

Myanmar Post-colonial Literature

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Introduction

This paper attempts to give an account of Myanmar literature which has taken place throughout the post-colonial period, i.e. from 1948, the year Myanmar regained her independence, up to present. Hence it covers a period of some fifty years which coincides with the second half of the 20th century.

With the broad literary scene in the background, major literary genres - poetry, fiction, drama and essay are to be introduced in this paper, highlighting some well-known literary works as examples.

Contributory factors for the development of Myanmar post colonial literature are Myanmar people's struggle for independence with 'anti-capitalist-anti-imperialist-anti-fascist' spirit ; their bitter experience of World War II and their awareness of the importance of unity and harmony between the various national races who have fought, hand in hand, for the independence of their mother land.¹

During the war, almost all literary activities ceased. However, after the war, books and periodicals reappeared in great number. New writers also appeared on the literary scene.² The above-mentioned experiences were depicted in the works of poets, novelists, short story writers, dramatists and essayists.

One more important factor for the development of Myanmar literature in this period is that on the eve of independence an institution named Burma (Myanmar) Translation Society, well known as **Sarpay Beikman** later, was created by the government to promote the writing, translation and publishing of good books and intellectual development.

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Amongst its activities was included the awarding of the literary prizes such as the best original novel, the best translated novel, the best original belles-lettres amongst a number of various genres.³ Literary awards have been extended in the course of time and at present such awards have been extended in the course of time and at present such awards as National Literary Award, Sarpaybeikman Manuscript Award, Pakokku U Ohn Pe Literary Award, etc are conferred every year for the literary works considered to be the best ones in various genres for that year.⁴ Literary competitions in commemoration of auspicious days such as Independence Day, Union Day, Arm Forces Day etc are also held annually and prizes are awarded to the winners.

Not long after regaining independence, Myanmar was in a state of chaos due to political unrest and incursion. Internal security was seriously threatened. Tatmadaw, the Myanmar army, was called upon to defend the country and restore law and order. Thus, Tatmadaw, born of antiimperialist struggle, came to the fore-front of national politics. Tatmadaw takes the major share as the theme of literary works.⁵

After the war and particularly after regaining independence, there appeared heated discussions and debates in magazines and journals, concerning ideological and literary problems. Such terms as 'New Literature', 'People's Literature', 'Socialist Realism', 'for the proletariat', 'Art for Art's Sake', 'Art for People's Sake', were widely used in their discussions which influenced more or less on some literary works.⁶

It is worth mentioning the important role of Sarpaybeikman's seminars on various aspects of literature. Seminars were held on such themes as translated literature, drama and dramatic literature, biographical literature, poetry, prose, novel, short story, essay, folklore, classical literature, etc. These seminars aroused the interest of many enthusiasts. They seminars aroused the interest of many enthusiasts. They attended the seminars and held discussions with the presenters of the papers.⁷

Papers on various aspects of Myanmar literature were similarly presented at the yearly seminars of Upper Myanmar Writers' Association at Mandalay.⁸ Papers presented at these seminars were published later in book form.

'Writers' Day', the first day of the month Nadaw (usually in December), has been celebrated since 1944. On that day literary award ceremonies as well as ceremonies to pay respect and offer gifts to the doyen writers of yesteryears are usually celebrated. Writers, at the invitation of enthusiasts, make trips all over the country to give lectures on literary aspects, to meet their readers and to hold discussions with them.⁹

One point to be mentioned is that throughout the colonial and post colonial periods, thanks to the scholars well versed in 'both languages', works from the repertoire of World Literature have been rendered from various languages such as French, German, Hindi, Japanese etc. and mostly from English into Myanmar.

All these factors have taken an important role for the development of Myanmar literature throughout the second half of the 20th century.

Now it is the time for me to introduce Myanmar literary genres poetry, fiction, drama and essay, in turn.

Poetry

With Myanmar's independence in 1948, there was an upsurge of national pride and aspirations as well as the emergence of new political, social and cultural environments. All these contributed to the making of the thought-contents of the new poets' minds.¹⁰

Two famous poets, **Zawgyi** and **Min Thuwun**, who led Khit San Sarpay (Tentative literature for a new age) movement in the colonial period play a more eminent role than others in the development of the new poetry. **Dagon Taryar**, the founder of Taryar magazine, is also an eminent poet who takes the leading role among the young budding poets who have produced numerous poems in magazines. **Ngwe Tar Yi, Nu Yin, Kyi Aye, Min Yu Wai, Daung Nwe Swe, Htilar Sitthu, Gon Win, Naung**, etc. are the names of some poets who have composed poems in great number in this period.¹¹

Zawgyi is a distinguished writer and poet. He has composed many poems throughout his lifetime. Among them, a series of poems named **Bedar Lan** (The Hyacinth's Way) is very famous. It describes the journey of the hyacinth flower along the river with the tidal waves in the delta area to lower Myanmar. In these poems Zawgyi

creates Bedar as a strong character who will never surrender no matter what kind of difficulties and in deed, wearing her hyacinth flower as the crown of endurance. It can be said that the theme is intended to give moral uplift to the people lost in despair. In Bedar Lan, Zawgyi has been expounding his philosophy of patient endurance of life's vicissitudes. Another series of his poems **Nyi Thit Sin** (Younger Brother of the New Generation) is a kind of didactic poems in which he gives instructions to the younger generation intimately addressing them as 'My Younger Brother'.

In the collection of poems, **Poems On Ancient Bagan And Other Poems**, published in his eighties before he passed away, patriotism is aroused describing the remarkable events of ancient Bagan. Zawgyi is highly honoured as 'the national poet' and as 'the philosophical poet'.¹²

Min Thuwun also took the leading role in Khit San movement. He, as Zawgyi, has also continued to compose poems. In his famous poem **Pyinma Ngokto** (A Stump of Pyinma Tree), he illustrates strength born of fortitude. He tells of an old gnarled burnt-out stump of Pyinma tree, ravaged by war, savaged by termite, notched by blade, scorched by the sun, but does not bow to the storm. Whatever the cause, the tree retains its ruined identity in its stump. With the coming of spring, to the astonishment of the poet, the stump changes from its subdued look to one of fresh cheerfulness with new leaves sprouting out of it. It wears its youthful beauty in the wind. In the last line of his poem the poet hails the stump : "You, the Superior Man." In the poem **Po Maung Lar Byi** (Po Maung Has Come), Min Thuwun gives a narrative of the sad life of Po Maung, the village fisherman, who sacrifices his life while defending his village from dacoits. In the poem **Thu Hmardan** (His Message), the poet tells about the message of a young soldier of guerilla warfare, fatally wounded while fighting for the country. When the villagers ask him "What will you say to your country?" He replied "In mid-journey, before the end of the road, for taking this way of escape, will you speak for me, please, my apologies."¹³

Dagon Taryar's influence on young poets is worth mentioning here. With the slogan 'new literature', these poets demand new forms of poetry, modifying the traditional 'four syllable rhyme' in their poems. The themes of Dagon Taryar's poems can be guessed

by merely looking at some titles of his poems - "The Country Girl", 'Nationalism', 'Poem in the Storm', 'Whisper in the Mist', 'Let's Go to Tahiti', 'Mainstream', 'Walking in the Rain', 'National Independence Movement', etc.¹⁴

It is interesting that a young female poet, named **Ngwe Tar Yi**, writes hundreds of poems many of which are on such unusual themes for a female as patriotism, resistance movement, lives of soldiers etc. In some poems she urges the people to go the battle field to fight for the country. In famous poem **Ahla Shi Yar** (Where Beauty Is) she describes the beauty of her mother land and expresses her strong decision, 'though I hear how their land is pleasant my mind is perturbed no more.'¹⁵

Daung Nwe Swe and **Htilar Sitthu**, apart from their other poems, are well known for composing long poems. While the former narrates stories on such themes as love, peace, vanity, remorse, etc. the latter narrates the remarkable and important events of the country. Htilar Sitthu's narrative poem **Me Khaung Myit Hma O Ywetwar** (Oh' Withered Leaf from Mekhaung River), for example, describes the suppression of intruding Kuminton troops by Myanmar Army. For this work he was conferred 'The Great Poet Laureate' by the Indo-China Venture Forum. He was also awarded the title 'Literary Messenger of Friendship Award' by Writers Association of People's Republic of China.¹⁶

Min Yu Wai's poem **Thudo Ywa Thudo Dadar** (Their Village Their Bridge) is also a long story poem describing the co-operation of the villagers for the benefit of their village.¹⁷

At present, the works of young poets can be seen in monthly magazines. It is found that while holding discussions about literary theories and techniques on the one hand, they are trying to find out new forms of poetry on the other.

Before concluding this section, I would like to refer to Professor DrHla Pe's categorization of the poems of this period. According to him, the poems may be paced under four categories :

(1) those having the themes of the eternal subjects - love and nature tinted with Buddhism, by romantic poets ;

(2) those deprecating some aspects of human society such as social evils and economic exploitation, by angry poets ;

(3) those concerning with the tackling of moral and spiritual problems in life by didactic poets and

(4) those advocating the need for faith in the doctrine of amity among the peoples of Myanmar, by patriotic poets.¹⁸

Fiction

After the war, books and periodicals reappeared in great number. Novels and short stories took the large portion of these works. Writers of the pre-war days, as well as the new writers created novels and short stories on various themes. As mentioned before, their experiences were depicted in these work.¹⁹

Min Aung's Moe Auk Mye Byin (The Earth Under the Sky), the first novel to win Sarpay Beikman prize in 1949, portrays peasant life, emphasizing their miseries and expectations for a redistribution of lands for cultivators. In the novel **Min Hmu Dan** (The Civil Servant), **Tet Toe** gives a true picture of the overbearing attitudes of certain British officials of the colonial period and their responsibility for the bribery and corruption widespread in some parts of the Civil Service. **Thar Du's Tat Hte Ga Myat Ko Ko** (The Magnificent Man From the Army) emphasizes the self-sacrificing spirit of soldiers and the code of conduct to be observed between the army personnel and the civilians.

The novels which have come out continuously portray the lives of people from various social strata - those of farmers, fishermen, toddy climbers, hunters, fish-mongers, taxi drivers, soldiers, doctors, engineers, teachers, students, etc. The lives of farmers, for example, are portrayed in **Gyarnaigyaw Ma Ma Lay's Gaba Mye Wai** (In the World). In **Mone Ywe Mahu** (Not Out of Hate) of the same author the clash of traditional and western culture is depicted.

In the years of sixties, seventies and eighties, in line with the Myanmar Socialist Programme, there appeared numerous novels and short stories depicting the lives of 'the working people'.

The lives of indigenous national races of the Union of Myanmar are also portrayed in some novels. **Narga Taungdan Maung Kyi Zin's Taungbaw Mye Hnint Myebyant Pan** (Mountain Land and Flower of the Plain) is an example of such kind in which voluntary works for the progress of the people of Naga hills are described in detail. **Sein Sein's Yoe Ma Taung Gyi Tha Phyo Laik Chin Dawt** (If Only the Rakhine Yomah Hills Can Be Levelled) portrays the endeavours of the Buddhist missionaries for the progress of the people of chin hills.

The struggle of the national races for the independence is an important theme of the novels of this period. **Thein Pe Myint's Ashei Ga Ne Wun Htwet Thi Pamar** (As Sure As the Sun Rising in the East), For example, is an excellent novel based on this theme. The setting of this novel is the anti-British struggle of the period 1936-1942. There are many characters in the novel, representing people from all social strata university students, politicians, school masters, merchants, retired civil servants, small scale vendors, pony cart drivers etc., all actively participating in the national movement. Similarly, **Khin Swe Oo's Do Taing Htarni** (Our Country Our Land), **Saw Oo's Tamoe Thauk Thaw** (When Another Day Breaks), **Yaung Ni's Saung** (Winter) and **Htay Maung's Taik Pwe Khaw Than** (Call Of The Battle) can represent the novels of the same theme-anti-imperialist-anti-fascist movements.

Among the historical novels written in this period some are recognized as brilliant ones. **Nanda's Than Ne Thway** (Iron And Blood) and **Nga Dah Nga Thaway Nga Ayeyarwaddy** (My Sword My Blood and My Ayeyarwaddy), **Tekkatho Phone Naing's Thu Kyun Makhan Byi** (Never Be His Slave), and **Chit Oo Nyo's Hnin Kaythara Chit Te Thu Ye Gaung** (The Hero Whom Hnin Kaythara Loves) are some examples of this kind.

Nanda's novels are based on historical events of Konbaung period, particularly in the reign of King Thibaw. The characters, fictional and real, in his novels are colourfully portrayed. With their swords tightly grasped in their hands they gallantly fight their enemies. **Thu Kyun Makhan Byi** has the same setting in which the author portrayed the important events happening on the eve of the annexation of Upper Myanmar and resistance

movement of Myanmar nationalities against British enemies. Chit Ooo Nyo's novel is based on a chronicle **Rajadirit Ayedawbon** (Historical Account Of King Rajadirit's Campaign), written in the 16th century. In this novel he particularly portrays a hero named Lagunein who faithfully stands on the side of his master and fights for him till the end of his life. Most of his novels are based on history as well as on Jatakas stories. His famous novel **Lingar Dipa Chit thu** (The Lover Of Sri Lanka), however, is based on Ramayana Epic. It is interesting to note that in this novel Dasagiri (Ravana) is portrayed not as a villain, as can be seen in Ramayana Epic, but as an efficient leader and very affectionate hero who sacrifices his life for his love of Sita.

There are also famous novels on various themes. **Khin Hnin Yu's Pan Pan Hlyet Par** (Ever Wearing a Flower), based on a poem Bedar Lan poem of Zawgyi, deals with the moral courage and endurance of an actress. **Kyaw Aung's A Ye Kyee Byi Thway See Gya Zo** (In Time Of Importance Let Us Be United) is about the unity and effort of workers in building a bridge. **Min Gyaw's Bethu Pyaing Lo Hla Ba Dawt Naing** (The Most Beautiful of All those Contesting) is about the active participation of University students in the nationwide literacy campaign. **Mya Than Tint's Dar Daung Go Kyaw Ywe Mee Pin Lai Go Hpyat Myi** (Surmounting Mountains of Swords and Crossing Over Oceans of Fire) glorifies a working-class man describing his courageous deeds to face difficulties and dangers.

Tekkatho Phone Naing's novels are well known and widely read. His prose style is smooth and attractive. It is interesting that, in discussing social problems, relevant facts from various disciplines such as Buddhism, literature, culture, music, drama, psychology, philosophy, etc are neatly intertwined in all his novels. It may be regarded as unique feature of his novels.

After the war, with the appearance of numerous magazines, short stories have taken place in great number on the literary scene. World War II gave short story writers new experiences which led them to create their works on various themes.²⁰

Kye Ni's short stories depict the life of fishermen. He creates a character Ko Daung Sein in all his works of the same kind. In his works, entitled **Lan Baw Hma** (On the

Street), **Min Shin** narrates interesting events which he has encountered on the street. **Maung Thin's** experiences lead him to write short stories based on the lives of physicians and surgeons. **Khin Hnin Yu's** outlooks on various aspects of life are colourfully reflected in her works. **Thawda Swe**, in his works, reflects a serious outlook on life and a deep love for life in general. **Min Gyaw** in some of his works asks "What are the causes of juvenile crime?". **Shinbyugyun Aung Thein** portrays the lives of peasants in his short stories creating a character named Ko Say Yoe.

Successful women writers - **Gyarneigyaw Ma Ma Lay, Khin Hin Yu, Khin Swe Oo, Kyu Kyu Thinn, Moe Moe (Inya), Ma Sandar, Gyu, Nu Nu Yi,** etc. discuss social problems in their works.

It can be said that fictional literature is in rapid progress in the post-colonial period. As mentioned before, A Seminar on Myanmar Drama and Dramatic Literature was held, in 1970, under the auspices of Sarpay Beikman. Papers were read and discussions followed. One of the objectives of this seminar is to pave the way for the development of Myanmar dramatic literature.

While lengthy plays were published in book form, short plays appeared sporadically in magazines and journals.²¹

Man Aung Piya writes humorous plays in magazines portraying various kinds of characters. **Khin Maung Yi's U Kan Kaung Hnint Thamee Myar** (U Kan Kaung and Daughters), and adaptation of S. Houghton's 'The Dear Departed', humorously describes covetous manners usually considered as human nature. **Aung Lin's Sar Yay Shaya Ko Daw Na** (Writer Ko Daw Na) criticizes misconducts of some writers. **Mya Than Tint's Ne Htwet Thaw Nya** (The Night When The Sun Rises) is a play depicting the family problems of a wealthy but loathsome mill owner. **Shinbyugyun Aung Thein**, in his play **Ne Minn La Minn Thein Yar Htaung** (Thousands of Suns and Moons) describes the life of peasants.

Maung Linn Yone gives the message in his plays **Ma Ma So She** (Miss Social), **Hezel Shet Te Ma Mi Ye** (Mummy, I Feel Ashamed !), it is shameful for a Myanmar if he or she does not know the value of Myanmar culture. It can be said that he indirectly warns his readers of the penetration of western culture into Myanmar family life. In **Ar Thit In Thit Swan Man Thit** (New Strength New Ability), by giving a representative example of a family, he emphasizes the importance of national unity and solidarity.

Tekkatho Maung Maung Khin's play **Asinn Khet Khet Atet Kyann Gyann** (Difficulties In Descent And Roughness In Descent), the first one to get the National Literary Award for Dramatic Literature in 1969, lays stress on the need for the uplift of morality of citizens. He creates truthful lawyers as main characters in his play.

In 'Worker's Journal', published in the seventies, short plays criticizing misdeeds of civil servants, attract the attention of its readers.

Dramatic literature, in this period, is not so popular as novels and short stories in our literary circle. However, as mentioned before, plays are sporadically appearing in magazines and journals.

Essay

Essay, a literary genre, can be defined as ' any brief composition in prose that undertakes to discuss a matter, express a point of view, or persuades us to accept a thesis on any subject whatever,'²² the imagination of the essayist takes an important role in this genre. This kind of literature has flourished since the thirties in our literary circle. In the magazines of pre-war days the works of brilliant essayists have taken place and attracted the attention of the readers.

After the war, essay takes place in various magazines, Well known writers, apart from other literary works, make their contributions as essayists. **Zayya, U Tint Swe, Zawgyi, Min Thuwun, Tet Toe, Taik Soe, Tekkatho Maung Maung Gyi**, etc are well known for their essays.²³

A collection of essays named **Gantgaw Myaing Sardan Myar** (Gantgaw Garden Essays) appeared in 1964, followed by another collection **Seik Pinle Sardan Mya** (Sea of the Mind Essays) in that year. Ngwe Tar Yi, a literary magazine, invites young writers to write essays and selects good ones to be published in it. In 1986, a seminar on Essay literature was held under the auspices of Sarpay Beikman. These are contributory factors for the development of Essay literature.

It is interesting that various kinds of themes can be observed in the works of essayists. U tint Swe in one of his essays stresses the importance of toys for the intellectual development of children. Zayya lays stress on the beauty of Myanmar rural life. Zawgyi expresses his thoughts concerning the glory of Ancient Bagan. Min Thuwun appreciates Myanmar traditional Ouzi (open-ended drum with a logn body) music. Tet Toe scrutinizes the unique nature of writers. Taik Soe tells us about the nature and value of darkness. Tekkatho Maung Maung Gyi glorifies Shwedagon Pagoda as 'The Face Of The State'.

Essays have taken wider and wider place in monthly magazines and journals. New collections of essays can be found in almost every bookstall. It is hoped that in the near future essay will keep abreast of other literary genres in our literary environment.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have presented a general outline of Myanmar Post-colonial literature, highlighting some literary works as representatives of the respective genres.

In Myanmar, writers and journalists are actively participating in the activities of building a peaceful, modern and developed nation. They are well organized under the auspices of Myanmar Writers and Journalists Association. As mentioned before, National Literary Awards are annually conferred to the best works of the year. The categories are novel, collection of short stories, collection of poems, translation (imaginative literature), translation (informative literature), belle-letres, political literature, general knowledge (arts), general knowledge (science and applied science), literature for children, literature for adolescents, literature of art and culture and dramativ literature.

Sarpaybeikman Manuscript Awards and similarly conferred to the best manuscripts of the year. Pakokku U Ohu Pe Literary Award is an outcome of the achievement of a donor, U Ohn Pe of Pakokku town, who voluntarily donated more than seventy million kyats to establish a literary award trust fund. This award is annually conferred to the best manuscripts, selected by competition, under five categories : novel, short stories, poetry, research work and treatise. Besides, a special award named 'the life-long literary award is also conferred to living writers who had devoted his whole life towards promotion and propagation of Myanmar literature.

These activities lead the writers to produce good literature which will serve the interests of the country and the people.

Now may I conclude my paper saying that Myanmar post-colonial literature had flourished, in line with the development of the country and will continue to flourish in line with the better future of the country.

ENDNOTES

1. See Htin Aung. 1967 and Bathaung. 1967.
2. Hon Wan and Khin Aye. 1975 : 153 - 154.
3. Than Htut and Thaw Kaung. 1999 : 98.
4. See Shwe Hmyar. 1972 and Ba Than. 1999.
5. Than Htut and Thaw Kaung. 1999 : 100.
6. See Taryar. 1967 (a).
7. The first semina, held in 1965, his on Children's Literature.
8. The first seminar was held in 1963.
9. Myanmar Swezon Kyan III. 1956 : 387 - 388.
10. Hla Pe. 1971 : 70
11. See Win Mon. 1968.
12. See Zawgyi. 1983, Thet Tun. 1994 and Khin Hla Han. 1999.
13. See Min Thuwun. 1973 and Win Pe. 1989.
14. Taryar. 1967 (b) : 383 - 531.

15. See Win Pe. 1989.
16. See Daung Nwe Swe. 1967 and Htilar Sitthu. 2002.
17. Min Yu Wai. 1989.
18. Hla Pe. 1971 : 70.
19. Than Htut and Thaw Kaung. 1999 : 98, Hon Wan and Khin Aye. 1975 : 153 - 166, Win Mon. 1981 : 261 - 296, Parragu. 1981 : 76 - 121 and Esche. 1996 : 346 - 350.
20. See Wuthtudo Sardan Myar (Papers on Short Stories). 1979.
21. Maung Maung Gyi. 1975 : 58 - 94.
22. Abrams. 1957 : 54.
23. See Kyaw Aung. 1987 : 151 - 153.

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