

LUDU DAW AMAR: A BURMESE LITERARY FIGURE
OF CONVICTION AND COURAGE

Myint Zan

Daw Amar—born November 29, 1915, Mandalay, Burma; died April 7, 2008, Mandalay, Burma

Ludu ('The People') Daw Amar a revered and eminent Burmese author died in Mandalay, Burma at the age of 92. She was respected throughout the country by people from all walks of life, not only for her writings but also for her courageous stand on literary, political and cultural causes.

Daw Amar (roughly translatable as Ms Firm, 'Daw' being an honorific for Burmese women) made her mark on the Burmese literary and political scene at a very young age. While still studying at Rangoon University she was one of the leading students who spearheaded what is now known as the second student strike of February 1936 against the University and British colonial authorities. In 1938, two years after the strike she published her first book, a translation of Maurice Collis' *Trials in Burma*. During her University days she met a journalist by the name of Maung (an honorific meaning 'lad') later U ('Mr.') Hla ('Mr. Handsome'). They married in 1939 and soon thereafter U Hla (a native of Lower Burma) moved to Mandalay, Burma's cultural capital and home town of Daw Amar. Except during the War years and the years they have spent in prison, the couple lived and worked in Mandalay for some forty years till *Ludu* U Hla's death on 7 August 1982.

As early as the 1950s both Hla and Amar were known by the honorific *Ludu*. For that was the name of the journal—and later a separate daily newspaper—that U Hla and Daw Amar co-founded in 1945 soon after the war ended. *Ludu* is translated into English as 'The People.' In Burmese the more commonly used term for the word 'People' is *Pyithu* which can be translated as 'citizens of the country.' The term *Ludu* has a more colloquial and in some sense more militant meaning—masses of the people. In 1946, the couple founded the *Ludu* daily newspaper which as its terms suggest took a left-wing editorial stance concerning both national and international affairs. It was the premier, and later, sole private newspaper in Mandalay until it was shut down permanently by the then Revolutionary government in July, 1967.

Ludu Daw Amar, with courage and fortitude, faced more than her fair share of the slings and arrows of misfortune. In the mid-1950s her

husband U Hla was sentenced to 3 years imprisonment for sedition. With his imprisonment she mainly ran the *Ludu* daily newspaper¹ as well as looking after her children who were growing up.

The leftist views of the *Ludu* couple were passed down to at least two of their offspring. Daw Amar's eldest son, Soe Win, while studying at Rangoon University 'went under ground' in 1963 to join the Communist rebels. (The Communist Party of Burma, CPB, was established in August 1939. Soon after independence, the CPB went underground and was outlawed in March 1948, as it still is today). Sadly during its 'internal purges' in the Pegu mountain ranges in then CPB's jungle headquarters, during the year 1968, Soe Win was killed. Daw Amar's second son, Pho Than Jaung was imprisoned without charge or trial for nearly six years from July, 1966 to May, 1972. On the verge of being rearrested in August, 1976, Pho Than Jaung managed to escape to join the CPB rebels; mother and son would never see each other again. On suspicion that they were in contact with Pho Than Jaung, both Daw Amar and U Hla were imprisoned in 1978-79. Daw Amar told me she was incarcerated for 'one year, one month and one day.' Her youngest son Nyein Chan, the writer Nyipulay, was convicted, like his late father, of sedition charges. Nyein Chan spent his prison years under a much more authoritarian regime and under much harsher conditions than his father did in the mid-1950s.²

In the *Ludu* newspaper both husband and wife had separate columns. U Hla's columns entitled, in translation, 'Motley of things that

¹ The October 1956 Hungarian uprising and the brutal response by the Soviet Communists took place while Daw Amar was one of the main editors of the *Ludu* daily newspaper in Mandalay when her husband U Hla was serving time in Rangoon's Insein prison. A brother-in-law of Daw Amar indicated to me that after the Soviets treacherous and ruthless suppression of the Hungarian people's (or *Ludu*) uprising in October, 1956, he urged Daw Amar to condemn or at least to critique the Soviets in the editorial columns of *Ludu* which she refused to do. Soon after the Sino-Soviet split began, around 1957, the *Ludu* newspaper firmly sided with the Chinese. In the 1960s the actions of "US imperialists" (mainly in Vietnam but in other parts of the world as well) and the "social imperialists" (the Soviets) were semi-regularly criticized by the *Ludu* editorials and Daw Amar's columns.

² Nyein Chan was imprisoned for more than eight years from December, 1990, to early 1999. His late father *Ludu* U Hla spent about three years in prison in the mid-1950s. As a political prisoner U Hla was able to move freely inside Insein jail and arrange sporting and literary events for the inmates. He was allowed to read books, write, and after his release from prison U Hla eventually published 9 books based on his prison experience and interviews with his fellow inmates.

Nyein Chan, on the other hand, spent nearly three times longer for even more spurious sedition charges. When Nyein Chan was imprisoned for eight years in the 1990s, he was able to write, clandestinely, only one short story that he managed to smuggle out of prison and published under a pseudonym.

[I] want to write about' was less ideological and softer in substance and tone than the columns Daw Amar authored under the heading 'Comments on the Moving World Events.' During the mid-1960s the *Ludu* editorials and especially Daw Amar's columns were scathing in their condemnation of President Lyndon Johnson's administration's policies in Vietnam. Daw Amar did not spare even her fellow countryman, then UN Secretary-General U Thant, accusing Thant of bias (in favour of the Americans of course) in his efforts to mediate the Vietnam conflict.

Daw Amar's literary contributions extended far beyond her newspaper and political contributions. In 1964, she won the national literary prize for her book, *Artistes Loved by the People*, a meticulous and informative study of Burmese musicians and artists, mainly those from Upper Burma, the country's cultural heartland. After the *Ludu* newspaper was closed in July, 1967, the orientation of her books shifted from political matters³ to topics concerning Burmese culture⁴ and later, when she was in her seventies and eighties, she wrote on social issues.⁵

In the past quarter century, before Daw Amar's death, hundreds of Burmese from around the country gathered on November 29 each year in a monastery near Mandalay to pay tribute to Daw Amar.⁶ In her later years Daw Amar was affectionately and reverentially known simply known as *Amei* (the Mother). Notwithstanding the adulation she had received especially in her later years, Daw Amar could be disarming and self-effacing. When I met Daw Amar in 2004, after not seeing her for more than 15 years, I mentioned that I had read a story about one of her birthday ceremonies at which she had been presented, through a proxy, by the Secretary of the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council, an expensive pen and that later she threw it away. She stated unself-consciously and disarmingly that it was not true, that she "dared not do it." But dare she did in so many other ways: always speaking her mind through print-media (she continued to write into her nineties by

³ For example one of the early books that she published in 1950 was entitled *Th.am.ada Ho Chi Minh* ("President Ho Chi Minh"). She also translated and published Edgar Snow's *The Other Side of the River* under the translated title of *Two Different Lives (Aspects) of China (Bawa Chinn Ma Tu Thi Tayoke Pyi)* in 1966.

⁴ For example, *Anyeint*, a book about Burmese traditional open air performances or "street theatre," published in two volumes in 1973.

⁵ For example, *Mother's Words of Old (Amei shaysaga)*, two volumes published in 1997 and a third volume in 2007.

⁶ For the last gathering, for Daw Amar's 92nd, and last birthday, the celebration was held in her eldest daughter's house in Mandalay due to restrictions imposed by the authorities.

dictating) and in broadcast interviews with Burmese language foreign radio stations up until virtually the last weeks of her life.

Living a long life as she did *Amei* Daw Amar had had many of her friends, contemporaries, and younger colleagues passed away during her long, productive and inspiring life. Throughout the years, she wrote obituaries and tributes to many of her elders, well-known international figures and junior colleagues. Among the world-figures she wrote about, Bertrand Russell (1872-1970)⁷ and Italo Calvino (1923-1985).⁸ Around 2003, Daw Amar's friends and colleagues collected and published her obituaries and tributes under the title, as translated, "Essays in Memories of (and nostalgia for) those (who have departed)."

When the late Burmese poet, Tin Moe (1933-2007),⁹ died in exile in Los Angeles on 22 January 2007, Daw Amar expressed in an interview her regrets and sorrow that Tin Moe¹⁰—who according to her was "in his prime"—"had to die at the age of 73" when she, according to her self-description, was a "useless old woman" who "did not die."¹¹ She thought she was "useless" because she could no longer write (even though in the

⁷ First published under the title, in translation, "Great (Revered) Teacher Bertrand Russell" (*Sayagyi* Bertrand Russell) within days of Russell's death on 2 February 1970. It was published in Mandalay's *Hanthawaddy* newspaper. Due to Russell's opposition to the Vietnam war, Russell was something of a hero to the *Ludu* couple and the left-wing Upper Burma writers of that time. During the 1960s, a portrait of Russell (but not of Marx, Engels, Lenin or Mao!) hang in the living room of the *Ludu* residence which also served as its publishing house. Later, in the March 1970 issue of *Oway* Journal, a journal edited by her University class mate U Nyo Mya, Daw Amar translated Bertrand Russell's essay "How Not to Grow Old" which U Nyo Mya published under the heading, "The Great Teacher Bertrand Russell's Formula to Produce Medicine for not Growing Old." U Nyo Mya had a war-time post graduate degree in journalism from the University of Chicago and held different political views from his class mate Daw Amar who had visited the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries in the 1950s but had never been to the United States. When U Nyo Mya died in October 1985, Daw Amar wrote an obituary for him, with the last lines stating, "May my friend Ko ("Brother") Nyo Mya rest in peace in a good abode."

⁸ First published in the November 1985 issue of *Sandar* magazine. U Hla was a compiler of thousands of folk tales of the indigenous peoples of Burma, and had also translated and published a few of Calvino's "folk tales."

⁹ For my obituary/tribute for Tin Moe, see Myint Zan, *Tin Moe: An Exiled Burmese Poet of Simplicity and Humanity*, 79 Bull. Burma Stud. Group 18 (2007).

¹⁰ Along with many others Upper Burma writers now in their age 70s, Tin Moe was a protege of the *Ludu* couple. He was poetry editor for a few years of the *Ludu* daily in the mid-1960s.

¹¹ Daw Amar's short tribute to Tin Moe, based on her comments to Burmese language foreign radio stations, can be found in a collection of tributes dedicated to Tin Moe entitled, in translation, *In Remembrance of the Lantern*; it was published in the United States a month after Tin Moe's death.

last few years of her life she continued to “write” by dictating to her granddaughters).

But, for once, *Amei* Daw Amar might have been too self-deprecating. Even in her last years she was not a “useless old woman.” Indeed, her life was nothing short of inspiring for all of us she has left behind.

In the very early years of Daw Amar’s literary and political career, more than seventy years ago during the February, 1936, Rangoon University student’s strike,¹² another prominent Burmese literary figure the late Minthuwun (1909-2004),¹³ gave her a poem, in his own hand writing, part of which read, in my adapted translation, as follows:

The crooked (way) is not the “straight” (up right) way
Supine-ness is not firmness
Don”t let the crookedness prevail over that of uprightness
Don”t let firmness become supine-ness

Daw Amar’s life is an ample testament that “the Mother” lived up to her name of principled firmness—a life indeed of kindness as well as conviction. For all those who mourn her passing, Daw Amar would continue to be a source of inspiration as well as a well-spring for courage.

¹² Around 1995 Daw Amar began to write her memoirs which were published initially in series of monthly installments in literary magazines. When she reached, chronologically, the stage in her memoirs where she left Mandalay college (around the years 1935-36) to attend Rangoon University, Daw Amar told me in early 2004, that the Military Intelligence (MI) personnel mentioned to her that though she could continue to write her memoirs she should not write any thing at all about the 1936 Rangoon University students’ strike (against the then British colonial authorities). (And if she did, the Burmese literary censors would delete it.)

The fact is that the military junta did not and does not want any mention of student strikes even though they occurred more than 70 years ago. The junta is, apparently, afraid that any mention of previous student strikes will “inspire” the current generation of students to go on similar missions. For more than a dozen years now, any mention of the 1936 student strikes as well as any student political movements, whether in the colonial era or after independence, is censored.

Daw Amar told me that after that preemptory and ‘preemptive’ censorship she stopped writing her memoirs altogether; if she could not write or mention one of the most important public events in her early career, then she would not write her memoirs.

Daw Amar’s memoirs, covering only up to the year 1935 when she left Mandalay college to attend Rangoon University, was published under the title *kyanma doe nge nge ga*. (*When We Were Young*).

¹³ For my obituary tribute to Minthuwun, see Myint Zan, *Minthuwun: A Tribute to a Gentle Burmese Poet*, 50 *Westerly* 179 (2005).