterness of war and poverty during the past twenty years and more. Yet it leaves a lasting impact on all those who have had a chance to go there.

My acquaintance with Afghanistan goes back to happier days in the 1970s. At first as a tourist, I stumbled into a country with a tremendously rich culture. I was an onlooker, fascinated by the self-contained, proud bearing of women and men alike, the ethnic mix and the variety of physical features and modes of dress. With the communist revolution of 1978 and the

☞ unfolding civil war, I witnessed this beautiful country disintegrate. The Soviet occupation during the 1980s closed Afghanistan to all westerners except a few daring journalists, and I turned my attention to the refugee camps that sprang up along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

As a tourist, I had fit more appropriately into the male, public domain of tea houses, hotels and the bazaar. In the refugee camps a new world opened up to me. I was not a spectator any more, but had the privilege of working together with

continued on page three



PRINTED IN THE USA

History lessons

continued from p.1

men and women to provide a service almost non-existent in the camps: basic and higher education for boys and girls. After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 the NGO I work for was able to shift some of its activities into Afghanistan. But as the war continued and wave upon wave of refugees arrived, our work in the refugee camps also had to continue.

Living conditions in the camps were cramped and placed stringent restrictions on women's scope of movement. It was here that the chadari or burqa became a powerful marker of male authority over women's bodies.

In the West, the burqa has become a symbol of the deprivations and oppressions women in Afghanistan have had to bear. Impeding both vision and movement, this sack-like garment represents the restrictions placed on women in all walks of life. It has fueled the Western debate over gender segregation as a human rights violation and has given substance to demands that women fleeing from policies like those of the Taliban be granted political asylum.

For all its merits, this debate has proven to be curiously limited and entirely removed from actual circumstances in Afghanistan. It has also, unfortunately, lent itself to the political justification of Western military involvement in Afghanistan. Since the takeover of the Northern Alliance in Kabul, it has become evident that the removal of the Taliban has done little to change the lot of women. Even before September 11th scattered bits of information called the Western focus on the burqa as the sole indication of the status of women into question.

Veiling takes different forms and meanings in different social and regional contexts. The word burqa is of Pakistani rather than Afghan origin, and has acquired a life of its own in recent media coverage. Known in Afghanistan as chadari, this garment originally was a town fashion. It was formerly worn by middle-class women, to signalize that they did not have to work with their hands. It also served as a sign of distinction for those women whose husbands had secured government employment. For rural women busy in the fields, a head scarf (chadar) draped over an embroidered cap was more practical, and they reserved the chadari for visits to town.

As the war tore at the social fabric, the chadari/burqa acquired a new meaning. In the anonymous and tense setting of the refugee camps in Pakistan, it became the most common form of veiling for women of all backgrounds. The Taliban, many of whom were a product of the Pakistani camp environment, conceived of it as the only proper form of veiling. From a socially approved custom it became a political statement imposed from above.

In the past, the debate about veiling had revolved around the Koranic injunctions concerning decency of dress; now the chadari/burqa came to symbolize Taliban control over society, especially in the towns. In the rural areas, by contrast, it was not so much an issue. Many traditionally clad women continued to work the fields. In 1997, a survey conducted among 120 women in eastern Afghanistan revealed that the new dress code had little bearing on their daily lives. The women even expressed a certain amount of appreciation for the Taliban who, unlike the previous regime of warlords, guaranteed them a degree of safety.¹ This view of atti-

tudes in rural Afghanistan is corroborated by a study that Physicians for Human Rights published last year. On the basis of 200,000 women interviewed, it concluded that educated urban women had borne the brunt of Taliban restrictions. In the countryside, by contrast, little had changed for women, as they traditionally had little or no access to education, not to mention public or professional positions.²

This is not to say that the Taliban were "not so bad" after all. They were clearly one of the most repressive regimes the Afghans have been exposed to in their recent history. At the same time, certain political continuities stand out. I would argue that current events in Afghanistan can only be properly understood if we widen our perspective beyond the simplistic equation of veiling and backwardness.

In a similar vein, the popular identification of Taliban rule with a return to medieval times or even the Stone Age obscures the fact that they are in many ways a very modern political phenomenon. The Taliban and the Islamic backlash they represent form part of a larger ideological conflict over modernity in Afghanistan. This conflict is carried out against the backdrop of existing political conventions and conceptions; what unites all parties involved is a continuing debate about women and women's bodies and how they are manipulated for political purposes.

The Taliban regime is often contrasted with the 1970s and 1980s, a time when urban women took an active part in public life and gained access to positions in the fields of health care, education and administration. Yet subsequent developments revealed how thin the veneer of progress was: it was not the result of sustained social movements but rather a by-product of government endeavors to project visions of a progressive nation. Women's status was addressed in fits and starts, and their advancement was a direct function of the government's ability to impose its will.

The stability of pre-war Afghanistan was safeguarded to a great extent by the authority of the royal house, whose different branches ruled the country with the help of small administrative elites for 150 years. The first sustained attempt at reforms is associated with the reign of Amir Amanullah Khan in the 1920s. As part of his endeavor to free Afghanistan from the yoke of backwardness, the Amir focused on the introduction of Western education and the advancement of women's rights. His wife Soraya, daughter of the famous reformer and publisher Mahmud Tarzi, gave public speeches on women's issues and founded two girls' schools in Kabul. While most of Amanullah Khan's policies were shrugged off as urban eccentricities, his plans to interfere with marriage customs and to impose a new fashion of veiling triggered a rebellion in November 1928. The Amir was forced to leave the country and all reforms affecting women were abandoned for the next thirty years.

In August 1959 Prime Minister Muhammad Daoud officially ended seclusion for women and abolished veiling. Having secured the backing of lawyers versed in Islamic and Western law, he chose the national celebration of independence to make a public statement. The wives and daughters of the highest government functionaries were ordered to show themselves unveiled to the stunned public, thus signaling the dawn of a new era. Daoud ensured the success of the new measure by ruthlessly suppressing the opposition of the clergy.

He also made the removal of the veil voluntary and turned the law into an offer, which was enthusiastically taken up by the urban elite.³ Five years later both men and women gained the right to vote for the first time in Afghanistan's history.

These reforms mostly affected the capital. The urban way of life, its fashions and the professional opportunities offered to women, were far removed from the traditional rural setting in which the vast majority of the Afghan population lived. To the villagers, Kabul represented an alien world that called their tribal values into question, and they avoided the changes emanating from it. For most of the twentieth century there was little contact between the central government and the periphery.

With the Marxist coup d'état of 1978 this uneasy relationship developed into open conflict. In order to gain a popular base for their alleged revolution, urban party members crossed the divide between city and countryside and attempted to impose well-intentioned but poorly conceived reforms upon the rural population. To their utter surprise, the supposed beneficiaries of the enforced redistribution of land and literacy campaigns for women were the first to resist communist rule openly. With the Soviet occupation in December 1979, Kabul became an island of stability and progress entirely dependent on Soviet support. In the countryside, the scorched-earth tactics of the Soviet army drove millions of villagers to flee to Pakistan, creating the largest refugee population on earth.

This overview underscores the limits of modernity in Afghanistan. Changes were initiated by the ruling elite and implemented autocratically. In great measure, the debate over modernity focused on externals. Marking the boundary between the inner (female) and outer (male) worlds, veiling served as an emotionally laden symbol for all parties involved. The reformers rejected it as the ultimate expression of backwardness. The Islamist groups which emerged in the 1970s, in contrast, focused on it as a symbol of female modesty, which by extension stood for the integrity of the entire social order. Reformers and traditionalists were locked into the same set of concepts, which proved to be remarkably stable throughout the twentieth century. The issues addressed by Amanullah Khan, the icon of progress, and the Taliban, the embodiment of religiously motivated oppression, were very similar. While arguing from opposite ends, both

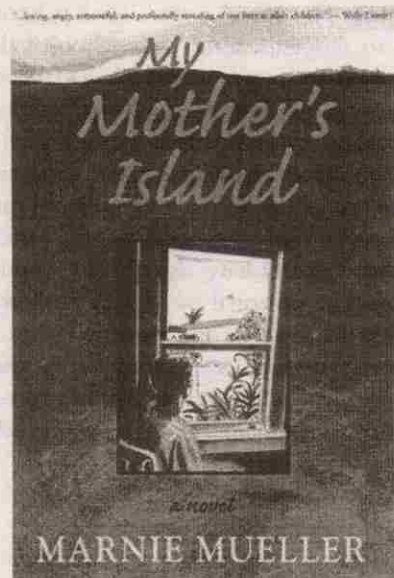
sides focused on veiling and the right of girls and women to acquire education and employment in the public domain.

While the push towards modernity found its outward expression in the rejection of veiling, it coincided with a larger venture—the opening up of the closed circuit of rural society to state control. German sociologist Renate Kreil notes that it comes as no surprise that Amanullah Khan and the communists both devoted much energy to implementing new marriage laws. Officially, these reforms were intended to free society from irrational and wasteful customs, such as the bride money usually paid as part of arranged marriages. But the ultimate goal was to transcend the role of the extended family as the basic unit of social reference. Declaring weddings to be a personal affair between bride and bridegroom, the government attempted to break into local relations of exchange and to take over functions that had traditionally belonged in the domain of the kinship group.⁴

At first sight, the Taliban endeavor to implement the utopia of a pure Islamic state derived from an imagined tradition may hardly seem like a very modern enterprise. Yet the methods they resorted to were not unlike those employed by previous "progressive" regimes. Like their communist predecessors, the Taliban meddled with local marriage practices, purportedly aiming at the eradication of un-Islamic customs. More importantly, they deliberately used the debate over women and their proper place in society to galvanize the support of a generation of young men raised in war.

Their propaganda served to penetrate those realms of society which had previously been entirely beyond the reach of government. The Taliban proclaimed and enacted their concept of social order on behalf of Afghan society, brutally punishing all perceived deviations. Men were deprived of their former prerogative of deciding how their women were to dress and how far they could venture from home. Punishment was no longer meted out by the head of the family but the infamous vice squads. This entailed a loss of honor for the men, who, no longer able to protect their wives, were forced to watch helplessly as they were beaten in public.

For all their appeals to overarching Islamic tradition, the Taliban are very much a product of their own environment. The decrees they issued in quick succession reflect simplistic religious notions that must have been soaked up either during basic religious training in



MY MOTHER'S ISLAND

a novel by
Marnie Mueller

"A profound and nuanced look at that most powerful of relationships, the one between mother and daughter."
—Jean Baker Miller

"...an exceptional book about the spirituality of death and dying that gets inside the reality of losing a parent with an intimacy and depth that no self-help treatise can hope to match."
—Publishers Weekly

1-880684-82-9 \$24.95 cloth

Ask your local bookstore for this and other Curbstone books by Marnie Mueller

CURBSTONE PRESS
www.curbstone.org

the countryside or in the fanaticized atmosphere of refugee camps. The draconian measures instituted in Kabul seem like a futile attempt to solve the complexities of urban life by imposing rules and regulations appropriate for the village setting. For example, the order that women may only leave the house accompanied by a close male relative (*mabram*) would seem perfectly natural within the closely-knit kinship structures and uncertain safety of the countryside. In the city, however, the limits of Taliban ideology soon became woefully clear: instead of being afforded real protection, countless women had to turn to begging or prostitution to make a living.

It is significant that the Taliban pronouncements about women and the burqa have been taken up in the Western media at face value. Separated from its original context, this garment assumes entirely negative associations and serves to reinforce Western notions of superiority over the "other" Islamic world. What troubles me is that Afghan women remain faceless and voiceless in this process. They are not only disenfranchised in their own environment but also subject to our pity. I think there is a larger story to be told, and it is about time we learn to listen.

Despite the removal of the Taliban the situation of the overwhelming majority of women in Afghanistan remains precarious. The current political constellations carry little promise for peace. The revival of the warlords evokes memories of their reign of terror, which engulfed the country after the fall of the communists in 1992 and prepared the way for the Taliban takeover of Kabul in 1996. Even if peace returns to Afghanistan some day, it will take generations to allow the wounds of the incessant war and its ever-changing front lines to heal. At every stage of the war, women have been raped, abducted and murdered. All parties involved are guilty of these transgressions, including the Northern Alliance, which has swept into power thanks to US support and holds key positions in the interim administration.

Most Afghans still find themselves in the grip of grinding poverty. The ecological equilibrium has been upset by the prevailing drought which is about to enter its fourth year, combined with immense population growth. Afghanistan has one of the highest birth rates in the world. The accompanying high rates of maternal mortality (15,000 die every year) and the fact that 25 percent of the children die before the age of five are further indications of glaring underdevelopment. Little aid has reached the drought-stricken countryside yet.

In this environment of scarcity, even seven-year-old girls are turned into a final investment by their desperate parents, who marry them off in exchange for bride money. In former times the sum collected served as "symbolic capital" within the village setting;⁵ now this money merely serves to stave off starvation for a few more weeks. Urban women are not much better off. Unable

to provide for their children, many have turned them over to orphanages to secure their survival. Countless children have died of starvation and cold.

The pressure exercised by Western countries to include a quota of women in all levels of the new government only provides a partial answer to the problems in Afghanistan. Quotas would primarily benefit the urban elite and ignore the needs of the overwhelming majority of women, only three percent of whom have had the chance to attend school. As long as the attitudes of those in charge do not change, the only effect of quotas will be that women are appointed to please Western sponsors. The difficulties Sima Samar, second in charge in the interim administration, is currently battling are a case in point. Unlike her male colleagues, she has no links to powerful political groups in neighboring countries. Her ability to make her influence felt is hampered by lack of funds and by insinuations that she is not a "true" Muslim.

But all the problems should not diminish the fact that a number of women are now contributing to the political process, notably two members of the 21-member commission in charge of preparing the *loya jirga*, or grand assembly: Mahbuba Hoquqmal is a law professor and Soraya Parlika is one of those courageous women who operated home schools for girls under the Taliban.

A graver problem is that the political culture in Afghanistan has not changed. Recent events suggest that those in charge still believe in imposing progress from above. There are reports that the minister of health, "General" Suhaila Siddiqi, attempted to demonstrate the abandonment of the politics of the Taliban by exerting pressure on female hospital staff to abandon the burqa, ignoring the fact that the women concerned did not feel safe to do so. At the same time, there are indications that participation from below is not really welcome. The spontaneous women's demonstrations which erupted after the fall of the Taliban were quickly dispersed. The fledgling press, including a weekly women's magazine entitled *Ayina-i Zan* (Women's Mirror), is operating under the watchful eyes of a censorship office.

But there are rays of hope. All over Afghanistan girls are entering schools. The region of Andkhoy on the northwestern edge of the country is a telling illustration of the prevailing mood. Despite immense economic hardships the focus of the population of 80,000 is on schooling for their children. The NGO I work for has been able to reopen a girls' high school with one thousand students, which had been closed by the Taliban. The high school staff of thirty experienced women teachers, who had continued their work in home schools, have taken up their regular positions again. Another six thousand girls in Andkhoy have signed up for education. The potential for change is there, but it will need time and much support to grow. If anything gives me hope for the future, it is the bravery and resilience of the Afghan women. ❧

¹ Heike Bill, "Country without a State—Does it Really Make a Difference for the Women?" in *Afghanistan—Country without a State?*, edited by Christine Noelle-Karimi, Conrad Schetter and Reinhard Schlagintweit (Frankfurt: IKO, 2002).

² Sonia Shah, "Unveiling the Taliban: Dress Codes Are Not the Issue," www.institute-for-afghan-studies.org, August 1, 2001.

³ Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 530-533.

⁴ Renate Kreile, "Zan, zar, zamin—Frauen, Gold und Land: Geschlechterpolitik und Staatsbildung in Afghanistan," *Leviathan*, Vol. 3 (1997), pp. 398-406.

⁵ Kreile, p. 401.

Letters

Editor's Note:

King-Kok Cheung, professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, now a visiting professor at Hong Kong University, contributed "Pedagogies of Resonance," an essay about her experience teaching Asian American literature in Asia, to our February special issue on "Women Teaching Diaspora." She sent us this letter from Myanmar/Burma as a postscript to her essay.

"Pedagogies of Resonance" was written before my visit to Burma/Myanmar in January 2002, when I was invited to give a lecture and two workshops by the US Embassy's Office of Public Affairs. The country has been under military dictatorship since 1962, when Ne Win seized power. Though Ne Win resigned in July 1988, those who took over the government to strangle the pro-democracy movement that developed following the collapse of his regime were no less repressive. In 1989 the ruling military council, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), now the State Peace and Development Committee (SPDC), placed the leaders of the country's pro-democracy movement in prison and its most famous figure, Aung San Suu Kyi, under house arrest. Although the name of the country has been changed to Myanmar, most people in the US Embassy, in their reluctance to acknowledge the legitimacy of the existing government, continue to refer to it as Burma.

I had read Wendy Law-Yone's *Irrawaddy Tango*, a roman à clef about Ne Win, the megalomaniac president, and seen the film *Beyond Rangoon*. A doctoral student of mine has also been working on a dissertation on Burma, so I had a sense of the totalitarian and whimsical regime that is still in power. When asked to lecture in Rangoon/Yangon, I picked a topic that was as apolitical as possible—on the representation of Asians and Asian Americans in Hollywood—so as not to get my audience into trouble for attending a "subversive" talk. I had been told that there might be anywhere from thirty to sixty people in the audience. Instead, over a hundred people—young and old, female and male—attended. While pleased by the turnout, I wondered about giving a lecture that seemed so remote to the life of my audience.

Just before the lecture, I was invited to meet three prominent Burmese writers, two of whom are also doctors and all of whom had spent years in jail. My host explained to me that in that country the most intelligent students are required to study medicine regardless of their own interest or lack thereof. Dr. Ma Thida is a surgeon working in a charity hospital; I later learned that she gives over all her medical fees to the hospital. She continues to write after spending five and a half years in jail, though hardly anyone would dare to publish her work in Burma now. She was grateful for my offer to try to get her stories published in the US. When I asked whether publication there might still get her into trouble, she said, "Of course. But I wouldn't keep writing if I were afraid." That night I stayed up reading some of her stories in English translation and was moved by the disarming vignettes about the daily life of orphans, abandoned children and harassed citizens in Burma. I was also struck by the coded language. For example, the translator tells the reader in a footnote that "traveling without business" is "a euphemism for

being a political prisoner" and therefore a friend to the narrator, and "away on business" means that "the man is a soldier at the frontier" and therefore her enemy.

Later, in Mandalay, I met Daw Ah Mar, a famous 86-year-old journalist who along with her husband U Hla were editors of the newspaper *Ludu* (People). The couple and their son, a fiction writer, had all been imprisoned on account of their writing—Daw Ah Mar for a year, U Hla for three years and three months, and their son for eight years. U Hla died soon after his release. Daw Ah Mar gave me a book in Burmese titled *To My Beloved*—letters to her husband telling him what Myanmar was like since his death. When asked whether she is still writing, she nodded. "I don't want my pen to die before I die."

During my lecture I showed some clips from *Slaying the Dragon*, a video produced and directed by Deborah Gee about the images of Asian women on the American screen. I felt it was almost insulting to parade the Hollywood stereotypes of Oriental women as lustful vamps, conniving villainesses, or submissive China dolls in front of my Burmese audience. Fortunately, I had an opportunity to modify my talk in the subsequent workshops, when I used the topic of media stereotypes as a transition to a discussion of the need to redefine femininity and masculinity. I told the audience about my disagreement with influential male Asian American writers—notably the editors of *Aiiieeeee* and *The Big Aiiieeeee*—who view "originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity" as exclusively "masculine qualities," and my uneasiness with their attempts to assert their masculinity by reclaiming the "Asian Heroic Tradition," thereby reinforcing the association of masculinity with physical violence. I contended that selfless, caring and courageous actions should be appreciated alike in women and men so that a man who is attentive and nurturing should not be dismissed as "feminine" and a woman who is outspoken, insubordinate and fearless should not be denounced as a "dragon lady." I added that Asian women should reclaim this derogatory term, since a dragon is after all a positive symbol in many Asian cultures.

I had expressed most of these ideas in writing before, but they remained more or less abstract. In Burma I found living examples of these ideas. I trust that my audience could hear between my lines. When I was talking about the misguided association of masculinity and violence, I was alluding to their own government. When I expressed my wish to redefine the "dragon lady," I was thinking about the likes of Aung San Suu Kyi, who is often referred to obliquely as "the lady" by her friends and as "the prostitute" by her government. When I urged them to appreciate caring, spirituality and courage in both women and men, I was paying indirect tribute to the doctors and nurses who lost their lives in their attempts to save others during protests and demonstrations, to the self-abnegating Buddhists who refused to be corrupted by money or political power, to the students and teachers who continue to fight for democracy and freedom, to the writers whose pens continue to flow under the shadow of censorship and imprisonment, to women like Dr. Ma Thida and Daw Ah Mar.

King-Kok Cheung
Hong Kong