

## **On Exile**

By Kyi May Kaung – Chevy Chase, Maryland

There was this friend of mine, who sent me a masthead from a journal on Immigration, suggesting I write for it.

I replied, “I am not an immigrant. I did not come to immigrate. I was not emigrating. It would take too much energy to try and prove I am an immigrant.”

I didn’t write anything then.

I came on a Fulbright Fellowship for a doctoral program at the University of Pennsylvania. Fulbright and the Burmese military dictatorship decided my field should be Transportation Economics, but by the time I finished my coursework, I found that Transportation Economics was not the answer for Burma.

Specifically, I saw a report from Fort Bragg that showed the surface of the Myitkyina Airport, probably from satellite photography.

In Burma you could not study Political Science. You could only study Marxism, and there were only two textbooks. I started reading Pol. Sci. on my own in van Pelt Library. I discussed things with the professors. One who always wore blue jeans to class, said, “You’re already at Penn, which is a good place to be, so I suggest you look around for a political scientist to be your dissertation supervisor.” I found the late Henry Teune. I also found my dissertation chair Herbert Levine, a Russia expert.

By the time I finished my Comprehensive Exams, the 1988 mass pro-democracy demonstrations took place in Burma. The clampdown started on September 18<sup>th</sup>.

Fulbright insisted their agreement was with the Burmese Government, and pulled our scholarships. My childhood friend would later tell my sister, she did not finish at Wharton because she was disturbed by me calling her on the phone and discussing my personal problems.

As I remember it, I only called her two times, during our asylum applications. Penn found us a lawyer.

So I am an asylee, a political refugee, who sought refuge and asylum.

In one fell swoop, I lost continent, country, city, job, marriage in Burma.

It's not a disaster, as Elizabeth Bishop wrote. To apply for asylum, I had to prove that I in particular, would be in danger.

It was not enough to say the whole country was in turmoil.

I am not "pure Burman," I am third generation Sino-Burmese-Mon, as in Mon-Khmer. My friend was Burmese-Muslim, but she was "more Burmese" than I. She spoke of her grandmother who kept her hair in a *sadone*, on top of her head. She wore her *longyi* (sarong) all the time on the unsafe Penn campus, where a police officer came and briefed us to wear clothes and shoes we could run in. We also attended sessions on date rape.

I don't know the immigration rules for Burmese right now when there is an all-out civil – (uncivil) war, going on, the junta bombing towns and villages daily.

Burmese diaspora, Burmese massacres are accepted terms now, like Tamil Massacre, Rohingya Genocide, Cambodian Genocide.

Nabokov wrote in *Speak Memory*, that his mother did not need anything because she remembered everything.