CONCLUSION

Becoming Women Nationalists

Helen Ting

Introduction

This book examines individual women’s experiences in nationalist struggles in Southeast Asia. A sceptical reader may wonder about the value of taking a biographical rather than a broader historical approach. Does it achieve anything more than just adding women into the equation? How can examining the life stories of individual women constitute a step towards a better knowledge of women’s involvement in nationalist movements? If those women we study represent the exceptions rather than the rule, how can the biographical approach go beyond focusing on mere personalities to linking their life stories with the social and collective aspects of history?

Shifts in theoretical concerns and attention to new historical questions have led to renewed academic interest in biography and to changing approaches in writing biography.¹ The biographical approach offers a window into what Roxana Waterson described as “that space where history intersects with personal experience”.² There is a growing effort “not only to understand the social and political contexts in which individuals lived but also to explore in much more detail the complex ways in which individuals relate to the worlds they inhabit”.³ This captures the intention of our biographical studies of individual women nationalists, within the limits of availability of information. Indeed, to look at life stories without the knowledge of their historical context impoverishes much of our understanding of their experiences.

Besides adding to our knowledge regarding women’s role in nationalist movements in Southeast Asia, the underlying theoretical
concern that inspired this book is to understand their political and personal trajectory from the point of view of identity and agency. To what extent and how did the ideas and perspectives of these women nationalists bear the imprint of the sociocultural context of their time, which was at the confluence of colonialism, patriarchal traditions and modern ideals of national and personal emancipation? Despite being “products” of their eras and being women, how did they overcome the odds to push for new norms and practices and challenge existing structures through their sociopolitical involvements?

Theoretical discussions on the relations between identity and agency, structure and individual autonomy have always stimulated engaging debates and lie at the heart of our understanding of social change. It could be readily agreed that the identity of a person is shaped by the larger social and historical structures, notwithstanding the individuality of each person’s life trajectory. How is this shaping manifested in the lives of our women nationalists? Conversely, to what extent is each of the women free to make her own decisions or to rise against structural forces such as colonialism and patriarchy? Nowadays it is fashionable to describe identity as fluid and situational. To what extent is the identity of our female protagonists changeable or rigidly determined by larger structural forces; and if their identity did evolve, how did that happen? These are the theoretical questions this short essay attempts to explore based on the preceding life narratives of our 12 heroines.

**Historical Structures as Resources and Constraints**

Many life events of the women nationalists described in this book were shaped by larger social forces, what Waterson described as the “intrusion of history” into their lives. Various chapters illustrate how historical structures “intervened” as a process, in the form of providing resources or opportunity on the one hand and imposing social constraints on the other. Some of these historical events, such as growing up in a war zone, may have had dramatic consequences, while others, such as schooling, may seem to readers to be routine life experiences.

The life story of Bisoi from East Timor presents a case of how powerful larger structural forces brought her schooling to a premature end. The eruption of generalised armed conflict forced her to flee into the jungle and drew her into a Falintil squad in the footsteps of her
uncle. In Laos, the impacts of the international and national socio-historical processes in the shadow of the Cold War were heavily consequential on the lives of highlanders such as Manivanh and Khamla. Laos during the 1950s and 1960s was embroiled in civil war, a victim of violent attempts by various international forces to influence the outcome of the political future of the country. Manivanh and Khamla decided that joining the Pathet Lao, which seemed to promise a better life through education, presented the best option to them.

Similarly, the life trajectory of Zipporah Sein simply cannot be understood without referring to the Karen people's historical struggle for autonomy from the Burmese state. More tragically, Zipporah recalls that she does not even have a place to call home, due to the nomadic life her family led fighting against the Burmese state. Her pursuit of higher education was blocked due to the problem of getting recognition from hostile state institutions of her schooling qualification obtained in the Karen-controlled area.

Anticipation of the eruption of an international conflict, in the shape of World War II, also led to the interruption of the education of Shamsiah Fakeh in Sumatra. Her return to Malaya led to her early marriage, which was a common practice then. As a consequence, she was not able to complete her high school education. Aishah Ghani would have suffered the same fate of being married off in her early teens, if not for the vehement opposition she staged, including a few days of hunger strike. She found an ally in the person of her Sumatran brother-in-law who was influenced by modernist Islamic thinking: he managed to persuade her parents of the importance of educating girls.

Historical structure also operated in the form of class relations. In the Philippines, historical conflicts between the landless and the landowners were carried over into the struggle for political independence, as illustrated by the struggle of Salud Algabre and her Sakdal peasant movement. Landlords maintained their grip on political power and were unsympathetic towards the efforts of peasants to fight for their welfare and improve their livelihood via anti-colonial struggle. The social position of the landlord class in Philippine society provided resources for this group's political dominance before and after independence. The impoverishment of Salud's initially landowning family bears witness to the exploitative impact of the larger socio-economic forces of the land tenure problem, leading to Salud's integration into the Sakdal peasant movement.
In many of the chapters, the education system represents an important institution of cultural reproduction, which may be part and parcel of the colonial project, or a creation of an indigenous socio-political movement, such as the case of the Thawalib school system in Sumatra based on a modernist understanding of Islam. Dissatisfaction with colonial education also led to the emergence of the “national education movement” in Burma, which emphasised Burmese language and literature as the rallying point for Burmese nationalism.

From the outset, the choice of the type of education experienced by our protagonists was often, though not always, a reflection of the socio-economic background and outlook of their parents and family, and constituted an important baseline in determining the subsequent life trajectory of these women. There is also the empowering dimension of having an educational qualification as a form of symbolic capital. Aishah Ghani from Malaya, who studied initially in Malay and Arabic, was unusual in her determination to further her studies in the English medium, which afforded her greater sociopolitical mobility. In the same light, the well-regarded Dutch education of Suyatin Kartowiyono differentiated her social position from that of Rasuna Said, who was a product of the Islamic reformist schooling system. Accordingly, it seems logical that Suyatin developed a secular political outlook while Rasuna inclined towards the Islamist groups.

Under Independent Daw San’s pen, the Buddhist parents of the main character in her novel Khin Aye Kyi debated whether to send their child to the American Baptist mission school, and situated the debate at the level of the importance of female education to the nationalist struggle. Daw San no doubt appreciated the empowerment she gained through her Western education, herself belonging to the early generation of Burmese women who benefitted from its expansion, eclipsing the role of Buddhist monastic schools. This illustrates the contradictory impact of colonisation, which may well favour one particular social group over another, be it based on gender, ethnicity, religion or class. More often than not, colonial education has historically been responsible for the emergence of the male political elites who became the leaders of the anti-colonial movement, while the first generation of educated women became the catalyst for the emancipation of women. In effect, without the expansion of female education during the colonial era, most of the women we studied would not have become teachers, writers, journalists and activists, taking the
roles in nationalist movements that they did, except perhaps for Bisoi, Manivanh and Khamla, who lacked such educational advantages.

Nationalist Movements as Sites of (Re)Production of Cultural Forms

The previous section discussed how historical structures and processes intruded into our individual protagonists’ lives, shaping their life trajectories, but also how the protagonists were the product of socialisation of their respective families and educational systems. This implies that they saw the world through the lenses of their parents, teachers, peers or significant others, appropriating and applying the existing norms, concepts, categories, idioms and practices that they were exposed to, what we may call “cultural forms”. Cultural forms are the medium through which we meaningfully carry out our daily activities and, through the process of doing so, become who we are and assume our identity.

We have read that Bisoi acquired her critical gender awareness as well as anti-colonial perspective from the nationalist movement she joined. In her autobiography, Shamsiah also credited the Malay Nationalist Party for her initiation to anti-colonialism, and traced the origins of her awareness of women’s oppression to nationalist struggle. Just as family and school could be important vehicles of identity formation, the nationalist movement provided a social milieu where alternative ways of thinking that challenged the status quo were articulated, affirmed and propagated. In order for this social milieu to develop, appropriate cultural forms such as alternative political discourse and social practices needed to be developed and disseminated.

As a journalist and prolific writer of nationalist (and feminist) writings, Burmese Daw San played an active role in the creation of literary medium and public discourse (one type of cultural form) to interpret and influence popular thinking on what constituted the “protection of the interests of the nation” as well as the “woman question”. Her first major publication, Khin Aye Kyi, was a pioneering effort to articulate a feminine model of the Burmese patriot. Reflecting the larger Burmese nationalist thinking of her time, she linked the survival of the Burmese nation to the revival and propagation of Buddha’s teachings and Burmese language and literature. As was common in anti-colonial movements, Burmese traditional culture, language and
religion served as a powerful mobilising force to demarcate the boundary with the “enemy” colonialists, who were Christian and English-speaking.

Nationalist movements did not invent their ideology and practices from scratch. The mode of organisation of the Viet Nam Quốc Dan Dang (VNQDD) is said to resemble Communist organisations, adopted through mimicking the Chinese nationalist party, Guomindang, which at one point received strategic advice from Soviet Union advisers. VNQDD began by establishing study groups and a bookshop, which effectively were means to spread their anti-colonial ideas. Modelled after the Guomindang, VNQDD leaders — unsurprisingly — derived their revolutionary inspiration from Sun Yat Sen and the 1911 Revolution in China. The VNQDD leader Nguyen Thai Hoc even drew a strategic comparison between the Vietnamese sociopolitical situation in 1929 and that of the 1911 Chinese Revolution in determining or justifying that the time was right to prepare for the general insurrection.

The case of the Philippine Independent Church, which united the Sakdalistas, is a good example of the transformative evolution of religious practices from the traditional Catholic Church. Its attraction to the masses was attributed to the similarity of its liturgy to the Catholic faith, minus the institutional control and link with Rome. Salud's home became a regular meeting place of the movement, where Mass was celebrated in the morning followed by prolonged political discussions. Salud described it as “exciting”: “Religion in the morning and politics all day.”

According to Salud, the Sakdalistas believed that independence, “as the United States had promised”, was part of the answer to the plight of the peasants: that independence would render “the people” powerful and free, while the leaders would “cease to be powerful”. Her perspective indicates that the Sakdalistas integrated the concept of democracy and nationalism as professed by the Americans themselves. In effect, Salud credited her American elementary education, which taught civics lessons for citizenship training, as contributing to her sense of patriotism and civic consciousness. In other words, nationalists have at their disposal not only those cultural forms derived from their local tradition and religion, but also those offered by other societies and cultures.

In the chapter on Rasuna Said, the Sumatran Thawalib school system and the Diniyah Putri School are fruits of the endeavour by a
social movement to popularise new cultural forms, that is, to promote alternative ways of understanding and practising Islam. They emerged out of the attempts by young Islamic scholars to revitalise and modernise Islamic practice in the face of what was perceived as Christian colonialism at the beginning of the 20th century. They derived their inspiration from the Islamic modernist school of thought in the Middle East and were vehemently resisted by local traditionalists. The Thawalib and Diniyah schools also integrated selective organisational aspects of the Western schooling system, such as the introduction of secular subjects, graded classes, the use of textbooks, and more modern methods of teaching and curriculum. Reflective of Marxist influence, the methods of Thawalib schools encouraged students to analyse their social and political circumstances. There was also innovative thinking with regard to the importance of female literacy. The Islamic reformist movement argued that women were entitled to religious education in order to pass on their faith to other women and their children, and by virtue of the fact that they were answerable to God, just like men.

The Sumatran Islamic school reform represents a historical case of “localisation,” whereby outside ideas were progressively and eclectically integrated into educational institutions and successfully brought about significant social changes. The Thawalib school was instrumental in shaping a generation of religiously educated leaders who formed Permi, one of the nationalist organisations Rasuna joined. These reformist schools became the crucible of identity formation not just for Minangkabau Rasuna Said but also for Shamsiah Fakeh and Aishah Ghani from Malaya.

The ultimate case of localisation here, of course, is the idea of nation (and of reclaiming sovereignty in the name of the people) by nationalist movements. Liah Greenfeld described national identity as an empty conceptual framework, providing “an organising principle applicable to different materials to which it then grants meaning, transforming them thereby into elements of a specific identity.” The raw materials used by nationalist leaders were existing symbolic resources such as historical narratives and cultural practices in colonial society, as well as collective identities, be it ethnic (Burmese, Karen, Malay), territorial (Indonesia), provincial (Timor-Leste), or even social class (Sakdal Movement). They bore the imprint of prior layers of localisation of outside ideas and norms that were then regarded as an integral part of local social practices and “indigenous” tradition.
Nationalism thrives on historical nostalgia and the impulse to restore precolonial order, but the truth is that colonialism participated intricately in the very creation and formation of the nation.

As a territorial and political entity, the form of nation-states that nationalist movements in the various chapters envisaged owed much to the boundaries and social divisions carved out by colonialists. In the chapter on the Javanese Suyatin, it was suggested how revolutionary the idea of an Indonesian nation was, to unite the hundreds of disparate islands of the archipelago whose only point in common was Dutch colonialism. Suyatin stated that she was attracted to the idea as a means “to fight the Dutch”. Ideas of nationalism among those Dutch-educated youth were picked up through their reading, from nationalist leaders who returned from their higher education in the Netherlands, as well as through the influence of nationalist movements.

We have also noted in the preceding paragraphs how nationalist movements, in their articulation of the idea of a nation, made innovative use of existing cultural forms, at times giving them new meanings, in their attempts to forge a collective sense of belonging and to mobilise the common people behind their nationalist struggle. Vatthana Pholsena in her chapter on Laos explained how the historical legacy of resistance to external control by highlanders was exploited by Communist propagandists to rally popular support among the former for the anti-colonial cause of the latter.

The outcome of the shape and content of a national identity is the fruit of negotiation with historical identities. In effect, at the formation of new nation-states, historically existent social structures and divisions could also maintain some form of colonial continuity — as clearly illustrated in the case study of the Philippines and Malaysia — provided that the dominant social group was on the winner’s side of history. Hence at independence, traditional norms and colonial practices were rarely evacuated of their influence once and for all, while the cultural and political transformation brought about by the process of localisation of the ideals of nation-states set off new powerful dynamics that might coexist, or at a later time come into contradiction, with “old” customs and practices.

Identity Formation as Social Practice and Process

The life story of Lily Eberwein in Sarawak presents a striking case of how identity formation is not given once and for all, but developed as
a social process whereby the changing cultural environment can bring about a radical personal transformation. Born Eurasian, and the recipient of an English-medium education, Eberwein became completely identified with the Malay ethnicity, despite her Eurasian complexion and name. The death of her Christian father in her early teens brought an end to her European lifestyle in Singapore. Following her Malay mother back from urbanised Singapore to a rural Malay social milieu in Sarawak plunged her into a completely alien cultural environment. We are told that young Eberwein had a hard time switching from being served by men servants to serving her uncles. But her mother was her window to the new social context, helping her to adjust and adopt new cultural practices and norms and to gain social acceptance. Eberwein embraced Islam soon after her return to Sarawak, adopting Malay etiquette and attire. Her appointment to head the Malay section of the women’s group during the Japanese occupation is indicative of the general social acceptance of her Malay identity. Her intimate involvement with the predominantly Malay anti-cession movement could also be interpreted as her complete identification with the Malay ethnic group’s perspective and interests in Sarawak. Eberwein’s assimilation as a Malay woman, however, represents an unusual and extreme case of identity change. Inadequacy of information does not allow us to go very far in our understanding of Eberwein’s identity transformation process, in particular the operation of agency on her part.

On the other hand, we can clearly see the exercise of agency in the case of Aishah Ghani in British Malaya. Her strong resistance to early marriage was crucial in opening up other life chances, such as enabling her to acquire higher educational qualifications and be exposed to political initiation and participation. Her choice to switch to a different strand of nationalist group effectively constituted a turning point in the development of her political identity.

Nonetheless, agency never worked in a straightforward way. In many cases, the initial motivation of the protagonists examined in various chapters to get involved was not even political in nature. We spoke about the more dramatic “intrusion” of historical process in the form of war and crisis into some of the protagonists’ lives; for others it was a spontaneous response to a mundane opportunity, such as an employment offer at the Malay Nationalist Party office in the case of Aishah. Manivanh, the Laotian revolutionary cadre, explained clearly that she first decided to join the guerrilla forces because she wanted
to study. The “hatred” and anger against the imperialist forces developed only later, after she joined the movement. Her revolutionary, anti-colonial identity developed over time, as the product of a social process of participation in the movement.

In the case of East Timorese Bisoi, we saw evidence of her distancing herself from the social norms in which she was brought up. When Bisoi stated in an interview that she perceived the source of gender inequality in East Timor as “from our ancestors”, that “traditional customs” dictated how women should behave, she was referring to gender norms that were prevalent in her society. This was evidence of her looking back from a distance at her initial stage of “political awakening” after joining OPMT, the women’s wing of Fretilin. Women’s emancipation constituted one of the founding aims of OPMT, and Bisoi embraced the discourse and acquired a critical gender consciousness from it.

Bisoi described how she was criticised by her community and her own family for her participation in political activism. She subsequently came to a form of compromise with her family, by acting as a “normal woman” when she was at home. She won the support of her family for her political activities by avoiding the outright rejection of the traditional gender position, at the price of leading “separate lives” in the respective social realms. Currently, as a married woman and a parliamentarian, she continues with this compromise of convenience, acting independently in the public realm of politics but submitting herself “to the structure of family” and deferring to her husband’s wishes in the domestic realm.

Attentive reading of the various chapters uncovers evidence, for Manivanh and Khamla, Aishah and Shamsiah, as well as Bisoi, that the identity of these women as anti-colonial fighters developed over the course of their increased participation in the nationalist movement they joined. Susan Blackburn, in her chapter on Suyatin, notes that “becoming a nationalist meant taking on a new identity, identifying with a huge archipelago rather than just one’s own ethnic group, and learning what was for most people an entirely new language”.

It was perhaps not a coincidence that the first responsibility assigned to many of the women when joining the nationalist movement was the role of “propagandist”. To be successful propagandists, they had to be convinced of the aims and perspective of their nationalist struggle before they could persuade others to join or mobilise popular
support. The more they did so, the more they themselves internalised the movement’s perspective and identified with the movement. On the other hand, in order to stamp out the development of a “counter-revolutionary” perspective, armed nationalist movements facing high security risks also imposed heavy sanctions to punish those members construed to have committed acts of betrayal, as we have seen in the case of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (VNQDD).

If we understand identity formation as a dynamic and intersubjective process of practice, the role of nationalist movements as a site of reproduction and reinforcement of the political identity of our protagonists should be foregrounded. The women nationalists we studied in the preceding chapters devoted a significant part of their lives, if not the whole of their adult lives, to the nationalist cause. Not only did they persist in their commitment to the nationalist struggle, most of them displayed bold determination in carrying out their missions, ready to risk imprisonment or give up their lives for the cause. Behind such supreme adherence to the cause, which Craig Calhoun described as bordering on “apparent foolishness”, these women perceived their personal integrity and honour in the eyes of their comrades to be at stake: the participation of these persons in the course of action “has over time committed one to an identity that would be irretrievably violated by pulling back from the risk”.

Discordance among the Nationalists: Open-endedness of the Localisation Process and Identity Formation

The chapters on Rasuna Said and Suyatin Kartowiyono help us understand how the anti-Dutch nationalism in the early 20th century, during what was referred to as “the age of pergerakan (movement)”, was far from monolithic, even contradictory. Not only were there multiple strands of competing and overlapping ideologies, purported “nation”-wide organisations such as Muhammadiyah and PSII-manifested variations when transplanted from Java to Sumatra. This illustrates how the idea of “nation”, when appropriated by a local society, may generate a whole spectrum of different articulations and interpretations, based on the specificity of local groups and the social processes they were involved in. The expulsion of Rachmany from the Indonesian Communist Party in Sumatra, the formation of Permi following the tension within Muhammadiyah, the controversies over the public role of
Muslim women, and responses to the controversial Marriage Ordinance tabled by the Dutch authorities are some examples of tension arising from such differences.

The political trajectory of Rasuna herself exemplifies an eclectic integration of political ideas from a variety of ideological sources, combining Islamic modernism, nationalism and socialism. Her public statements during her famous trial in 1932 reveal her creative combination of anti-colonialism and Islam, arguing that her nationalist party's struggle for a free nation was sanctioned by Islam and hence even if it was unsuccessful, "paradise still awaits". Her perspective against the 1937 Marriage Ordinance in defence of Islamic marriage laws, including provisions for polygamy and divorce which disadvantaged Muslim wives, put her in the camp of the Islamic women's movement and set her apart from the secular women's movement. (However, in subsequent years, Rasuna apparently became more closely associated with organisations with left-wing orientations as well as the secular women's organisation Perwari). Secular women's movements had been seeking marriage law reform and rejected the ordinance only because they saw it as a colonial device to drive a wedge between the Islamists and others, as noted by Susan Blackburn in her chapter. As a matter of fact, the success of the nationalist struggle depends on the effectiveness of bringing together different strands of nationalist groups under a common anti-colonial front or even suppressing brutally those whom others judge as "inadmissible", failing which the deep hostility of ideologically incompatible groups may become its gravest obstacle. Hence the battle line of conflicts (determination of who the enemy was) was more often than not multifaceted, and generally not as simplistic as just anti-colonial versus colonial.

In Burma, the historical emergence of the Karen National Union and its ongoing struggle against the Burmese state for an autonomous homeland is testimony to the ambivalent and contested nature of nationalist struggle. Despite helping Burma gain its independence from the British, the Burmese nationalist movement was not able to hold together competing, even incompatible, ideological and ethnic factions, and this led to prolonged armed conflicts that still continue today.

In the Philippines, at the heart of the struggle of the Sakdal peasant uprising was the sense of despair among landless peasants that their plight was overlooked by the dominant bourgeois nationalist movement led by Manuel Quezon, who negotiated with the American colonialists for independence. At times, it is even deemed desirable to
collaborate with one colonising power against another. The strategic collaboration of Salud and her group with the Japanese during World War II, just as Rasuna’s in Hahanokai and the political struggle of Lily Eberwein for the retention of White Rajah dynastic rule against the British takeover, manifested the ambivalent nature of ascertaining the “colonial enemy”.

In Malaysia, due to the hegemonic and continued dominance of political power of UMNO in the federal government since independence, the historical recognition of the anti-colonial role played by the Malay Nationalist Party and, to a greater extent, the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), remains hotly contested. The Malaysian official historical narrative regarded UMNO leaders as nationalists, while the MCP leaders were labelled simply as “terrorists”. History textbooks even make allusions to the MCP as a potential “coloniser”. This continues to fashion official and popular perceptions of Shamsiah Fakeh and Aishah Ghani. Official historians and MCP fighters clearly do not share the same view of the role of the latter, and MCP leaders in turn claimed that Malaya did not attain real independence as the British continued to maintain their military presence after independence. The dispute was over the very meaning of “what was going on”.

This complexity of nationalist struggles on the ground is not unique to Malaysia, and cannot always be captured simply by drawing a clear line between a pre-categorised “oppressor” and “oppressed”, as at times those who fight against a common oppressor may not see eye to eye with — or even acknowledge — one another.

The divergence of the political orientation of some of our protagonists appears to confirm Ranchod and Tétreault’s statement that “there is no single ‘woman’s view’ of the nation”: in the contrasting ways secular Suyatin and Islamic Rasuna articulated their nationalist discourses; the participation of Shamsiah and Aishah in antagonistically positioned factions of the Malayan nationalist movement; and finally, the commitment of Burmese Daw San and Karen Zipporah to the struggle for different forms of nation.

The “Woman Question” and Gendered Experience of Nationalist Struggles

The ideals of human autonomy, equality and emancipation inspire nationalist struggles as well as feminist movements. A number of the subjects of this book, such as Daw San, Zipporah, Shamsiah and Suyatin,
expressed a strong conviction that the “woman question” went hand in hand with the “national question”. In her autobiography, Suyatin explained that her parents had inculcated in her a strong sense of egalitarianism and passionate opposition to discrimination. She saw feminist struggle as “especially stimulated by the spirit of nationalism and the sense of justice”. Her keen sense of justice was also consistently applied to her acceptance of people of all faiths and ethnic groups. To maintain her autonomy, she made clear that she chose a husband who truly respected her socio-political engagement. An interesting adaptation of her idea of gender equality was her reversal of the local concept of leadership roles in the household and in the public sphere: according to her, her husband was the head of the household while she was the leader in the public sphere.

Burmese Daw San also tried to hold together nationalism and feminism. In her writings, she stressed that the “protection of the interests of the nation” was inextricably linked to the liberation of women from inequitable gender relations in society and at home. She argued that female education was a crucial yardstick in the assessment of the readiness of a people for national self-determination. The most controversial position she took in gender terms was her declaration of personal rejection of married life after divorcing her drunkard husband, equating marriage with the subjugation and exploitative nature of colonisation and wage labour.

Shamsiah in Malaya, like Biso in East Timor, claimed that she became conscious of the oppression of women through her participation in the leftist nationalist movement that critiqued the feudalist, capitalist and imperialist systems as sources of women’s oppression. She described her negative experience of marriage as an example of oppression in the name of traditional customs and religious rules. She reasoned that achieving political independence for her homeland constituted the first step towards the liberation of women. On a more ambivalent note, Shamsiah experimented briefly with a polygamous marriage arrangement, which she appeared to condone as permissible in Islam and justified as being for the furtherance of the nationalist cause. The struggle against female subordination did not seem to inspire all our protagonists in the same way as the nationalist endeavour, perhaps due to the selectivity and specificity of our focus here. A lack of sources, particularly in the case of Nguyen Thi Giang of Vietnam, did not allow us to ascertain the experiences and perspectives of all our protagonists on the women’s situation, nor to discover how they
imagined the nation for which they struggled, suffered and sacrificed their lives. Some chapters, however, do allow us glimpses into gender issues as confronted by these women in their participation in nationalist movements.

Bisoi’s bitter post-independence experience is testimony to how her male comrades perceived women’s role in the East Timorese armed struggle differently from women. The male-dominated leadership appeared to have decided on the criteria for recognition and compensation of war veterans based solely on masculine experience in the armed forces, overlooking the equally crucial though different roles played by women soldiers. The fact that Bisoi had learned from the nationalist movement that independence would bring women’s liberation would have accentuated her disappointment and frustration. Sara Niner notes how the “revolutionary” and gender-emancipative agenda of the Fretilin was progressively lost in the succession of leaders and the challenging efforts to reorganise and unify various factions of the nationalist movement.

Given that the gender orientation of the nationalist movements involved was not examined in all the chapters, we are not in a position to discuss in depth or verify Kumari Jayawardena’s contention that “revolutionary” nationalist movements were more receptive to the feminist agenda than “bourgeois” nationalist movements. The East Timorese case nonetheless illustrates the practical difficulty of categorising nationalist movements as “revolutionary” or “bourgeois.” It shows how a movement’s ideology may evolve over time and according to historical circumstances, especially if a longer time frame is involved.

Contrary to the metamorphosis experienced by the Fretilin, the 60-year-old Karen National Union is confronted with a different dilemma. Its founding nationalist principles, which have remained unchanged, are now subject to contestation and blamed as an obstacle to the search for a viable peace settlement with the Burmese state. The KNU is affected adversely by the current modified international and domestic geopolitical context and evolving evaluation of past military practices such as the recruitment of child soldiers and the use of landmines. The unprecedented election of a civilian woman as its general secretary was probably made possible by the increasing importance of international lobbying and foreign funding as a means to achieve the KNU’s nationalist cause. But the macho militaristic culture among Zipporah’s male colleagues remains. Zipporah barely
concealed her frustration as she shared her first-hand experience of the condescending attitude of her male colleagues who purportedly professed their belief in equal opportunity and equal rights.

The 1937 Dutch Marriage Ordinance controversy is an example of how nationalist and feminist agendas may sometimes appear incompatible. Between her nationalist and feminist commitments, Suyatin had to decide where she put her priority. Interpreting the proposal as a means to split the nationalist movement, Suyatin supported Sukarno’s suggestion to defer marriage law reform until after independence. This was to delay it for almost four decades to come. The episode is a good illustration of how, in a particular context, women nationalists may have to prioritise the nationalist cause over feminist struggle.

In the same light as our discussions on political identity, the development of feminist consciousness and critical gender identity by these women may also be understood as a social process, at times in tandem with other aspects of social identity. Divorcing her alcoholic husband must have been a defining moment in Daw San’s life, as indicated by her declaration, through the naming of her paper as Independent Weekly, that she would never return to the shackled life of a married woman. Aishah and Shamsiah both experienced family pressure to be married off as young teenage girls; while Shamsiah docilely obeyed her father, Aishah rebelled. Shamsiah learned the hard way to recognise the vulnerability of women’s position in traditional gender relations. Bisoi, in her interview by Sara Niner, summarised her life as a journey in three progressions: “first, the Portuguese time, when women didn’t have the right to do anything. Second, the resistance period, when women suffered a lot compared to men; and third, the independence period, when some women are still not yet free, such as those who have no education”. It is interesting that she spoke of her personal life as reflective of the overall East Timorese women’s experience.

The localisations of nationalism and feminism, despite their common source of inspiration, do not in reality always share the same trajectory in their interaction with local norms. As a whole, we saw how female rights to education and universal suffrage were less contested, while domestic relations remained murky and subject to negotiation, as illustrated by the variable strategies deployed by Suyatin, Shamsiah, Daw San, Zipporah and Bisoi. Over the long term, the generalisation of female literacy should in principle have an empowering
effect. On the other hand, the evolution of gender relations need not be linear and unidirectional. The struggle of feminists in pushing the frontier of women's emancipation against the tide of gender conservatism continues, and the obstacles they face in building a united front is different but no less challenging than those of nationalists.

Conclusion

Biographical studies of women leaders are not meant to replace conventional historical studies of women's participation in nationalist movements on a larger scale. They are complementary in helping us to understand better the issues at hand.

The relevance of biographical studies in understanding historical change has always been recognised with regard to important historical personalities. What is new is an increased awareness of how posing thoughtful questions about life stories of ordinary people could also help scholars understand historical process and human agency. This book certainly does not exhaust the potential offered by biographical studies of different women's lives in understanding women's involvement in nationalist movements in the region. Comparison of different women's lives focusing on a specific subject of enquiry, such as identity issues, differences in gender perspectives, leadership styles or the strategy in pursuit of women's rights can be fruitfully carried out. One can make comparative biographical studies within the same movement, among different movements, among those living through the same era, across a geographical region, and so forth. Through careful examination of individual lives in their larger social and political contexts, we can gain insights into the subject of enquiry as well as both the individuals' lives and the eras they lived through.

Notes

4. The term “modern” here is intended to be descriptive, as opposed to “traditional”, without value judgement.


