

**Janie Conway Herron**

**The importance of Thanaka: Narrative and human rights in Burma**

Abstract:

In his address to the International Parliament of Writers in Strasbourg, 1996, Derrida proposes ‘an audacious call for a genuine innovation in the history of the right to asylum or the duty of hospitality’. Here cosmopolitanism characterises the International Parliament of Writers call for the opening of refugee cities across the world. In 2007 we have more than 40 million refugees worldwide and in Australia our Indigenous peoples have become internally displaced persons, making their own hospitality a tragic paradox. On February 1 this year I flew to Bangkok Thailand, to run writing workshops with Burmese women refugees. The women were preparing to submit work to the sixth edition of *Burma Women's Voices*, a publication supported by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. These anthologies focus on the stories of women's experiences living within Burma and as refugees. In this paper I will use the background of over forty years of military oppression in Burma to show the ways in which narrative and advocacy have been important factors in Burma women giving voice and how this has created positive steps towards reconciliation, healing and education in their lives.

Biographical note:

Dr Janie Conway-Herron has been a lecturer in creative writing at Southern Cross University for the last 10 years. Janie is a novelist, poet, musician, lyricist and scriptwriter and her work has been published in a number of journals and anthologies. Recently returned from conducting creative writing workshops with Burmese women refugees for Altsean Burma, her work reflects her passion for human rights and explores landscapes of identity in both an historical and contemporary context. Her novels *Stories and Secrets* and *Spotlighting* are currently being considered for publication. She is working on a third novel, *Looking for Elsie* due to be completed in 2009.

My sister ... I have told you about our situation before. Now you have asked me to tell you more about the Palaung people of Burma. I am thinking about what I should share with you. I haven't really told you about the Palaung and how deeply they suffer. I would like to tell you about the Palaung women who are eating with tears on their faces after the Palaung armed forces we used to rely on were forced to surrender to the military regime. (Hnoug 2007: 50)

The above quote comes from a story entitled 'My Sister' written by Lway Nway Hnoug, for *Burma Women's Voices for Hope*, an anthology of stories by women living in Burma and in exile. It is the sixth anthology of its kind, and written at a time when hope is all that many of these women have left. My involvement in this anthology was life changing, bringing together my passion for human rights and my ability to teach creative writing. In his address 'On Cosmopolitanism' given at the International Parliament of Writers in Strasbourg, 1996, Derrida proposes 'an audacious call for a genuine innovation in the history of the right to asylum or the duty of hospitality' (Derrida 2001: 4). Here Derrida connects the term cosmopolitanism with the International Parliament of Writers call for the opening of refugee cities across the world. Currently, there are more than 40 million refugees worldwide and it seems to me that the need for a writerly activism in terms of human rights, refugees and the global diaspora is more pertinent now than it has been for a long time.

But how do writers engage themselves in such matters? By writing about them? Of course, but we can also assist those who are part of that global diaspora to write about their own experiences. Forging links between narrative and advocacy, storytelling and capacity building is of paramount importance in this equation, making the call made by the International Parliament of Writers still resonant today. Central to my thesis here is the importance of narrative in the voicing of unheard stories. Behind this storytelling lies the importance of narration itself; the way it can bring about agency through giving voice to a particular situation. This story I am about to tell also involves a personal journey that is physical, political and spiritual. There is nothing unique in this except for the way my personal story connects to the particular global context that it draws into existence by its very telling.

In the 1980s, as an undergraduate and student activist at the University of Technology, Sydney, one of my close friends was a Malaysian student, Debbie Stothard. As Overseas Student Officer and Women's Officer respectively, we would front the relatively conservative Student Representative Council meetings, taking solace in each other's company, knowing that when either of us opened our mouths the rest of the council would hold their collective breath in anticipation of whatever we might say. In 1988, at the end of our undergraduate degrees, we were both involved in organising anti-bicentenary activities but over the next couple of years after leaving university we gradually lost track of each other. Then in 2006, I had a chance conversation with Australian journalist, Jim Pollard who was working in Bangkok, and discovered that Debbie was also living there, having set

up an organisation called Altsean Burma, an advocacy group dedicated to achieving human rights and democracy in Burma. Jim was impressed that I knew Debbie, describing her as the person that everyone goes to if they want to know about the situation in Burma. ‘Next time you see her,’ I said, handing him a card, ‘can you give her my address?’ It wasn’t long before I received an email from her, and in my reply I described my increasing involvement in teaching creative writing since we had last met. In her second email, Debbie invited me to give writing workshops to Burmese women refugees on the Thai/Burma border and the following February I flew to Bangkok.

Women preparing to submit work for the sixth edition of ‘Burma Women’s Voices’, a publication supported by Nobel Laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, were to attend the workshops. These anthologies focus on the stories of women’s experiences and the workshop participants came from many of the countries surrounding Burma where refugee camps swell with dispossessed peoples, as well as from countries further a field where refugees live in exile. The work I undertook involved what Marcelle Freiman describes as postcolonial strategies for writing that include teaching strategies that ‘open up new ways of thinking about writing, creativity and representation’. These teaching strategies have what Freiman describes as ‘the effect of focusing on self-reflection as part of writing and on writers’ responsibility for their textual representation’ (Freiman 2006: 91). The workshops I facilitated on the Thai/Burma border involved intense self-reflection for both teacher and student.

After sixty years of struggle for democracy, fear and intimidation have created a blanket of silence around the internal machinations of Burma, both within the country and internationally, creating ignorance and suspicion about the real atrocities happening there. A strong combination of hope and endurance are mainstays of emotional life for refugees living in exile as well as internally displaced persons (IDP) within Burma. During the long struggle for democracy the ethnic peoples of Burma have continually maintained their recognition as distinct groups. Refusing to give up their sense of community, they have worked strategically towards maintaining a cohesive sense of individual identity that continues to this day.

In 1988, when Debbie and I were in our last year as undergraduate students and engrossed in the bi-centennial protests in Australia, students in Burma were launching a demonstration that was synchronised across the country, called *shiq lay-lone* or four eights. At ‘eight minutes past eight in the morning on the eighth day of the eighth month of the year’ (Larkin 2004: 13) thousands of people took to the streets across the country to demonstrate against more than three decades of poverty and military oppression. The brutal military response was overwhelming. More than 10,000 people were killed, while thousands more fled the country. According to Emma Larkin, ‘the date of the uprising has become a whispered mantra in Burma, denoting a tragic turning point in the history of the country which can only be remembered secretly, behind closed doors’ (ibid: 13). At this time Aung San Suu Kyi addressed more than a million people and vowed to continue the ongoing struggle for democracy, and the National League for Democracy (NLD) was founded. The NLD went on to win a democratic election in 1990 but the military refused to

convene parliament and transfer power. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest and disqualified from running an election. Still the NLD won 80.8% of the vote and 392 out of 485 parliamentary seats. Aung San Suu Kyi, who was awarded the Nobel Peace prize in 1991, was in and out of house arrest from 1990 until 2003 when she was imprisoned once more after her convoy had been attacked and 282 people killed in what is now referred to by Burmese human rights activists as the Depayin massacre. Since then, under international pressure, there have been steps towards implementing a plan for democracy, but calls for an independent tribunal into the events at Depayin have gone unheeded (Altsean Burma 2004: 9-10). In May 2007 Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest was extended for another twelve months. In a 1990 speech entitled 'Freedom from Fear' Aung San Suu Kyi discussed the relationship between fear and corruption and the way that economic hardship caused the growing movement for democracy as well as the 1988 student demonstrations. The people of Burma had 'wearied of a precarious state of passive apprehension where they were "as water in the cupped hands" of the powers that be', but she wrote, this water can turn to glass 'with its sharp glinting power to defend itself against hands that try to crush'.<sup>1</sup>

The Burmese military, under the guise of the ironically titled State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), has been responsible for the systematic harassment, torture and imprisonment of the mainly ethnic minority villagers whose homes stretch along the northern and eastern borders of Burma and along the far reaches of the Irrawaddy delta. Of a population of forty-three million over half a million ethnic people along the eastern border with Thailand, China and Laos have become internally displaced peoples. In the summer of 2005, of 540,000 IDP in Burma '340,000 [had] fled to temporary settlements in ceasefire areas controlled by ethnic nationalities, 92,000 remained in hiding in the forests of 'free-fire' conflict zones in eastern Burma, and another 108,000 [were] in state controlled relocation sites after being forcibly evicted from their homes' (Online source, *Witness*).

Altsean Burma was formed in October 1996 as a network of Southeast Asian groups and individuals engaged in human rights for Burma. Altsean works on advocacy campaigns in Burma plus research, publications and campaign materials as well as capacity building programs. They have also set up women specific programs designed to create networks of women experienced in advocacy work and capacity building. Through their campaigning on human rights in Burma, Altsean also pressures ASEAN to focus more clearly on issues of human rights and democracy. The *Burma Women's Voices* anthologies are part of the women's programs.

If we say the development of a nation depends on how much its citizens love reading and writing, then it is our duty to read and write as much as we can. (Chan 2007: 62)

As a creative writing teacher I have been involved for more than a decade in what Freiman describes as the 'potential of creative writing to engage with significant textual concerns and to engage particular kinds of critique' (Freiman 2006: 82). Yet this awareness has often felt like engagement at a distance; a study of the phenomena that is one step removed from the actual writing itself; as if I was writing about, rather than being centrally involved with,

the creative expression of a dissenting voice. My involvement in facilitating the writing of refugee women on the Thai/ Burma border was advocacy in action, it wasn't my writing, but the gap between writing about and the experience of activism became smaller in a way that was intensely satisfying. In writing about their personal experiences these women were expressing a distinct identity, one that will play a huge part in the future restoration of democracy in their country.

On the morning after my arrival in Bangkok, as we prepared to leave for our first workshop in Mae Sot, the young women interns from Altsean helped me into the car with my luggage. One shook her head when she was invited outside to help, saying, 'I can't come,' and pointing to the intricate patterns painted with a creamy paste on her face. 'It's Thanaka,' Mandi, an Australian working for Altsean, explained. 'It distinguishes her as coming from Burma and she is a refugee, it's too risky for her to be seen on the street.' Thanaka, a paste made from the sap of a tree and used as protection from the sun has become a distinctive and recognisable custom for Burmese in exile. When a Burmese person wears it, it symbolises their identity in the same way that voices of Burmese dissention have distinct and individual resonances of their own. This was to be the first experience of many that would help me appreciate just how important and how risky this identification was.

The women in the Mae Sot workshop were mainly Karen, from the network of organisations in Mae Sot that provide supportive networks for refugees. Life is cheap in Mae Sot and the refugees, as stateless people, are easy prey for unscrupulous marketing in cheap labour, drugs and arms trade. These supportive networks are a much-needed safety net for those who eke out a living in the town. A report called *State of Terror*, compiled by the Karen Women's Organisation and published in February 2007, the month I was in Thailand, details the systematic human rights abuses that continue to be perpetrated across the Karen State. A few of the women who attended the workshop in Mae Sot had been part of the group who compiled the statistics for the report and they gave me copy while I was there. The statistics are horrendous, mapping a range of human rights abuses including rape, forced labour, torture, arbitrary detention, death and injury from landmines. These types of abuse are carried out daily in Karen State and in the other states as well. Anyone who is seen as not conforming to the already cruel conditions of the ruling military becomes the subject of systematic maltreatment that contravenes any convention on human rights. The women I met in Mae Sot had survived all of this and more. They belonged to a large network of organisations set up with the express aim of building an educated and astute group of people preparing for a democratic Burma. This preparation is implicit in everything they do. Silence is a tool of oppression; speaking out is an act of defiance and they want to let the world know what is happening to their country and its peoples. Many risk their lives regularly, going back over the border to collect statistics on human rights abuses for reports like *State of Terror*.

In spite of the obvious poverty in Mae Sot there was something magic in the Muslim call to prayer in the morning and evening while saffron-robed monks walked streets teeming with motorbikes stacked with families and tuk-tuks filled with passengers wending their way

around each other. After the workshops, Mandi and I would walk through the markets to the town, stopping at the stalls while young children followed us pleading for money. When I offered them some, more would magically appear. 'Just keep walking,' Mandi instructed, 'once we are out of their territory they'll stop following us'. In town we met Phil Thornton and his wife who works at Dr Cynthia's hospital a famous clinic that people trek to from Burma, risking their lives to cross the border because there are no health facilities where they live. They deal daily with landmine victims, starvation dengue fever and the myriad repercussions of the Burma situation. In contrast the chief of police in Mae Sot is a popular aspiration for the Thai force, where lucrative fines from illegal border crossings can be a welcome bonus to the ordinary wage of Thai police.

After Mae Sot, we drove eastwards down the steep curving road to the sprawling tourist metropolis of Chiang Mai. The mountains that surround this town mark the border between Thailand and Shan State in Burma. The workshop group in Chiang Mai involved Shan, Kachin, Chin, Karenni and Burman women. While Chiang Mai may appear hospitable to refugees, we had to begin the workshops after peak hour so that the participants without ID would be less likely to be picked up. One of the women from Chiang Mai gave me a postcard with a photo on the front of a young Burmese girl, her terrified brown eyes staring back through the camera lens. She is carrying a young baby who's asleep in a bag held close to her breast; on her back another child clings to the sling that stretches tightly across her head as she strains forward with the weight of it. Behind her, others follow, equally loaded up with belongings and children. The woman is running for her life down the narrow jungle path that stretches in front her and out of the frame of the photo. On the back of the postcard more statistics give explanation to the image. The interns from Altsean Burma who put this postcard together were part of a program that was designed to give them skills in advocacy. The combination of image, personal story and statistical fact on the postcard draws the viewer into a circle of fact and emotion, linking narrative and advocacy with an eyewitness account that fills the space between the necessarily objective statistics and personal experience. In Chiang Mai, tourism and western opulence rub paradoxically against the poverty of the hills people who live in the surrounding mountains. We stayed in a large hotel teeming with tourists whose comparative wealth was paraded before the participants on a daily basis. Our workshop was held in a small glass-walled room on the ground floor of the hotel where we pulled the thick white curtains for privacy while sixteen lively women crowded in eager to begin work. At lunchtime as we mingled with the tourists in the dining hall I wondered at the ease with which the women without papers blended in without showing the slightest hint of nervousness.

After the Chiang Mai workshops, Mandi and I flew back to Bangkok and the next day we drove southwest to Sangklaburi for the last workshop, hosted by the Mon Women's Organisation and held in their headquarters, a small wooden building where the workshop participants lived and worked. Sangklaburi is close to Mon State on the southern Thai/Burma border, it has an enormous pagoda on its eastern perimeter built by the people of Sangklaburi for the Mon monks after a dam immersed the old pagoda. On the road into town a gold-leafed Buddha reclines by the side of the road in symbolic gesture to a town

that seems half asleep, disguising its restless underbelly in a quiet slow pace. One evening Ei Ei, our translator in Sangklaburi, invited me to meet her family who lived near the Mon Women's Organisation. When Ei Ei was eleven years old, her family were arrested in Thailand for being illegal workers and detained for over three months. Children who were under eighteen were not given anything to eat, as they were not listed as prisoners on the warden's list. Parents gave their food to their children and went hungry themselves. Some passed away in jail as a result. Ei Ei's and her family survived but as we sat on the cement floor of their house sipping Coca-cola from plastic cups she whispered to me 'this is a poor person's house'. Later she took us down to the bridge that crosses the lake and divides the Thai side, from the Mon side of Sangklaburi. In the quiet of the late afternoon the sun was setting, reflecting rosy hues on the still waters below us. As we walked across, houses with wooden walkways connecting them floated underneath us, while long narrow boats sped quickly and silently across the water hardly breaking the surface. 'There's no work for the people on the Mon side of the bridge,' Ei Ei informed me, 'at dawn you can see hundreds of people walking across from the Mon side to the Thai side for work'. Ei, Ei nodded at the village of thatched roofed huts on one side and said, 'This is like people live in the refugee camps.'

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I based a large part of my workshop process on the idea of the talking stone used by Associate Professor Judy Atkinson, director of The College of Indigenous Australian Peoples at Southern Cross University. I had participated in workshops Judy had facilitated that worked with the notion of what Ungunmerr-Bauman calls 'Dadirri' or deep listening, and had been impressed with the way people were encouraged to participate through the act of listening to each other.<sup>2</sup> The stone I used was brought from Australia; it was round and flat with a picture of a blue turtle painted on it by Wiradjuri artist Donna Henderson. At the start of the workshops, the participants were invited to sit on mats in a circle with the stone placed in the middle. Each person introduced themselves by picking up the stone and speaking about who they were, why they had come to the workshop and what they hoped to get out of it. The speaking was entirely voluntary, the one rule being that only the person who had the stone could speak – the rest listened; no one had to pick up the stone if they didn't want to. While participants were reluctant at first, not one person declined to speak, and by the end of the first session each participant had introduced herself. The talking stone sessions were repeated again at the end of each day offering everyone the opportunity to share thoughts about what had happened so far.

On the first day, we discussed point of view and the different ways it could assist in storytelling. This stage of the workshop was about fostering ideas, building trust and understanding different ways of narrating stories. There can be a lot of anxiety about what gets told in this kind of work, with participants being worried about the safety of their families if they are recognised in the storytelling; many of the writers who submit to *Burma*

*Women's Voices* use false names in order to provide a protective screen to tell their stories through. In this sensitive situation the importance of the authenticity of an eyewitness account needs to be balanced against the safety of both the author and the people who are written about. On the other hand if the stories are seen as being fictionalised they can too easily be dismissed as not really true. In this part of the workshop students were shown ways in which their choice of narrator and the narrator's relationship to what was being told could affect the way the story was received and help them over the stumbling block of protecting their loved ones. The participants broke into groups and discussed what they wanted to write about and who would be the narrator, writing their ideas on butcher's paper. When everyone had finished they returned to the main group and presented their ideas. A Karen woman from the first workshop in Mae Sot outlined a story about a village head who has to make a terrible choice. When the military sets up base near a village they decide to hold a beauty quest. They ask the village head to choose the most beautiful young girls and send them to military headquarters for training to become beauty queens. Everyone knows they will be exploited by the military once they go. Forced into sexual and domestic subservience, their lives will never be the same. In this story the village head sends a girl to the barracks who later commits suicide. The story was to be told from the village head's point of view, at a point of regret after the young girl had died. In our conversations I assumed that the village head was a man but the group promptly corrected me, letting me know that the village head was to be a woman. Most of the male village heads having been killed off or joined the resistance forces in the jungle. The women do everything, they told me; they make all the decisions. If you are an older sister and you decide to run away from this situation you know your younger sister will have to go in your stead. I didn't ask if the story came from personal experience, but I understood at a deep level from that moment on, the profundity of the project I was undertaking.

The second part of the workshop used guided meditation to take participants into more inner worlds. I used the image of the stone once again, asking participants to imagine a stone dropping in to a still pond and to watch the way the ripples fan out from the stillness of the centre to the edge where the ripples break up and disperse. Then I asked them to consider a feeling of belonging, a sense of being at the centre of things where everything is still and peaceful, but also where comfort is taken for-granted lulling us all into a false sense of security. Away from the centre, at the edges, where there is more friction, things break up and disperse; but it's at the edges of things that we are more aware of things, more alert to the ways in which the centre lulls us with false comfort. I let the women contemplate this in silence for about ten minutes. Afterwards they were given fifteen minutes to write continuously as quickly as they could without thinking too much about what they were writing. This form of automatic writing gets right to the heart of emotions. When they had finished they picked their best lines, writing them out on butcher's paper that was then displayed alongside the results of the previous group work. Everyone wrote in English where they could but the interpreters were kept busy writing the lines out so I could read them. One woman wrote:

*A present for the old mother*



*Who provided everything to fulfil their son's desire.*

*A regret,*

*With a broken heart,*

*that's a son's aged mother*

Others contributed lines such as:

*I want to go back to my own village, yard and my home*

*I want to regain my life in freedom.*

*When I came of age I was in the jungle as an IDP*

*It was forced starvation, no medicine in the jungle, where people lost their lives.*

*There is nothing other than crying from the villagers and me*

Each woman was able to share a small segment of their inner world with the rest of the group. The lines were not named or owned by any particular person and in the quiet contemplation that followed as they read each other's lines, the silence was palpable.

The third section aimed to help workshop participants integrate the outline of their stories in part one of the workshop with the inner work of part two and to understand the difference between a work that simply told the story and one where the inner and outer worlds of the people in their stories were fully drawn and connected. I gave an outline of a story about my great, great grandmother who, under the dire conditions of eighteenth-century England worked as a seamstress in a factory. After being charged with theft from her employer she was transported as the youngest convict on the first fleet. At the age of thirteen, she had been flogged for insolence. I then pointed out that what I had just told them took around twenty minutes but was also the subject of a novel that was more than 500 pages long.<sup>3</sup> The way I had written the novel was to move the story from the same factual outline I had just given them, but by breathing life into the characters, I had given them a power all of their own. After this, we discussed ways in which each person could use the power of description to draw their own worlds and to attach the heartfelt nature of their inner work with the plot driven work of what happened next. There was time in the workshop to begin work on their stories; then, at the end of the day, they took their stories home and worked on them overnight.

On the last day of each workshop, the women gathered expectantly, eager to read their stories. As many of the participants didn't speak English well enough to read in that language and I certainly had no ability in Burmese or the range of other languages used by the participants, many of the stories had to be translated. Time didn't permit everyone to read all of their stories, but we asked them to pick a section to read. In the reading of their

individual stories, each of the women experienced the power of their own voice and writing style, and a recognition of shared experience helped them realise the commonality of their situation, both as women and as people with a stake in the future of Burma. Before we went our separate ways I presented each of the participants with a gift of a small stone painted by Bundjalung women from my home in northern New South Wales. Many of the Burmese women had no idea there were Indigenous people in Australia and they were eager to know more and to make connections with Aboriginal people in Australia. Saying goodbye was the hardest thing of all. I had bonded strongly with each group and had no idea when and if I would see any of them again. But as I flew back to Australia after the last workshop I had a strong feeling this was the beginning rather than the end of a long relationship with the people of Burma.<sup>4</sup>

Stories like those in *Burma Women's Voices for Hope* underline the bitter psychology of egos made brutal by the lure of power. They remind us too, of the right of any human being to be treated fairly. They also give testimony to the powerful spirit of human beings in maintaining their right to voice an opinion that might go against the grain of the powers that be. In Australia, the recent military incursions into the Northern Territory Indigenous communities has compounded a long history of colonial invasion that has turned the notion of Indigenous hospitality in Australia into a tragic paradox that renders the people in those communities displaced persons in their own country. This is not too far removed from what is happening in Burma where Indigenous peoples have been similarly hounded. In Australia also, people like to discuss whether incidents such as the Tampa actually happened and whether, if they did, the refugees on board were good or bad parents. Why not ask instead what might drive a loving parent to such a desperate act? But questions such as these and the stories that accompany them belong in the grey area, the in-between space that sits uncomfortably between the opposition of right and wrong and forces us to look at humanity itself. It's here that human rights and narrative intersect; where silence and the powerful, celebratory act of giving voice rub against each other and where Derrida's call for hospitality has most resonance. bell hooks writes of being 'paralysed by the fear that [she] will not be able to name or speak words that fully articulate [her] experience of the collective reality of struggling black people'. Of being 'tempted to remain silent' (hooks 1991: 53). She writes of the danger of forgetting and the struggle of 'memory against forgetting' (ibid: 54), where memory finally makes people subjects of history. It is this struggle of memory against forgetting that makes stories such the ones from the women in Burma so important in the continuing global struggle to enshrine the right of the human being to live a reasonable and relatively ordinary life, safe and free from harm.

### **Postscript**

Two nights ago my mobile phone sounded with the first of several text messages from Debbie alerting people to the situation. Thousands of monks, students, ordinary citizens and elected MPs were marching in Rangoon. On the television Burma was headlining news, with secretly shot footage of red-robed monks and pink-clad nuns surrounded by

rings of handholding citizens. Then the image changed to a diminutive Aung San Suu Kyi standing at the gate of her compound surrounded by police in riot gear. The organisers had diverted the march down her street. The announcer described her as tearful. I went to bed, not knowing whether to be elated or despondent, and dreamed I was in Burma. Next day more texts came through with triumphant messages like, ‘another inspirational day! Protest ended peacefully despite earlier threats from SPDC. Total estimate is 100,000 in 12 cities, more than 200,000 in Rangoon’. Another read ‘Army trucks stationed and on patrol, activists worry arrests 2nite’.<sup>5</sup> That evening, Phillip Adams covered the Burma crisis, interviewing a number of people, including Phil Thornton, the journalist I met in Mae Sot. Then he announced Debbie, and I listened to her familiar voice describing events and talking about uncertainty in Burma. Will this be another *shiq lay-lone* where tens of thousands of people will die? Debbie hoped not and so did I.

Now the mobile phone networks in Burma have been closed and foreign journalists barred, but people find ways to get news out and images of bloodied monks have been splashed across the front pages of Australian newspapers. Desmond Tutu is on the television describing the Burmese people’s bravery and their fight for freedom, justice and democracy while the UN Security council adjourns a special meeting overnight. When the All Burmese Monks Alliance announces that five monks have been killed in Rangoon, I wonder who else has been killed. British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown and even George Bush have joined the fray, admonishing the Burmese military for their actions. I sit in the comfort of my home wondering how I can finish this piece when writing seems like such a comparative luxury. Then I imagine the Burmese women I have worked with waiting anxiously on the periphery of their country their faces painted in intricate patterns of Thanaka, hoping for news from their loved ones. Our lives and our stories have interconnected in ways I could not have imagined a year ago and my heart expands to bursting point with my wish that their hopes for a peaceful future will finally be realised.

## Endnotes

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, speech given 07.10.99 downloaded from Aung San, Suu Kyi, *Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s Pages* [www.dassk.com/categories.php?category\\_no=6](http://www.dassk.com/categories.php?category_no=6) [accessed 6 September 2007].

2. These workshops are based on work by Ngangikurugkurr woman, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Bauman, from Daly River. The concept of Dadirri works with inner deep listening and quiet still awareness it’s used as a process of storytelling and contemplation—see <http://www.heartdidg.com/Cultural/dadirri.htm>

3. Unpublished manuscript, ‘Stories and Secrets’.

4. Burma Women’s Voices Workshop, February 2007. For further descriptions of the writing workshops see also Conway-Herron, 2007, ‘Narrative and Advocacy: Burma’s Identity Through it’s Women’s Voices’ *Australian Folklore*, No 22, 2007.

5. Text messages sent on 25 & 26 September 2007.

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