



13. INTIMATE CONFLICTS: REBELS, HEROES AND DISFIGURED TERRORISTS IN BURMESE ANGLOPHONE LITERATURE

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DISFIGURING THE TERRORIST: TROPES, FIGURES AND THE INTIMACY OF VIOLENCE

In a post-war story about the intimacy of two amputated legs, an investigative team of inspectors descends upon a battle zone to collect evidence. ‘28 legs in all’, cries out an inspector, ‘19 military personnel and 9 militants’.¹ ‘No, our boss won’t accept that’, responds the officer, ‘we can’t have odd numbers, we need two legs per person’. Even if we assume that one of the military personnel was an amputee from a previous battle, we still have one militant leg to account for. So, the investigative team either needs to wait until one of the insurgents steps on a mine, or chase some of the local villagers from the militant-controlled areas in the direction of a mine field and hope that they will get an odd number of blasts to even the number of legs. But there will be a problem if one of the military personnel steps on a mine accidentally. That is exactly what happens in Mitali Perkins’ novel *Bamboo People* (2010), in which a fifteen-year-old foot soldier of the Burmese junta, forcefully recruited, loses his leg in a landmine explosion. Left to die, with a missing leg, he is eventually rescued by another teenager from the enemy’s camp, a Karenni insurgent, who takes pity on him and gifts him a prosthetic leg which was meant for the teenage amputees of his own camp.

The boy goes home to Rangoon, proudly displaying his ‘Karenni leg’ (Perkins 2010, 60) to his Burmese friends, in an overt gesture of political bonhomie that allegorically reinforces the notion that Burma the nation needs two legs to trundle along, one organic and one inorganic, one aesthetic and one

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1 prosthetic, the Burman and the Karenni, which stand side by side, as it were,
 2 but never even on ground or in life. The Burmese teenager can walk only at
 3 the expense of a Karenni amputee. The conflict that holds the two legs of the
 4 same body together and apart is therefore binding and intimate at the same
 5 time, as Moira Fradinger observes in the context of the Dominican Republic
 6 under the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo: the violence between ‘the most pow-
 7 erless and most powerful [is] part of a structure of enmity whose two polar
 8 opposites alternatively embody figures inimical to the fantasized unity of the
 9 nation’ (2010, 188). It is the very intimate enmity which is conditioned by the
 10 paradoxical coexistence of harm and peace, division and unity that is char-
 11 acteristic of the Burmese texts featured in this chapter: Pascal Khoo Thwe’s
 12 *From the Land of Green Ghosts* (2002) and Lucy Cruickshanks’ *The Road to*
 13 *Rangoon* (2015).

14 Put simply, I refer to intimate conflict as a product of violence that is famil-
 15 iar, generational, inherited, inevitable and indispensable; it is a violence that
 16 turns brothers, sisters, neighbours and entire communities which share the
 17 same cultural space against each other in the name of new national identities
 18 and destinies. It is a violence in which the brush with the lover and the brush
 19 with the leader become the same thing; a violence in which the loss of an inti-
 20 mate partner and the loss of a national leader could trigger the same insurgent
 21 response; a violence which is unencumbered by the ideologies of redemptive
 22 justice, figural terrorism, mythic violence or any other sovereign arrogation of
 23 terror which is unleashed upon its populace in the name of the greater good;
 24 a violence which rallies around lovers, losers, limping insurgents, famished
 25 revolutionaries, unpaid mercenaries and rebels with more than one cause. The
 26 inimical ‘conversion of kinsmen into enemies’, as Shruti Kapila argues, can be
 27 traced to the decoupling of sovereignty from ‘its mooring in the state’ and its
 28 ‘deposit[ion] in the political subject’ by the postcolonial elites (2021, 7). This
 29 process, which holds the individual as the sovereign agent of violence rather
 30 than the state, enables the colonial fraternity to create an enemy within, in
 31 which the individual subjects, communities, and non-sovereign entities can be
 32 pitted against other such entities. Thus, by infiltrating violence to the societal
 33 and communal level, the state flexes its muscles and frees its hands of actual
 34 violence, and through ‘logics of murder and affinity’ promises ‘the creation of
 35 fellowship’ (8–9). And because intimate violence is so familiar to every stake-
 36 holder involved in the *longue durée* of conflict, and because it is carried out in
 37 *known* social sites and communal spaces, its ideological containers become so
 38 strained and porous that they render the essentialist as well as figurative catego-
 39 ries such as terrorist and counterterrorist almost meaningless.

40 Nested between Thailand in the south, China to the north east and India
 41 to the west, perhaps no postcolonial nation is more susceptible to the intimacy
 42 of violence than Burma, not least because of a culture of dictatorship regimes

which led to its isolation from the rest of the world for over half a century. 1
 Between 1824 and 1885, Burma was gradually annexed to the British Raj. 2
 From 1919 to 1937, the country was ruled as part of India, and was made into 3
 a separate colony in 1937. After the Japanese invasion in 1942, it became a 4
 Japanese colony until 1945, after which the British returned. Burma remained 5
 a British colony until its independence in 1948. The seeds of Burmese civic 6
 dissent can be traced to the intimate affects, such as trust and loyalty, vested 7
 in the colonial benefactors: while the Central Burmans, a Theravada Buddhist 8
 majority, fought on the side of the Japanese who had promised liberation from 9
 the British Empire, the ethnic groups of the frontier region – such as Karen, 10
 Kachin, Shan and Mon – fought on the side of the British who had promised 11
 them political autonomy and sovereignty. As these promises remain unfulfilled 12
 today, both the conflict and the parties involved in the conflict remain equally, 13
 if not intimately, familiar to each other. 14

Given this conflictual heritage, Burma has been implicated in discourses of 15
 terrorism in myriad, often bizarre, and unpredictable ways. To begin with, the 16
 military junta that overthrew the democratically elected government led by 17
 Aung San Suu Kyi in 2021, has called the latter's shadow government a terror- 18
 ist group for allegedly inciting violence against the military (DW 2021). It is the 19
 same military junta, known as the Tatmadaw, which has been labelled by many 20
 Western states a terrorist government since 1962. Yet, the insurgents fighting 21
 the junta, who had evidently been American allies, were classified as terror- 22
 ists by the CIA and other agencies in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. The 23
 fact that Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize also served to legitimise 24
 the perception of the junta as a terrorist or rogue government, a label which 25
 was used, ironically, to describe Suu Kyi's own political party – the National 26
 League of Democracy, which shared power with the Tatmadaw till the 2021 27
 coup – on an earlier occasion, and for an entirely different reason: its passive 28
 compliance with the Rohingya massacre of 2016–17. This was followed by 29
 appeals from various statespersons and intellectuals, including former Nobel 30
 laureates such as Desmond Tutu to revoke her Nobel Peace Prize (Zhou and 31
 Safi 2017). Suu Kyi's is not alone in this: historically there has been an unavoi- 32
 dable collusion and complicity between Nobel Peace Prize winners and terror- 33
 ists, as in the case of Menachem Begin, Nelson Mandela or Yasir Arafat, who 34
 were labelled as terrorists by their respective colonial governments but went 35
 on to win Nobel Peace Prizes (Scanlan 2001, 6). What such uncanny intimacy 36
 between the figures of terrorism and the icons of peace tells us is that if one is 37
 to aim for the Nobel Peace Prize, terrorism is actually a good place to start. Or 38
 quite inversely, if one does not have a good start with terrorism, aim for the 39
 Nobel Peace Prize, and one would eventually get there, or at least get to broker 40
 power or share governments with the terrorists – as in the case of Suu Kyi – and 41
 eventually earn the title of terrorist. 42

1 This inverted paradox of the same person being the nation builder, terror-
 2 rist or the pacifist of our times is also central to the disfigured subjects of
 3 intimate violence. Consider, for instance, how the fictional hero of Charmaine
 4 Craig's *Miss Burma* (2017), a Burmese-Jewish tradesman, reflects on the end-
 5 less metamorphosis of Aung San who invited the Japanese to Burma to over-
 6 throw the British:

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 8 Yet the past did encroach, particularly with news that trickled in – along
 9 with the occasional English-speaking Karen soldier – of the destruction of
 10 four hundred Karen villages ('not villagers, villages!') within the span of
 11 a few days by Aung San's army. ('Man, woman, child – no matter. They
 12 shot them and pushed them into heaps – eighteen hundred of them just in
 13 that one place.') News of Karen retaliation. Of race wars. Of a total Brit-
 14 ish retreat to Assam. Of emptying prisons, and escalating murder rates,
 15 and thousands of released dacoits joining Aung San's ranks. (65)

16
 17 In the same breadth the narrator recounts:

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 19 The loyal are fully capable of deceit. That was something Benny told
 20 himself four months later, in May 1945, after the last of the Japanese had
 21 evacuated Rangoon and more than twelve thousand of their troops had
 22 been killed by Karen guerrillas supplied by British airdrop . . . Among the
 23 other intelligence and paramilitary groups working separately in Burma
 24 in support of the Allied cause were Kachin Rangers, Chin levies, Commu-
 25 nist Party cadres, socialists, and even, in the final weeks of the campaign,
 26 Aung San's renamed Burma National Army . . . They had all fought the
 27 same enemy, yet what they had been fighting for apparently diverged
 28 widely. (81)

29
 30 What is striking about Benny's fixation with Aung San is that his persona
 31 is split into polar opposites. Not long before Aung San was seated as the
 32 Prime Minister of Burma, he was regarded by both the colonial powers – the
 33 British and the Japanese – as an insurrectionist, a rebel, or an anti-colonial
 34 revolutionary of maverick proportions given his ability to switch sides to the
 35 British in March 1945 when the tide rose against his allies, the Japanese. For
 36 the British, yesteryear's rebel and anti-colonial insurgent became a peacemaker,
 37 or rather a piece-meal maker of a nation, who would eventually quell ethnic
 38 insurgencies by means of counterinsurgency: razing up of Karen villages,
 39 which – as Benny recounts – led to some eighteen hundred deaths of Karen
 40 minorities. In spite of this bloodthirsty and almost terroristic portrayal of
 41 Aung San, when Benny does encounter Aung San for the first time at a political
 42 rally, when it has become clear that Burma was going to gain independence,

he makes this observation: ‘There wasn’t evil anywhere in the man’s face that Benny could spot. There was anger, ancient anger, to be sure, and the focused ferocity of someone who would stop at nothing to free Burma’s people’ (92).

From being the leader of an insurgent national army, to an opportunist anti-colonialist, a murderer of eighteen hundred Karens, a man of ‘focused ferocity’, and to the ‘father of the[ir] nation’ (225), the label ‘terrorism’ uncannily eludes Aung San, but always lingers, especially in a nation where the familial, generational and national become inseparable. Consider, for instance, the views of Aung San’s daughter as expressed in 1994, and then her fall from grace after the Rohingya massacre:

The present armed forces of Burma were created and nurtured by my father. It is not simply a matter of words to say that my father built up armed forces. It is a fact . . . Let me speak frankly. I feel strong attachment for the armed forces. Not only were they built up by my father, as a child I was cared for by his soldiers . . . I would therefore not wish to see any splits and struggles between the army which my father built up and the people who love my father so much. May I also from this platform ask the personnel of the armed forces to reciprocate this kind of understanding and sympathy? For their part the people should try to forget what has already taken place, and I would like to appeal to them not to lose their affection for the army. (Suu Kyi 1995, 194–5; emphasis added)

Sympathy for the devil, and scorn for the terrorist. It is not that Suu Kyi’s views have become aligned with the terrorist junta overnight, it is just that she now reloads and then relaunches the term ‘terrorism’ against another group of people: the Muslim minority in her own country (Safi 2017). The boundaries between the father, national father, family, military, foe and terrorists not only become porous here, but they do so precisely with the invocation of a collective threat by virtue of the same reductive principle that subsumes all social identities into the trans- and dis-figurations of a terrorist. This is particularly the case in a conflictual world where each life comes under a perceived threat, where every form of fellowship and intimate relationship could pose a potential ‘terrorist’ threat.

Such a strained, if not constrained, relationship to alterity in the context of threat, terrorism, social and civic unrest evokes two theoretical cues. The first one refers to Emmanuel Levinas’ thesis on violence in the face of alterity, or our ethical bind to the familiarly unfamiliar Other. For Levinas, our very relationship to the Other is pure violence, because the face of the Other – not simply as a physical encounter of the visage but as an affective countenance – is vulnerable to the hazards of nonrepresentation. As he writes: ‘The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is



1 what forbids us to kill' (Levinas 1985, 86). Yet, the face is also a source of invi-
2 tation to violence and conflict as a trope of radical otherness: 'The Other is the
3 only being that one can be tempted to kill. This temptation to murder and this
4 impossibility of murder constitute the very vision of the face' (Levinas 1990,
5 8). Sure enough, in what Levinas (1998) terms the theodicy there is always
6 a justification for the suffering of the Other in the name of the greater good
7 or the preservation of the Self, which is being carried into the secular institu-
8 tions of the day, that justify the killing, suffering and torture of the dangerous
9 Other – in the present instance, the terrorist. Against this intimacy of face-
10 to-face violence, Levinas does not call for the end of wars or pure violence
11 as such, but for a primordial ethical imperative towards alterity, via a 'non-
12 useless' or 'useful' suffering (Pugliese 2013, 5–11), by which the suffering in the
13 Other can be made useful and meaningful by acknowledging the 'suffering in
14 me for the unjustifiable suffering of the other' (Levinas 1998, 94).

15 Slavoj Žižek's interjection in, or rather rejection of, Levinas' face-to-face
16 ethical pact serves as bridge to my second cue: rather than worship the face of
17 the other as a pathway into transcendence, Žižek advocates for the smashing
18 of the other's face because it is a sign of gentrified Otherness: 'Far from display-
19 ing "a quality of God's image carried with it", the face is the ultimate ethical
20 lure . . . the neighbor is not displayed through a face; it is, as we have seen, in
21 his or her fundamental dimension a *faceless monster*' (2013, 185; emphasis
22 original). Ashis Nandy (1989) gives a face to this *faceless monster* of Žižek
23 and calls him the intimate enemy, or Other within. For Nandy, the Other is not
24 only encoded but is embodied within the Self, at least in the colonial context.
25 In order to perform the hostile dominance, the coloniser and the colonised need
26 to both invoke and negate the internalised Other within. This results in what
27 Nandy (2010) calls the intimate animosity whereby 'what others can do to you,
28 you also can do to your own kind': 'The colonial mantle is now worn by native
29 regimes', Nandy affirms, 'who are willing to do what the colonial powers did'
30 (ibid.). In an erstwhile colonial context, Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton
31 (2015, 15), formulate Achille Mbembe's position on the violence employed by
32 the postcolonial subject as follows: 'He who inflicts terror himself, having once
33 been its victim, is the quintessential contested subject of the postcolony'. In
34 other words, the violence that enters the colonised subject, is the violence that
35 exits through him/her as cathartic terror: a form of release from a permanent
36 state of being in pain.

37 Intimate violence is thus violence that is omnipresent, routine and endemic
38 to the communal fabric, a violence that becomes an immediate response to
39 myriad claims for agency. It is not only immediate but equally indispensable,
40 as Kimberley Theidon puts it in the context of Peruvian villagers who sud-
41 denly find themselves in conflict with their fellow peasants and have to 'learn to
42 kill [their] own brothers' (2012, 208). Accordingly, Theidon argues, via Veena





Das and Arthur Kleinman, intimate violence concerns itself with ‘how people engage in the tasks of daily living, reinhabiting worlds in full recognition that perpetrators, victims and witnesses come from the same social space’ (384). In such a scenario, ‘[p]erhaps strategies that permit people to delay that full recognition – that permit people to mask the unbearable truth of intimate, lethal violence – are key to staying the hand of vengeance’ (384).

If the victims of terrorism are those who are likely to use terrorism – both literally and metaphorically – against others, intimate violence is then both binding and divisive as Moira Fradinger argues in her work on Latin America:

It is the friend whose difference is manufactured in times of crisis to be placed in liminal space, between the outside and inside, in order to differentiate the interior and exterior whose borders have been thrown into crisis. It is the friend become enemy who reminds us how a given political fraternity was built on foundational violence. (2010, 247)

The fact that Suu Kyi’s shadow government is labelled as a terrorist group by a terrorist junta – the very junta instituted by her father and the one by which Suu Kyi was cared for as a child – is a glaring reminder of the interplay between intimacy and enmity bred by the foundational violence of power-harnessing in postcolonial Burma. The wheel now has turned full circle: in an ironic turn of events, the same Suu Kyi, showcased by the West as the champion of democracy and rights, denounced as a terrorist-ally when the Rohingya massacre was underway, begins to garner international solidarity as the last vestige of hope against the military junta that deposed her.

Such porousness of iconicity, including the tropological substitutions vested in the figure of the terrorists, military, militias, saviours of the nation and insurgents, is endemic to the notion of intimate violence. Here, the interchangeability of terrorist and nationalist or nation builder are made possible, according to Laura Sjoberg (2015, 393), precisely because of the epistemic intimacy of the violence involved: ‘If the terrorist is the dissolution of order, the counterterrorist is its reconstitution’. Sjoberg further contends, via Cynthia Weber, that much like the power dynamics of the intimate relationships between the masculine and feminine, the “terrorist” is susceptible to the violation of the “counter-terrorist” [which] is made possible by the epistemology of intimate (in)violability constituting the existence of “the terrorist” even without his/her materiality’ (394). To put it differently, if masculinity is considered ‘invulnerable’, any challenge to its constituent elements such as ‘bravery, independence, protector status and honour’ (394) leads to the construction of the other as a threat. Thus, the very existence of the category of ‘terrorist’, which serves as a fleeting and floating metaphor for those who are in a position to effectively impose it on others, is an exegesis of foundational violence through which





1 nations are born, societies are made, and simultaneously, citizenship is gentry-
 2 fied and communities are destroyed. It is this very simultaneity of terrorism and
 3 counterterrorism – the dissolution and reconstruction of order – embedded in
 4 the *foundational violence*, such as the founding dominance of central Burmans
 5 over the minority tribes, that makes the enduring conflicts all the more inti-
 6 mate: ‘the historical development and radical shifts in affinities within relation-
 7 ships that frequently involve a more powerful partner who, over the course of
 8 the relationship, exercises control’ (Pain 2015, 67).
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10 REBELS, HEROES AND THE DISFIGURED TERRORISTS IN BURMESE LITERATURE

11
 12 Pascal Khoo Thwe’s *From The Land of Green Ghosts* (2002) features a
 13 series of allegorical cues on the intimacy of private and political violence.
 14 Thwe’s memoir was written during his exile in Cambridge, after having been
 15 rescued by a Cambridge don named John Casey from the persecution of the
 16 junta for his role in student mobilisation.² Although Thwe inevitably joins an
 17 insurgency led by the Karennis during his flight from the junta, his decision to
 18 become an active political campaigner is shaped by the abduction and murder
 19 of his lover Moe, the daughter of a Burmese military officer who was killed
 20 in the conflict with the Shan insurgents. Since Moe is the only Burman in his
 21 life who shows unconditional affection and love in the land of ‘Green Ghosts’
 22 (the name Thwe’s Padaung tribe gave the Burmans), her murder marks a
 23 decisive moment in his subsequent encounters with violence. As Thwe writes:
 24 ‘I believe that in the months to come, some part of her spirit and defiance
 25 entered into me, for this loss I have no words. Moe’s body was never returned
 26 or recovered’ (158–9).

27 Admittedly, this intimate loss manifests itself in Thwe’s life as ‘defiance’,
 28 which in turn transforms into an act of rebellion against his father who, Thwe
 29 believes, had long been imprisoned by his own docility and submissiveness to
 30 the regime. From defiance to rebellion, Thwe channels his pent-up anger into
 31 an allegorical insurgency during one of his jungle hunts:
 32

33 I waited until the target could be seen distinctly. At the clearing in the bush
 34 a forked tongue appeared, an inch or two from the hutoo’s nest. I pulled
 35 the rubber of the catapult. Off it went, and hit a dry twig and the snake’s
 36 head. Such was the impact that the snake fell to the ground, sinking into
 37 a heap like a silk ribbon, but in slow motion . . . The creature didn’t die
 38 at once. Its center of life is not in the head, as it is with humans and
 39 animals – you can chop the head off and it will still wriggle and trash
 40 and not die. You must break the spine to render it lifeless. I held it in
 41 triumph . . . Looking into the nest I found that it contained three baby
 42 birds, about two or three days old. Poor creatures, they almost ended up





in the snake's belly, I thought, without ever having the experience of flying freely. I took my trophy to the hut and rubbed it with ash. I cut off its head, skinned and gutted it, then buried in the inedible parts near the bush where it fell. I felt satisfied and had no wish for further hunting that day. (175–7)

Here, the hunt itself becomes not only a source of intimate psychological catharsis that brings Thwe much 'satisfaction', but its description alludes to a tropological substitution wherein Moe's loss stands in for the bird he could save, whose spirit, as it were *enters* into him (158-9) and invokes the insurgent impulse in him to shoot the head of the snake and save the bird. The synecdochic formulation 'the snake's life does not lie in its head' is indeed befitting of the intimacy of the singular body and the dismembering of its organic parts: if we read the junta's leader Ne Win as the head of the snake, the spine of the snake is his henchmen in the junta itself. Taken together, they make a toxic body of a regime splashing venom mixed with blood at the moment of their death, to say nothing of the satisfaction and triumph one gets from the crushing sound off each death blow to one's enemy. The perilous freedom of the birds in the nest that cannot fly shall remain. This organic allegory, or rather the allegory of dismembered organisms – the head, the body, the spine – resurfaces frequently throughout the text, most particularly in the form of a radio interlude between the Karenni militants and the Tatmadaw:

'So you don't love the old man anymore? I'm really shocked. By the way, how many men have you got? . . . And how many civilian porters?'
 'They're all volunteers, all volunteers. It's a lie that we kidnap them.'
 'Well, you said it. Pretty impressive that they volunteer to wear chains, volunteer to walk through the minefields, volunteer to be blown to bits. The Burmese like getting killed, then?'
 . . . 'Why are you trying to kill us?'
 'Orders. And it's my duty.'
 'I bet you enjoy your duty – you know, all the mowing down monks, women, unarmed students. You must feel pretty good after that, I suppose. After all, what could be more satisfying than murdering your own children'.
 . . . 'I'm not going to talk politics. I have a job. I have to feed my wife and family. Don't try to teach an old crocodile how to swim.'
 'Talking of old crocodiles, how is your boss, your father? Still the benevolent ruler? Still ending the exploitation of man by man?' (241–2)

Again, the 'father' metaphor alludes to the junta 'head' New Win as the poisonous head of the snake and his henchmen as its spine (175–6) evokes the organic intimacy innate to one's body, but also the estrangement stemming from the presence of murderous venom in the same being. The radio banter, too, bears



1 testimony to an indivisible belonging in a divided community, wherein duty
 2 and desperation are thrust upon each party to kill and to be killed in the name
 3 of preserving the self, the greater good of the community. Such indivisible pres-
 4 ence of what can be called ‘estranged familiarity’ is akin to Patrick Rotman’s
 5 reading of intimate enemies in the context of Algeria: ‘having lived in close
 6 proximity as coloniser and colonised for almost 130 years, fighters on both
 7 sides had the sense of a foe at once completely other, yet strangely familiar’ (qtd
 8 in Flood and Martin 2019, 173). Thwe captures another such intimate encoun-
 9 ter with violence when he stumbles on the corpse of his enemy:

10
 11 When it was all over I walked up to the field of the battle. One of the
 12 Burmese soldiers was lying on his face. Curious, and with a feeling of
 13 presentiment, I turned him over. It was the same army officer who had
 14 told me in the restaurant in Mandalay that I was worth only one bullet.
 15 ‘Surely’, I thought, with a cruel and exultant sense that justice had been
 16 done, ‘he was worth a lot of bullets.’ Then I looked down at his puck-
 17 ered face, and all I could feel was pity at the waste of it. After all, he had
 18 been courageous, I could not sum up his worth by the number of bullets
 19 needed to kill him (2002, 250).

20
 21 In this disconsolate encounter with the death of the enemy, it is as if only
 22 through certain familiarity, that is, an intimate understanding of violence, that
 23 an ethical alterity could be forged. A case in point, the bittersweet vengeance
 24 of seeing his enemy fall is immediately undercut by Pascal’s acknowledgement
 25 of his enemy’s courage, who like himself, knowingly walks into the enemy’s
 26 jaws. Yet, in Thwe’s exultant remark that ‘justice had been done’, there is an
 27 iota of vengeance that unravels its intimate bonds with violence. If vengeance
 28 is retributive of violence, then as Jacky Bouju and Mirijam de Bruijn (2014, 9–10)
 29 assert, ‘in the course of this cyclical negative reciprocity, the permutations of
 30 the position of aggressor/victim ensure a replication of fears. In spite of this,
 31 revenge is always an opportunity as it remains the only recourse for defending
 32 one’s interests or seizing lost power in an inescapable relationship’. However,
 33 Thwe converts his fleeting moment of vengeance into a moment of ethical
 34 alterity by virtue of his own intimacy with violence, one that enables him to
 35 acknowledge the suffering of the Žižekian faceless monster. Such suffering,
 36 however, does not necessarily amount to a useful suffering in a Levinasian
 37 sense, so long as Thwe’s response is based on his encounter with the ill-fated
 38 visage of his enemy when he turns his body over, not its countenance that
 39 invokes his own suffering (for the Other). The chief culprit here is not the
 40 vengeance or the desire for retribution, but the inherent unpredictability and
 41 opacity, as well as the uncontrollability of redemptive violence, which, as Bouju
 42 and de Bruijn (2014, 10–11) observe,



is so old that nobody knows anymore who the original aggressor or victim was and because the unexpected consequences and outcomes of violent deeds usually exceed the perpetrator's initial intentions. . . . Over the course of time, the initial conflict expands socially, involving unexpected new actors, witnesses or institutions, thus creating other sources of conflict and violence.

This is certainly the case with Thwe's own foray into the Karenni insurgency, the insurgent group that takes him under its wing, and its leader concedes that he is no longer sure who exactly his group is fighting, and that he prefers a federal solution to the multiple insurgencies because the separatists 'are tired of killing each other' (2002, 200).

An equally arresting tale, Lucy Cruickshanks (2015) *The Road to Rangoon* follows the lives of two orphaned siblings, Kyaw and Thuza, in the militarised zone in the small town of Mogok in the Shan State. While Kyaw becomes a member of the rebel army (Shan State Army), Thuza makes a subsistence living as a small-time ruby pilferer with the help of her brother from the rebel-controlled areas, and acts as a messenger between the Tatmadaw, the rebels and a Thai arms dealer. In the absence of any kin, except for an opium-addicted grandmother, Thuza comes under the paternal care of a Buddhist monk, Zwatika, a secret Tatmadaw agent, who tells Thuza that her parents were imprisoned in a jail near Rangoon, and manipulates her to accumulate as many rubies in order to bribe the prison officials and free her loved ones who, as we learn later, were killed by the Tatmadaw the moment they were abducted.

The subsequent story evolves through a series of intimate yet violent relationships between four sets of characters, each consisting of an entangled intimacy of friendships, loyalty and brotherhood: Thuza, Kyaw and Zwatika; the Tatmadaw officer Tan Chit and his son Min; Michael, son of the British Ambassador, and Sein, the son of a university professor, both hailing from the upper echelons of Burmese society; and finally Thuza and Tan Chit. Each of these dyadic, at times triadic relationships is bound by acts of violence, and in almost every instance by the loss of a loved one that sets them on a path towards vengeance, redemption and retribution. Since all the characters have lost something intimate through the conflict, their families are both split and bound by the war. This enables the acts and actants of violence from each end of the spectrum – rebels, civilians and the military – to morph and metamorphosise their roles at will: from the loyalists to the Union of Burma to infiltrators, smugglers, terrorists, and finally, to insurgents vis-a-vis the saviours of their nation. In each case, the manifestations of intimate relations, such as care, safety and justice, take a violent course, or rather take recourse to violence to such an extent that intimate acts and political acts can no longer be seen as separate. For the son of the British Ambassador, his own intimate feelings



1 of shame and guilt for abandoning his friend Sein – a friend who becomes his
 2 sole companion by virtue of his class and habitus in a land of ‘injured charm’
 3 (Cruickshanks 2016, 321) that he barely understands – during a bomb blast
 4 turn him into a rebel sympathiser. Yet, Michael’s bid for affective redemption
 5 here is neither ideological nor lumpen, but one triggered by intimate feelings of
 6 pain, loss and guilt:

7
 8 This guilt was different from the constant, ignorable, low rumble of nervousness he had about Sein being his friend, and from the moment he had
 9 let the car drive away with his bleeding body in the boot, and even from
 10 the moment that he’d fled from the hospital. He realised now that he’d
 11 turned away often, in the way he admonished his father for doing – and
 12 Sein’s father too, though he understood why. (154)

13
 14
 15 Upon learning that the bomb was actually planted by the Tatmadaw but was
 16 blamed on the rebels, Michael teams up with his teacher, a former member of
 17 the Shan State Army, and embarks on a risky venture to deliver a catchment
 18 of arms to the insurgents in the jungles of Burma. Despite the fact that he is
 19 visible, and risks being exposed, Michael grows intent on using privilege, and
 20 thereby risks one intimacy – that of his relationship to his father, an ambassador
 21 in service – to offset another, that is, the retribution for his friend’s loss.

22 Like the dramatic metamorphosis of Michael Atwood’s role, from a member
 23 of British diplomatic family to rebel aid, another significant exchange of
 24 roles occurs between the siblings Thuza and Kyaw, whereby the split in the intimacy
 25 of the family mirrors the split in their respective political ideologies and
 26 allegiances. In a clash of insurgent alternatives of their own peculiar brands, the
 27 siblings stand on opposite ends of the political spectrum:

28
 29 ‘They taught you to fight, like I do. Why haven’t you listened?’ Thuza shook
 30 her head and stared at the ground. ‘Our parents are nothing like you,
 31 Kyaw. They never touched a weapon.’ . . . ‘They wouldn’t support you,
 32 Kyaw. You know that.’

33 . . .

34 ‘I have hope Thuza, but I am a realist. You are the hopeless one. How many
 35 years have you saved? How much money do you have? Is it enough for
 36 a train to Rangoon? Is it enough to bribe a colonel or a general, to buy
 37 them a yacht and to break Mumma free?’ He laughed and bared his
 38 beetle black teeth ‘You are a joke’.

39 ‘Fuck off, Kyaw’.

40 ‘It’s the daydreams in your head that keep you trapped. You’re like those
 41 birds in your cage, like your little hidden bank notes. Every time you tuck
 42 another away, you’re choosing to surrender. You’re doing this, not me.



After all the Tatmadaw have done to our people – after all they’ve done to you, Thuza Win – I don’t understand how you simply ignore them. Why don’t you want to fight?’
 ‘I’m fighting, brother. I am. Every day.’ (227–9)

This everyday fight is indeed the most intimate aspect of violence, and if only for its familiarity, knowability, and its ability to naturalise itself, such violence risks being discounted as ordinary or unspectacular. Evidently, Kyaw discredits any ‘fight’ other than insurgent labour as a passive submission to the regime, in spite of Thuza’s own ‘fight’ on an everyday basis: having lost her parents at an early age, she is forced by the circumstances of her life to be a ruby smuggler, bird catcher, pilferer and double agent. The extraordinariness of these occupations becomes transformed into a new ‘ordinariness’ of life. As Susanna Trnka argues in the context of Fiji,

events that had previously been ‘extraordinary’ became a part of everyday life and discourse, but also in the ways in which the ‘ordinary’ events of daily living became implicated as sites of communication and understanding of political conflict. It was as if there could be no event that was not in some way narrated as a part of the political situation. (2008, 146)

In this sense, hidden from the ‘extraordinary’ and the ‘spectacular’, Thuza’s ‘everyday’ insurgency, as Laura Sjoberg (2015, 386) would put it, is ‘evidence that everyday/intimate violence is one of the greatest threats to people’s security globally, and one of the greatest sources of terror to people – certainly as grave as, if not graver than, the acts that policymakers in global politics traditionally and easily label as “terrorism”’. By placing intimate violence at the heart of global terrorism debate, Sjoberg’s appeals to policy makers to turn their attention to the intimate sites of violent production that are often misread as people’s motives for terrorism. Much the same way, both terror and counter-terror reproduce violence ‘in the intimate sphere, [which] manifest[s] as a violent act of control’ (389), something that holds particularly true for the orphaned siblings who take divergent paths to insurgency – one fighting the odds of everyday violence, one fighting the everyday odds of violence – but are bound by an intimate cause, that is, to free their parents from the Insein prison. Thuza’s aversion to *bona fide* insurgency remains somewhat short-lived, however, as she first turns to vengeance, indulging in the only intimate act of violence in her life: she kills her paternal figure Zwatika with her own hands upon learning that the monk was a military agent who had her parents killed, and evolves into a full-blown insurgent after the killing of Kyaw by the Tatmadaw.

But it is another intimate encounter of familial violence, almost as if mirroring the sibling’s own forked path towards insurgency, between the Tatmadaw



1 officer Than Chit and his wife Malar over the fate of their teenage son Min,
 2 that plays a decisive role in Thuza's journey towards insurgency. Ever since he
 3 was rescued from the streets by the Tatmadaw, Than Chit has channelled all his
 4 loyalty to the military institution. He even idolises Aung San, the founder of the
 5 Burmese National Army, and dreams of turning his son Min to a fine soldier
 6 of the Tatmadaw. But his wife Malar, who is a victim of intimate violence by
 7 way of her father who nearly died in the service of Tatmadaw, sees things dif-
 8 ferently:

9
 10 'Why aren't you happy, Malar?' he said. 'Honestly. It's the only place a boy
 11 of his age should be. You know that. The people love and respect the
 12 Tatmadaw.'

13 'They fear them, Than Chit.'

14 'It's the same thing. They keep us together, sweetheart. What's not to love?
 15 Without strong men like Min and me to hold the insurgents at bay – all
 16 murderers and rapists wherever else they are – the whole country would
 17 collapse.' (180)

18
 19 The tragic death of Min – who is sent to the battlefield by his superior unbe-
 20 knownst to Than Chit – at the hands of the Shan insurgents is inimical to,
 21 if not proleptic of, the violent ending of the argument between the intimate
 22 partners: 'he slapped the wall beside her face and she yelped and flinched
 23 then scurried away' (181). Ironically though, it is not Kyaw's death, but
 24 Min's death that inspires Thuza to embark on an insurgent path of vengeance
 25 and redemptive justice in which a member of her enemy camp, Than Chit,
 26 becomes an unlikely ally. Even before the funeral of Min, the head of the
 27 Tatmadaw sends Than Chait on a mission to capture ruby pilferers, and when
 28 captured, Thuza makes an assault on the weaker constitution of a father who
 29 has just lost his son:

30
 31 'You knew my brother was a rebel but you didn't make me say it. You knew
 32 he fought with the SSA. Their men killed your boy, but you didn't need
 33 to throw me with them . . . You showed me mercy, Officer. You're a
 34 good man. You understood what I was feeling. My loss. You don't want
 35 others to suffer like you have done. That makes you more chivalrous
 36 than the Tatmadaw deserves. More gallant. Show me mercy again. . . .

37 The Tatmadaw has robbed us both. Your son was a soldier but he was a
 38 brilliant boy . . . They sent you to work before your child was buried.
 39 Worse than that, they signed his murder warrant. They killed Min as
 40 eagerly as they killed my brother. . . .

41 Pass me the keys, sir. You won't be sorry. Pass me the keys and turn your
 42 eyes sideways, and I promise I'll punish them all for us both.' (356–8)



The fact that Than Chit sets Thuza free in order to avenge his son's death with her help, and sees the injustice he has done to Min by forcing his own ambitions upon his son, unravels what Ashis Nandy has called the intimate enemy, or the enemy within:

Ultimately, modern oppression, as opposed to traditional oppression, is not an encounter between the self and the enemy, the rulers and the ruled, the gods and the demons. It is a battle between the de-humanized self and the objectified enemy, the technologized bureaucrat and his reified victim, pseudo-rulers and their fearsome other selves projected on to their 'subjects'. (1989, xvii)

In an unholy union of sorts, terrorist and counterterrorist join hands to kill *their* collective terrorist, the head of the Tatmadaw, who was indeed responsible for the killing of their loved ones. Through violence, the intimate loss at both ends of the spectrum – the military and the militant – forges a connivingly just political bonhomie among sworn enemies: the prisoner and the imprisoned – Than Chit and Thuza – join hands and pass on intelligence to the rebels to ambush the head of the Tatmadaw and blow him into pieces. In this intimate interplay of violence, no usurpers, no agent provocateurs and no agents of violence remain ideologically frozen or figuratively fixated: insurgents are repeatedly, and at times interchangeably, equated with terrorists (Cruikshanks 2016, 78), and a terrorist, such as Kyaw, in turn, is variedly labelled as a 'notorious insurgent, a sniper, a bandit and a critical money-cow' (364); a ruby pilferer becomes an insurgent; a Buddhist monk secretly acts as a counterterrorism agent; an aspiring soldier models his career after the nation's father; and the father of the aspiring soldier aids and abets the very terrorists who kill his son.

CONCLUSION

In view of these constantly morphing and metamorphosing agents of violence in the Burmese case, it is no overstatement to say that our preoccupation with deconstructing the figure of the terrorist, does much disservice to the presence and prevalence of diverse modes and modalities of violence in the postcolonial world. Against this background, rather than using the concept of terrorism or the figure of the terrorist as the departure point of our inquiry, there is a further need to take an inductive approach to registering the political modalities of violence for what they are: peasant wars, banditry, mass killings, mutinies, nationalist struggles, riots, insurgencies, acts of vengeance and unfulfilled emancipatory movements.

This chapter has argued that intimate violence as a concept helps understand not only the constant mitosis, if not the transfiguration the agents of



1 violence undergo, but also sheds light on how violence becomes an inevita-
 2 ble yet indispensable tool to enliven all those very unfulfilled roles – a beauty
 3 queen becoming an insurgent leader, a ruby pilferer becoming a rebel aid, or a
 4 military officer committing an act of treason – that risk being subsumed under
 5 the figural force of the terrorist. Like the disjointed legs of the violators and
 6 the violated, the terrorists or the victims of terrorism as evinced in the story of
 7 the Burmese teenage soldier cited in the opening of this chapter, it is the con-
 8 joining groin of the two legs that bespeaks of an intimacy of conflicts, enmity,
 9 solidarity and violence in the postcolonial world. The two separate(d) legs of
 10 the allegorical nation, as it were, are pivoted to the most intimate part of the
 11 same body, as captured in the mise-en-scène of Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel *Cracking*
 12 *India* (1988) in which a man is tied to two jeeps and pulled apart, evoking an
 13 arresting imagery of violence that is congenital to the two communities and
 14 the(ir) respective nations – India and Pakistan – which are not only disjointed
 15 at, but are essentially conjoined by, the same severed groin.

NOTES

1. The vignette presented here is loosely based on Minoli Salgado’s (2019) short story ‘Too Many Legs’.
2. A work of life fiction, which is in fact described as English literature of ‘quality’ (Thwe 2002, xvi) by the Oxford literary scholar Colin Burrow for its remarkable use of literary devices. Given its literary focus, this chapter makes a concerted attempt to steer away from the ‘factual authority’ of life fiction towards the execution of literary devices in Thwe’s work.

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