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THE SPIRIT OF AUNG SAN SUU KYI

Birtukan Midekssa

The Lady and the Peacock: The Life of Aung San Suu Kyi. By Peter Popham. New York: The Experiment, 2011. 480 pp.

Everyone recognizes that Aung San Suu Kyi is an iconic figure who garners immense support and adoration from millions of Burmese and countless others around the world. Her story stirs a desire to understand how she has remained resolute and has inspired multitudes despite years of isolation. Yet experts, writers, and journalists disagree about her. At least prior to Burma's recent opening, some believed that she was a failure in terms of achieving her political goals, having wasted her life nobly but fruitlessly defying a brutal regime that knows no pity or shame.

Peter Popham, a veteran correspondent for the British newspaper the *Independent*, does a fine job of tracing the making of this great moral and political leader. He offers a satisfying account of why we should see Daw Suu's life as a real success story, even if it does not lead to a conventionally happy ending.

When Daw Suu decided to take on the leadership of an ongoing democratic movement in August 1988, most Burmese knew her only as the daughter of General Aung San (1915–47), an architect of Burma's independence. The historic significance attached to the name of this father whom she never knew—she was barely two when he was assassinated—clearly inspired her and made her eager, even at a young age, to learn what could be done to save her country from its multifaceted deterioration. Though plagued by doubt and ambivalence, Daw Suu was haunted even more strongly by the conviction that she had a calling to

offer Burma's people her humble service during their time of need. This made her what Popham calls a "seeker."

The organizers of Burma's democracy movement counted on Daw Suu, as the daughter of the father of the nation, to unify and energize the movement. Her very presence in Burma had a fortuitous quality—she was visiting there in 1988 to tend to her dying mother, and one wonders how different Burmese history might be had her mother fallen ill at another time. Popham boldly calls her a "child to her father," but I have my doubts, since her path is so different from the "by any means necessary" approach that Aung San chose to restore his country's independence.

One might assume that Daw Suu, as an Oxford graduate and as a woman who spent the bulk of her formative and adult years abroad, has been tirelessly trying to introduce democracy and the rule of law into Burma as these are understood and practiced in the West. But her intellectual and moral orientation is far more complex, as Popham shows through her writings, through interviews with her friends and relatives plus Daw Suu herself (whom he met with once, in 2002), and through diary entries by her former confidante Ma Thanegi.

Daw Suu's move to India at age fifteen was crucial to her intellectual development. Indians' well-known flair for blending old traditions with modern ways in a confident, self-assured, and uniquely Indian manner fascinated the young Daw Suu. The inspiring example set by India has shaped Daw Suu's life. While learning to appreciate the art, ideas, and cultures of varying countries, she has never let go of her own well-grounded moral principles or her Burmese upbringing and identity.

Obviously, there is a universal dimension to the ideals of human rights and democracy that she wants to see fulfilled in her own country. But in the course of her intellectual and spiritual journey, Daw Suu has rediscovered the values and principles ingrained in her country's Buddhist-dominated culture, on which those universal ideals can be grounded. It is highly symbolic that she delivered her first major address on 26 August 1988, before Yangon's revered Shwedagon Pagoda. Millions were moved by this direct and down-to-earth speech. She was not preaching something new. She was calling upon resources that her people already possessed. She was leading them to rediscover the values of compassion and love that they have been taught all their lives. That was the beginning of her attempt to mend the soul of Burma.

It was clear from the start that Daw Suu was a nonviolent warrior whose fight would be waged on levels far deeper than that of laws and institutions. She understands the importance of that level and resolutely opposes the military junta, but the dramatic change to which she aspires amounts to a basic transformation in the mental attitude and value system of each individual. "The quintessential revolution," she has written, "is a revolution of the spirit."

Daw Suu naturally made those spiritual values of compassion and

loving kindness (*metta* in Burmese) part of the political discourse. By invoking those powerful Burmese values and by enabling her fellow citizens to reclaim them, she was able to make her party, the National League for Democracy, rigorously abide by principles of nonviolence.

Popham unsparingly depicts the extreme brutality and ruthlessness of Burma's military rulers. Many Burmese have suffered unspeakably for daring to defy them. Indeed, it seems a sad fact that the global attention paid to Daw Suu has drawn attention away from the horrors of torture and repression that other and less famous Burmese have had to endure as the price of keeping the democratic movement alive. Yet live it does.

Daw Suu's admirers call her not a dissident but a *bodhisattva*, which in Buddhist terms means one who suffers so that others might experience life to the fullest. Popham quotes Burma expert and anthropologist Ingrid Jordt as saying, "[Aung San Suu Kyi] inspires the populace to recall or imagine a different kind of social contract between ruler and the ruled based on the highest human aspirations of compassion, loving-kindness, sympathetic joy and equanimity: the four sublime states of mind" (380). Daw Suu, in short, is a living testament to the politics of conscience.

Some, including previous biographers, have asked if she was a failure. To those who conceive of politics as the pursuit of raw power, her life may indeed seem a tragic one marked by frustrated purpose and scant achievement. But Daw Suu is about a "revolution of the spirit" that occurred first in her and has now also affected millions of others: Burmese and non-Burmese, world leaders, policy makers, academics, and countless "regular people" too.

As Daw Suu's friend and ardent supporter the late Václav Havel observed near the end of his 1984 essay "Politics and Conscience," such a change is not something that one could call a political success in the traditional sense:

That effect, to be sure, is of a wholly different nature from what the West considers political success. It is hidden, indirect, long-term, and hard to measure; often it exists only in the invisible realm of social consciousness, conscience, and subconsciousness.

This change has transformed Burma and helped to make it what it is today—a country poised for significant political change. Daw Suu has also saved the international political discourse of our day from being devoid of the moral grandeur supplied by voices such as Mahatma Gandhi's and Martin Luther King's.

Popham has done much to help us see the life of Daw Suu through this prism. His book is one more testimony to the idea that any given culture harbors a craving for a life of freedom and dignity. Popham also highlights Daw Suu as a model for all the striving advocates of democracy: She reminds us that if our respective nations are going to enjoy a life which is free, flourishing, and dignified, we will need to liberate and disentangle

suppressed societal values that express the universal human aspiration for freedom from other, more archaic values that clash with them.

As rich as his treatment is, I wish that Popham had paid more heed to the challenges and contributions of Daw Suu as a *woman* political leader. While showing that she has no taste for feminism per se, Popham regretfully fails to tell us her thoughts on women's political participation and leadership. Nor does he discuss the effect that her gender had on others. When the generals called her "that woman" (Ethiopia's prime minister called me the same thing when I was jailed in 2008), were they adding a dash of sexism to their usual arrogant rhetoric?

Although Popham provides some of what might be called the usual "celebrity lowdown" on Daw Suu's preferences in food, clothing, and even men, he could have done more to illuminate her humanity in less trivial ways. I wanted more insights into her moments of confusion, weakness, or anguish. About the closest Popham comes is a general discussion of how much this wife and mother of two sons missed the family from which she was forcibly separated for so long (her husband, Michael Aris, who died of cancer at 53 in 1999, saw her only five times in the last decade of his life).

Yet Popham's book is a must-read for anyone who wants to grasp how this "pretty little thing," as an old lady in a Burmese village once called her, has been able to radiate the beauty of what it means to be human all across the globe, making us feel that we are all her friends, which truly we are as members of the human family.

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