

**Ma Ma Lay, *A Man Like Him*, translated by Ma Thanegi, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, 2008, viii + 204 pp.**

reviewed by *Tharaphi Than, Teaching Fellow, SOAS, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG. E-mail: tt3@soas.ac.uk.*

One of Burma's finest authors, Ma Ma Lay, wrote as many as 26 short stories and 13 novels and yet only two novels have been made available to an international audience. A Russian version of *Not Out of Hate* was first published in Russia and then in the Soviet Republic of Uzbekistan in 1984 and sold more than 80,000 copies in the latter alone. An English version by Margaret Aung-Thwin came out in 1991.

*A Man Like Him* has now been translated into English by Ma Thanegi, and Robert Taylor has written an introduction, setting the scene of late colonial Burma for the narrative. The book is a biography of Ma Ma Lay's late husband, U Chit Maung, a well known journalist and founder of *Journal Kyaw* magazine, and it could be regarded as a wife's post-humous gift, as promised to her husband when he was alive. In fact, she filed all the letters from her husband in different categories – Burmese, English, poems and such – and documented their lives in detail, but much was lost in the bombing at the end of the war.

The book is divided into 37 small chapters, following the life of U Chit Maung chronologically from the time the couple first came to know each other to the day he died. The book also includes short essays by U Chit Maung on the Burma Rebellion and the AFPFL, hence offering more than merely a biography of a journalist. It further provides a rich, first-hand account of Burmese courtship, the world of the Burmese print media, the chaos at the onset of the war, the Indian-Burmese riots in Rangoon, and the underground movement during the Japanese Occupation. There are also glimpses of Burma's political figures, including Aung San, Ba Maw, U Saw, Bo Letya and Than Tun.

Burma's history between 1936 and 1946 is the backdrop to an extraordinary story of a loving husband, talented journalist and selfless nationalist.

Nicknamed 'monk', U Chit Maung led an almost ascetic life, yet fell deeply in love with a 'modern' girl, Ma Ma Lay. She came to know him through a letter she wrote to *Myamma Alin*, in response to a letter from the women's committee of her town, criticizing her for playing badminton with boys. He expressed his love for her through traditional Burmese poems as well as some in English, and Ma Ma Lay, herself a nationalist, decided to marry him, in the belief that if she could take care of him and change his unhealthy lifestyle, the country would benefit. It will perhaps help if the reader puts him-/herself in the context of the mid- to late 1930s, in the gathering storm of the Burmese nationalist movement, to appreciate the text fully.

The fact that U Chit Maung did not aspire to become a politician or seek fame could also be read in the context of the nationalist movement, during which many individuals tried to win public support as journalists and editors first, before transferring their energies to politics. U Ba Pe, U Tin and U Htun Pe who edited *Thuriya* [*The Sun*], *Myamma Alin* [*Light of Burma*, which later became *New Light of Burma*] and *Htun Daily* stand out. Against this tradition, U Chit Maung, as Ma Ma Lay portrays him, was a man who did not aspire to become a politician, although he was undertaking top-level political work behind the scenes. He was a man who believed that the pen could change the country as much as politics sought to do.

When the book was first published in 1947, Ma Ma Lay feared that such a biography would be premature for a Burmese audience, and doubted whether it was appropriate to write publicly about their private affairs. Indeed, such a biography was rare and the open discussion of love and devotion between husband and wife was much ahead of its time. But her desire to deliver on the promise she had made to her husband overcame these reservations. And her love for U Chit Maung was the dominant theme of the book – so much so that one cannot help but wonder whether the picture painted of her husband is achieved at some cost to her own standing. Did she downplay herself to elevate her husband's position? After all, she was a talented writer herself and the main driving force behind the success of the *Journal Kyaw* magazine; and indeed, she enabled U Chit Maung to realize his dreams and his self-worth. The classic view of Burmese women as powerful and independent could perhaps be challenged by the evidence from this book,

for Ma Ma Lay positioned herself beneath and below her husband, as if it were expected of her both by tradition and religion.

The translator, Ma Thanegi, has not only translated but also edited the original. The fact that she has deleted some text is frustrating. The underground intelligence chapter suffers a drastic cut. The paragraphs on the underground work and the reference books used by U Chit Maung when he wrote his history of Burma are also edited out. Some of the letters from U Chit Maung to Ma Ma Lay, poems recited by U Chit Maung to Ma Ma Lay, and Ma Ma Lay's comparison of Burmese marriage to Western marriage have also been removed. It would be interesting to be told why these cuts were made. Ma Thanegi does explain, however, why she chose to use post-1988 place names, for example, 'Myanmar' instead of 'Burma'. Aside from these shortcomings, the book is a rich vernacular source for scholars of Burma, and it certainly contributes considerably to the study of Burma.

## Reference

Phyu Phyu Thin (1981), 'Bibliography of Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay', a Master's thesis submitted for library science diploma, Rangoon University, Rangoon.

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