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ORIENTALISM, "BURMA GIRLS" AND WESTERN MUSIC

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Over the past 75 years or so, a number of scholars and commentators have tried to answer the questions: how was colonial Burma perceived in and by the Western world, how did people in countries like the United Kingdom (UK) and United States (US) form their views, and how were they manifested?[1]

Historians led the way, not only by informing Western audiences about developments relating to Burma but also by describing how European contacts over the centuries gave rise to a wide range of myths and misconceptions.[2] Other social scientists made useful contributions. In 1985, for example, Josef Silverstein wrote an article which discussed the portrayal of Burma in a number of novels by European and American authors.[3] Clive Christie and Stephen Keck later surveyed the travel literature produced during the colonial period, and weighed its impact on Western perceptions of Burma.[4] In 2002, Deborah Boyer searched through Victorian-era periodicals for references to Burma and its role in the British Empire.[5] In 2009, this author examined the way in which Burma had been represented in Hollywood movies and how this might have influenced views of the country.[6] Others have commented on the paintings of Burma and Burmese people produced by British artists during the colonial period.[7] Engravings, photographs and picture postcards also influenced the way in which Burma was seen in the UK, US and elsewhere.[8]

To date, however, no-one has looked in a systematic way at how Western views of colonial Burma have been influenced by popular music. Indeed, music has been absent from almost all overviews of the country.[9] This is surprising, as during the 19th and early 20th centuries songs and tunes were powerful cultural vectors, highly influential in

[1] This working paper is drawn from Andrew Selth, *The Riff From Mandalay: Kipling, Burma and Western Music* (forthcoming).
[2] See, for example, Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Michael Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
[3] Josef Silverstein, 'Burma Through the Prism of Western Novels', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol.16, No.1, March 1985, pp.129-40. See also C.S. Braden, 'The Novelist Discovers the Orient', *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, Vol.7, No.2, February 1948, pp.165-75.
[4] C.J. Christie, 'British Literary Travellers in Southeast Asia in an Era of Colonial Retreat', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.28, No.4, 1994, pp.673-737; and Stephen Keck, 'Picturesque Burma: British Travel Writing, 1880-1914', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol.35, No.3, October 2004, pp.387-414.
[5] D.D. Boyer, 'Picturing the Other: Images of Burmans in Imperial Britain', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, Vol.35, No.3, Fall 2002, pp.214-26.
[6] Andrew Selth, 'Burma, Hollywood and the Politics of Entertainment', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, Vol.23, No.3, June 2009, pp.321-34.
[7] See, for example, Andrew Selth, *Burma Watching: A Retrospective*, Regional Outlook No.39 (Brisbane: Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, 2012).
[8] See, for example, *Living Burmah: An Album of Thirty-six Views of the Country and its People* (Rangoon: Whiteaway, Laidlaw and Co. Ltd., 1890?); and *Scenes in Burma: An Album of 125 Views Depicting the Principal Features of Interest in Rangoon, Lower and Upper Burma, and the Shan States* (Rangoon: Whiteaway, Laidlaw and Co. Ltd, 1900).
[9] Two early works that devoted some space to traditional Burmese music are Max Ferrars and Bertha Ferrars, *Burma* (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Co., 1900), pp.210-1; and Paul Edmonds, *Peacocks and Pagodas* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1925), pp.112-26.

shaping not only domestic attitudes but also perceptions of foreign places and events.[10] As well as live performances, both in public and in private, broadsides and commercial sheet music were important means of conveying ideas about the countries and peoples that were being conquered as part of Britain's second great burst of imperial expansion. The transmission process rapidly increased in scope and pace after the turn of the 20th century, encouraged by the development of gramophone records, commercial AM radio stations and 'talking' pictures. Music became an even more important vehicle for influencing — and reflecting — popular perceptions. This phenomenon has been recognised by cultural historians and musicologists in other fields, but to date its implications for Burma seem to have escaped their attention.[11]

One reason why Burma seems to have been overlooked as a discrete subject for analysis in this regard is that it was never seen as a noteworthy example of wider historical and socio-cultural trends. The 19th century was a time of far-reaching political, economic and social change. It was also a time of vigorous Western expansion into other parts of the world, including the 'Far East'. Even before popular music became a significant factor, and was recognised as such, vivid images of the 'orient' had been formed in the West through novels, poems, paintings and operas. In all these and other mediums, such as fashion, particular attention was given to the role of Oriental women and their (often imagined) attributes and characteristics. In some respects, they became emblematic of the West's perceptions of, and approach to, foreign lands and peoples. Because it was not well known to Western populations, Burma played a relatively minor part in all these processes. In its own way, however, it did conform to broader patterns.

One aspect of this subject that deserves close attention is the way in which Burmese women were perceived and portrayed by Western commentators and, specifically, by composers and song-writers. For in the writings of visitors to colonial Burma, the local women were described in ways that helped plant in the popular imagination a picture that was both alluring and shocking. After publication of Rudyard Kipling's enormously influential poem 'Mandalay' in 1890, that image became more codified, as 'Burma girls' were repeatedly portrayed in musical compositions as attractive, demure and available. Over the next 60 or so years, as the market for popular songs grew, and was flooded by works with 'oriental' themes, this stereotype was strengthened. Between 1890 and 1948, when Burma regained its independence, dozens of songs were written which referred to Burmese 'girls' — rarely 'women' — waiting in bucolic surroundings for their European lovers to return. The few compositions that deliberately challenged this convention only helped to underscore the dominance of the main theme in popular Western culture.

To understand all these developments, it is helpful first to survey the way in which Western countries perceived the 'Orient' during the imperial era and, secondly, to look

[10] Jeffrey Richards, *Imperialism and Music: Britain 1876-1953* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p.367.
[11] See, for example, K.R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s-1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005); and Thomas Walsh, *Tin Pan Alley and the Philippines: American Songs of War and Love, 1898-1946* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2013).

more closely at how Burma (and Burmese women) played a role in the formation and demonstration of such views. With all that in mind, it is easier to appreciate the way in which Burmese women were portrayed in the popular songs of the period.

The West and the 'Orient'

The 100 years between 1815 and 1914 have been described as the UK's 'imperial century'. During this period, most of which coincided with the reign of Queen Victoria, Britain consolidated its hold over India and acquired control over vast new territories in Africa, Southeast Asia and China.[12] While driven as much by commercial imperatives as by political and strategic interests, this expansion was clothed in the rhetoric of a philanthropic mission. Influenced by social Darwinism — the application of biological concepts like 'the survival of the fittest' to entire societies — and emerging theories of eugenics, the British were convinced that they had a special role to bring peace, order and technology to the lesser races of the world. Different approaches were taken by the Conservative and Liberal Parties but, to quote a character in George Orwell's 1934 novel *Burmese Days*, successive British governments saw themselves as 'torchbearers upon the path of progress'.[13] By 1881, Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli could claim with some justification that Britain had 'stamped its diligent and methodic character on the century'.[14]

Britain's sense of imperial destiny, and the support given to this notion by 'white' colonies like Australia, New Zealand and Canada, inspired songs like 'It's the English-Speaking Race Against the World'. Made famous in the late 19th century by the renowned music hall performer Charles Godfrey, the song began:

> We're brothers of the self-same race,
> Speakers of the self-same tongue,
> With the same brave hearts that feel no fears
> From fighting sires of a thousand years;
> Folks say, 'What will Britain do?
> Will she rest with banners furled?'
> No! No! No!
> When we go to meet the foe,
> It's the English-speaking race against the world.[15]

[12] It has been estimated that, by 1922, the British Empire covered almost a quarter of the Earth's total land area, and controlled over 458 million people, or one fifth of the world's population at the time. Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The rise and demise of the British world order and the lessons for global power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), p.15.
[13] George Orwell, *Burmese Days* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1934), p.36. See also Michael Mann, '"Torchbearers Upon the Path of Progress": Britain's Ideology of a "Moral and Material Progress" in India', in Michael Mann and Harald Fischer-Tine (eds), *Colonialism as Civilizing Mission: Cultural Ideology in British India* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), pp.1-26.
[14] Benjamin Disraeli, *Tancred, or The New Crusade* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1881), p.148.
[15] 'It's the English-Speaking Race Against the World' (date unknown), cited in J.B. Booth, *The Days We Knew* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1943), p.39.

The British believed that they had won 'the lottery of life', and represented rationality, energy, cultural superiority and technical skills.[16] Their colonial subjects, in Africa and Asia at least, were considered much less fortunate. They were invariably characterised as lawless, listless, undeveloped and unpredictable, sorely in need of the UK's civilizing presence.

These intellectual and social currents were found not only at the elite level, in government, business and the armed forces, but also among the wider British public. Particularly in the second half of the 19th century, after the Crimean War (1853-56) and Indian Mutiny (1857), they were reflected in popular culture. Crossing class lines, the 'imperial ethos' manifested itself in theatres, music halls, taverns, barracks and classrooms.[17] This enthusiasm for overseas adventures, however, did not translate into a greater knowledge of foreign places and peoples. Indeed, one striking aspect of Victorian imperialism was the profound ignorance at home of the countries that were falling to the crown. The public was dependent for its understanding of events on an unreliable press and an entertainment industry that, both deliberately and incidentally, conveyed a distorted picture.[18] In the case of India (including Burma), for example, extreme views were possible due to 'the paucity of its defenders and the utter ignorance of the British reading public' beyond a small circle of specialists.[19] These views conformed — and contributed — to a mindset that has come to be known as 'Orientalism'.

There is a long tradition of Western authors, musicians, artists and architects drawing on foreign countries and cultures for inspiration. Many writers on this subject have taken Edward Said's controversial 1978 book *Orientalism* as a starting point.[20] In a sweeping judgement that has since been challenged at several levels, Said wrote that 'Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient'.[21] He suggested that, through many often subtle ways, the West had successfully established itself as the acceptable norm, while the 'Orient' (in his book, mainly the Middle East) was relegated to the status of the foreign 'Other'. While relevant to the discussion that follows, it is not proposed to explore this complex subject here. However, to provide a broad framework for the consideration of music related to Burma, and references in such works to 'Burma girls', it is worth briefly touching upon the impact of 'the East' on popular perceptions and the way that they affected Western music and the West's portrayal of Asian women.

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[16] The term 'lottery of life', first used by the ardent imperialist Cecil Rhodes, gave rise to the popular misquotation (often credited to Rudyard Kipling) 'To be born an Englishman is to win first prize in the lottery of life'. See W.T. Stead (ed), *The Last Will and Testament of Cecil John Rhodes, with Elucidatory Notes* (London: 'Review of Reviews' Office, 1902), p.183.
[17] See, for example, J.M. MacKenzie (ed), *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986).
[18] See, for example, J.M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880-1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).
[19] Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p.169.
[20] See, for example, J.M. MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, theory and the arts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).
[21] E.W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), p.3.

For centuries, Western literature and art referred to what the poet William Wordsworth, among others, called 'the gorgeous East'.[22] While its geographical focus shifted over time, it was invariably portrayed as an exotic part of the world, the social customs, architecture, fauna and even climate of which were quite different from those 'at home'.

Fanciful visions of Oriental life were conveyed directly or indirectly in novels like William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* (1868) and Anatole France's *Thais* (1890). The opulence of the East was a common theme. For the narrator of Charles Dickens' *Dombey and Son* (1848), for example, the prospect of 'rich East India House' in London spontaneously evoked visions of:

> precious stuff and stones, tigers, elephants, howdahs, hookahs, umbrellas, palm trees, palanquins, and gorgeous princes of brown complexion sitting on carpets, with their slippers very much turned up at the toes.[23]

Equally dramatic pictures were painted by poems like Percy Shelley's 'Ozymandias' (1818) and Ralph Emerson's 'Indian Superstition' (1821), in which 'Dishonoured India clanks her sullen chain'.[24] Edwin Arnold's 1879 narrative poem *The Light of Asia* captivated Western audiences and created a picture of 'that noble hero and reformer, Prince Gautama of India, the founder of Buddhism', that endured for decades.[25] 'Hindoo' and 'Mohammedan' architectural motifs, such as vaulted roofs, 'onion' domes and 'Moorish' windows became fashionable throughout Europe. For example, the Royal Pavilion at Brighton, which was completed in 1822, incorporated various Oriental styles.

Initially, the West focussed its attentions on the 'Near East', notably Turkey, which had been a source of interest since the Ottoman invasions of the 17th century. During the 19th century, however, European authors and artists increasingly travelled to North Africa, the Middle East and the Far East, widening the geographical scope of their work. For example, French painters like Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863) began by depicting scenes in Morocco and Algeria. He was followed by artists such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780-1867), Henri Regnaut (1843-1871) and Gustave Guillaumet (1840-1887). Europe's long interest in *Chinoiserie* was joined in mid-century by *Japonisme*, which became an important influence on Western art. These trends were given a fillip by the expansion of the European powers, reflecting not only colonial conquests but also developments like the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the dramatic growth in railways, the increasing number of steamships and, by the 1920s, the advent of inter-

[22] William Wordsworth, 'On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic' (1802), in A.T. Quiller-Couch (ed), *The Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250-1900* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), p.599. See also Frank Elias, *The Gorgeous East: India, Burma, Ceylon and Siam* (London: A. and C. Black, 1913).
[23] Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (London: Dent and Sons, 1960), p.30.
[24] K.W. Cameron (ed), *Indian Superstition by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Hanover: Friends of the Dartmouth Library, 1954), p.49.
[25] Edwin Arnold, *The Light of Asia, or The Great Renunciation, Being the life and teaching of Gautama, Prince of India and founder of Buddhism* (London: Trubner and Co., 1879), p.ix.

continental air travel.[26] The Orient became more accessible and safer to visit, prompting greater middle and upper class tourism.[27]

It might be expected that a greater familiarity with Asian countries, including a degree of firsthand knowledge of their peoples and cultures, would lead to a better understanding of the region and more realistic representations in print and on canvas. Certainly, many paintings of the period conveyed accurate and remarkably evocative pictures of life in foreign climes.[28] Yet, as a general rule, their educative value was slight. The aura of mystery and glamour — even decadence — surrounding Asia was remarkably persistent. This was in part because many visitors to the region were like Kipling's 'Globe-trotter' ('who "does" kingdoms in days and writes books upon them in weeks').[29] It was also because descriptions that catered to the curious and romantic tended to be more attractive (and doubtless more profitable to publishers and producers) than unvarnished factual accounts. This was particularly the case when supposedly Oriental beliefs, practices and styles were embraced by fashionable society.

Throughout the mid-late Victorian era, for example, the English-speaking world was captivated by Asian mysticism and magic tricks which called up 'a thousand thoughts and fancies associated with all that is weird and mysterious'.[30] Among those happy to exploit the credulousness of Western audiences, by claiming special insights into arcane 'Eastern' knowledge, was a British illusionist named Isaiah Hughes. Active in the US around the mid-19th century, he wore dark makeup and exotic clothes, styled himself 'The Fakir of Ava, Chief of Staff of Conjurors to His Sublime Greatness the Nanka of Aristaphae', and claimed to have come from Burma.[31] Also, during the Edwardian era designers like Paul Poiret were quick to capitalise on the public's continuing fascination with the East. Inspired in part by Leon Bakst's exotic costumes for the Ballets Russes, Poiret promoted such Orientalist fashions as 'lampshade' tunics, 'harem' pantaloons, turbans, jewelled slippers and parasols.[32] They quickly became the rage in London, Paris and New York.

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[26] Between 1840 and 1870 the world's merchant shipping rose from 10 to 16 million tons, and it doubled over the next 40 years. The world's railway network expanded from about 200,000 kilometres in 1870 to over one million kilometres just before the First World War. KLM's commercial air service to the East Indies was inaugurated in 1924. Imperial Airways' regular service to Delhi began in 1929, and was extended to Singapore in 1930. See, for example, Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire* (London: Folio Society, 2005), p.67.

[27] The firm Thomas Cook and Son began publishing guide books in the 1840s and by the 1880s was arranging foreign tours. By 1888, the company had offices around the world. In 1894, it published *India, Burma and Ceylon: Information for Travellers and Residents* (London: Thomas Cook and Son, 1894).

[28] See, for example, Roger Benjamin, *Orientalism: Delacroix to Klee* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997).

[29] Rudyard Kipling, *From Sea to Sea* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1909), p.3.

[30] L.A. Weatherly, *The Supernatural? With a Chapter on Oriental Magic, Spiritualism and Theosophy, by J.N. Maskelyne* (London: J.W. Arrowsmith, 1891), pp.155-6. See also Peter Lamont and Crispin Bates, 'Conjuring Images of India in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Social History*, Vol.32, No.3, 2007, pp.308-24.

[31] 'The "Fakir of Ava" Dead', *The New York Times* (New York, US), 25 May 1891.

[32] See, for example, Palmer White, *Poiret* (London: Studio Vista, 1973), pp.83-95.

Throughout the latter part of the 19th century there were occasional attempts to counter what one hard-headed rationalist described as 'the romance clinging to all things oriental'.[33] However, even among those not taken in by fake fakirs and shonky spiritualists, or attracted to sensuality and ornamentalism, the East remained a source of fascination and wonder. As Clive Christie has described, in the 1920s and 1930s, Western literature about the 'Far East' was still 'saturated with "exoticism" and "orientalism"'.[34] Describing his voyage to China in 1937, for example, the poet W.H. Auden wrote:

> Slowly our Western culture in full pomp progresses
> Over the barren plains of the sea; somewhere ahead
> A septic East, odd fowl and flowers, odder dresses'.[35]

Despite, or perhaps even because of, the writings of such 'literary travellers', there remained a profound ignorance of real life in Asia. This applied as much to the region's admirers as to its detractors. Not everyone learnt, as did Aldous Huxley (who visited Burma in 1926), that 'The philosophies, the civilisations which seem, at a distance, so superior to those current at home, all prove on closer inspection to be in their own way just as hopelessly imperfect'.[36]

The Orientalist strain in music followed the progress of European interest in and travel to the East. For example, Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio* (1782) reflected Europe's contacts with Turkey in the 17th century and prevailing myths about Middle Eastern sexual mores. Rossini's opera *The Italian Girl in Algiers* (1813) and Verdi's *Aida* (1871) were influenced by Europe's increasing presence in and colonisation of North Africa, including Egypt. While it has become a musical cliché, Albert Ketelbey's 'In a Persian Market' (1920) can still evoke an atmosphere of Middle Eastern mystery. During the latter part of the 19th century, attention moved further east and there was a renewed interest in musical representations of Asia, coinciding with various imperial ventures and the growing number of references to that part of the world in the popular press. For example, Bizet's *Pearl Fishers* (1863) was set in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado* (1885) employed a Japanese theme. Puccini's *Turandot* (1926) was set in China.[37] Perhaps more than most, Edward Elgar's masque *Crown of India* (1912) exposed the imperialistic and Orientalist overtones of the music of the period.[38]

Mention must also be made of developments in popular entertainment, in particular the appearance of revues, musical comedies and comic operas. During the second half of the

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[33] J.N. Maskelyne, 'Oriental Jugglery', *Leisure Hour*, 1878, cited in Peter Lamont, *The Rise of the Indian Rope Trick: The Biography of a Legend* (London: Little Brown, 2004), p.56.
[34] Christie, 'British Literary Travellers in Southeast Asia in an Era of Colonial Retreat', p.675.
[35] 'A Voyage', in W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *Journey to a War* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1973), p.12.
[36] Aldous Huxley, *Jesting Pilate* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948), p.214.
[37] Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music: Volume 3, The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp.386ff.
[38] Corissa Gould, '"An Inoffensive Thing": Edward Elgar, *The Crown of India* and Empire', in Martin Clayton and Bennett Zon (eds), *Music and Orientalism in the British Empire, 1780s-1940s: Portrayal of the East* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p.148.

19th century, music halls became enormously popular. By 1892, an estimated 14 million seats were sold annually in 35 music halls in London alone.[39] The imperialist and Orientalist themes of acts at such venues not only catered to the insular outlook and provincial tastes of their largely working class audiences, but they also reflected deeper undercurrents in British society. As one popular song went:

> Oriental eyes,
> Oriental moons,
> Oriental sighs,
> And oriental tunes,
> They simply get me going,
> I do things without knowing.
> Eastern perfume in the air,
> Oh! Let me live and give you there,
> That oriental kiss
> In an oriental way,
> One can never miss what one has never had, they say.
>
> I want it, want it!
> I won't deny it!
> I'd sell my soul to try it,
> That's why I'm strong for,
> That's why I long for,
> Something O – O – Oriental![40]

The depiction of foreigners in musical comedies and operettas tended to be a little more restrained, probably to appeal to more genteel audiences, but they still permitted the producers considerable licence.[41] Not only did shows with Oriental themes lend themselves to exotic settings and splendid costumes, but because of the 'foreignness' of their subject matter they permitted scenes and the representation of ideas that were not otherwise acceptable in polite Victorian society. Oriental stereotypes such as cruel despots, depraved luxury and orgiastic rites were all popular fare, albeit presented as non-Christian practices to be abhorred. 'Under cover of moral censure an otherwise inadmissible voyeurism could be indulged'.[42]

A key aspect of all these works was the way in which they depicted women. At first, plots tended to revolve around the abduction of Western women by Eastern potentates, but by the 19th century the focus had changed. Reflecting the racial ethic of the times, and doubtless the influence of the imperialist project, stage productions increasingly included

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[39] J.M. MacKenzie (ed), *Popular Imperialism and the Military, 1850-1950* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p.50. See also Brad Beaven, *Visions of Empire: Patriotism, popular culture and the city, 1870-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p.179-207.
[40] 'Something Oriental', words by Clifford Grey and music by N.D. Ayer, in *Bing Boys on Broadway*, by Fred Thompson and H.M. Vernon (London: B. Feldman and Co., 1918).
[41] See, for example, Michael Newbury, 'Polite Gaiety: Cultural Hierarchy and Musical Comedy, 1893-1904', *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, Vol.4, No.4, October 2005, pp.381-407.
[42] Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, Vol.3, p.390.

stories of Western men winning the hearts of foreign girls. An obvious example is Puccini's *Madam Butterfly* (1904). Also, as seen in operas like Bizet's *Carmen* (1875) and Delibes' *Lakme* (1883), the protagonist was often a European soldier who falls in love with a woman from the conquered country. He then leaves her, responding to the call of duty or for less honourable reasons.[43] The fiery Carmen is a notable exception, but such women were usually described in terms which emphasised their childlike and stereotypical 'feminine' attributes. The Orient was a place of masculine dreams and desires, as suggested in the musical comedy *A Chinese Honeymoon* (1899):

> It was a truly happy land,
> I pictured in my dreams,
> Each household was a model, and
> Each husband reigned supreme.
> There wives ne'er raised a noisy din
> But wore a smile so bland,
> They lived to serve her husband in
> This truly happy land.[44]

If popular entertainment in Victorian Britain was any guide, ideal marriages were based on orderly, compliant females deferring to sexist and patriarchal husbands.[45] There was always the hint, however, of attractions outside such relationships.

In Said's 1978 critique, 'the orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe', and from an early date popular attitudes towards sex played an important part in establishing the parameters of the Orientalist scene.[46] As Ian Buruma has written:

> Neither puritanism nor sensuality was ever unique to East or West, yet, on the whole, it is for the latter that Westerners have looked East. There has been a sensual, even erotic, element in encounters — imaginary or real — between East and West since the ancient Greeks. The European idea of the Orient as female, voluptuous, decadent, amoral — in short, as dangerously seductive — long predates the European empires in India and Southeast Asia.[47]

The Orient was seen as a sexual playground, a view encouraged by personal accounts of life in the region, both published and unpublished. For example, one British army officer

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[43] This subject is explored in James Parakilas, 'The Soldier and the Exotic: Operatic Variations on a Theme of Racial Encounter, Part 1', *The Opera Quarterly*, Vol.10, No.2, 1994, pp.33-56; and James Parakilas, 'The Soldier and the Exotic: Operatic Variations on a Theme of Racial Encounter, Part 2', *The Opera Quarterly*, Vol.10, No.3, 1994, pp.43-69.

[44] *A Chinese Honeymoon: A Musical Comedy in Two Acts*, words by George Dance and others, music by Howard Talbot and others (London: Hopwood and Crew, 1901).

[45] Brian Singleton, *Oscar Asche, Orientalism and British Musical Comedy* (Westport: Praeger, 2004), p.25.

[46] Said, *Orientalism*, p.190. See also Sheridan Prasso, *The Asian Mystique: Dragon Ladies, Geisha Girls and Our Fantasies of the Exotic Orient* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005).

[47] Ian Buruma, *The Missionary and the Libertine: Love and War in East and West* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), p.xvi.

wrote in the 1840s that Asian women 'understand in perfection all the arts and wiles of love, are capable of gratifying any tastes, and in face and figure they are unsurpassed by any women in the world'.[48] This was contrasted with the reputedly moralistic and sexually inhibited women found in the West. Even popular fiction referred to 'the luresome, caressing smile of the East' and 'the numerous and exotic vices which have sprung from the soil of the Orient'.[49]

In this wide-ranging and multi-layered discourse, conducted over many decades in the UK, US and elsewhere, Burma and the Burmese were rarely singled out for attention. However, when they were mentioned during this period, representations of the country and its peoples tended to conform to the same broad patterns.

Burma and the Popular Imagination

European contacts with Burma began during the 16th and 17th centuries. In their ship's logs and private journals, early explorers described a society and culture — indeed, several societies and cultures — that were quite different from any they had encountered before. Inevitably, they emphasized the sensational and shocking, such as Burma's reputedly fabulous wealth and its inhabitants' sexual freedom. For example, travelers never tired of describing Pegu's shrines 'filled with images of massy gold and gems'.[50] There were also reports that Burmese women went about 'in almost complete nudity to entice the men and to keep them away from sodomy'.[51] Such stories were given wide circulation. As foreign contacts grew, and Burma came to be visited more often by traders, officials and missionaries, accounts grew in range and number. As a rule, they became more comprehensive and reflective, but many continued to promote some outlandish ideas.[52] As might be expected, European writings of all kinds increased during the 19th century, with the three stage annexation of the country by the UK.

In one way or another, these works touched upon almost every aspect of life in Burma, but they seemed to achieve little in terms of educating the Western world about the country and its culture. Even after the First Anglo-Burmese War, and the annexation of parts of coastal Burma in 1826, it is unlikely that many people in the UK had even heard of it. If they had, it was probably only in connection with unusual phenomena like Burma's 'hairy families', news of which caused a sensation throughout Western Europe, and later the United States.[53] Another subject considered worthy of comment at the time

[48] Cited in Anton Gill, *Ruling Passions: Sex, Race and Empire* (London: BBC Books, 1995), p.37.
[49] Sax Rohmer, *The Golden Scorpion* (1919) and Sax Rohmer, *The Yellow Claw* (1915), cited in David Scott, 'Rohmer's "Orient" – Pulp Orientalism?', *Oriental Archive*, Vol.80, No.3, 2012, p.4.
[50] G.E. Harvey, *History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824, The Beginning of the English Conquest* (London: Frank Cass, 1967), p.175.
[51] Cited in D.F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), Vol.1, Bk 2, p.554.
[52] Andrew Selth, 'Modern Burma Studies: A Survey of the Field', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.44, No.2, March 2010, pp.401-40.
[53] A British delegation visiting the Burmese royal court in 1826 encountered an entertainer suffering from hypertrichosis ('werewolf syndrome'), or an abnormal amount of body hair. Illustrations of this man and his family were subsequently published in magazines in the UK and France. In 1888, the family toured the US with P.T. Barnum's circus. See John Crawfurd, *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of*

was the spicy side dish known as *ngapi*, which some commentators considered 'the rankest filth', 'perfectly unbearable to the European'.[54] It was described by one British visitor to Burma at the turn of the century as 'a horrid decoction of rotten fish pounded with chillies, garlic, and other condiments'.[55] Yet another source of fascination was the 'giraffe-neck' Padaung women of eastern Burma who, like the country's 'hairy families', were put on public display by circuses in the UK and US.[56]

As Jonathan Saha has observed, accounts of such unusual people and practices were 'no doubt a way of portraying Burma as a strange and backward place'.[57]

This situation did not really change after the Second Anglo-Burmese War in 1852, and the annexation of Lower Burma in January 1853. This was due in large part to a lack of reporting on the country. As Deborah Boyer has noted, 'In the early 1870s, Burma was considered an uneventful backwater, worthy of little attention in Britain'.[58] Many in the UK (and US) saw it simply as an extension of India (which technically it was), and often confused the two places. There were descriptions of Burma in the memoirs of officials, missionaries and soldiers who had been posted there, but the readership of such works was small. In any case, the general mood was one of complacency. In 1860, one official described the 'general character of the Burman' as 'naturally gay and careless'.[59] 'At all times', wrote another observer in 1878, the Burmese 'frankly yield to the superiority of the European'.[60] As far as it went, the popular view was summed up in 1882 by the Indian Civil Service (ICS) officer George Scott, writing under the pseudonym 'Shway Yoe'. To his mind, 'the Burman is the most calm and contented of mortals', with a 'light heart and buoyant disposition'.[61]

Around 1880, however, relations between the British government and the Burmese monarchy began to deteriorate. Stories about Burma in the popular press in the UK began to take on a much more critical tone. King Mindon (reigned 1853-1878) had been seen by most foreigners as a moderate and sensible reformer. However, his successor King Thibaw (reigned 1878-1885) was increasingly portrayed either as a fool and a weakling manipulated by his scheming and vicious wife, Queen Supayalat, or as a drunken and bloodthirsty tyrant who cared little for his country or people. Concerns in London were

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India to the Court of Ava, in the year 1827 (London: Henry Colburn, 1829), Vol.1, p.318; and J. Bondeson and A.E.W. Miles, 'The hairy family of Burma: a four generation pedigree of congenital hypertrichosis lanuginosa', *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, Vol.89, July 1996, pp.403-8.

[54] C.J.F.S. Forbes, *British Burma and its People, Being Sketches of Native Manners, Customs and Religions* (London: John Murray, 1878), p.83.

[55] F.T. Pollok and W.S. Thom, *Wild Sports of Burma and Assam* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1900), p.14.

[56] Padaung women traditionally elongate their necks using brass rings. See 'The "Champagne-Bottle" Neck: Brass-collared Padaung Women', *Illustrated London News*, 12 January 1935, p.48. See also H.Y. Bary, *Interesting Facts and Illustrations of the Royal Padaung Giraffe-Neck Women from Burma* (US: n.p., 1933), an American circus booklet in the author's possession.

[57] Jonathan Saha, 'Condiments of Colonialism', 27 September 2013, at http://jonathansaha.wordpress.com/2013/09/27/condiments-of-colonialism/

[58] Boyer, 'Picturing the Other', p.214.

[59] W.H. Marshall, *Four Years in Burmah* (London: Charles J. Skeet, 1860), Vol.1, p.125.

[60] Forbes, *British Burma and its People*, p.44.

[61] J.G. Scott, ('Shway Yoe'), *The Burman: His Life and Notions* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1910), p.65.

further raised when Mandalay opened negotiations with the French government, a 'sly move' in the eyes of the British, which threatened India and upset the balance of power in Southeast Asia.[62] In both stories and editorials, newspapers like *The Times* and *Pall Mall Gazette*, periodicals like *Punch* and *The Cornhill Magazine*, and pictorial publications like *The Graphic* and the *Illustrated London News* began to lay the groundwork for a noble military venture that would not only protect British strategic and commercial interests in the region, but also free the Burmese people from the yoke of oppression.

The Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885 was covered by the British press in predictably 'jingoistic' terms, with the inevitable fanfare after the fall of Mandalay and subsequent exile of King Thibaw and his wife to India.[63] To the conquerors, the benefits of British rule were felt to be obvious. According to one contemporary commentator:

> If riches and personal comfort, protection of property, just laws, incorruptible judges and rulers, are blessings as a set-off against Utopian dreams of freedom, then Jack Burman has a happy future'.[64]

Another saw the new political order improving the character of the Burmese people:

> European civilisation will become engrafted on Oriental customs, and British energy will banish to some extent Burmese indolence. It cannot but be good for the Burmans to undergo the discipline of British rule.[65]

The Burmese themselves, however, were not as quick to embrace the blessings of a colonial administration as their conquerors expected.

Before Mandalay fell, it had been supposed by British officials that 'the prospects of the substitution of a strong and orderly government for the incompetent and cruel tyranny of their former ruler' would be welcomed by the local population.[66] It was not long, however, before this assumption was proven wrong. Newspapers and periodicals in the UK began to report on a drawn-out campaign being waged to 'pacify' Upper Burma, mainly through a series of small-scale engagements against former members of Thibaw's army, other nationalists and lawless elements.[67] Also, as the British extended their reach further north and west, they encountered opposition from some of the ethnic minorities,

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[62] Mrs Ernest Hart, 'Burma Past and Present', in *The British Empire Series, Vol.1: India, Ceylon, Straits Settlements, British North Borneo, Hong-Kong* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1899), p.256.

[63] While its origins can be traced to the 17th century, the term 'jingoistic' derives from 'War Song' (1878) by G.W. Hunter, made famous by the music hall singer G.H. MacDermott. The 'war' to which it referred was the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878.

[64] E.C. Browne, *The Coming of the Great Queen: A Narrative of the Acquisition of Burma* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1888), p.247.

[65] This commentator was moved to add, however, that 'we should regret to see the Burmese type a thing of the past, and the unique Burmese personality lost in a British imitation'. Hart, 'Burma Past and Present', in *The British Empire Series, Vol.1*, p.268.

[66] Charles Crosthwaite, *The Pacification of Burma* (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1968), p.13.

[67] See, for example, Crosthwaite, *The Pacification of Burma*, pp.60-5; and 'The Attack on Fort Dufferin, Mandalay: The Dacoits Under Custody', *The Graphic*, 5 February 1898, p.176.

usually described as 'hill tribes'. These operations necessitated the deployment of additional army units from India and, in 1887, the creation of the Burma Military Police (BMP), a powerful force that eventually took over primary responsibility for internal security.[68] Those Burmese violently resisting the imposition of British rule were not accorded any political status, but were simply described as *dacoits*, or armed bandits.

Initially, breathless accounts of British derring-do in far-off Burma were followed with interest by the wider public in the UK, and elsewhere. The efforts of the soldiers and military policemen conducting counter-insurgency campaigns were reported in positive terms. Those men killed were extolled in the news media as heroes.[69] As noted by Deborah Boyer, however:

> People tired quickly of the reports of violence in Burma, and by March 1886, Burma was rarely mentioned in the press. The articles that did appear again shifted their depictions of the Burmans towards the palatable.[70]

In 1887, the commander of military forces in Burma reported that 'the country was gradually becoming quiet'. In part, he put this down to 'the entire absence of fanaticism amongst the Burmese, and their cheerful, happy natures'.[71] Burma was effectively under military rule, and indeed remained so for most of the colonial period, but it came to be described as a kind of earthly 'Arcadia' populated by a gentle and generous people.[72]

By 1893, Burma was considered sufficiently settled and secure to permit a glittering state tour by the Viceroy of India, Lord Landsdowne. The country was also visited by a growing number of tourists and artists, several of whom published enthusiastic accounts of the UK's picturesque new possession. At the end of the century one female traveller summarised the prevailing mood in glowing terms:

> Burma combines so much: the glory of the East; the mystery of the unknown, in its strange tribes and races as yet but half understood, even by those who have studied them most; the fascination of nature untamed; and the comfort of travelling under British rule.[73]

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[68] By the time Burma formally separated from India in 1937, the BMP had grown to nine battalions, easily outnumbering the regular army units based there. See Andrew Selth, *Burma's Police Forces: Continuities and Contradictions*, Regional Outlook Paper No.32 (Brisbane: Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, 2011).

[69] See, for example, 'The late Lieutenant Guy Palmer RE', *The Illustrated London News*, 18 May 1889, p.631. Palmer was killed by 'a murderous shot' while campaigning against the 'hostile Chin tribes' on Burma's north-eastern border.

[70] Boyer, 'Picturing the Other', p.66 and p.224.

[71] Field Marshall Lord Roberts of Kandahar, *Forty-One Years in India: From Subaltern to Commander-in-Chief* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1897), Vol.2, p.416.

[72] R. T. Kelly, *Burma Painted and Described* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1905), p.243.

[73] G.E. Mitton, *A Bachelor Girl in Burma* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1907), p.2.

The people too were described in glowing, if rather patronising, terms. When the Prince of Wales (later George V) toured Burma in 1906, for example, the 'real Burmese' were described by a journalist in his party as:

> the clean, happy-go-lucky aristocratic children of the land, content to leave the sordid pursuit of lucre to their more astute and prosaic competitors from East and West … It is an idyllic people, almost unreal in its delicate quaintness'.[74]

Reminiscing about his career many years later, the historian (and former ICS member) G.E. Harvey recalled that:

> When I was sent to Burma in 1912 everyone congratulated me on being sent to the happiest and most charming people in India, laughing fairskinned Mongolians, quite unspoilt, quite unlike the sullen seditious Indians.[75]

Doubtless prompted by the successful campaign waged by the army and military police after the fall of Mandalay, and the subsequent installation of British administration throughout the country, yet another foreign observer wrote in the 1920s that 'the Burman is adaptable and easily civilised'.[76] This visitor envisaged a politically stable and prosperous province for years to come.

Perhaps reflecting the debate over female emancipation then occurring in the West, but more likely the enduring preoccupations of Western men, one constant focus of the attention being paid to Burma during the colonial period was its women.

The West and 'Burma Girls'

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, there were three parallel narratives governing the perceived status and character of Burmese women.

In the first, foreign observers saw them as independent and liberated, by contemporary standards. There were frequent comparisons with less tolerant cultures and approving references to the fact that in Buddhist Burma women did not have to submit to practices such as *sati* or *purdah*.[77] For example, the American Baptist missionary Ann Judson

[74] G.F. Abbott, *Through India with The Prince* (London: E. Arnold, 1906), p.211.
[75] Cited in Alyssa Phillips, 'Romance and Tragedy in Burmese History: A Reading of G.E. Harvey's *A History of Burma*', *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research*, Vol.3, No.1, Spring 2005, p.6.
[76] R. G. Brown, *Burma As I Saw It, 1889-1917, With a chapter on recent events* (London: Methuen and Co., 1926), p.32.
[77] See, for example, Kipling, *From Sea to Sea*, p.206. *Sati* (or *suttee*) was the custom, outlawed in India by the British in 1829, which required widows to immolate themselves on their husband's funeral pyre. *Purdah*, from the Persian for 'curtain', was the religious and social practice of female seclusion common among Muslim communities. This took the forms both of physical isolation and the adoption of clothes that concealed the female face and form.

wrote in 1823 that 'the sexes have equally free intercourse as in Europe'.[78] In 1878, Charles Forbes wrote that:

> Though the inferiority of the softer sex is a point that has never been disputed, in Burma women enjoy a much freer and higher position than elsewhere in the East; indeed, in some matters they have attained rights that their sisters in England are still seeking to obtain, or have only lately gained.[79]

George Scott (again writing as 'Shway Yoe') felt that 'Burmese maidens … enjoy a freer and happier position than in any other Eastern country, and in some respects are better off even than women in England'.[80]

In the same vein, Harold Fielding Hall, a senior government official in Burma between 1887 and 1891, wrote an article for the *Scientific American* in 1895 which began:

> Nowhere under the sun has any nation accorded to its women such absolute freedom, such entire command of their lives and property, as have the Burmese. They stand in every way on an absolute equality with men, as far as law, as religion, and as custom are concerned.[81]

Expounding on this theme in a later book, Fielding Hall claimed that a Burmese woman, unlike her European or Indian counterparts, 'has been bound by no ties':

> In Burma she has been neither confined nor guided. In Europe and India for very long the idea was to make woman a hot-house plant, to see that no rough winds struck her, that no injuries overtook her. In Burma she has had to look out for herself: she has had freedom to come to grief as well as to come to strength.[82]

He felt that this experience made Burmese women stronger and more independent.

They were also considered excellent business and household managers. Writing about Burmese wives, for example, George Scott stated that 'she keeps the shop that is to be found in almost every house in the country towns, and usually makes far more money than the goodman himself'.[83] In Burma, wrote another observer, 'few husbands would dare to enter into any mercantile arrangements without the aid or advice of their wives'.[84] Other foreign visitors commented on the dominant role that Burmese women played in the local markets and bazaars. In his short story 'Georgie Porgie' (1888), Rudyard Kipling wrote that:

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[78] J.D. Knowles, *Memoir of Ann H. Judson, Missionary to Burmah* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1855), p.111. Judson went on to say, however, that 'they treat the women as an inferior order of beings'.
[79] Forbes, *British Burma and its People*, p.55.
[80] Scott, *The Burman*, p.52.
[81] H. Fielding, 'Burmese Women', *Scientific American Supplement*, No.1033, 19 October 1895, pp.16516.
[82] H. Fielding Hall, *The Soul of a People* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1914), p.173.
[83] Scott, *The Burman*, p.61.
[84] Gwendolen Trench Gascoigne, *Among Pagodas and Fair Ladies: An Account of a Tour Through Burma* (London: A.D. Innes and Co., 1896), p.43.

> No race, men say who know, produces such good wives and heads of households as the Burmese … When all our troops are back from Burma there will be a proverb in their mouths, "As thrifty as a Burmese wife" … English ladies will wonder what it means.[85]

Burmese women were contrasted with 'ornamental' European women, who were described by some colonials as 'a useless, expensive misery'.[86] Writing soon after the Second World War, the Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett stated of Burmese women that 'Throughout the East they are known for their shrewdness in business dealings, their independence, and the fact of their higher social status than any of their sisters in Asia'.[87]

As scholars like Chie Ikeya and Jessica Harriden have pointed out, the lot of women in Burma was in fact much more complicated, and the widespread perception of their 'traditional' high status was in part the result of self-serving misrepresentations by European colonialists and missionaries.[88] Even so, foreign observers both during this period and since have generally agreed that, compared to their counterparts elsewhere, Burmese women enjoyed a 'remarkable degree of independence'.[89]

One corollary of this perceived independence, however, and the apparent ease with which Burmese women could secure a divorce, was the implication of sexual availability, even licentiousness. For example, an 1826 guide book entitled *The Modern Traveller* stated that:

> Unfortunately, however, for the perpetuity of conjugal felicity, in no country, perhaps, is the marriage contract regarded with so little respect, or maintained with so little propriety as in Birmah.[90]

Other Europeans described what they saw as evidence of the ingrained promiscuity of Burmese women. For example, in 1827 Thomas Trant wrote that 'Chastity, in the sense we understand the word, is but little known'.[91] W.H. Marshall opined in 1860 that the dress of Burmese women was 'unbecoming and indecent'.[92] Gwendolen Trench Gascoigne was hinting at their sexual freedom when she wrote in 1896 that 'Utterly unlike their miserable Mahomedan and Hindoo sisters, they enjoy absolute liberty — a

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[85] Rudyard Kipling, 'Georgie Porgie', in *Life's Handicap: Being Stories of Mine Own People* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1891), pp.331-2.
[86] W.N. Willis, *Western Men with Eastern Morals* (London: Stanley Paul and Co., 1913), p.196.
[87] W.G. Burchett, *Democracy With A Tommy-Gun* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1946), p.28.
[88] Chie Ikeya, 'The "Traditional" High Status of Women in Burma', *The Journal of Burma Studies*, Vol.10, 2005/06, pp.51-82. See also Jessica Harriden, *The Authority of Influence: Women and Power in Burmese History* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012).
[89] Brown, *Burma As I Saw It*, p.53. See also T.A. Trant, *Two Years in Ava, from May 1824 to May 1826* (London: John Murray, 1827), pp.208-9.
[90] *The Modern Traveller: A Popular Description Geographical, Historical and Topographical of the Various Countries of the Globe: Birmah, Siam and Anam* (London: James Duncan, 1826), p.89.
[91] Trant, *Two Years in Ava*, pp.219-20.
[92] Marshall, *Four Years in Burmah*, Vol.1, p.116.

liberty of which, if rumour prove true, they make ample use'.[93] The painter Robert Kelly was reflecting a widely held belief that Burmese men were lazy and effeminate, and Burmese women free and easy, when he wrote in 1905 that the latter preferred 'to mate with the more energetic males of other countries'.[94]

These views seem to have been widely held. They also maintained their currency over a considerable period. For example, one British character in Orwell's *Burmese Days*, published in 1934, remarks to a compatriot that 'These people's sense of decency isn't the same as ours'.[95]

The judgements implicit in this second narrative were applied to other social behaviours. For example, there was a widespread belief in the West that, according to Burmese custom, there was 'nothing dishonourable or wrong' in taking a woman as a mistress or 'local wife'.[96] Several 17th century visitors to the southern kingdoms of Arakan and Pegu had described the local custom of offering guests women for their amusement and comfort.[97] After his visit to Burma in 1795, the British envoy Michael Symes wrote that:

> The lower class of Burmans make no scruple of selling their daughters, and even their wives, to foreigners, who come to pass a temporary residence among them. It reflects no disgrace on any of the parties, and the woman is not dishonoured by the connection.[98]

Colonial officials later posted to Burma were happy to take advantage of this custom. They found that they could recruit a local girl to act as a concubine. This was the subject of Kipling's 'Georgie Porgie', in which a British officer purchases a Burmese girl, but later returns to the UK to marry a European woman.[99] In that story, the girl accepted her abandonment quietly, unlike the Burmese mistresses portrayed in Orwell's *Burmese Days* and Pablo Neruda's poem 'Widower's Tango'.[100]

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[93] Gascoigne, *Among Pagodas and Fair Ladies*, p.43.
[94] Kelly, *Burma Painted and Described*, p.244.
[95] He goes on to say of Burmese culture that 'it's stricter in some ways'. Referring to a Burmese girl's highly sexualised performance at a *pwe* (variety show) he adds: 'One gets not to notice that kind of thing in this country'. Orwell, *Burmese Days*, p.102.
[96] Marshall, *Four Years in Burmah*, Vol.1, pp.123-4.
[97] See, for example, William Dampier, *A New Voyage Around the World etc*. (London: James Knapton, 1698), p.397. Also relevant is Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680: Volume One, The Lands Below the Winds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p.155; and Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, Vol.1, Bk.2, pp.554-5.
[98] Michael Symes, *An Account of an Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava, Sent by the Governor-General of India in the Year 1795* (London: W. Bulmer and Co., 1800), p.217. See also Forbes, *British Burma and its People*, p.56.
[99] Kipling, 'Georgie Porgie', in *Life's Handicap*, pp.328-39.
[100] A Burmese mistress jilted by Pablo Neruda threatened him with a knife — and inspired 'Tango del viudo' ('Widower's Tango') (1928). The poet was posted to Rangoon in 1927 as the Honorary Consul for Chile. Pablo Neruda, *Memoirs* , translated by Hardie St. Martin (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p.87.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, cohabitation with local women was more common among Europeans in Burma than it was among the expatriate community in India. One ICS officer posted to Burma in 1898 estimated that 90 per cent of the British men there had local mistresses.[101] A special school was founded in Rangoon to educate children with European fathers. Such a situation inevitably aroused some controversy.[102] Groups like the London-based Association for Moral and Social Hygiene reported disapprovingly that 'The general attitude of the Local [colonial] Government towards the concubinage of Europeans with Burmese women and girls has been one not only of leniency and condonation, but of positive friendliness'.[103] Faced with persistent pressure from such groups, and their supporters in the British parliament, the colonial authorities issued four official notices to restrict the practice in Burma, but they were only partially successful.[104] Perhaps it was this situation which prompted one expatriate to write in 1916 that, of all countries, Burma was 'one of the most immoral in the world'.[105]

In the third narrative, Burmese females enjoyed a more positive image. They were described by most foreign observers as 'on the whole, remarkably good-looking', with 'faultless figures'.[106] According to the Burmese scholar Maung Htin Aung, 'Even that proud conqueror of Ava, Lord Dufferin, although he was received with dark looks by the Burmese during his state visit to Mandalay early in 1886, wrote back to a friend in England, extolling the grace, charm and freedom of Burmese women'.[107] A few years later, Robert Kelly wrote that 'among the women and young girls I have seen many of extreme beauty'.[108] Rudyard Kipling too felt that 'seriously, the Burmese girls are very pretty'.[109] In 1946, Wilfred Burchett described Burmese women as 'slim, sprightly and beautiful, with a natural exquisite taste for dress and decoration'.[110]

At the same time, however, they were constantly patronised and infantilised, treated as though they (and the Burmese people more generally) were 'immature and incomplete, and therefore in need of protection and control by a more historically adult people, which is how the British thought of and represented themselves'.[111] While at one level their independence and managerial capabilities were acknowledged, Burmese women were

[101] David Gilmour, *The Ruling Caste: Imperial Lives in the Victorian Raj* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2005), p.285. See also Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), p.108.
[102] See, for example, Willis, *Western Men with Eastern Morals*, in particular pp.99-109 and pp.127-44.
[103] *Public Prostitution in Rangoon: Report to the Association for Social and Moral Hygiene on Brothel-keeping, Prostitution, Segregation and Immoral Conditions in Rangoon and other Towns and Stations in Burma* (London: Association for Social and Moral Hygiene, 1916), p.10.
[104] Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics, 1793-1905* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), pp.144-59. See also Gill, *Ruling Passions*, p.65.
[105] Cited in Penny Edwards, 'Half-cast: Staging race in British Burma', *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol.5, No.3, 2002, p.285.
[106] C.T. Paske, *Life and Travel in Lower Burmah: A Retrospect* (London: W.H. Allen and Co., 1892), p.45.
[107] Maung Htin Aung, 'George Orwell and Burma', *Asian Affairs*, Vol.1, No.1, 1970, p.21.
[108] R.T. Kelly, *Peeps at Many Lands: Burma* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1909), p.18.
[109] Kipling, *From Sea to Sea*, p.206.
[110] Burchett, *Democracy With A Tommy-Gun*, p.28.
[111] Douglas Kerr, *Eastern Figures: Orient and Empire in British Writing* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), p.2.

repeatedly dismissed by officials, tourists and others as 'happy, smiling, care-free little women' and 'grinning, good-humoured little maidens'.[112] One observer felt that 'a more cheery little body is not to be met with on earth'.[113] In 1907, a female visitor to Burma described them as 'dear coquettish little things'.[114] Six years later, a book published in London on the subject of *Western Men with Eastern Morals* argued that, in Burma's rural districts, 'the maidens are as simple and sweet as wild flowers'.[115] Burmese girls were also praised for their delicate charm and 'winsome womanhood'.[116]

George Scott felt that, unlike the women of some other Asian cultures, Burmese wives treated their husbands as comrades, not idols.[117] Even so, the English-language literature of the time made frequent references to Burmese women in terms which emphasised their apparent submissiveness and willingness to cater to men's needs and desires. For example, one study of 'Oriental women' written in 1915 stated:

> The Burmese wife makes no demands upon her lord and master; she is obedient, attendant to his every want, and never scolding and discontented. As far as material wants are concerned, the native woman of any Eastern country makes an ideal wife for the average European … he is always her lord, she is always his slave.[118]

To a greater or lesser degree, these sentiments were echoed by other observers, strengthening the view in the West that 'Burma girls' were invariably meek and obedient. As companions, they were compared favourably to their British counterparts, who were implicitly described as cold and formal, and bound by rigid conventions.[119] One traditionally-minded European visiting Burma in the 1890s went further, describing emancipated British women as the 'shrieking, lecturing, struggling, unmannerly female, this terrible product of the nineteenth century'.[120]

These images were strengthened by pictorial representations of Burma and Burmese women by British artists such as Frederick Goodall (1822-1904), Robert Talbot Kelly (1861-1934), W.G. Burn Murdoch (1862-1939), A. Hugh Fisher (1867-1945), Gerald Kelly (1879-1972) and James Raeburn Middleton (1887-1928).[121] All except Goodall visited Burma, and for his painting 'The Road to Mandalay' (1899) Goodall drew on the

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[112] Elizabeth Cooper, *The Harim and the Purdah: Studies of Oriental Women* (London: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., 1915), p.198; and Kipling, *From Sea to Sea*, p.205.
[113] Browne, *The Coming of the Great Queen*, p.287.
[114] Mitton, *A Bachelor Girl in Burma*, p.52.
[115] Willis, *Western Men with Eastern Morals*, p.101.
[116] Gascoigne, *Among Pagodas and Fair Ladies*, p.56.
[117] J.G. Scott, *Burma: A Handbook of Practical Information* (London: Daniel O'Connor, 1921), p.77.
[118] Cooper, *The Harim and the Purdah*, p.198.
[119] Cooper, *The Harim and the Purdah*, p.197.
[120] Gascoigne, *Among Pagodas and Fair Ladies*, p.56.
[121] See, for example, Kelly, *Peeps at Many Lands: Burma*; and A.H. Fisher, *Through India and Burmah with pen and brush* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1911). These and other early Western painters of Burma, including Colesworthy Grant (1813-1880) and W.H.Y. Titcomb (1858-1930), are discussed in Andrew Ranard, *Burmese Painting: A Linear and Lateral History* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2009), pp.47-69.

advice of people familiar with the country.[122] Almost without exception, in oil paintings, watercolours and sketches, the works of these artists emphasised the slightness, natural elegance and beauty of their subjects, who were usually dressed in colourful traditional costumes and posed in exotic settings.[123] Such portraits proved immensely popular. For example, a number of Gerald Kelly's 20 or so iconic portraits of the Burmese 'princess' Sao Ohn Nyunt, painted during the 1930s, were made into limited edition prints and posters. Sales of the latter over the years exceeded 50,000 copies, and some are still available.[124] Revealingly, the writer Somerset Maugham said of Kelly's Burma paintings that he had 'given us the character of the East as we of our generation see it'.[125]

As more and more people visited Burma after its 'pacification', the country became a little better known, helped by the increasing flow of memoirs, travel books and (to a lesser extent) novels about the country.[126] Juvenile literature too proved to be an effective means for the diffusion of ideas and attitudes. They were not uniform, but the main themes were surprisingly consistent, and conformed to well-established images of the country and its people. This included depictions of Burmese women. As Lucy Delap has argued, 'Despite portrayals as "new" and "modern" womanhood, Burmese women were usually seen as ignorant, eroticised and physically "other"'.[127] These views tapped into racial stereotypes regarding the sexual propensities of Asian women as well as other views prevalent at the time, for example that a tropical climate accentuated physical desires and made them harder to resist.[128] All these images were tied to a re-emergence of wider Western interest in what Scott O'Connor and others called the 'silken East'.[129]

Such an Orientalist picture catered to the fantasies of many white men at the time, but apparently it was also accepted as valid by many European and American women. It made all of them, and those who followed after them, highly receptive to romanticised images of exotic places far away, and sentimental odes to demure and love-struck Asian girls. As composers and producers had discovered long before then, a potent means of exploiting such feelings and turning them into a profit was through music.

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[122] One collaborator was Colonel Richard Temple, who held a number of appointments in Burma before and after the Third Anglo-Burmese War. Another advisor was Alice Hart, the author of *Picturesque Burma, Past and Present* (London: J.M. Dent, 1897). See Frederick Goodall, *The Reminiscences of Frederick Goodall RA* (London: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., 1902), pp.392-3.

[123] See, for example, 'A Burmese Beauty' (1905) by R.T. Kelly; and 'A Burmese Dancer' (c.1920) by J.R. Middleton.

[124] Ma Thanegi, 'Shan princess "returns" to Myanmar', *The Myanmar Times*, 13 June 2011, at http://www.mmtimes.com/2011/timeout/579/timeout57901.html

[125] Cited in Derek Hudson, *For Love of Painting: The Life of Sir Gerald Kelly* (London: Peter Davies, 1975), p.36.

[126] According to a survey conducted in 1948, there were only eight novels relating to Burma published in English between 1917 and 1941. This compared with 224 for China, 100 for India, 44 for Japan, 11 for Borneo, Java and Sumatra, and 11 for Malaysia. See Braden, 'The Novelist Discovers the Orient', p.167.

[127] Lucy Delap, 'Uneven Orientalisms: Burmese Women and the Feminist Imagination', *Gender and History*, Vol.24, No.2, August 2012, p.406.

[128] B.W. Andaya, 'From Temporary Wife to Prostitute: Sexuality and Economic Change in Early Modern Southeast Asia', *Journal of Women's History*, Vol.9, No.4, Winter 1998, p.21. Also relevant is Ian Littlewood, *Sultry Climates: Travel and Sex* (Boston: Da Capo, 2001).

[129] V.C. Scott O'Connor, *The Silken East: A Record of Life and Travel in Burma* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1928), pp.9-14.

Sexism and Songs

The portrayal of Burmese women in popular songs during the colonial period was affected not just by a sense of racial and cultural superiority but also by the deeply patriarchal nature of Victorian society. Even the UK's imperial expansion was expressed in terms of a strong, masculine Britain imposing its will on weak, feminine foreigners. In addition to those deeply ingrained attitudes, the treatment of Burmese women was affected by their Orientalist image in the West and the mixed reactions this provoked. For, as noted by Ian Buruma, even before Britain's conquest of Burma, Asian women were portrayed in Western literature and music as exotic beauties, figures of mystery, objects of desire, and the potential sources of unimaginable pleasures. This added to their erotic fascination for many men.

As far as Burma was concerned, popular music in the West took its tone from Rudyard Kipling's 'Mandalay' (1890), a poem of six stanzas in which a former British soldier, discharged from military service and working in a London bank, reviews his experiences during the recent Burma campaign. He expresses his longing for a young Burmese girl, who is described as waiting in idyllic surroundings for her sweetheart to return.

> By the old Moulmein Pagoda, lookin' eastward to the sea,
> There's a Burma girl a-settin', and I know she thinks o' me;
> For the wind is in the palm-trees, and the temple-bells they say:
> 'Come you back, you British soldier; come you back to Mandalay!'[130]

This poem, with its timeless themes of idealised romance, cultural fusion and exotic locales, had an extraordinary impact on the popular imagination in the West. It inspired more than 24 different musical settings, usually published under the title of 'On The Road to Mandalay', and coloured hundreds of later works with similar themes.

An early example was a song by Roderic Penfield and Hans Scherber entitled 'My Maid of Mandalay' (1907), which followed the Kipling story closely. The singer pines for 'My little girl in green' who 'lifted up her tear-dimmed eyes to look a last goodbye'.

> The palm trees trembled in the breeze,
> The temple bells rang out,
> Their music floated far across the water of the bay;
> She said her heart was mine, all
> My maid of Mandalay.[131]

During the jazz age (1918-1929), the composers and songwriters of America's Tin Pan Alley, and its UK counterpart, produced dozens of songs that depicted young Burmese

[130] Rudyard Kipling, 'Mandalay', in *Barrack Room Ballads and Other Verses* (London: Methuen, 1892), pp.50-3.
[131] 'My Maid of Mandalay', words by Roderic Penfield and music by Hans Scherber (New York: Maurice Shapiro, 1907).

women pining for their foreign lovers. 'Down in Old Rangoon' (1923), with words by Win Ewart and music by Charles Prentice, was typical of the genre:

> Down in old Rangoon
> 'Neath the shining moon
> Sings a maiden fair,
> Clear in the evening air.
> Sad and lone is she,
> Singing to her boy o'er the sea.[132]

As an aside, this song is noteworthy for being one of the few musical works of the period that specifically mentioned the administrative and commercial capital of the colonial regime, which was built by the British after the Second Anglo-Burmese War.[133] Thanks to Kipling's abiding influence, most songs with Burmese themes referred to Mandalay.

A slightly different approach taken by some lyricists was to describe a Western man fondly recalling his days in Asia and the local girl who had kept him company there. This was the theme, for example, of 'Moonlight in Mandalay' (1925) by Lou Herscher, Elmer Naylor and Marty Fay:

> Oh take me back to Mandalay,
> My land of dreams;
> Where palm trees sway and moon beams play
> On silv'ry streams
> With lips aflame, oh let me claim
> The heart I stole away [134]

It was released by Victor Records in 1926 starring Edwin J. McEnelly's orchestra, and with vocals by Lewis James.

In these and many other songs, Burmese women were consistently infantilised and praised for their supposedly childlike qualities. They were repeatedly described as 'maids' or 'little girls'.[135] The song 'In Mandalay' (1918), for example, speaks of a 'little Burmese maiden' and a 'brown eyed wonder'. They are typically 'sweet and gentle'.[136] Even when played by an English girl in disguise, as in the musical comedy *The Blue*

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[132] 'Down in Old Rangoon', words by Wyn Ewart and music by Charles Prentice (London: Chappell and Co., 1923).
[133] When it was attacked during the First Anglo-Burmese War, Rangoon (or 'Yangon') was a small village at the base of the revered Shwedagon Pagoda. After the Second Anglo-Burmese War, and the annexation of Lower Burma in 1852, a new city was built along European lines. See B.R. Pearn, *A History of Rangoon* (Rangoon: American Baptist Mission Press, 1939); and O.H.K. Spate and L.W. Trueblood, 'Rangoon: A Study in Urban Geography', *Geographical Review*, Vol.32, No.1, January 1942, pp.56-73.
[134] 'Moonlight in Mandalay', words by Marty Fay and music by Lou Herscher and Elmer Naylor (New York: Jack Mills Inc., 1925).
[135] 'My Maid of Mandalay', words by Roderic Penfield and music by Hans Scherber (New York: Maurice Shapiro, 1907).
[136] 'I'm On My Way to Mandalay', words by Alfred L. Bryan and music by Fred Fisher (New York: Leo Feist Inc., 1913).

Moon (1905), they are 'dark, demure and dreamy'.[137] This idealised picture found a ready audience. It not only fitted prevailing male ideas of ideal womanhood, but it also conformed to other common beliefs. For example, notwithstanding the widespread views of 'primitive' foreigners, many Europeans were still attracted to the romantic notion of the 'noble savage', uncorrupted by Western civilisation, which had taken a hold on the popular imagination the previous century.[138]

Burmese women were also seen as essentially passive figures, accepting of their lot in life, even if that was to be abandoned by their European lover or temporary 'husband'. Indeed, their apparently uncomplicated lifestyle and simple tastes were seen as highly desirable, making them even more attractive to Western men:

> Oh Burmah girl you're quite divine,
> Would we had met before,
> On my half pay if you were mine
> I could do so much more;
> You do not ask for rows of pearls
> To trim your frenzied frocks,
> You only need a simple bead,
> You've got no op'ra box.
> Burmah, Burmah, Burmah girl
> You don't spend your days at
> Woolland's and Jay's,
> You don't fret to play roulette,
> Making a poor man squirm, ah!
> Burmah, Burmah, Burmah girl no Carlton for you,
> No supper for two,
> I've made up my mind,
> If a wife I find I shall bring her to live in Burmah.[139]

Again emphasising the supposed simple pleasures of life with a Burmese girl, 'My Song of India' (1921) claimed that 'wealth means nothing down old Burmah way'.[140]

Similar sentiments were expressed by some British colonial civil servants (and amateur songwriters) who were living in Burma at the time. They contrasted the behaviour and demeanour of local women with those of their counterparts back home in the UK, who were agitating for equal rights with men:

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[137] 'Little Blue Moon', words by Percy Greenbank, music by Howard Talbot, in *The Blue Moon*, by Howard Talbot and P.A. Rubens (New York: Chappell and Co., 1905).
[138] While usually, and mistakenly, associated with the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the term was in fact coined by John Dryden in 1672. See Charles Dickens' 1853 satirical essay 'The Noble Savage', in the weekly *Household Words*, in which he attacked those who exalted the cultures of 'primitive' peoples.
[139] 'Burmah Girl', words and music by Paul A. Rubens, in *The Blue Moon*, by Howard Talbot and P.A. Rubens (New York: Chappell and Co., Ltd., 1905) .
[140] 'My Song of India', words and music by Harley Rosso and H.L. Alford (St. Paul: McClure Music Co., 1921) .

Come where the *mingaley* reigns supreme,
Beyond the hope of the Feminist's dream;
Where the pranks of the hooligan Suffragette
Are quite as unknown as the wilds of Thibet.
The sceptre she wields is a winsome smile,
Mightier far than "political bile":
As sparkling champagne surpasses the Nile,
Or the skin of an apple the core![141]

One verse of the song's chorus referred to 'dear old Burma / Where votes do not vex / The feminine sex'.[142] A 'mingaley' (or *mingale*) is a young Burmese girl.

In popular songs, 'Burma girls' were frequently compared with the women of other countries, usually with positive results. Kipling started the practice in 'Mandalay' by referring to 'fifty 'ousemaids outer Chelsea to the Strand' with 'Beefy face an' grubby 'and', who did not understand the wants and needs of servicemen returned from the East. He longed for a 'neater, sweeter maiden' in a 'cleaner, greener land'.[143] Also, as a song in *The Blue Moon* made clear:

Throughout the world I've been or seen
Girls of each sort and kind,
But not one have I met as yet
With qualities so defined.
The Irish girl, the Scottish lass, delightful in their way,
And English girls, forgive me please, but I am bound to say:
Burmah, Burmah, Burmah girl
You stand alone of all I have known
With your smiles and roguish wiles,
How can a man be firm, ah! ... …[144]

Over and again in the songs of the day European men declaimed that 'Other girls are lovely yet / You are still my eastern Queen'.[145]

In most of these works, sex is only hinted at, but it is an ever-present consideration. For example, there is the suggestion in 'Mandalay' that Kipling's British soldier did more than just kiss his 'Burma girl' by the pagoda. Many of Kipling's readers would have known that in 1886 he had written another poem, called 'The Ladies', which included a verse about Burmese women:

Then I was ordered to Burma,

[141] 'The Land of the Golden Semaphore', Air: "Brighton"', in "Oolay" [pseud. M.C.C. Poole], *Ballads of Burma*, reprint of the 1912 edition (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2000), p.2.
[142] 'The Land of the Golden Semaphore', in "Oolay", *Ballads of Burma*, p.1.
[143] Kipling, 'Mandalay', in *Barrack Room Ballads and Other Verses*, pp.50-3.
[144] 'Burmah Girl' (1905).
[145] 'Mandalay Moon', words and music by Tom King and W.J. Munday (pseud. Jack Fewster) (London: West's Ltd., 1924) .

> Actin' in charge o' Bazar,
> An' I got me a tiddy live 'eathen
> Through buyin' supplies off 'er pa.
> Funny and yellow an' faithful
> Doll in a teacup she were
> But we lived on the square, like a true-married pair,
> An' I learned about women from 'er![146]

The narrator adds, 'But the things you will learn from the Yellow an' Brown, / They'll 'elp you a lot with the White!'

In such cases, Kipling's sympathies tended to be with the women left behind, but he also understood the impulses which prompted men in Burma and India proper to take 'local wives' and, in most cases, eventually leave them behind. To criticisms of such behaviour, his response was:

> civilised people who eat out of china and carry card-cases have no right to apply their standard of right and wrong to an unsettled land … The men who run ahead of the cars of Decency and Propriety, and make the jungle ways straight, cannot be judged in the same manner as the stay-at-home folks of the ranks of the regular Tchin.'[147]

'Tchin' appears to be a reference to 'the ranks', that is officials and civil servants not posted abroad. Kipling's was a view that was shared by many European men at the time, including those in Burma where, after all, 'there aren't no ten commandments'.[148] When it became the subject of public debate in the UK in 1912, similar views were expressed by a senior ICS officer who, referring to the health risks associated with prostitution, felt that 'the Burman system of concubinage, with its attendant evils, is, after all, more moral than a less permanent tie'.[149]

Music hall performances and vaudeville shows during the Victorian and Edwardian eras could be rather bawdy but the mood in musical comedies and operettas tended to be a little more restrained. As Michael Newbury has noted, it was 'prim but sexually promising, decent but potentially disruptive'.[150] This theme of coy suggestiveness was carried over to many Burma-related songs. The artwork on the covers of some sheet music alludes to a sexual liaison, with its pictures of girls dressed for the *harem*, or women with off-the-shoulder dresses giving arch backward looks of the kind associated

[146] Rudyard Kipling, 'The Ladies' (1896), in Kipling, *Rudyard Kipling's Verse: Definitive Edition*, pp.442-3.
[147] Kipling, 'Georgie Porgie', in *Life's Handicap*, p.328. See also D.H. Stewart, 'Tchin?', 'Letters to the Editor', *The Kipling Journal*, No.241, March 1987, p.39.
[148] Kipling, 'Mandalay', in *Barrack Room Ballads and Other Verses*, pp.50-3.
[149] Willis, *Western Men with Eastern Morals*, p.12.
[150] Newbury, 'Polite Gaiety', p.395.

with something more than an innocent kiss behind the pagoda.[151] In the song 'Moonlight in Mandalay' (1920), the allusion is stronger:

> 'Neath your skies tender eyes are burning,
> Oh Mandalay,
> My Mandalay!
> 'Neath your palms slender arms are yearning,
> And I am far away.[152]

On the cover of the sheet music for 'Burma Nights' (1922), the woman appears topless, in what could be mistaken for a South Pacific scene. The song's lyrics hint at 'mystic sweet delights'. The song 'I'm Goin' to Jazz My Way to Mandalay' (1924), which was a hit for the Swanee Syncopators, Charles 'Nat' Star's Orchestra, and Jack Hylton and his band, was a knowing reference to unbridled sexual activity.[153]

In a major departure from the mainstream, sex was a central theme of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's 1929 musical *Happy End*. In a deliberate challenge to the stereotypical heroine of 'Mandalay' and its imitators, the 'Burma girl' is a prostitute working in a brothel. She is clearly in great demand, if not actually overworked:

> Faster, Johnny hey, faster, Johnny, hey,
> Sing the man the song of Mandalay:
> Love doesn't have days and weeks to be reckoned,
> Johnny, come on, don't you dare waste a second![154]

In the show, Burma is summed up by the line:

> All the girls are cute as they can be,
> Even if they won't put out for free.[155]

Fantasizing about such matters was common musical comedy fare, but Weill and Brecht took the popular myth of the sexual allure and availability of Asian women, and stood it on its head. In doing so they successfully challenged not only the social conventions of the day (although Berlin between the wars was pretty relaxed about such matters) but also one of the most durable myths prevailing in the Western world about Burmese 'maids'.

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[151] See, for example, 'Rose of Mandalay: Fox Trot Song', words and music by Ted Koehler and Frank Magine (New York: Leo Feist Inc., 1928) .
[152] 'Moonlight in Mandalay' (1925)
[153] 'I'm Goin' to Jazz My Way to Mandalay', words and music by J.G .Gilbert (London: Lawrence Wright Music Co., 1925). The title of this song was sometimes given as 'I'm Jazzin' My Way to Mandalay'. This tune was recorded between 1924-6 by Charles 'Nat' Star and the Star Syncopators, possibly for Pathe's Actuelle record label. It was also recorded by Homochord Records C750 (London: Homophone Co., 1926). See also A.P. Merriam and F.H. Garner, 'Jazz – The Word', in R.G. O'Meally (ed), *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp.20-1.
[154] 'Song of Mandalay', in *Happy End*, book by Elisabeth Hauptman, words by Bertolt Brecht and music by Kurt Weill (Berlin: 1929), pp.72-3.
[155] Brecht and Weill, 'Song of Mandalay' (1929), in *Happy End*, p.70.

There is unlikely to be a direct connection, but this cynical view of Burmese girls echoes a poem by George Orwell, written around 1925 when he was serving in Burma with the Indian Imperial Police. It was ironically titled 'A Romance':

> When I was young and had no sense
> In far-off Mandalay
> I lost my heart to a Burmese girl
> As lovely as the day.
>
> Her skin was gold, her hair was jet,
> Her teeth were ivory;
> I said "For twenty silver pieces,
> Maiden sleep with me".
>
> She looked at me, so pure, so sad,
> The loveliest thing alive,
> And in her lisping, virgin voice,
> Stood out for twenty-five'.[156]

This poem does not appear ever to have been published; at least not in Orwell's lifetime. However, it neatly captures some of the abiding perceptions of 'Burma girls' during the colonial period — namely their attractiveness, their demureness and their availability — which featured so strongly in popular Western music.

At this stage, it might be asked why all these songs with a Burma theme were so popular. Many were ephemeral pieces and quickly forgotten, but Kipling's ballad and its key elements, enshrined in so many later songs, have clearly endured. The easy answer is that, regardless of their structure or subject matter, they were entertaining. They provided enjoyment and amusement. They were written to catchy tunes and met the immediate needs of the day, whether that was for songs in music halls and theatres, or for lively dance tunes. More than that, however, to most songwriters of the period Burma, and Mandalay in particular, became a potent symbol of the distant, exotic and mythical, where the codified 'Burma girl' waited patiently for her European lover to return. As Edward Said wrote, 'In a system of knowledge about the Orient, the orient is less a place than a *topos*, a set of references'.[157] They in turn made these songs and tunes enormously attractive to their prime audiences in the West, albeit usually at the expense of accuracy, balance and perspective.

Perhaps it is within the historical context that the ultimate explanation of the popularity of these Burma-related songs must be sought. To use James Dormon's argument about the popularity of 'coon songs' during much the same period, Burma-related songs conveyed 'a multi-layered set of meanings and images, at times shifting and even contradictory in

[156] George Orwell, 'Romance', in George Orwell, *'A Kind of Compulsion', 1903-1936* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2000), pp.89-90.
[157] Said, *Orientalism*, p.177.

its implications'.[158] They appealed at many different levels. At the risk of straying into socio-psychological analysis, there seems to have been a need in Western societies at the time for something that was offered by these songs and others like them. Again drawing on Dormon's analysis, if the complex signals operating at the conscious, cognitive level were to be construed as a symbolic statement, the songs might be said to have constituted a form of rhetoric encompassing an ideology, a belief system reflecting the social needs of bourgeois society in the West.

This system seems to have included a need to judge and ultimately to dominate a society and culture that, despite its usual portrayal as 'primitive', in some way threatened the West's sense of itself. On the surface, the songs suggested confidence — even arrogance. Looked at from another perspective, however, these works arguably revealed what Nigel Leask has described as 'anxieties and instabilities' in Western society, not just 'positivities and totalities'.[159] While popular perceptions of the orient were clearly rooted in a sense of superiority, there was also recognition of a kind that aspects of the East undermined such a claim. This tension exposed the Western world's political and economic insecurities and its concerns over issues relating to religion, race and gender. At a deep level, the songs and tunes of the day seemed to offer comfort and reassurance about such matters, doubtless adding to their appeal and, in the case of Kipling's ballad 'Mandalay', their durability.

BurmaGirlsWP
18 February 2015

[158] J.H. Dormon, 'Shaping the Popular Image of Post-Reconstruction American Blacks: The "Coon Song" Phenomenon of the Gilded Age', *American Quarterly*, Vol.40, No.4, December 1988, p.466.
[159] Cited in MacKenzie, *Orientalism*, p.30.