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## Defiance through rediscovery: the “Burmese english” memoir, imperial “borders”, and nation-building

Isabel L.M. Khine

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This article seeks to explore the complicated role that the memoir form of Thant Myint-U’s text, *The River of Lost Footsteps*, plays in the development of a combined national identity and literature in the context of Burma. *The River of Lost Footsteps* is read as a literary foray into Burmese sociopolitical history that is focalised through Thant Myint-U’s necessarily personalised lens. Through an exploration of “Burmese english” as a radical linguistic act of reclamation and rediscovery, this polemic comes to the conclusion that an understanding of language as a material pursuit is essential to the process of achieving the self-direction of formerly colonised nations and nation-states. I reach this conclusion by offering an argument that deploys the scope of a distinctively racialised authorial perspective. In doing so, post-colonialism can be construed as a twofold operation; to be postcolonial is to be theorised as such, but it also enacts post-colonialism through language use as a means of resistance against the naturalised imperial project of both past and present.

The question of Burma’s national and cultural identity has long plagued a global community of diplomats, politicians, and academics.<sup>1</sup> Although the recent politics of Burma are worthy of significant address, its colonial history and subsequent status as a “real” nation has largely been ignored. Burma as a post-colonial nation is non-existent, in the sense that its national literary history and artistic history is entirely hypothetical; little to no critical discussion has been afforded to it in the last century. This is peculiarly problematic when considering the role that literature plays in the process of nation, and consequently, national-identity building. Burma is rendered a static “thing” for diplomats to fight over, for academics to ponder, and for politicians to condemn for the human rights abuses committed by the ruling government. Burma’s identity as a nation is complicated by the fact that the state Burma, as politically defined, consists of over forty nations of various ethnic minorities—hence the emphasis here on multivocality. The study of Burma has been largely ethnographic or linguistic, for example, in the case of John Okell’s work on Burmese language/dialects; with an interest in the nation and the people as sources of material information that can be used by the literati for one purpose or another in ethnographic museums; and as a side-note in World History university courses. Thant Myint-U’s memoir *The River of Lost Footsteps* is a personal foray into the history of Burma. As the grandson of former United Nations Secretary General U Thant, Thant Myint-U’s identity as a diasporic Burmese person comes to the forefront of this text as a means of exploring wider questions concerning Burma’s development of national and cultural identity. The hybridity of Thant Myint-U’s identity manifests itself in the language that he utilises. It is this hybridity that illuminates the notion that the materiality of language and the exploration of that materiality is at the heart of understanding the way in which *The River of Lost Footsteps* functions as an integral part of the laborious process of building a national identity. Certainly under-read and undervalued, *The River of Lost Footsteps* is imperative to the act of building a nation that is free from the shackles of imperialism and its seemingly ceaseless grip on the post-colonial. By the conclusion of this essay, I hope to have participated in the disruption of the geographic and conceptual borders that have defined Burma by highlighting the emergence of a bur-

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<sup>1</sup> Burma is officially known as *Pyindaunzu Thanmada Myánma Nainngandaw*.

geoning literary canon, free from the constraints of imperialism, in a language that is hybrid, but uniquely Burmese.

In “1870 a telegraph line was laid linking Mandalay to Rangoon as well as to other towns in Upper Burma [...] The idea was that to be modern, there had to be uniformity, definite lines of authority, and clear boundaries of jurisdiction.”<sup>2</sup> The key feature of imperially created borders was therefore the need for there to be a clear delineation of who controlled the means of communication. It is not solely language itself that must be controlled, but the means through which such language is communicated, as “[...] the control of the means of communication is the empowering factor in any colonial enterprise”.<sup>3</sup> The control of Burmese english through its own writing is therefore imperative to the act of resistance against imperial ideology. Using Burmese english in a multi-vocal, discursive manner—as *The River of Lost Footsteps* is simultaneously polemical, historical, and literary—renders communication the right of writers such as Thant Myint-U. The right to use english as a discourse and communicative medium is not to appease the colonial narrative, but rather to subvert the material control of the conditions of communication as delineated by the imperial project. The act of writing in english with a lower case “e” reclaims discourse; it is an appropriation of the “telegraph lines” and an abrogation of English with a capital “E” in its hegemony.

Within the specifically Burmese branch of post-colonial literature, “it is not always possible to separate theory and practice”.<sup>4</sup> To be post-colonial is to be theorised, and also to put into practice post-colonialism. For a state that has been defined by only external forces for almost two centuries, the strength of Burmese post-colonial literature is the ability to write itself. This is not a discussion of, or a return to, a “pure” or “source” Burmese literature as the Orientalists would prefer, but is part of a nation-building exercise that begins from the nothingness of the post-colonial condition. “Nothingness” is used in the sense that imperialism leaves nothing behind that is that of the colonised—it must all be re-appropriated, repossessed, and reclaimed by the new social consciousness that arises out of post-colonial writing. To reclaim “nothing”, at the outset, appears to be paradoxical. However, the “nothingness” attributed to the colonised also implies and encapsulates the totality of control attributed to the coloniser; by repossessing the nothingness, the entirety is also repossessed. A new language of resistance against the materialism of hegemonic empires and their lasting ideologies is formed in the use of “english”—and english that is Burmese in its form and usage. Such Burmese english is resultant of authorial identity—in a post-colonial text, it is impossible to separate the hybrid identity of the author from the text, as the language utilised is always an extension of the self. From the destruction of a nation’s past comes freedom from the fetters of external definition and the birth of the “real” *Pyindaunzu Thanmada Myânma Nainngandaw*. The rebirth of Burma is manifested in the textuality of Burmese english, and since “each birth represents a new beginning and the introduction of novelty into the world”, the birth of a national literary consciousness is the introduction of a literal “novel”ty.<sup>5</sup> The resistance to which I refer as presented in this Burmese english memoir must not be misconstrued as synonymous or interchangeable with “nationalism” as defined by European philosophical norms. As aforementioned, the independent state of Burma is made up of a number of nations and ethnic minorities, and these nations are largely defined by cultural or ethnic ties, not political borders. The nation-building project to Burma is therefore not an isolating, state-focused nationalism but a culture-oriented resistance against the naturalised material order left behind by imperial administration. *The River of Lost Footsteps* as written by a diasporic Burmese person is therefore a

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<sup>2</sup> Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 138.

<sup>3</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, “Re-placing Language: Textual Strategies in post-colonial writing,” in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 2002), 78.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>5</sup> Maurizio Passerin d’Entreves, “Hannah Arendt,” in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, last modified April 2014, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/arendt/>.

highly significant act of rediscovery—one that refutes the “discovery” of nation-states as delineated by the imperial project of both past and present. I refer to the present imperial project because it continues materially in Burma through the continued existence of physical railways, buildings, and textually written laws that were imposed by the British. While the formal process of “decolonisation” has been and gone, such material presences allow the imperial project to continue ideologically.

Writing in the post-colonial context is akin to taking; writing back and taking back are synonymous. This notion of not just returning, for there is nothing to return to, but reclaiming, it textualised in the lines, “Three of the world’s great rivers—the Yangtze, the Mekong, and the Brahmaputra—come within a hundred miles of one another here, in nearly parallel lines, before setting off for thousands more miles in different ways and meeting the sea at Shanghai, Saigon, and Calcutta. The area [...] was the home of the Burmese language.”<sup>6</sup> The rivers, independent of imperial jurisdiction in their wholeness as utterly embedded within the physical earth itself, yet flowing freely through it, is the ultimate embodiment of the Burmese English text, and the concept of truly “writing back”. To write “back” does not refer to an essential notion of the “pure” or “authentic” Burma before its “discovery” by outside forces. Resistance of imperial ideology is not a romantic adventure back to the green paddy fields of yesteryear—it is imperial ideology that has presumed this purity exists. Purity is what the white-skinned lends of the colonial traveller is fed through Kipling’s diaries. To write “back” is an act of reclaiming both language and physical space for the multitudinous Burmese. For the formerly colonised and for their children, as well as for the diaspora, there will never be a true, pure, Burmese “home”, for the “home” does not exist. The conventional Burmese language as ethnographically defined, much like the water of the rivers, is embedded within Burma itself, but its embedding is fluid in the sense that it is a social vernacular and highly visible. Less visible is the institutionalised value of the English language as the still-remaining British crux of the modern legal system in Burma. The English language is the ground in which the Burmese flows through. The two, however, appear to require the presence of the other in order to create a full-functioning river of language. English is not just English in Burma, just as Burmese is not just Burmese; both are embedded within systems that intersect in more ways than not—legal (English) jurisdiction is, after all, social (Burmese) control. To undergo the material process of writing in Burmese English is an act of reclaiming the language for Burma. The initial reclamation of language in *The River of Lost Footsteps*, found within the fundamental life source of water, reaches its full potential in the text when the rivers intersect after miles of separation. The reclaimed language flows across imperially created and enforced borders that were coded through ethnography—and, in the twenty-first century, modern Area Studies—towards the polyphony of Burmese English.

The notion of “centres” and “peripheries” is integral to *The River of Lost Footsteps*. Thant Myint-U writes, “The English to the extent that they were considered, were seen initially as just another group of people from the West. And for Burma the West began in Bengal [...] All the many and varied visitors and immigrants [...] were classified under the single ethnic category of *kala* [...] the newer *kala* from Europe was sometimes referred to as the *bayingyi kala*.”<sup>7</sup> The instance of contextualising surroundings clearly “offers a frame of reference that exists outside the boundaries of European knowledge production” through sheer indifference.<sup>8</sup> The notion of the “West” in its rigidity as the world’s hegemonic power melts away within the use of the term *kala*. *Kala* has no direct translation in the English language, and is therefore decidedly Burmese English in its manifestation as both the sign *kala* in the Roman alphabet, and *kala* in that which is signified. By textually placing Burma as the locus of mapping—the course of knowledge—as produced materially (i.e., textually) by human individuals, the “West” as it is known to the reader of English, as opposed to English, no longer exists: it

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<sup>6</sup> Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps*, 351.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 108; White visitors to Burma are also commonly referred to as *kala-phyu*, *phyu* meaning “white”.

<sup>8</sup> Justin D. Edwards and Rune Grauland, “Introduction,” in *Postcolonial Travel Writing: Critical Explorations*, ed. by J.D. Edwards and R. Grauland (London: Palgrave Macmillan), 3.

fades away into nothingness with the use of Burmese english. Just as the “West” fades from view, the “East” does too. Burma is no longer part of the Orient that is looked towards from across the ocean; it is no longer the subject of an Orientalism that is involved in the “distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological text” from the “West”.<sup>9</sup> Burma becomes the centre, not in the traditional sense of everything else becoming peripheral, but in the sense of reclamation; the text takes “hold of the marginality imposed on it and makes hybridity and syncreticity the source of literary and cultural redefinition”.<sup>10</sup>

The “centre” of Burmese english is its fluidity. “The appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre, the process of capturing and re-moulding the language to new usages marks a separation from the site of colonial privilege” in a birth.<sup>11</sup> Referring back to the concept of natality, Burma, through the reclamation of not only language, but the discourse created by geopolitical hegemones, begins its birth from the river of Burmese english. Hybridity displaces the essentialising “Oriental” or “East” and acts as liberating forces by explicitly using plurality to their advantage. The hybridity of *The River of Lost Footsteps* alludes to Hannah Arendt’s assertion that “without the presence and acknowledgement of others, action would cease to be a meaningful activity”.<sup>12</sup> The “action” in the textual use of Burmese english and the fading of the West/East binary enables to globe to finally become truly spherical in the text through the acknowledgment of a necessarily hybrid Burmese english. There is no specified or fixed beginning and end point. The centre moves fluidly from locale to locale. The centre can be British and Burmese; it possesses the emancipative emancipatory potential to be both simultaneously. The borders of not only nations, but of the philosophical and literary, as formerly delineated by Orientalists and ethnographers alike, are firmly dislocated and displaced for the purpose of a genuinely post-colonial polyphony of discourse.

The practice of post-colonialism, as demonstrated in *The River of Lost Footsteps*, is deeply personal. Gramsci states that “The starting point of a critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is “knowing thyself” as a product of the historical processes to date, which had deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory”.<sup>13</sup> The personal history aspect of *The River of Lost Footsteps* is therefore essential to the process of nation building; there are implicit mental (inventory-less, as in not-recorded) borders that have been imposed on the Burmese individual—diasporic or not—that must be dislodged, and, eventually, destroyed completely. English as an area of academic study is an inherently political phenomenon; the study of it was institutionalised in colonially administrated areas for the purpose of “naturalising [...] constructed values” and is as such “the language of our intellectual make-up [...] but not of our emotional make-up”.<sup>14</sup> Referring back to *The River of Lost Footsteps*, whilst the physical “house”—the emotional—in New York was “on the map [...] part of Riverdale” for Thant Myint-U, it was “in most other ways [...] a small slice of Burma”.<sup>15</sup> There is a presumed knowledge here that the sign in English, “Riverdale” signifies a thing that is very different than the English sign “Burma”, and the discourse between these two signs is therefore rooted in their difference. In these few lines, Thant Myint-U demonstrates that “all post-colonial literatures are cross-cultural because they negotiate a gap between “worlds”, a gap between which the simultaneous process of abrogation and appropriate continually strives to define and de-

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<sup>9</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), 12.

<sup>10</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, “Re-placing Language”, 77.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>12</sup> Maurizio Passerin d’Entreves, “Hannah Arendt”.

<sup>13</sup> Gramsci, quoted by Edward W. Said, in *Orientalism*, 25.

<sup>14</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, “Introduction,” in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, ed. by B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin (London: Routledge, 2002), 3; Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, “Re-placing Language”, 60.

<sup>15</sup> Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps*, 38.

termine their practice”.<sup>16</sup> He does so by taking the English academicism of “abrogation and appropriation” as the “intellectual make-up” of his hybrid being, and brings the presumed intellectualism of English into the personal realm of the physical childhood house. English is therefore abrogated in this context through a denial of Riverdale and its significations as the source of knowledge and experience because it is the “small slice of Burma” that is the contents of the physical “mapping” of Riverdale, irrespective of Riverdale’s superficially physical imposition on the map. Burmese english is contextualised in the personal realm of diaspora where Burmese exists within, and provides substance to, the English. This allows Thant Myint-U to reclaim the Burmese english discourse through effectively destroying the notion that the academic and personal—the English of Riverdale and the Burmese of Burma—are separate realms. He once again uses the necessary plurality of Burmese english to demonstrate the hybridity that presupposes its existence.

Remaining within the realm of the personal, Thant Myint-U discusses his trips to Burma as a young boy by stating that “[...] those trips to Burma were always a surprise, a surprise that the inside world, inside the walls of Riverdale, had become the outside world, of people on streets and in markets [...] What was particular to my family was suddenly public and everywhere[...].”<sup>17</sup> This is a particularly common experience of diasporic individuals. There is a simultaneous movement of both the physical and mental from the “inside” space of the aforementioned house in Riverdale, to the “outside” space. Seemingly private, incredibly localised rituals are rendered jarringly public. This movement’s subsequent memorialisation within the text, lies at the core of *The River of Lost Footsteps*. This experience can be referred to as what Jean-François Lyotard dubbed a *petits récits*: the “local histories that resist systematisation”.<sup>18</sup> Such systematisation through the means of Orientalist travel writing or European ethnography is resisted through the exploration of the self by an observation of the material conditions of travel. Language itself is a material pursuit, and Thant Myint-U has therefore moved physically—through his actual travels—through Burma, and has materialised these travels through their memorialisation in the text. Through the act of writing the memoir, Thant Myint-U controls the material conditions of his representation and existence. Burmese english is a means of reclaiming and recreating Burma itself—the notion of Burma as a nation is being reframed by Thant Myint-U writing in a language that is uniquely Burmese. Such signifying of his experiences through the medium of Burmese english brings about the dislocation of the concept that Burma must be internalised. Self-reflexivity is a facet of humanity that the imperial project did not allow the Burmese people, as “Orientals [...] were always and only the human material [...] in British colonies”.<sup>19</sup> The Burmese travel writer, through the material act of writing, is made self-aware of their inherent materialism not just in terms of being an imperial subject, but on a global scale. There is a realisation through the democratisation of Burmese english that materialism, and the pursuit of a material text that can define a nation, is what unites humanity. This is explored through Thant Myint-U’s movement as he realises textually that all individuals, and all rituals deriving from the discourse between these individuals, must be materially manifested: either in physical movement, or in the text, or simultaneously. Materialism is reclaimed as a constituent part of Burmese english, and to deny such materialism is to deny the ability to move within these abundant, varying spaces. Such recovery of the material conditions of existence and the text prevents systematisation because it cannot be utilised by the hegemonic imperial project to ideologically control the formerly colonised; it is the formerly colonised that now control their own material status. The material conditions of being a diasporas Burmese individual who necessarily moves materially through a plethora of spaces therefore renders

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<sup>16</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, “Re-placing Language”, 38.

<sup>17</sup> Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps*, 38.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Smethurst, “Post-Orientalism and Past-Colonial in William Dalrymple’s Travel Histories,” in *Postcolonial Travel Writing: Critical Explorations*, ed. by J.D. Edwards and R. Grauland (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 168.

<sup>19</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 39.

the movement—both bodily and textual—into Burma not a rediscovery in the traditional sense, but a discovering. “Those trips to Burma” as “always a surprise” lifts the veil of Orientalism from which it is clear, through Thant Myint-U’s described surprise, that even the Oriental is not immune. Thant Myint-U’s life has been defined by Orientalists in the sense that the “ritualisation” of life within the confines of the house has been as such because of their culturally rendered illegitimacy in the space of imagined “West”. Those “rituals” are ritualised through their enforced hiding—it is hiding and othering that is now discovered through the reclamation of the materiality of existence.

Adding to this discussion of the necessary materialism of post-colonial memoir writing is the notion of the sign releasing “language from the myth of cultural authenticity” through the utilisation of the term *longyi* in *The River of Lost Footsteps*: “The UN security guard at the gate [...] wore uniforms of light and navy blue, but inside the stone walls a Burmese sarong or *longyi*, even in the Northeast winter, was the more predictable sight.”<sup>20</sup> The *longyi*—as a sign created by the Burmese, manifested in the conventional English alphabet, integrated into the Burmese English text—embodies the materially “fundamental importance of the situating context in according meaning”.<sup>21</sup> The *longyi*, as an item that is materially created—the cloth the literally woven by a labourer, and textually through its written form—is the “more predictable sight”. Within Orientalism, there is a notion that the colonised or non-white person is one that can be presupposed. The *longyi* as the archetype of the signified image of the “Burmese” is reclaimed within *The River of Lost Footsteps*. The image no longer belongs to the Orientalist who desires to materially essentialise and create the image of a pure Burmese-ness, but becomes that of the Burmese, and is repossessed by the Burmese through its manifestation in the dynamic, material fluidity of Burmese English.

This article has begun a discussion of not only Burmese English memoir writing, but Burmese English literature as a whole. Nation building is an arduous and physically demanding process that requires the labour and suffering of those who write it, and of those who choose to discuss it critically. The ability to utilise language as a form of self-direction lies at the heart of such texts, and consequentially self-direction is simultaneously an academic and personal pursuit. It is this deeply personal aspect of the post-colonial that cannot be ignored, for “we have precisely chosen to speak of that kind of *tabula rasa* which characterises at the outside all decolonisation”.<sup>22</sup> The painful realisation of the nothingness that presupposed the post-colonial condition brings to light the necessity of self-definition as the crux of resistance. It is therefore through decolonisation by the birth and use of Burmese English that we will see the building of a *Pyindaunzu Thanmada Myánma Nainngandaw* that possesses a self-made critical discourse, which must necessarily begin at the *tabula rasa* that is the dislodging of imperialism. ■

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<sup>20</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, “Re-placing Language”, 65; Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps*, 38.

<sup>21</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, “Re-placing Language”, 65.

<sup>22</sup> Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 2001), 1.

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