

Multiple Discourses:  
The Mobilization of Trauma Narratives  
within Burma's Transnational Advocacy Network

by

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## ABSTRACT

Since the 1988 uprising, a transnational advocacy network has formed around the issue of democracy and human rights in Burma. Within this transnational advocacy network, personal narratives of trauma have been promulgated in both international and oppositional news media and human rights reports. My thesis critically analyzes the use of the trauma narrative for advocacy purposes by the transnational advocacy network that has emerged around Burma and reveals the degree to which these narratives adhere to a Western, individualistic meta-narrative focused on political and civil liberties.

Examining the “boomerang” pattern and the concept of marketability of movements, I highlight the characteristics of the 1988 uprising and subsequent opposition movement that attracted international interest. Reflecting on the psychological aspects of constructing trauma narratives, I then review the scholarship which links trauma narratives to social and human rights movements. Using a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis, I subsequently explain my methodology in analyzing the personal narratives I have chosen.

Beyond a theoretical discussion of trauma narratives and transnational advocacy networks, I analyze the use of personal narratives of activists involved in the 1988 uprising and the emergence of Aung San Suu Kyi's life story as a compelling narrative for Western audiences. I then explore the structure of human rights reports which situate personal narratives of trauma within the framework of international human rights law. I note the differences in the construction of traumatic narratives of agency and those of victimization. Finally, using Cyclone

Nargis as a case study, I uncover the discursive divide between human rights and humanitarian actors and their use of personal narratives to support different discursive constructions of the aid effort in the aftermath of the cyclone. I conclude with an appeal to a more reflexive approach to advocacy work reliant on trauma narratives and highlight feminist methodologies that have been successful in bringing marginalized narratives to the center of human rights discussions.

## DEDICATION

To Myingyan Bakhet

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

Under the rule of a military dictatorship since 1962, the Burmese people throughout the past five decades have engaged in acts of resistance with every decade seeing the emergence of a new generation of activists. Whether concerning political, human rights or humanitarian issues, such activists have sought to challenge the military regime's misrule of the country. When the currency was devalued in 1987, causing severe hardship for the population, university students began to organize demonstrations which led to an uprising in 1988. In the aftermath of this uprising, which ended with the death of over 3,000 protestors and a severe crackdown, the cause of democracy and human rights in Burma<sup>1</sup> began to attract the interest of the international community (Fink, 2009, p. 52). Burmese and international activists have coalesced to form a transnational advocacy network in the intervening decades.

Seeking to raise awareness about Burma and influence the policy of foreign governments and intergovernmental entities such as the United Nations, the transnational advocacy network has recognized the emotive power of the personal narratives<sup>2</sup> of Burmese activists and victims of human rights violations

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<sup>1</sup> In 1989, the military regime changed the name of the country to Myanmar (Fink, 2009, p. 5). While in the Burmese language, the terms "Burma" and "Myanmar" are both similarly used, within the transnational advocacy network there is an insistence on using the term "Burma" as a sign of rejection of the military regime's authority.

<sup>2</sup> I use the terms "personal narrative," "trauma narrative" and "personal account" interchangeably throughout my thesis. Following Polletta's lead, I recognize the

in advocacy efforts. As such, these personal narratives have been collected and promulgated in various forums in the years since 1988. Whether in news media, reports, testimony before the United Nations, or other venues, personal narratives serve to support multiple discourses concerning the situation in Burma. My thesis critically analyzes the mobilization of personal narratives by the transnational advocacy network that has arisen around the issue of democracy and human rights in Burma and demonstrates the degree to which these accounts align themselves to a Western,<sup>3</sup> individualistic meta-narrative focused on political and civil liberties.

In Chapter 1, I discuss Keck and Sikkink (1998) and Bob (2005) and their conceptions of transnational advocacy networks, paying particular attention to the framework that Bob offers when considering the ability of local movements to attract the attention of international actors.<sup>4</sup> Applying this framework to Burma, I

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need to pay “close attention to what distinguishes narratives from other discursive forms” (p. 2). I identify such narratives or accounts in my thesis as any sustained recounting of biographical information or life experiences with a particular focus on those related to traumatic events.

<sup>3</sup> I recognize the limitations of the term “Western.” Taking note of Mohanty (2003), I do not use the term as a “geographically or spatially defined category,” but rather to refer to “political and analytic sites and methodologies used” (p. 270). The cannon of literature concerning international human rights law, social movement and trauma studies in which I situate my thesis is largely the product of observations and analysis of Euro-American societies. Both “Western” and Burmese activists are capable of using “Western” analyses and methodologies which is important to note when discussing transnational advocacy networks.

<sup>4</sup> The use of the terms “local,” “movement” and “international actors” all can be problematized. However, in my thesis, I use the term “local” when referring to Burmese movements or organizations; I use the term “movement” largely in reference to the solely Burmese opposition to the military regime. I use the term



then note the characteristics of the Burmese democracy movement which led to the interest of international actors and the subsequent formation of a transnational advocacy network around the cause of democracy and human rights in Burma.

Chapter 2 seeks to situate the personal narratives examined in my thesis within the discourse of trauma and trauma narratives. Drawing on the work of Scarry (1985), Herman (1992) and White and Epston (1990), I discuss the ideas behind the importance of victims of trauma constructing fluid narratives of their trauma, and the inherent political nature of this process. The political use of the trauma narrative whether in social or human rights movements is recognized in the work of Davis (2002) and Schaffer and Smith (2004). The transition of the trauma narrative from the personal to the public sphere is thus shown.

In Chapter 3, I outline my methodology for my thesis using Michel Foucault's approach to discourse analysis, observing the ability of both the discourse of international human rights law and the discourse of trauma to repress the emergence of local knowledge and practices. Choosing to narrow the focus of my thesis to a brief examination of the personal narrative as found in news media, I then offer a more elaborate analysis of the structure of the human rights report, calling on the work of Dudai (2009) to serve as a guide in this endeavor.

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“international actors” to encompass international human rights, humanitarian and political actors whether they function as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governmental or intergovernmental entities. Though, it should be noted there is a distinction between international NGOs and governmental and intergovernmental entities. International NGOs operate inside the transnational advocacy network while governmental and intergovernmental entities are the target of the network.

Considering the personal accounts that emerged from the 1988 protests, Chapter 4 focuses in particular on the life story of Aung San Suu Kyi who has become the leading opposition figure in the country. It is through Aung San Suu Kyi's life story that many people have taken an interest in the Burmese democracy movement. Her ability to operate in both Western and Burmese contexts has uniquely situated her to receive the support of the international community. The telling of her story as one of good versus evil, of a lone woman fighting the military dictatorship, while compelling for international audiences, obscures the contributions of other Burmese activists and the complexity of the situation in Burma, as Aung San Suu Kyi herself has observed.

As many Burmese activists fled the country after the 1988 uprising, the border areas, particularly between Burma and Thailand, became home to local human rights organizations formed with the support of international donors. Gradually, the focus solely on political activism shifted to include a focus on human rights documentation and advocacy. It is thus that the human rights report emerged as a key document for the transmission of information from local human rights organizations to international actors. In Chapter 5, I examine the structure of the human rights report, noting its strict adherence to the standards of international human rights law. The discursive use of international human rights law within such reports serves to marginalize the personal narratives which constitute evidence of human rights violations.

Chapter 6 uses the human rights reports and statements that emerged after Cyclone Nargis to demonstrate the contested narratives that arose between the

human rights and humanitarian spheres. While a spatial distinction can not be decisively drawn in regards to the discourse concerning Burma, many issues are filtered through either a human rights lens which is used by the transnational advocacy network for Burma, or a humanitarian lens used primarily by international humanitarian organizations inside the country. The multiple discourses that result are then supported by a careful selection of personal narratives and claims to an authentic Burmese voice. I seek in this chapter to highlight this practice as exemplified in a moment of crisis, and to contend that there is room for multiple narratives and discourses to exist simultaneously.

In concluding, I seek to raise the possibility that feminist methodologies may offer insight into achieving a more ethical and egalitarian collection and dissemination of personal narratives within transnational advocacy networks. While recognizing the value of the current advocacy model, I push for a reflexive approach that recognizes the inherent power differential between Burmese and international actors and the need to ensure that the public revelation of trauma and the use of this revelation as advocacy be handled with greater acknowledgement of the sovereignty of each individual's personal narrative and a full accounting of the effectiveness of such an endeavor.

## Chapter 2

### BURMA'S TRANSNATIONAL ADVOCACY NETWORK

A transnational advocacy network has arisen around the issue of democracy and human rights in Burma. A discussion of how such a transnational advocacy network has come into being foregrounds subsequent chapters addressing the mobilization of the personal narratives of those engaged in the social movement inside the country and those who have fallen victim to the military regime's myriad of human rights violations. Using Keck and Sikkink's (1998) concept of the "boomerang" pattern as well as Bob's (2005) notion of marketing rebellion, this chapter demonstrates the appeal of supporting the Burmese opposition movement to international non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Keck and Sikkink (1998) have defined transnational advocacy networks as "those relevant actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse and dense exchanges of information and services" (p. 2). Once a movement establishes a connection with international NGOs, a "boomerang" pattern emerges (p. 13). In this pattern, movements or NGOs in a country with a repressive government that fails to respond to the needs of its people are blocked from engaging in direct advocacy efforts and look outward to find support from international NGOs. These movements or local NGOs are able to provide international NGOs with the information needed about human rights violations or other issues which the international NGOs in turn use to develop campaigns targeting other governments or intergovernmental entities

such as the United Nations with the expectation that such bodies will pressure the offending State to halt its abuses.

When the Burmese people took to the streets in August 1988 to protest against military rule, no transnational advocacy network yet existed for Burma. The protests were organized and led by university students in the country. Fortuitously, the uprising in Burma coincided with the rise of the international human rights movement in the late 1980s and early 90s (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, p. 90). While the history of how Burmese activists sought out or were sought out by international actors has not been officially detailed and is therefore beyond the scope of this chapter, many characteristics of the Burmese democracy movement attracted the interest of international advocacy NGOs and led to the formation of a number of solidarity organizations based in neighboring and Western countries forming a transnational advocacy network that adhered to the “boomerang” model in advocacy efforts (Dale, 2008).

In examining the success of the Mexican Zapatistas and Nigeria’s Ogoni movement, Bob (2005) highlights several characteristics of movements that manage to gain the support of international NGOs. Bob identifies movements, international advocacy NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch and international solidarity NGOs such as those NGOs focused exclusively on a particular country or group of people as being engaged in a supply and demand relationship. The ability of a movement to attract the interest of international NGOs is based on certain marketable features that resonate with international NGOs. With Bob’s framework in mind, I seek below to highlight a

few of the distinctive characteristics of the Burmese movement for democracy and human rights which likely attracted the attention of international actors and resulted in the formation of a transnational advocacy network.

Central to a local social movement's marketability is the presence of a strong, charismatic leader who is able to bridge the divide between the local character of a particular social movement and the international conception of how activists in a developing country should carry out their movements (Bob, 2005, p. 46). Aung San Suu Kyi fulfills this role easily for the Burmese movement for democracy and human rights. As the daughter of Aung San, the Burmese independence hero, Aung San Suu Kyi was able to command the respect of the Burmese people and came to the fore of the democracy movement after encouragement by university students (Fink, 2009, p. 57). In addition to attracting a strong following among the Burmese, she was able to gain worldwide attention owing in some part to her having grown up outside the country after her father was assassinated and thus acquiring an understanding of Western norms and practices (p. 62). Her perfect command of English and ability to communicate her message directly to her Western supporters likewise ensured a sustained degree of interest in her cause (Bob, 2005, p. 47). When she won the Nobel Prize in 1991, her place in the Western consciousness was assured.

The presence of a charismatic leader can allow groups to present their struggle as one of good versus evil by simplifying the complexities of a particular situation (Bob, 2005, p. 30). Such a "framing" tactic (Snow & Benford, 1992) has been applied in Burma where Aung San Suu Kyi has often been portrayed as a

lone woman fighting the military dictatorship. When one looks beyond Aung San Suu Kyi's story, there is yet still the effort to portray the struggle as one between opposition activists and the regime. These simplifying actions likewise lead a movement to shoehorning their cause into established "universal" human rights narratives (Bob, 2005, p. 31).

Further, the ability of a movement to culturally, tactically, ethically and organizationally "match" international NGOs' expectations ensures a greater likelihood of a transnational advocacy network forming (Bob, 2005, p. 26). When movements are able to adopt structures that are similar to international NGOs, they are more likely to gain support (p. 39). After the 1988 uprising in Burma, as many Burmese students fled to Thailand and made contact with international NGOs, their capabilities as urban, educated and articulate youth to adapt to the organizational expectations that came with international support guaranteed the continued interest of international NGOs (Brooten, 2004, p. 10). This adaptability led to a professionalization of movement activities in Thailand on the border as the social movement transformed itself into a human rights movement (p. 12).

The interest in developing Burmese human rights organizations led to increased trainings aimed at ensuring the information collected by such organizations would be presented in a fashion consistent with international human rights standards. Trainings and workshops conducted by international actors ensured that the message of the Burmese movement adhered to internationally favored ideals, focusing on political and civil rights (Brooten, 2004, p. 11). Further, the fact that the 1988 uprising was a non-violent uprising brutally

suppressed by the military regime guaranteed the activists international sympathy while also wedding them to this non-violent tactic for future protests (Bob, 2005, p. 36). Admiration for the Burmese activists' non-violent ways has encouraged international donors to provide support for the movement for activities that are seen as potentially leading to the next non-violent uprising (National Endowment for Democracy, 2011). This practice is in keeping with a global trend after the Cold War of Western governments and institutions providing support for civil society and democracy promotion abroad (Ottoway & Carothers, 2000).

As international NGOs became more involved in supporting the democracy and human rights movement in Burma, they began to look for activist targets outside the country that would be easier to challenge than the Burmese military regime. Creating a villain that can be targeted by activists in the developed world is particularly appealing to international NGOs (Bob, 2005, p. 32). It is thus that the late 1990s saw numerous campaigns aimed at boycotting multinational companies that continued to do business in Burma. These boycotts buoyed efforts to have sanctions levied against Burma. Campaigns likewise targeted oil and gas giants such as Unocal and Total whose construction of pipelines in Burma has led to forced labor among other human rights violations (Dale, 2008, p. 17). The ability of a movement to provide activists in the developed world concrete actions and victories is thus key to maintaining interest in a movement and contributing to a greater sense of solidarity within a transnational advocacy network.



While both Keck and Sikkink (1998) and Bob (2005) offer insight into the nature of transnational advocacy networks and their influence, little attention is given to an analysis of the efficacy of such networks in achieving their stated goals. While movements in developing countries may be successful in gaining the support of international NGOs, the ability of such international NGOs to convince other governments to pressure the offending State can be called into question. While Burmese activists have positioned themselves well in relation to international NGOs, and these international NGOs have undertaken numerous campaigns to encourage governments and intergovernmental entities to pressure the Burmese military regime, there has been little positive change in Burma in the past twenty-two years. This lack of change problematizes the work of international NGOs.

Campaigns geared towards the citizens and governments of countries with minimal influence over Burma use the time and resources of activists that could otherwise be focused on supporting individual and local organizations working inside the country to bring about change. An example of this can be seen in the “Burma: It Can’t Wait” campaign orchestrated by the U.S Campaign for Burma in which Hollywood celebrities made short YouTube videos to raise awareness about Burma (Fink, 2009, p. 264). The videos were released every day for 30 days in May 2008, the same month Cyclone Nargis hit Burma leaving hundreds of thousands dead in its wake. While the U.S. Campaign for Burma and other international organizations were responsive to the needs of the Burmese people after Cyclone Nargis, and a case can be made that such videos brought needed

attention to Burma, this campaign starkly reflected the incongruent nature of international advocacy and local reality.

In the following chapters, I look at this incongruity by exploring the power of international human rights discourse and discourses of trauma which obscure local knowledge and the potential emergence of local strategies to address human rights violations. Linking discourse to the personal narratives of Burmese activists and victims of human rights violations gives rise to “the tension between the discourse as a universally substantive language of morals and the discourse as a formal structure for the preservation of the right of individuals and local communities, cultures and traditions to being and self-expression” (Langlois, 2001, p. 165). Slaughter (2007) observes that individuals join the human rights community by “narrating the mandatory story of incorporation as if it were the result of personally orchestrated desire and design” (p. 251). As shown in this chapter, Burmese activists have joined the international human rights community, linking with international NGOs and the attending discourse to form a transnational advocacy network. It is thus that an examination of the way that Burmese activists have narrated their way into the international human rights sphere through personal accounts of trauma is in order.

## Chapter 3

### TRAUMA NARRATIVES WITHIN TRANSNATIONAL ADVOCACY NETWORKS

Along with the rise of transnational advocacy networks, the past few decades has seen an increased interest in personal narratives of trauma. Luckhurst (2008) traces the genealogy of trauma and this present day interest in trauma narratives. Western audiences in particular have grown accustomed to perceiving the public sharing of personal traumas as cathartic and an important step in the healing process. The field of trauma studies has offered insight into the construction of a coherent narrative of one's traumatic experience as necessary for healing to begin. This construction of a fluid account of trauma in some cases overlaps with the use of narrative in social and human rights movements, leaving the traumatized "other" to engage in public acts of revelation for the purpose of inspiring Western individuals to action. I aim in this chapter to bring together the linguistic, psychological and social and human rights movement scholarship concerning the public sharing of stories of trauma, tracing the link between private healing, public witnessing and political advocacy through narrative.

Herman (1992) observes that "the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma" (p. 1). Many scholars have subsequently shown that those who have endured trauma who are able to construct a narrative of their experience of trauma are often better adjusted after their traumatic experience (Amir, Stafford, Freshman, & Foa, 1998; Beaudreau, 2007). They are presumably able to

heal once they are able to speak of their trauma in a chronological and logical way. However, Michael White, drawing from the work of Michel Foucault, has noted that individuals become subjects through discourse and in turn “narrate themselves in particular ways that they may experience as profoundly distressing or pathological” (Kennedy & Wilson, 2003, p. 123). White notes that such hegemonic discourses are not successful all the time, and counter discourses or alternative stories then emerge. White and Epston (1990) have developed a narrative therapy which avoids a totalizing discourse and directly confronts the power relations and differentials within a therapeutic encounter. They likewise recognize that “life is not text, not stories, but rather performance of stories” (Kennedy & Wilson, 2003, p. 132).

It is this performance of stories that can be found in transnational advocacy networks, linking the work of trauma theorists with social movement and human rights theorists. Early efforts to link trauma narratives with political action can be seen in the work of Aggar (1994) and Cienfuegos & Monelli (1983). Aggar (1994), in her research with refugee women, notes the ability of testimony, the sharing of personal narratives, to bring together the private and political, observing that testimony “has a special, double connotation: it contains objective, judicial, public and political aspects as well as subjective, spiritual, cathartic and private aspects” (p. 9). As well, Herman (1992) has observed that some trauma survivors seek to “transform the meaning of their personal tragedy by making it the basis for social action,” labeling this impulse a “survivor mission” (p. 207). Such missions lead survivors to publicly share their experiences in the belief that

this sharing will give other survivors hope and encourage people to action around a particular violation.

When survivors embark on this mission, they enter into a relationship with those who bear witness to their telling of their personal narrative. Herman (1992) holds that “when others bear witness to the testimony of a crime, others share the responsibility of restoring justice” (p. 210). Recognizing this responsibility, individuals often engage in the practice of speaking for or about traumatized individuals with the conviction that such action is required in the process of bearing witness. Scarry (1985) and Alcoff (1992) address the politics of speaking for and about the other, the survivor of trauma, and the reason why this speaking for the other occurs. Traumatic experiences have the effect of unmaking a person’s world due to the language destroying nature of pain. Scarry (1985) studied the personal accounts of tortured individuals in Amnesty International reports and identified the impossibility of verbalizing pain. Because of the need to invent a language that forces pain into an object, the question of who the creator of such language should be arises (Flanzbaum, 1999; Scarry, 1985). Often as those in pain are unable to speak, other individuals attempt to speak on behalf of the person in pain (Scarry, 1985, p. 6). It is in this way that discussions of pain enter the public discourse. It is assumed that the “the act of verbally expressing pain is a necessary prelude to the collective task of diminishing pain” (p. 9). Unfortunately, there is commonly a “discrepancy between discourses about survivors and what survivors actually seem to have to tell us” (Greenspan, 1999, p. 46). Alcoff (1992) notes the “discursively dangerous” practice of speaking for

the other can result in “increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for” (p. 7). The discursive limitations of the language of trauma and international human rights and the practices in which one finds these discourses then deserve further examination.

Davis (2002) and Schaffer and Smith (2004) have identified the various forums in which trauma narratives are performed whether in written form or before a public audience. Through truth commissions, human rights reports, international tribunals, handbooks and websites, stories of trauma are circulated and raise questions as to “the ethics of recognition” as Schaffer and Smith subtitle their book. The ethics of recognition is in part the acknowledgement that in spite of the healing properties of the vocal sharing of traumatic experiences, bringing this process into the public sphere necessitates a consideration of the audience with whom a story is being shared and the ethical implications when an audience is not ready to receive a story. In providing a public forum in which trauma survivors are able to share their stories, the question becomes whether an ethical discursive interaction is created or whether a traumatized individual is potentially retraumatized while their story is consumed by a disinterested public. Schaffer and Smith (2004) note that “affirmation of the testimony allows those who testified to take up agentic social positions in the present even as they bear witness to their objectification in the past, although it can also, at least partially, instate their identity status as victims” (p. 43). Those who chose to tell their story thus have little control over how the story will be received and considered (p. 31). Further, certain stories are chosen to be circulated while others outside the

established discourse are excluded which can have an impact on activist or survivor communities (ibid.). Often, those that reflect an understanding of the Western meta-narrative of democracy and human rights receive greater attention as the legal scholar Catharine Mackinnon has noted “dominant narratives are not called stories. They are called reality” (Nolan, 2002, p. 174).

As trauma narratives are collected and shared within transnational advocacy networks, the authenticity of such narratives can fall under scrutiny. This has been exemplified in scholarship concerning the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United States and the awareness that refugees have of the need to structure their personal stories in ways that match the criteria set forth by the UNHCR for gaining refugee status or the United States for gaining asylum (Grewal, 2005; Sandvik, 2009; Shuman & Bohmer, 2004). Refugees, fully aware of the stories told by successful applicants, adjust their telling to match certain discursive markers deemed by the UNHCR or United States as indicating truthfulness. This structuring of identity according to available discourse represents the ability of individuals from developing countries to effectively “other” themselves. The findings from this research concerning refugees can be extrapolated to a discussion of transnational advocacy networks to make the point that activists from developing countries who join with international NGOs to form transnational advocacy networks are well-aware of the discursive formations available to them when engaging in advocacy efforts.

It is thus that I posit in my thesis that trauma narratives told by activists or victims of human rights violations are shared based on the Western belief in the

healing and political potential of such an act. These narratives reflect the “individualist ideology of the West, that a self is not constituted by multiple intersecting discourses but consists in a unified whole capable of autonomy from others” (Alcoff, 1992, p. 21). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to determine whether the scholarship concerning trauma, social movements and human rights can account for Burmese conceptions of these subjects and whether such conceptions would be similar or different from Western theories. However, one is able to see the power structures present in the acknowledgement of a particular traumatic event as a human rights violation as established by international human rights law which provides a framework for reporting such violations. It is these discursive structures of trauma and international human rights which I identify as Western that I seek to uncover in my examination of human rights reports and their incorporation of traumatic narratives.



## Chapter 4

### METHODOLOGY

The study of narratives has gradually gained greater acceptance in the humanities and social sciences. This interest in narrative analysis challenges “the methodological hegemony of quantitative research paradigms in education, sociology and psychology” (Johnstone, 2001, p. 643). Given the “autobiographical impulse” of individuals, the desire to make sense of one’s life through the telling of stories, studying such narratives offers a window into the ways in which people view and situate themselves in a particular society (p. 640). Through narratives, one is able to see the ways that societies are constructed. The political effect of the dissemination of these narratives on communities can likewise be observed (p. 644). In examining narrative texts, one encounters the struggle between local knowledge and dominant discourses; as well, one is able to assess the potential political repercussions that construction of events in particular, predetermined ways has on the ability of marginalized communities to resist domination.

Inherent in any text are the discursive structures that establish power/knowledge and lead to the inclusion or exclusion of local knowledge and culture. Individuals who have endured traumatic human rights violations have an established discourse at their disposal which they employ to construct a narrative of their experience. This discourse has been determined by institutions of international human rights law and Western conceptions of social movements and trauma as discussed in the previous chapters. Foucault (1972) acknowledges that

the “will to knowledge, thus reliant upon institutional support and distribution, tends to exercise a sort of pressure, a power of constraint upon other forms of discourse” (p. 219).

Foucault offers key insight into a reading of the materials produced by transnational advocacy networks that include personal narratives of trauma. By interrogating texts, Foucault recognizes the possibility of uncovering spaces for resistance against dominant discourses. As a “violence that we do to things,” discourse can limit the expression of local knowledge through the dominant authority of the text (Foucault, 1972, p. 229). While it would be tempting to assume that human rights discourse inherently allows for local knowledge and desires to emerge, in fact, international human rights discourse often obscures the local character and complexity of human rights violations. As human rights violations have been defined and delineated by a Western legal regime, the subsequent discourse largely reflects an individualistic approach to human rights. As the solution to human rights violations is placed outside of local communities and seen as the responsibility of States, human rights discourse can in many ways preserve governmentalities that suppress dissenting discourses.

The use of an international human rights legal discourse to frame human rights violations in local contexts brings up the question of how local knowledge and experience is discursively represented and subsequently seen as either true or false by international NGOs who hold greater power in determining with which movements to work. Personal narratives that fit into the established power/knowledge meta-narrative concerning democracy and human rights are

more likely to be accepted as true. Foucault states that “it’s not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time” (Foucault, 1980, p. 133). Truth is ‘the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true’ (p. 132). The ability of local activists to express their experiences inline with the international human rights discourse gives them the favorable label of truth by international NGOs interested in using their personal narratives in advocacy work.

While “the existing discursive horizon limits the ‘discursive availability,’ social movements are not, in a strict sense, *determined* by it” (Piper& Uhlin, 2004, p.172); some social movements manage to “traverse the existing discursive horizon and act as ‘founders of discursivity’ (Foucault 1984: 114), which in turn grants intelligibility and validity to contending discourses” (p. 173). It thus becomes a question of whether Burmese activists see fit to traverse the discursive structures of international human rights law and conceptions of trauma to establish their own discursive practices that challenge the dominance of those international NGOs within the context of the transnational advocacy network. While answering such a question is beyond the scope of my thesis, the dominance of certain discourses and subsequent power disparities between international and Burmese activists can be revealed through further examination of the mobilization of personal narratives to support dominant discourses.

Within the transnational activist network that has arisen around Burma, there are a number of venues in which personal accounts are shared. Personal accounts are told through online opposition news sources, the websites of Burmese human rights organizations, the human rights reports produced by such organizations, documentaries, testimony before foreign governments and even speaking tours for Burmese activists or victims of particular violations. While such a range of forums exist for the sharing of personal accounts, I have focused my thesis on the personal narratives found in online Burmese and international news media and the human rights reports produced by Burmese and international human rights NGOs. I place greater emphasis on the analysis of the human rights report because of the scarcity of such an analysis in the Burmese context and the relative importance that such reports have gained in the transnational advocacy network for Burma. The production of human rights reports has emerged as one of the central activities of Burmese and international human rights organizations. Such reports are used to present information concerning rights violations in a manner that adheres to established international human rights discourse.

Dudai (2009) offers an interesting analysis of human rights reports which has guided my observations about the Burmese human rights reports I have chosen. Dudai notes the empirical emphasis of human rights reports and the importance of detailed facts in lending reports credibility. The use of emotive language is viewed unfavorably in comparison with a succinct account of events. Likewise, historical, moral and political frameworks are seen as biasing the information. Finally, human rights reports incorporate international human rights

law to move the report from the realm of rhetoric to that of substance. Human rights reports are then seen as an objective documentation and legal assessment of a particular violation. The structure of human rights reports thus does not lend itself well to storytelling. The stockpiling efforts of organizations in collecting facts lead to a “universal decontextualized individual” (Dudai, 2009, p. 253). Despite this, Dudai observes that the function of the human rights report is not to “contribute to richer collective memory, nor necessarily to empower victims” (ibid.). Human rights reports serve the purpose of attracting the attention of the offending State and other governments and intergovernmental entities with the power to stop a violation from occurring. It is at this point that I would take issue with Dudai’s analysis as while the function of human rights reports in providing States and intergovernmental entities information is important, Dudai holds that mobilizing a local population or taking an anthropological approach is not a function of the report. I believe this represents a hegemonic, Westphalian view as it assumes the power to prevent or protect individuals from violations lay only in the State. However, it is possible that were human rights reports to be constructed using local languages and discourse, they could function as organizational tools for local activists. This is not to deny the value of the human rights report as it currently exists, but rather to problematize the notion that power for change lies outside the communities in which human rights violations occur.

While personal accounts are included in human rights reports, the content of these accounts is determined by the questions researchers ask when interviewing victims and the ability to fit an individual’s narrative into the legal,

authoritative accounting of a particular violation. This leads in many cases to an exclusion of the aspects of an individual's story that fall outside the predetermined discourse. Thus, while the inclusion of personal narratives adds to the empathetic possibilities for a human rights report, the testimonies are "always marginal to the claims made by the authors themselves" (Dudai, 2009, p. 255).

As noted, Dudai addresses the need for human rights reports to refrain from incorporating the political situation of a country. While this is true for contentious political situations such as in Israel where Dudai was a researcher, the grounding that Burmese human rights organizations have in the political and social movements in the country and the reliance of international NGOs on these human rights organizations for information makes a non-political account of human rights violations in Burma seem impossible. While vague efforts have been made by international NGOs to extend the same human rights violations reporting activities to ethnic minority armies who commit abuses in Burma, this effort is somewhat problematic when the operations of Burmese and international human rights organizations are made possible by the buffer that ethnic minority armies provide between the Burmese military and organizations operating in the border areas.

Foucault and Dudai's theoretical frameworks guide my analysis of the texts chosen. However, with the exception of "*Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy*," a journalistic account of the 1988 uprising, no official human rights report has been released detailing the human rights violations that took place in that period (Lintner, 1990). Personal accounts of the events of 1988 have been

found however on Burmese opposition news websites that annually publish articles commemorating the 1988 uprising. Thus, I have chosen a sample of newspaper articles to analyze the personal accounts of university students involved in the 1988 uprising, as well as to look at the discourse surrounding Aung San Suu Kyi. I have selected articles from the *Democratic Voice of Burma*, the *Irrawaddy* and *Mizzima*, three of the leading Burmese opposition news sources, as well as articles from international news sources such as the *New York Times* and the *British Broadcasting Corporation*. Analyzing such materials provides background for my discussion of human rights reports in subsequent chapters and insight into forums outside of the human rights report used for the dissemination of personal accounts.

## Chapter 5

### CONSTITUTIVE LIFE STORIES: THE 1988 UPRISING AND AUNG SAN SUU KYI

When Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest in November 2010, the headline for the *Irrawaddy*, a leading Burmese opposition online magazine, read simply “Hope Returns” (“Hope Returns,” 2010). This headline belied the lack of hope among an opposition movement that in the eyes of the world and among the Burmese population relied largely on the efforts of one woman. Aung San Suu Kyi came to be involved in the opposition movement at the encouragement of student protestors during the 1988 uprising, and her struggle has often been portrayed in the media as one of good versus evil. An examination of a sampling of articles written about Aung San Suu Kyi from both Burmese opposition and international media reveals the characterization of Aung San Suu Kyi as a moral woman engaged in a heroic struggle, her life story thus used to encourage the international community to action.

As noted in Chapter 1, Aung San Suu Kyi’s background as the daughter of an independence hero and someone who grew up outside of Burma put her in a unique position to take a leadership role in the opposition movement. She has frequently been called the “Nelson Mandela of Asia” in an attempt by international solidarity and advocacy groups to attract interest in her cause. News articles make mention of the fact that she has “inspired the world with her campaign of non-violent resistance” again demonstrating the tendency to attribute the success (and in some cases weaknesses) of the movement to her (Brown,



2011). The discourse used when writing about Aung San Suu Kyi posits her largely as a moral leader who “did not enter politics for personal power, nor even in pursuit of an ideology” (ibid.). Yet, this depiction is problematic because in fact Aung San Suu Kyi has not positioned herself solely as a moral leader, but rather as the leader of the National League for Democracy, a political party which won the 1990 elections in Burma. Her decision to sacrifice her family life is frequently seen as indicating her commitment to democracy and international actors note that she has “fought for the freedom of her people with a dignity that has entranced the world” (ibid.). The use of the term “entranced” is telling in that it is indicative of the inability of the international community to do anything for Burma beyond admiring Aung San Suu Kyi, a common sentiment among Burmese activists.

International NGOs and solidarity groups have worked to make Aung San Suu Kyi’s birthday a focal point for a campaign in which individuals in past years when she has been under house arrest participate in “Arrest Yourself” events in which international activists remain at home for a full day, invite friends and educate themselves about Burma (Fink, 2009, p. 264). World leaders have spoken in glowing terms about Aung San Suu Kyi’s moral resoluteness (“World Unites,” 2010). A number of biographies have been written about her which support the mythologization of her life story, labeling her a “perfect hostage” and “political madonna” (Wintle, 2007). Newspaper articles about Aung San Suu Kyi frequently make mention of her physical appearance and her habit of wearing flowers in her hair. Such commentary on a political leader’s appearance would likely not occur

were Aung San Suu Kyi a man, or were she truly seen as a politician as opposed to a inspirational figure (Brooten, 2005).

Recognized as the “honest, fearless voice of the people's aspirations” (Htwe, 2011), Aung San Suu Kyi thus receives significant attention in both Western and opposition media. However, it is important to note that the opposition movement in Burma and in the diaspora is comprised of individuals who have made similar sacrifices to Aung San Suu Kyi who herself is quick to make this point and express embarrassment at the inordinate amount of attention that she receives (“An Icon is Just a Label,” 2011). Nevertheless, it is her life story of trauma and resilience that has ensured an international interest in Burma. Without Aung San Suu Kyi, it is unclear whether there would have been such a sustained interest in the events in the country subsequent to 1988.

In the Burmese diaspora, the events of 1988 are remembered in ceremonies held every year to commemorate key days. Statements are published by Burmese political and human rights organizations urging people to remember the unity and “spirit” of 1988 (Zaw, 2007). Articles appear telling the stories of those who were killed in the protests such as Phone Maw for whom Burmese Human Rights Day is now celebrated and Win Maw Oo a young high school student who died clutching a portrait of Aung San (Lintner, 1989, p. 202, 134). In analyzing a similar sample of media articles containing the personal accounts of activists involved in the 1988 protests, one is able to see how such articles function as both a way to remember past events and encourage future action. The mobilization of these trauma narratives can be seen in this case to inspire action

not just when told in Western contexts, but when remembered in local contexts as well.

As constitutive life stories, the personal narratives of Aung San Suu Kyi and the university student activists in 1988 all position the events of that year as life changing. Aung San Suu Kyi had arrived in Burma from England in 1988 to care for her dying mother, and felt compelled to join the demonstrations, noting her duty as her father's daughter (Fink, 2009, p. 57; Wintle, 2007, p. 279). A student activist involved in the events of 1988 observes that during that time "I was too young - I didn't know much about democracy and human rights. I only knew that this was really wrong, so it was really a spontaneous response" (Fogarty, 2008). Such a statement reveals the lack of prior knowledge of such concepts as democracy and human rights which is important to my point that adherence to internationally formed discursive conceptions of democracy, human rights and trauma came only after Burmese activists had narrated themselves into established discourses and formed connections with international actors.

Student activists from 1988 are quick in their narratives to point out the absolute support they enjoyed from the public, noting that "onlookers gathered and cheered us" (Zaw, 2007) and that they were "confident" after seeing people out on the streets (Fogarty, 2008). The belief that they were acting according to the will of the people is what propels student activists from that period to continue their activities into the present day. An activist states, "Many thought that what happened in 1988 would stay in 1988. Nobody expected that it would continue, but it has survived to this day" (Fogarty, 2008). In this statement, one can observe

the desire to transcend the time elapsed since 1988 and finish what was started. Another activist from the time recalls a promise he made to the public then that they would “get democracy one day” and recognizes the need to “fulfill my promise I made to my people” (Fogarty, 2008). Yet another activist states that the Burmese people “need our help to make their dreams come true” (Myint, 2009). Holding that “the regime can’t kill the spirit of ’88” (Zaw, 2007), there is thus a sense both stated and implied that the sharing of traumatic personal narratives is being done as part of an appeal for action. The trauma of the events of 1988 is mobilized to elicit a response from the reader that is sympathetic and ultimately actionable.

While the events of 1988 have been memorialized annually outside the country, no public space exists in which the events can be remembered inside the country. The military regime exerts complete control over the history of the country characterizing the uprising as a mere disturbance. Personal accounts of the events are thus shared in private if at all and with the passing of time individuals lose perspective on the uprising and its importance (Larkin, 2010, p. 219). However, for a brief period of time between 2003 and 2007 key student activists from the 1988 uprising were released from prison and banded together to form a group called the “88 Generation Students,” emphasizing and memorializing the connection between 1988 and the present (88 Generation Students, 2008). In 2007, many of these activists from the 1988 uprising were re-arrested after engaging in acts of resistance, including an “Open Heart” campaign which reflected their belief that they continue to hold the public’s support, and

seeking to urge people back onto the streets (ibid.). When Buddhist monks finally ignited countrywide protests against the regime, a new generation of activists came to prominence and their stories were sought after. Unlike the 1988 protests when human rights reports were not yet common, the protests of 2007 and subsequent crackdown was documented in two human rights reports, one by Human Rights Watch and the other by the Human Rights Documentation Unit which was run by the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, the self-proclaimed exiled government of Burma formed after the 1988 uprising (Human Rights Documentation Unit, 2008; Human Rights Watch, 2007). While the personal narratives of 1988 represent political awakenings and the entry of Burmese activists into the discourse of democracy and human rights, an examination of human rights reports in the next chapter reveals the subsequent marginalization of the Burmese activist and victim narrative as the cause of democracy and human rights in Burma transitioned from a national cause to a transnational one, from a social movement to a human rights movement.

## Chapter 6

### HUMAN RIGHTS REPORTS: PERSONAL NARRATIVES AT THE MARGINS

In the aftermath of the 1988 uprising in Burma, hundreds of university students fled to the Thailand-Burma border where they were able to establish a student army in cooperation with the ethnic minority armies already waging civil war against the Burmese military regime (Fink, 2009, p. 59). Gradually, as these students made contact with international NGOs, funding became available for human rights activities (Brooten, 2004, p. 4). As noted in Chapter 1, the status of the university students as educated, urban and amenable to Western organizational structures led to international support and the development of human rights focused organizations on the Thailand-Burma border. Efforts to bring about change in Burma slowly shifted from an exclusive focus on social movement activities to the capacity building of Burmese activists to carry out human rights documentation and advocacy work.

Fields and Narr have observed that “if people are not aware of the historical and contextual nature of human rights and are not aware that human rights become realized only by the struggles of real people experiencing real instances of domination, then human rights are all too easily symbolic legitimizers for instruments of that very domination” (as cited in Stammers, 1999, p. 980). Stammers (1999) thus seeks to connect human rights back to its origins in social movements, noting that when “individual states become increasingly unable to fulfill duties in respect of human rights, but supranational bodies have not gained

the legitimation traditionally accorded to the nation-state via nationalism and national identity, perhaps a space is opening up for social movements to extend popular understandings of human rights as challenges to extant relations and structures of power” (p. 1007). In Burma, one can see Burmese and international human rights organizations shy away from social movement strategies in favor of the “human rights repertoire” which consists of “collecting, publishing, distributing, and advocating human rights claims”(Hagan, 2010, p. 560). It is from this repertoire that the human rights report emerges.

The documentation of human rights violations by Burmese and international human rights organizations has led to the production of many human rights reports in the past two decades. In my analysis of a sampling of these human right reports, I have found that these reports clearly serve the function of sharing information with international NGOs according to the “boomerang” model discussed in Chapter 1. According to my analysis, and speaking generally so as to offer a descriptive narrative of the structure of the human rights report, most all human rights reports are intended for the “international community,” a phrase that has been imbued with greater meaning than a realistic assessment would perhaps permit. That the audience is the international community is evidenced clearly by the fact that these reports are written in English and rarely translated into Burmese. The reports frequently contain a list of recommendations directed at the United Nations and foreign governments. Recommendations are also made to the Burmese military government indicating the tendency to view the State as the guarantor and protector of human rights. Rarely are any action

steps included for Burmese people concerning community actions that could be taken to avoid or document a human rights violation when it occurs. This is likely due to the fact that the Burmese storyteller, whose accounts of trauma provide evidence for the report, lies outside the forms of power targeted in these reports.

Another key feature of human rights reports produced by human rights organizations is the introduction of the report by someone deemed an authoritative figure on the subject of human rights. Figures have ranged from Desmond Tutu to Vaclav Havel (DLA Piper Rudnick Gray Cary, 2005), from the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar to the Washington Advocacy Director of Human Rights Watch (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 2006). While increasing the likelihood that a report will receive media attention, these introductions also indicate the degree to which a human rights organization is connected to international NGOs which impacts their perceived credibility when presenting information.

After the introduction of the report, many reports include an acknowledgement page which reveals the foreign researchers and sources of funding involved in the production of the report. As with the introduction, this recognition that a particular organization was deemed worthy and capable of receiving funding serves to shape the readers' perception of the trustworthiness of the information of the organization.

Most of the human rights reports produced include a section at the beginning in which international human rights law is discussed. The laws in place identifying and guarding against particular human rights violations are laid out



clearly so that the audience is able to recognize that the traumatic personal accounts found in the pages of the report meet the criteria set forth by the international human rights paradigm. Framing the report in legal discourse represents a clear attempt to take the particulars of a human rights violation and fit the telling of the violation into the universally accepted legal discourse on human rights. As with the introduction and presence of foreign donors, the use of legal discourse speaks to efforts to lend a report an authoritative quality that perhaps would not exist without these features.

A final feature of human rights reports produced by Burmese human rights organizations which demonstrates the discursive adherence to Western norms is seen in the manner in which personal accounts are incorporated into the report. While most of the reports make an effort to highlight the “voices” of the individuals whose rights have been violated, they do so through a problematic presentation style. Rarely are accounts of violations given in a long form narrative; instead a person’s testimony is broken into small two to three sentence paragraphs and inserted after a summary of a particular aspect of a violation. These paragraphs thus become representations of the violation experience without offering the reader any context or broader explanation of a person’s life and the more subtle, structural factors that lead to human rights violations. The victim then becomes an object that only the State can address.

This fragmentation of the telling of the traumatic personal narrative contrasts with the presumed value of constructing a fluid account of trauma as discussed in Chapter 2. While in the information collection phase, human rights

researchers likely engaged the victim of such violations in a lengthy account of their experience, even this interview process is constricted by the researcher's questions and the difficulties of translation (Ditton, 2010). It is here that we see the tension between narrative construction for the purpose of use by transnational advocacy networks and narrative construction for the benefit of the trauma survivor. Whether a more trauma informed approach in not only the collection of information, but also in its presentation, is warranted should be further examined. Though, it is necessary to note that some reports do include the full narratives of victims reconstructed through interviews, but these are offered as appendices and thus not presented as the primary material in the report. Having presented my findings concerning the structure of human rights reports, I will now move on to a more focused discussion of the personal narratives found in human rights reports through the examples of reports concerning political prisoners and those concerning the use of rape as a weapon of war in Burma.<sup>5</sup>

An examination of human rights reports concerning Burma requires a distinction between the ethnic Burma majority university students and the ethnic minority human rights organizations that often are offshoots of the many ethnic minority armies currently waging war against the military regime in Burma. Many of the university students who did not flee to the Thailand-Burma border in the aftermath of the failed uprising were arrested and imprisoned for lengthy periods

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<sup>5</sup> It is perhaps interesting to note that my thesis frames a small number of quotes taken from personal narratives with my own analysis thus to some degree imitating and replicating the same power structures I have sought to uncover in human rights reports.

of time (Fink, 2009, p. 172). The personal accounts of university students thus often diverge based on decisions to stay in the country or to leave and continue fighting the regime outside Burma. Those who became political prisoners have had their narratives become prominent in discussions of the political and human rights situation in the country.

Likewise, the work of the ethnic minority human rights organizations has led to an increased recognition of the severe human rights violations that have occurred during the course of the civil war in Burma. Forced labor, displacement, torture and rape and have all become common place in eastern Burma where fighting is most intense (Fink, 2009, p. 45). The Burmese military regime's use of rape as a weapon of war has been well documented by ethnic minority women's human rights organizations. While reports concerning both violations adhere to a similar format, key differences have created a distinction between the agency of political prisoners and the victimization of ethnic minorities.

While social movements rely on collective action for success, human rights struggles are sometimes seen as individualistic. One person has had their rights violated and this situation should be documented as evidence in the event that legal action is taken or a campaign around that person is formed by international NGOs. This focus on the individual is perhaps most evident when considering political prisoners and the manner in which human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and other prison rights groups tend to focus on each individual case. The focus on the individual and their imprisonment as a result of engaging in activities demanding political and civil

rights are often told as universal stories of the individual struggling against injustice (Brooten, 2004, p. 4). Reviewing human rights reports produced by Burmese organizations concerning political prisoners likewise reveals the relative agency of political prisoners in continuing to resist the military regime while in prison.

There are currently 2, 076 political prisoners in Burma ([www.aappb.net](http://www.aappb.net)). Political activists arrested for their political activities find themselves imprisoned in inhuman conditions and subject to torture and ill-treatment. While human rights reports primarily seek to document these violations, the reports written with regards to political prisoners often contain sections that acknowledge the resilience of political prisoners while in prison. Initial reports about political prisoners in Burma were authored by the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) which was the student army formed after the 1988 uprising (All Burma Students' Democratic Front, 1997, 1998). Interestingly, these initial reports are less formulaic than subsequent reports by a human rights organization formed specifically for the purpose of documenting the situation of political prisoners in Burma, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

Oo (1996) highlights a sort of code that political prisoners have established among themselves which includes the prohibition of "any act that will tarnish their political dignity" and the decree that political prisoners must "preserve, protect and care for the rights of other prisoners" (p. 7). Maintaining a political identity in the face of violation thus becomes paramount for political prisoners. Accounts of political resistance inside the prison include hunger strikes,

negotiations with wardens, clandestinely reading scraps of newspaper used to wrap items in care packages, secretly storing away writing materials, attempts to commemorate important anniversaries for the movement and collecting information about prison conditions to have smuggled out of the prison (All Burma Students' Democratic Front, 1997). Buddhist monks imprisoned for their political activities have also attempted to resist by often refusing to remove their robes and change into the prison uniform (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 2004). One female political prisoner recalls efforts to stay active, stating "We staged a play. We created fun for ourselves... We sang political songs" (Burma Women's Union, 2004). Political prisoners have thus articulated their "spirit for survival" as is the title of one report (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 2001). One prisoner concluded after release from prison, "I never considered myself a politician before my arrest, but now the regime has made me political through my arrest" (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 2005, p. 97). These explanations of resistance lead to an appreciation of the political prisoner's agency and demonstrate their ability to maintain their status as political activists despite enduring this human rights violation.

In contrast with the personal accounts of political prisoners, the human rights reports produced by and about the human rights violations endured by ethnic minority communities have largely presented a narrative of victimization with little attention to acts of agency (Brooten, 2004, p. 2). This can be seen particularly in the reports by ethnic minority women's human rights organizations which have extensively documented the use of rape as a weapon of war by the

Burmese military against ethnic minorities. Due to the international human rights and humanitarian laws in place to address the use of rape as a weapon of war, human rights reports that focus on this topic have received significant attention in contrast with reports of other violations taking place in ethnic minority areas.

In 2002, the Shan Women's Action Network and the Shan Human Rights Foundation released "*License to Rape: The Burmese Military Regime's Use of Sexual Violence in the Ongoing War in Shan State*" a report detailing 173 incidences of rape and other sexual violence by the Burmese military in Shan state. The report received significant attention for its authors and led to an increased awareness of the use of rape by the military regime. Subsequently, many other ethnic minority women's human rights organizations published similar reports detailing the incidences in rape in their areas. The Women's League of Chinland (2007) produced "*Unsafe State: State Sanctioned Sexual Violence Against Chin Women in Burma*" detailing sexual violence in Chin state while the Karen Women's Organization (2007) released "*State of Terror: The Ongoing Rape, Murder, Torture and Forced Labor Suffered by Women Living Under the Burmese Military Regime in Karen State*" revealing the use of rape in Karen state.

As previously discussed, these reports begin with acknowledgements which indicate the presence of foreign researchers and donors in compiling the reports. The first sections of the reports outline the legal language that will be used to frame the women's testimonies which in subsequent sections are interspersed with authoritative summaries of the specifics of particular violations.

The final section of *“License to Rape”* contains a detailed list of all the documented instances of rape. Uniquely, the reports produced about sexual violence include sections dedicated to the overall treatment of women in Burma, an acknowledgement of the structural factors which lead to immunity for rape instead of a sole focus on the individual act. Such a discussion of gender norms within Burma indicates that beyond the language of human rights violations there exists societal structures which are inherently violent. These structures will remain in place regardless of the government in Burma and its adherence to human rights standards which raises the question of whether addressing such societal norms exists outside the scope of human rights discourse as currently conceived.

While other human rights reports concerning violations in ethnic minority areas have received some attention, the relative interest in the reports detailing rape has created a contrast in the transnational advocacy network for Burma. The personal accounts shared by educated, urban ethnic majority Burmans are stories of agency and choice while the personal accounts shared by ethnic minority women from rural areas are narratives of victimization and failed agency. Many of the accounts show attempts by women to resist being raped, but they are overpowered often through threats made at gunpoint (Shan Women’s Action Network, 2002; Karen Women’s Organization, 2007; Women’s League of Chinland, 2007). It is interesting to point out that the women are resisting being bodily transgressed against while political prisoners are not in a position to resist this bodily transgression (often in the form of beating), but rather create positive

spaces of resistance. An equivalent action is not seen in the reports about the rape of ethnic minority women, though such actions may simply have been excluded from the report as it may not be deemed an important part of the narrative of violation. It is also important to note the temporal differences of the two violations with political prisoners held for a long period of time and rape being a singular act. Thus, the ability to resist, to demonstrate agency, is severely limited for the women sharing their stories and the success or failure to resist is only very tenuously connected to agency anyway. Essentially, it would be quite difficult for a report detailing the violation of rape as a weapon of war to avoid the presentation of women as victims without a full account of the woman's entire life story before and beyond the violation.

The dichotomy that exists between the Burman male/ethnic woman, agent/victim, is often played out when campaigns are formed around the release of such reports and policies are set by the international community. In recent years, there have been more concerted efforts to address the lack of agency narratives coming from ethnic minority groups. The Karen Human Rights Group (2006, 2008) has published reports such as "*Dignity in the Shadow of Oppression: The Abuse and Agency of Karen Women Under Militarization*" and "*Village Agency: Rural Rights and Resistance in Militarized Karen State.*" The Karen Women's Organization (2010) has released "*Walking Amongst Sharp Knives: The Unsung Courage of Karen Women Village Chiefs in Conflict Areas in Eastern Burma.*" Even Amnesty International (2010) published a report entitled "*The Repression of Ethnic Minority Activists in Myanmar*" which while documenting



abuse likewise set out to acknowledge the contributions and agency of ethnic minority activists so often submerged in the larger narrative of the Burmese democracy movement. These reports underscore the complexity of the situation for ethnic minorities in Burma though they have not garnered a similar amount of attention as those reports that adhere to the more common victim narrative.

While human rights reports ultimately adhere to the structures put forth by nation-centered international human rights legal discourse, they have allowed for the atrocities in Burma to come to light. It is interesting to note that all the reports that I have analyzed or cited in this chapter were published outside of Burma.

While the reports are published outside of the country, much of the information in the reports is collected inside the country by underground activists. The existence inside Burma of extensive networks continuously collecting human rights related information and sending it outside the country is well known, as are the activities of underground or “UG” networks geared towards overthrowing the military regime (Zin, 2010). These networks offer some hope that social movement methods have not been abandoned, but also raise questions about why, when such extensive clandestine activity is taking place, a human rights discourse has not emerged inside Burma. While the easy answer is that activists are afraid of exposing themselves to the regime and enduring the subsequent harassment and arrest, thousands of activists have dared to engage in the political discourse of the country and face similar hardships. For a brief period of time prior to the 2007 demonstrations, the Human Rights Defenders and Promoters group worked to educate the public about human rights through distribution of the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights (Fink, 2009, p. 97). The tactics this group employed were social movement oriented yet focused on human rights. With this exception, no other groups are taking such a public approach at this time. It is thus that a discursive divide begins to emerge between those operating inside Burma and those operating outside the country. This divide is explored further in the next chapter through a brief case study of Cyclone Nargis.

## Chapter 7

### CONTESTED NARRATIVES: CYCLONE NARGIS AND THE HUMAN RIGHTS/HUMANITARIAN DIVIDE

While a distinction is often made in the discourse concerning the human rights violations in urban/rural, ethnic majority/ethnic minority areas, there has likewise emerged a discursive distinction between those involved in the transnational advocacy network focused on human rights and those working inside Burma on humanitarian issues. A number of debates have arisen over the years concerning sanctions, cross-border aid and civil society in Burma which demonstrates an often unnecessarily sharp divide between those engaged in human rights work and those engaged in humanitarian work. Such a divide often simplifies the nuance and complexity of an issue, and limits the ability of both camps to devise programs responsive to the needs of the people whose voice both sides are eager to lay claim over. This divide was evidenced clearly when Cyclone Nargis hit the country and subsequent reports emerged that highlighted different aspects of the recovery effort.

On May 2, 2008, Cyclone Nargis made landfall leaving an estimated 130,000 plus individuals dead in its wake (Larkin, 2010, p. 55). The cyclone hit hardest in the country's Irrawaddy delta with survivors of the storm displaced and in need of immediate assistance. Yet, in the aftermath of the storm, the military regime in Burma saw fit to block aid from entering the country and reaching the affected population (p. 12). International humanitarian organizations based in Rangoon were unable to send international staff to the affected areas and instead

had to rely on Burmese staff for initial assessments of the situation on the ground (p. 9). A few weeks after the storm, after international condemnation, the Burmese government began to allow aid trips into the delta (p. 65).

In the confusion of the storm, the transnational advocacy network for Burma with a focus on human rights was left in the unfamiliar position of not being able to take the lead in reporting on information about the storm. Instead, international humanitarian organizations took the lead in delivering aid and monitoring the situation on the ground. However, the transnational advocacy network engaged its inside sources to collect information and was able to produce reports which focused on the human rights violations that were committed in the context of this humanitarian emergency. International humanitarian organizations on the other hand made sure to produce statements noting the expanded humanitarian space that had opened up within the country making it possible to effectively deliver aid.

It is thus that two competing discourses emerged from this singular event. This is demonstrated rather clearly through a close reading and analysis comparing the statements made by a collection of humanitarian organizations and those made by a Burmese organization supported by Johns Hopkins University. The Emergency Assistance Team was established in the immediate aftermath of Cyclone Nargis with the intention of organizing groups on the Thailand-Burma border to provide aid to those affected by the storm. Johns Hopkins University provided support for this group and jointly they researched and prepared a report which highlighted the human rights violations occurring as aid was being

delivered to affected areas (Emergency Assistance Team & Johns Hopkins University, 2009a).

The publication of the report, “*After the Storm: Voices from the Delta*,” sparked a rare response from the international humanitarian organizations in the country who collectively issued a statement entitled “Joint Response to ‘*After the Storm: Voices from the Delta*’.” This statement was met with the EAT and Johns Hopkins releasing its own statement, “Statement of Emergency Assistance Team - Burma and The Johns Hopkins Center for Public Health and Human Rights regarding the report ‘*After the Storm: Voices from the Delta*’,” seeking to clarify points made in their report and refute the claims made by international humanitarian organizations. A discursive comparison of these two statements highlights the division and tension between those engaged in humanitarian work and those engaged in human rights work in Burma.

The statement issued collectively by several international humanitarian organizations based in Rangoon begins by claiming that they will be offering a “balanced and accurate view” of the situation in the country (Action Aid, ADRA, Burnet Institute, Care, CESVI, Danish Church Aid...World Vision, 2009, p. 1). They move on by noting that the EAT report had done a disservice to the “courageous and resilient survivors” of the storm (ibid.). These initial sentences thus indicate the belief that the humanitarian organizations have in their view of the situation and that their work honors those affected by the storm in ways that the EAT report did not. The statement then indicates that while the EAT report claimed to offer the only independent assessment of the storm, the failure of the

EAT researchers to contact them or to acknowledge the assessments they had carried out was problematic.

Going on to question the methodology of the report as being “inadequate” for the severity of the storm, the humanitarian organizations highlight their ability to carry out more extensive surveys of the damage, noting their “robust and transparent” methodology (p. 2). While acknowledging the military regime’s hindrance of aid from reaching the delta, the organizations ask that “we pay tribute” to local Burmese organizations and relief workers who managed to deliver aid (ibid.). Further, it is noted that the organizations operated “according to humanitarian principles of impartiality” and “reinforced conflict-sensitive approaches” in addressing charges that religious and ethnic differences led to an unequal distribution of aid (p. 3).

The statement continues by cautioning that the EAT report could potentially serve to “undermine the case for further aid for survivors” (p. 4). Questioning the report’s call for a review of the aid effort before any further assistance is delivered, the statement then claims that the international humanitarian organizations in the country actually have the most access to and understanding of the “voices” of the survivors, concluding that these voices are pleading with the world not to be abandoned (ibid.). The statement ends by extending an invitation the EAT report’s researchers to join them on trips to the delta so that they can “meet directly with cyclone survivors to hear their views on continued assistance,” the presumption being that the researchers have not already tried or have not already done so (ibid.). Again, the statement notes the

“courageous” survivors that the organizations are seeking to help at this “critical juncture” (ibid.).

As this statement challenged the work of EAT, the EAT and Johns Hopkins University felt it necessary to release a follow up statement defending their research. Their statement begins by expressing appreciation for the work of international humanitarian organizations and takes a conciliatory tone in noting that the report and statements have brought about a “dialogue” among those carrying out relief work in the delta (Emergency Assistance Team & Johns Hopkins University, 2009b, p. 1). Observing that “people of good intent” can disagree about the best way to provide aid, the statement points out that despite the importance of humanitarian aid, “transparency and accountability” are also important (ibid.). Careful to point out the “constrained environment” in which humanitarian organizations operate per agreement with the military government, the statement notes the difficulty these organizations may have in hearing “uncensored” accounts of survivors (ibid.). The statement notes that while aid workers have been arrested, international humanitarian organizations are not in a position to demand their release due to their tenuous relationship with the military regime. The fear that might prevent Burmese survivors from speaking out is acknowledged with EAT saying that it aims to “create a venue by which these voices can be heard and the issues addressed” (p. 2). Thus, EAT sought to establish itself as an organization where an uncensored full account of the aid effort could be found.

EAT then seeks to identify itself as a humanitarian organization similar to those operating in the country. The methodology of the report is addressed with an explanation given that the organization's methodology was qualitative and not a population based survey as those organizations inside the country were in a position to carry out. However, they note that the small and independent nature of EAT allowed for them to operate without the constraints placed on the international humanitarian organizations in the country. This then allowed EAT access to "voices from the Delta [that] were exceptionally candid, uncensored, and cannot be dismissed" (p. 2). Taking note of the criticism of their interviews of people not located in the delta, EAT further makes the claim that "interviews conducted in settings where they [victims of human rights violations] are safer to speak are viewed as more, not less, credible" (ibid.). Security of those sharing their stories then is seen as paramount by the EAT and they further note that they did collect information from the delta though avoided interaction with international humanitarian organizations and operated "under the radar" in order to avoid repercussions from the regime (p. 3). Again appealing for "dialogue," EAT stresses its importance in establishing a "complete picture of the complex nature of the situation" (ibid.).

Interestingly, the EAT statement ends with an explanation as to why the researchers are unable to join the international humanitarian organizations in the delta which is due to the fact that those researchers from Johns Hopkins University have been blacklisted by the regime and the Burmese researchers, having been subject to the regime's human rights violations prior to fleeing the



country and being internationally acknowledged human rights activists, would be unable to travel inside Burma without being arrested and imprisoned (p. 4). What is interesting about this statement is the inclusion of Burmese activists which EAT clearly believes strengthens their ability to claim to speak for the Burmese population.

What is clear from both statements is that each group believes firmly that they best represent the “voices” of the survivors and are best responding to the situation. The statement by the international humanitarian aid organizations attempts to downplay any notion of resistance by the military regime to delivering aid and highlights the success of Burmese and international humanitarian organizations in carrying out trips to the delta. They perceive that the information they gather from Burmese survivors is complete and that a humanitarian space has emerged in the country. The EAT report and follow-up statement highlights accusations of impropriety in delivering aid and the human rights violations that were committed by the regime.

Beyond these statements, a number of other organizations based inside and outside the country have sought to contribute to the documentation and analysis of the situation on the ground by publishing reports with titles like “*Voices of Nargis Survivors: The Story of Survivors from Cyclone Nargis,*” “*Listening to Voices from Inside: Myanmar Civil Society’s Response to Cyclone Nargis,*” and “*Post-Nargis Analysis: the Other Side of the Story*” (Association of South East Asian Nations, 2010; Center for Peace and Conflict Studies, 2008; Akimoto, 2008). As the titles of these reports suggest, whether based inside the

country or outside, whether focused on human rights or humanitarian assistance, all were trying to claim that their reports and their recommendations for action represented the true voice of the people. Opposition news media further added to this interest in telling the stories of those affected by identifying “*Heroes of the Cyclone*” as one headline read shortly after the storm (Heroes of the Cyclone, 2008). Those arrested delivering aid were deemed heroes while those receiving the aid were either victims or survivors.

The scramble in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis for international and Burmese organizations to lay claim to the voices of the Burmese public represents a common trend in humanitarian and human rights organizations alike to use personal accounts to make an argument for policies or procedures. The exclusive focus of human rights organizations on the human rights violations that occurred during the delivery of aid heavily obscured the work being done by international and local humanitarian organizations to address an unprecedented crisis. The exclusive focus of humanitarian organizations on the small humanitarian window that opened up in the aftermath of the storm ignored or made light of the political and human rights repercussions that local Burmese faced in delivering and obtaining aid. Neither narrative stands alone as the whole story, but the combination of the narratives gives a complete, if complex, picture of the situation. While eventually fuller accounts of the situation were written (Larkin, 2010), the emergency nature of the cyclone helped to bring these different narratives and discursive choices into stark relief with each other in the immediate aftermath of the storm. It is these discursive differences and selective choosing of

which stories to tell that continue to create barriers for international and Burmese human rights and humanitarian organizations in finding common ground from which to speak.

## Chapter 8

### CONCLUSION

As the personal narratives of the traumatized “other” are collected and disseminated within transnational advocacy networks, it becomes important to establish a reflexive praxis that allows for ethical engagement in the multitude of forums in which such storytelling takes place. My thesis has sought to demonstrate the ways that the discourses of international human rights law and Western conceptions of trauma limit and suppress the potential for local knowledge and practices to emerge. Within Burma’s transnational advocacy network, we see further the use of the trauma narrative to support multiple and often divergent points of view concerning the situation inside the country. As such, the personal narratives of Burmese activists and victims of human rights violations become universalized and stripped of local character in a selective process designed to support advocacy initiatives.

While the established discourses of both international human rights law and trauma can serve to repress local knowledge and practices, they also serve what can be construed as a positive function in offering local movements a discourse through which to connect with sympathetic international actors. Training Burmese activists in international human rights research and advocacy methods is a bid at efficiency in producing information and materials that government and intergovernmental officials will read. Adhering to a predetermined discourse allows for an understanding of the issue and recognition of action to be taken that may be lost in reports that seek to offer a more complex

or lengthy discussion of an issue. It likewise assumes the international community will respond to oppression in a way that will move a military dictatorship to change. However, in the case of Burma, the sheer lack of positive change over the past two decades brings into question the effectiveness of the current advocacy model and whether or not an alternative model might offer a more effective and egalitarian means of advocating for democracy and human rights.

It is here where a brief discussion of feminist methodologies can illuminate the importance of local actors maintaining control over their personal narratives. Feminist scholars engaged in the study of transnational feminisms have articulated the power differential between Western and local activists. Such analyses can be extended to transnational advocacy networks formed around other issues. Mohanty (2003) has observed the growing presence of works in which Third World women “authenticate ‘their own oppression,’ in the tradition of the Euro-American women’s autobiography” (p. 77). Highlighting the testimonials of Latin American women, she notes that “testimonials do not focus on unfolding a singular woman’s consciousness (in the hegemonic tradition of European modernist autobiography); rather, their purpose is to speak *from within* a collective, as participants in revolutionary struggles, and to speak with the express purpose of bringing about social and political change” (p. 80). Nance (2006) offers a fuller account of Latin American *testimonios*, which Mohanty is describing, and the relationship between trauma narrative and social action.

Additionally, the work of the Sangtin writers in India offers insight into the potential of collective writing in efforts to uncover hidden power structures

within movements, local and international NGOs and transnational advocacy networks. Nagar (2006) describes the experience of the Sangtin writers who through a reflexive collective writing process challenged local NGOs that had become complacent in adhering to the desires of northern-government donors at the expense of responding to grassroots needs. The Sangtin writers were able to identify the ability of local NGOs to “divert the poor and disadvantaged from more radical ideas about how to overcome poverty” (p. 146). In challenging the hegemonic practices of local NGOs, the Sangtin writers, many of whom had held positions within such NGOs, faced a significant backlash. Yet, despite the negative reception of their work, the Sangtin writers were able to reveal the power structures that serve to prevent potentially more effective grassroots action and were ultimately empowered by their experience.

While the Sangtin writers were involved in issues of development, the same notion that more radical ideas are suppressed by local organizations adhering to the hegemonic practices promoted by international NGOs should be addressed with regard to the transnational advocacy network in Burma. While activists inside Burma would likely be unable to even begin a collective writing process without fear of harassment or imprisonment by the military regime, Burmese human rights organizations outside of the country would be capable of engaging in such a practice were it encouraged by international donors. However, the significance of such a collective writing process is that it holds the potential to challenge the standard human rights practices in place, and to alienate those government and intergovernmental actors being targeted by current advocacy

efforts. It then becomes a matter of whether to place greater faith in the ability of the international community to bring about change or in the ability of the local Burmese communities to radically challenge the military regime through means of a genuine, grassroots revolution.

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