

# The role of women in ancient Myanmar Society

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## Abstract

Most of the countries all over the world, there is the discrimination between men and women that has been long rooted due to cultural and religious beliefs. Women in most countries not only in the East but also in the West do not have the equal rights and status like as men. Why can it be said that Myanmar women have equal rights as men in society since ancient times? This paper can contribute that Myanmar women have more awareness their role in the progress of society.

**Keywords:** (1) discrimination (2) equal rights (3) equality

## Introduction

The roles of women in Myanmar, Indian and Chinese societies are comparable in a lot of different ways. But what remains common is that women are not the ones with the power. Men control almost everything, including the women in some cases. In every society, women were expected to fulfill certain requirements and fulfill duties. But the values that are placed on women's role still vary from society to society.

A study of Myanmar history shows that although there was a patriarchal society, a lot of Myanmar women were not as bad as those of women in neighboring India and China.

There has been no hard and fast rule of gender discrimination in Myanmar anthropologically, culturally and religiously. All Myanmar ethnic nationalities give equal status and treatment to men and women. Women are treated not only as weaker sex but also as fairer gender. Fairer gender by own virtues has feminine modesty and feminine privilege to be respected and protected by men. Therefore, certain jobs, works and places are regarded as not stable for fairer gender. So, these are marked only for men not because of discrimination but out of respect and regard for fairer gender.

Throughout Myanmar history, women have enjoyed equal rights with men in the household and economy. In the eyes of law, men and women were equal. Marriage was a civil act, women retained their own names during marriage and divorce was a simple procedure with no stigma attached to either party.

More importantly, women have always had the right of inheritance. Women liked to give precedence to their own men in their own houses because by tradition women

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acknowledged them as head of the household until their death. This was offered to the husbands because women felt secure in their own rights and status.

In this paper, there can be seen the works of women and their status in society and the role of ancient women from Bagan Period to Kaungboun period.

### **The Role of Women in Ancient Myanmar Society**

The world around today, there can be seen many positions of women in every society. It seems that they have no proper rights and they are discriminated in various fields. Even in some western countries, women like the suffragettes had to fight for their rights. In some countries, most women have to struggle for their religious freedom.

Since ancient time, women in Myanmar have had a unique social status and respected women in Myanmar society. For many centuries, Myanmar women possessed “a high measure of independence” and had achieved their legal and economic rights. They have also religious freedom.

In Myanmar history, there are instances where women possessed positions of power and influences, for example, Rakhine Queen Kyawmpi who ruled Vesali, Queen Shin Saw Pu of Mon kingdom, The Daughter of Theingathu and Queen Phwar Saw who was famous queen of the Bagan Period. Nanmadaw Me Nu, Sinphyumashin and Supaya Lat in the Konbaung period were famous for their strong will and involvement in government.

In this paper, the roles of some famous women are presented to express the role of women in ancient Myanmar society.

### **The Role of Ancient Women in Bagan Period**

In ancient Myanmar history, there were many famous wives and influential queens of Myanmar kings. There were many famous queens in Bagan period. Some of them were obvious as for the ideal persons for women and their performances showed the important role of women in society. Among them, Theingathu Thamee, Thanbyin Minthamee, Queen Phwar Saw and Queen Shin Saw Pu were obvious.

#### **Theingathu Thamee**

Theingathu Thamee was a queen of the Bagan period. The exact name of Theingathu Thamee was unknown. According to the stone's records, she was the granddaughter of King Mahtilo of Bagan period. She was the queen consort of the King Narathiha Patae. Theingathu Thamee donated the construction of school in the year 628. She also offered the school fields, garden and the office to the monks who lived at the monastery. The records of all prayer could be found in the stone of Theingathu Thamee.

From the studying of the stone of Theingathu Thamee, she gave an honest declaration in a time when it was more common to inscribe ritualistic prayers such as wishing for *Nibbana*. Another unusual prayer was made by a minor queen of Narathiha Patae, who gave her name only as Theingathu Thamee, a noble women at court.

Moreover, her view in separating learning and insight to foresee seemed to mean that to be educated was not enough. One needs to have insightful reasoning power. Her remark upon forgetfulness and awareness was an acknowledgement of the Buddhist concept that those who live without awareness are like cattle that know nothing but to sleep, eat and fornicate. So, she can be said to be a true *Buddhist* and a true daughter of Bagan, who advocated harmony of living without anger, lust and envy.

There can be seen the status of ancient Myanmar women that they had the opportunity to administrate their own property even in marriage and had the right of inheritances equal to men since the times of the Bagan period.

#### **Thanbyin Minthamee**

In the history of Bagan period, some women were considered masterful as well as worthy example both *Lokī* and *Lokuttarā* in the history of literature. The appearance of women literates became the precursor of women poetess in Innwa period. Thanbyin Minthamee was a woman who was the oldest educated person in the beginning of the Bagan period.

As, King Kyaswa learned Three Baskets (*Tipitaka*) for nine folds, he taught the monks those folds back to seven times a day. One of the daughters of King Kyaswa like her father taught the *Buddhist* monks at the lecture even seven times a day. Thanbyin Minthamee taught the Buddhist monks at staying behind the wall.

Thanbyin Minthamee was the pioneer of ancient Myanmar sophisticated women. It shows that educated women can teach even the literatures even to the monks. It also proves that Myanmar women can perform at the development of education by their good qualities since ancient times.

#### **Queen Phwar Saw (1240–1296)**

Phwar Saw who was also known as Saw Hla Wun was a queen consort of kings Narathihapatae of the Bagan Dynasty. She was remembered as witty, wise and beautiful woman. And she was obvious for her political influences for decades during one of the most difficult periods in the country's history.

Saw Hla Wun was the most well-known of the three historical Bagan periods. Her epithet was known as Phwar Saw. The benevolent power of Queen Phwar Saw behind the

throne, shielding the public and the court from the irregular pronouncements of Narathihapatae. Phwar Saw was born from a farmer family in a small village. She was just a country girl and she was not a person of a palace where only the royal bloods could influence.

The prayer inscription of Queen Phwar Saw is a rare old ancient scripture in Myanmar literature. She was revered as an able woman leader in Myanmar history along with the Mon Queen Shin Saw Pu. Scottish writer Maurice Collic wrote about *Queen Saw*, the book called “*She was a Queen*”.

#### **Queen Shin Saw Pu (1394–1471)**

Shin Saw Pu was a queen of four successive Myanmar Kings. She ultimately arose to be a monarch of the kingdom of the Mon. Her father was Razadarit who was a king of the Mons in Hanthawaddy in lower Myanmar. At the age of 20, Shin Saw Pu was married to her cousin who died after five years of marriage. And her husband left her with two daughters and a son.

Queen Phwar Saw was the most outstanding queen in Bagan dynasty. She got ahead four kings who gave advice in the conduct of ruling, administration and display domestic welfare. She was the most outstanding queen of *Mon* Kingdom. The success of the throne of Queen Shin Saw Pu proved that Myanmar women are equal with man even in ruling the country. In the history of Myanmar, women never take inferior place either in private or public life. There is no discrimination. Myanmar women have taken their roles and performed their duties like men since Bagan Period.

#### **The Status of Sophisticated Women from Innwa Period to Konbaung Period**

The Myanmar saying goes “ယောကျ်ား စာမတတ်ရင် အကန်း၊ မိန်းမယတ္တန်း မခတ်တတ်ရင် အကျိုး” (An Uneducated man likes being blind, a girl without weaving skill is like being crippled) demonstrates traditional education for women who were beginning at home. Myanmar women transformed the former mode of education in the domestic skills. They were able to acquire and explore modern ideas, concepts and learning within the sphere of traditional values and live under in this light in their own society.

At ancient time, the majority of Myanmar women attained an education level of just being able to read and write. At the school age, girls together with boys went to the village monastery. There, they learned how to read and write the alphabets, work on mathematics, recite the *Mangala Sutta*, *Singalo Vada Suttan*, and the *Eleven Paritta Suttan*. They were taught up to the age of thirteen. This level of education was probably equivalent to the present basic primary level. Monastic education continued after Myanmar was

colonized by the British and during that period girls from wealthy families were able to continue to study. Sir George Scott who had the pen name Shwe Yoe said that

Till the English came and took the country, everybody went to the *phonn-gyee kyaung* (monastery) <sup>1</sup>

After reaching this level of education, the ancient Myanmar girls whether they passed or not had to leave the monastery and stay at home. At that time, the Myanmar society did not allow girls over thirteen to continue their studies. However, there was an exception. Not all girls had to stop their formal learning. Princess and daughters of governors and officials from the palace had opportunities to continue their studies.

There were many famous women writers in Myanmar culture. Among these poetesses or women writers, most of all were obvious and they were presented in this paper.

#### **Rakhinethu Nandwin Mi Nyo (1513–1563)**

Rakhinethu Nandwin Mi Nyo was a famous poetess like Inwathu Nandwin Mi Phyu in the days of King Si Thu Kyaw Htin who was ascended the throne of Inwa in Myanmar era-(913).<sup>1</sup> Among the literatures that were written by Mi Nyo, except “Among Mountain” Self-Praise, she described her good qualities boastfully. It was famous in the world of literatures.

In those days, there were no famous people for their mental ability like them because of the unpleasant political situations. King Si Thu Kyaw Htin did not rule the country for a long term. When he was governing the country, there were many political problems and wars. So, he had no time to endeavor the country for the development. He was not able to strengthen the improvement of art and literature. Mi Nyo had written Self-Praise Ya Du “Among Mountain”.

From the studying of the literatures of Nandwin Mi Nyo, it can be seen that she perfected the exaltation of *Sila*, *Samādhi* and *Wisdom*. She was the person of good morality. And then, there could be found that ancient Myanmar women had the capacity to produce good literature and poetry like men.

#### **Yawai Shin Htwe (1568–1618)**

Myanmar women have cherished and preserved the good customs and traditions since ancient times. The behaviors of Myanmar women performed and the good traditions and customs that were preserved may clearly be seen in the literature over the ages. The

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<sup>1</sup> U Shway Yoe, (1963). His Life and Notions .p.19

<sup>1</sup> ဒေါ်မိမိလေး ။(၂၀၀၃) အမျိုးသမီးစာဆိုလောကနှင့်ဘဝကြေးမုံ၊ မာတိကာ (၁)။

(55) kinds of knotted hair from the classic choral song of Yawai Shin Htwe of the Innwa period can be said to be the hair styles of Bagan women.

Yawai Shin Htwe was obvious as a forefront poetess in the world of women literate in Innwa Period. She was known as An Gyinn poetess in the world of literates. Some scholars accepted that the An Gyinn of Yawai Shin Htwe were the oldest works in the literature.

The Twelve Months Bachelor Season Ya Du was one of the remarkable Ya Du among her works. Yawai Shin Htwe continued to write the (55) kinds of knotted hair styles of Bagan women. Before (1000) era, Yawai Shin Htwe recorded different forms of the coiled knot of Myanmar women.<sup>3</sup> Myanmar women hollowed out their hairs. As Yawai Shin Htwe recorded and preserved the important customs and traditions of Myanmar women, it can be clearly seen as the good customs from Innwa to Kaungbong dynasties.

#### **Hlaing -Hteik -Khaung- Tin (1833-1875)**

Princess Hlaing -Hteik -Tin (1833-1875) was a gifted poetess and musician as well as one of the most beautiful women at the Mandalay Court. She was born in 1833. Like her mother as a romantic poetess Hlaing created a new class of songs known as Baw Lals. These songs expressed her grief at the absence and neglect of her husband. She also wrote the Wizayakaryi Pyazat and Indawu Pyazat.<sup>4</sup>

Her Yeyamon Patpyo is a lullaby for her infant son, Tantabin *Prince*, using common lullabies such as the Shwe-Byine-Nyo and the Kazaunbin. There is no doubt that Hlaing Hteik Khaung Tin who also composed many Tay Htats, Lay Sits and Ya Du ranked with Mya Wati Mingyi U Sa in her composition of Patpyos and all credit for her creation of Baw-Lals.

The poems of Princess Hlaing-Hteik\_Khaung-Tin are like the small flowers- gems. They are stabbing realistic and yet ineluctably exotic. Her poems bear the stamp of a unique genius.

#### **Taung Twin Shin Nyein Mal**

In the world of Myanmar literature, Yawai Shin Htwe was famous for as An Gyinn poetess and Hlaing -Hteik -Khaung -Tin was also famous for as the poetess of Baw Lal. Taung Twin Shin Nyein Mal was also famous for Aing Gyinn. In the works of Aing Gyin, Shin Nyein Mal is the oldest person. There is no exactly record about the biography of Shin Nyein Mal.

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<sup>3</sup> ဒေါ်မိမိလေး ။ (၂၀၀၃) အမျိုးသမီးစာဆိုလောကနှင့်ဘဝကြေးမုံ၊ စာ-၁၃၇။

<sup>4</sup> ဒဂုန်ခင်ခင်လေး၊ (၂၀၁၇)၊ အမျိုးသမီးစာဆိုလောကနှင့်ဘဝကြေးမုံ။ တတိယအကြိမ်၊ စာ-၁၆၁။

The Aing Gyins that were written by Shin Myein Mal are the literatures about the life of the ordinary person. In the world of men poet, Wun Gyi Padethayaza's Trajin are the best literature to illustrate the manifestation of the life of the ordinary class. And then, in the world of women laureates, there is no better Aing Gyin like the works of Shin Nyein Mal to describe the life of the ordinary person.

Taung Twin Shin Nyein Mal was one of the obvious laureates in the Nyaung Yan Dynasty. She was the rare woman laureate in that age. From the studying of her writings, like men poets she possesses the ability to illustrate not only the love story but also the poem of pleasantness of the environment and the beauty of nature.

So, from the studying of the works of the women laureates in ancient Myanmar society, the abilities and knowledge of ancient Myanmar women can be seen. In addition, like men they can perform their duties like in every field of society such as politics, social, economic and even in the field of literatures. So, women should not be underestimated. The roles of Myanmar women have been obvious in the progress society since ancient times.

### **Conclusion**

For many centuries, even before recorded history, women have equal chance for a high measure of independence in our society. In the family, both husbands and wives are expected to share equal responsibility and discharge their duties with equal dedication. The husband used to consider the wife as a friend, a companion and a partner.

During the days of Myanmar Kings, women were frequently appointed to high position in the office and became leaders of a village, chieftains and even ruled as queens. So, it can be said that women have played a role in the fields of administrations and government service since ancient times. There were the most outstanding, reigning and ruling Queens. They had succeeded the thrones like kings. It proves that Myanmar women have equal chance with men even to rule the country. It also shows that Myanmar women have equal opportunity to lead in the affairs of politics.

In business, small, medium or great, in politics, in education, in freedom movement and in war, Myanmar women always take their roles. So also, there have been found also women writers since ancient times.

In some other cultures in the world, there is discrimination between men and women. Such discrimination can be found not only in the West but also in the East. But, in

Myanmar culture, since ancient times, women have had a high measure of independence more than other women in neighboring countries such as India and China.

“The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world”. This old saying is unquestionably true for Myanmar society. In Myanmar family, mother is the Queen though father is the supporter of the family and mainly responsible for earning. Although there was a traditional Myanmar saying “The hen’s crow will never bring the dawn”, there were obvious that women who attained the position of power and influenced on the affairs of politics, social affairs and economy.

Therefore, it can be said that most of Myanmar women hold a unique desirable position in society. So, from the studying of the women’s literature works and their performance in political and social activities, it shows that the status of Myanmar women was not bad as other societies in the East and in the West. And then, they did enjoy a certain amount of rights and freedom.

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မြန်မာဘာစာကျမ်းကိုးစာရင်း

၁။ စောမုံညင်း ။ (၂၀၀၈) ။ မြန်မာအမျိုးသမီး တတိယအကြိမ်၊ ရန်ကုန်မြို့။ စိတ်ကူးချိုချိုပုံနှိပ်တိုက်။

၂။ ဒဂုန်ခင်ခင်လေး။ (၂၀၁၇)။ အမျိုးသမီး အနုပညာရှင်များ၊ တတိယအကြိမ်၊ ရန်ကုန်မြို့။ စိတ်ကူးချိုချို ပုံနှိပ်တိုက်။

၃။ ဖေမောင်တင်ဦး။ (၂၀၁၃)။ မြန်မာစာပေသမိုင်း၊ ဧကဒသမအကြိမ်။ ရန်ကုန်မြို့ ။ ရာပြည့်စာအုပ်တိုက်။

၄။ ဖိုးကျား (အမျိုးသားပညာဝန်)၊ ဦး။ (၂၀၀၈) ။ မြန်မာ့ ဂုဏ်ရည်စာပေ၊ ဒုတိယအကြိမ်၊ ရန်ကုန်မြို့။ စိတ်ကူးချိုချို ပုံနှိပ်တိုက်။

၅။ မိမိလေး၊ ဒေါ်။ (၂၀၀၃)။ အမျိုးသမီးစာဆိုလောကနှင့်ဘဝကြေးမုံ ရန်ကုန်မြို့။ ပညာရေးဝန်ကြီးဌာန။

၆။ မြန်မာစာအဖွဲ့။ (၁၉၉၁)။ မြန်မာစာညွန့်ပေါင်းကျမ်း၊ ပထမတွဲ၊ ဒုတိယအကြိမ်၊ ရန်ကုန်မြို့။ မြန်မာ့အလင်း သတင်းစာတိုက်နှင့် ဂါဒီယန် သတင်းစာတိုက်။

၇။ မြန်မာစာအဖွဲ့။ (၁၉၉၁)။ မြန်မာစာညွန့်ပေါင်းကျမ်း၊ ဒုတိယတွဲ၊ ဒုတိယအကြိမ်၊ ရန်ကုန်မြို့။ မြန်မာ့အလင်း သတင်းစာတိုက်နှင့် ဂါဒီယန် သတင်းစာတိုက်။

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