

**Post-Colonial Society and Culture:  
Reflections in Myanmar Novels of the Last 50 years**

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This paper is an attempt to depict some facets of post-colonial society and culture in Myanmar during the second half of this century as it is portrayed by selective Myanmar novelists in fiction.

We would like to point out that this paper is not a survey of Myanmar fiction in the post-colonial period, as such, though we did go through quite a large number of novels written during the last fifty years. We selected novels, to include in this paper, only those which mirrored the social, cultural, economic and political conditions and problems of Myanmar.

Our paper is presented chronologically, roughly following the political history of the country in the Post-Independence period.

In the introductory part, pre-colonial and colonial society as depicted in Myanmar novels is briefly touched upon, and the rise of the novel in Myanmar is given.

Some of the themes depicted in the novels of the post-colonial period were:-

- (1) Social problems faced by Myanmar people because of the violent civil war waged with the communists and some ethnic minorities soon after Independence.
- (2) Lives of the defence forces trying to bring peace and stability to the country.
- (3) The preservation of Myanmar traditional culture against the onslaught of Western and other foreign influences.
- (4) Nation-building activities and the creation of a national identity.
- (5) Social change as a result of modernization.

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Although the word “novel” appeared in England in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century and the novel had become a popular literary form by the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was introduced to the Myanmar reading public only in 1904 by James Hla Gyaw (1866-1926) and other early Myanmar novelists like U Kyee (1848-1908)<sup>1</sup>. It quickly became the most widely read literary genre with Myanmar readers and by the 1920’s both the novel and the short story were firmly established in Myanmar<sup>1</sup>.

One of the main reasons for its popularity is because of its “inherent concept of being truthful to life and feelings” and because a novel must “mirror life as we know it”<sup>2</sup>

From its earliest years the novel in Myanmar had a political message. U Lat in Shwe Pyi-soe (1914) gave the political theme that “it was essential to maintain the dignity and integrity of Burmese Buddhist culture against the advance of Western education and technology”<sup>3</sup>.

It is a truism that the novel contains characters and events in social context, as part of a culture. Tradition and history have extensively and deeply permeated the nature of Myanmar novels of the post-Independence period as will be seen in this paper.

For centuries Myanmar had been a multi-racial country ruled by Buddhist kings who were the patrons of learning and the arts. People of the plains like Bamars (Myanmars) and Mons had lived together with their brethren of the hills like the Shans, Kachins and Chins through weal and woe.

Myanmar is predominantly a rural society. In *Myanmar Pyi Tha* ( ) (Son of the Myanmar Soil, 1966) Yangon Ba Swe paints an idealized picture of old Myanmar where, in peace time, the rural folk (peasants) led simple, contented lives under a subsistence economy, did seasonal work to the accompaniment of paddy-planting and harvest songs, enjoyed a round of festivals and feasts, secular and religious and where, in war-time, they girt up their loins and fought bravely for the country.

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<sup>1</sup> Thien Han, U. “A Study of the Rise of the Myanmar Novel,” *JBRS*, vol. 51, pt. 1 (June 1968), p. 1.

<sup>1</sup> Allott, Anna. “Introduction,” *Not out of Hate*, by Ma Ma Lay ... 1991.p. xxiv.

<sup>2</sup> Thein Han, U. *Ibid. Collected Works of Saya Zaw Gyi*. vol. 2, p. 27 and 35.

<sup>3</sup> Allott, Anna. *Ibid*, p. xxiv.

With the passing of time the country stagnated. The absolute monarchy of King Thibaw (1878-1885) could no longer keep pace with the times and lagged behind Western powers in material progress. The court of Mandalay was inept. Dagon Khin Khin Lay's *Sarsodaw* ( ) (The Great Poet, 1950) is partly illustrative of the palace intrigues prevailing at the time of King Mindon's death (1878) and the deplorable state of affairs that prevailed during this period.

Myanmar succumbed to British colonialism. Under British rule high posts were mostly held by them, and lower ones by the Myanmars. The peasants had lost the majority of their lands to a handful of absentee landlords, mostly British and Indians. In Tet Toe's *Min Hmudan* ( ) (The Civil Servant, 1950) will be seen how haughtily the British officials behaved towards the native subordinates, called themselves *Thakins* (masters) when dealing with Myanmars and how they were in some way responsible for the bribery and corruption that was widespread in the services. Min Aung's *Moe Auk Mye Pyin* ( ) (The Earth Under the Sky, 1948) goes deep into the misery of poor peasants living in the idyllic rural scene, and envisages a time when there will be a redistribution of lands for the cultivators.

Being under alien rule Myanmar language, literature and the arts received but scant attention by the authorities. In the beginning years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century some energetic young men of Rangoon College founded the Young Men's Buddhist Association with the object of promoting race, language, religion and knowledge. In fact they were among the educated class which had not only cherished the Myanmar Buddhist values, but also imbibed some concepts of the rule of law and democracy through foreign literature. The YMBA had started the era of political consciousness among the people. Agitation for reforms or the right of self-determination for the country began.

The trauma of a proud nation being conquered and ruled by an imperialist ruler for 63 to 122 years in various parts of Myanmar, the fight for Independence led by the Dobama Asiayone and later by the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, left indelible marks on Myanmar society and culture which is depicted in the fiction or the post-colonial period.

The Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League--a united front to nationalist, socialist, communist, armed forces and ethnic minorities rose up in arms against the Japanese militarist. Their goal was directed towards independence first, democracy

second and socialism third. The Union of Myanmar became a sovereign state on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1948 and then looked forward to a better future, of peace and prosperity.

On the eve of Myanmar's Independence and institution named the Burma Translation Society or Sarpay Beikman was created by the government to promote the writing, translation and publishing of good books and intellectual development. Among its activities was included the awarding of literary prizes such as the best original novel, the best translated novel and the best original belles-letters amongst a number of various genres.

To quote from the speech delivered by the President of the Governing Council of the B. T. S. (Prime Minister U Nu) at a prize-giving ceremony:

Our Union is building a new pattern of culture. In this glorious work of rebuilding, cultivators, workers, government servants, police personnel, armed forces, technicians, teachers, and traders--all play their part. The lives of these men and women are filled with ups and downs, rain and sunshine, tears and laughter. Here you have an inexhaustible field from which you can draw endless material. If only our writers can utilize these materials adroitly, our literature will certainly undergo a change for the better...I therefore appeal to you all-novelists as well as exponents of other forms of arts to bear these facts in mind for the sake of the Union.<sup>4</sup>

Since 1948 Sarpay Beikman literary prizes have been awarded to worthy novels such as Min Aung's *Moe Auk Mye Pyin* ( ) (The Earth Under the Sky, 1948), Thadu's *Tat-hei ga Myat Ko Ko* ( ) (The Magnificent Man from the Army, 1951) and Thein Pe Myint's *A Shei ga Ne-wun Htwet Thi Pa-mar* ( ) (As Sure as the Sun Rising in the East, 1958).

It may, however, be said that along with the prize-winning novels, other novels of literary merit also appeared though they did not win any prizes. *Moe Auk Mye Pyin* ( ) is the first novel to win the Sarpay Beikman prize. Among the novels that have won the prize is *A Shei ga Ne-wun Htwet Thi Pa-mar* ( ). It is a long novel dealing with the anti-British struggle of the period 1936 to 1942.

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<sup>4</sup> Nu, U. "Intellectual Development", speech delivered on 20<sup>th</sup> Dec., 1953 at the 4<sup>th</sup> Ceremonial Award of Sarpay Beikman Prize, p. 106.

The whole work is full of characters, real and imaginary, with Tin Tun, the narrator playing a minor role in the nationalist movement. However, the story moves smoothly in a happy blend of fact and fiction.

In Maung Htin's *Nga Ba* ( ) (Nga Na [name of a peasant cultivator] 1947) the evils of the Japanese rule in Myanmar and the plight of the peasant at the cancellation of the Japanese military currency are revealed ironically through the life-story of a peasant, Nga Ba by name, and his family.

Htay Maung in *Taik Pwe Khaw Than* ( ) (Call of the Battle, 1965) vividly shows the notorious detention camps of the Japanese military and the courage of men and women during the Resistance Movement in an Upper Myanmar town and exposes the machinations of the opportunists in the post-war AFPFL councils and the unenviable position of the war-veterans who had previously fought the Japanese.

In Linyon Thit Lwin's *Dhammawilatha* ( ) (Dhammawilatha [title of a Buddhist monk], 1971) the scene is laid in a fishing village of Lower Myanmar where a young unmarried mother and the head monk of the village monastery are suspected of having an affair amidst the clandestine activities of anti-Japanese fighters.

Thein Pe Myint's *Lan-Sa PawPyi* ( ) (The Way Out is Seen, 1949), gives a picture of the socialists and communists trying to dominate the AFPFL, with the war-veterans, especially the Pyin-the Yebaw, in a dilemma, just after the War, and busy setting up rival organizations for peasants and workers throughout the country.

On the day of Independence, 4 January 1948, the government declared itself socialist in orientation, but the character and extent of the Myanmar socialism was a matter for debate among the left-wing politicians and other nationalists. The appropriate form of state organization was also at issue. The Communists accused the AFPFL government of being a stooge for Anglo-American capitalism and former landlords. Dissident Karin groups wanted more autonomy. Three months after Independence the Communists revolted and went underground. Next Karin Battalions and some army personnel sympathetic to the Communists mutinied.

The government was not in a position to carry out the social and economic programs which it had charted out. The country must be saved from chaos first. Then some remnants of Chiang-Kai-Sheik's Chinese Nationalist Army fleeing from the People Liberation Army (Communists) entered Myanmar's northeastern frontier and joined forces with the Karin rebels.

Internal security was seriously threatened. The army was then called upon to defend the country and restore law and order. Thus, *Tamara* ( ) the Myanmar army, born of the anti-imperialist struggle, came to the fore-front of national politics. *Tamara* takes a major share as the theme of many novels. Among them two are outstanding.

Thad's *Tat-the-ga Mat Kop Kop* ( ) (The Magnificent Man from the Army, 1951) is a paean to the capacity of the Myanmar army. The heroine, as a winner of a Miss Myanmar Beauty Contest, has attracted the attention of many a young man, but she vows to marry only a man from the army. She makes her intention known publicly and enters into a correspondence with an army man whom she had never met. She finally marries a soldier, irrespective of his rank, as he is held in high regard for his self-sacrificing spirit. From the literary point of view the hero and the heroine are stereotype characters, specimens of exemplary conduct, with mentality contrived by the author and the whole work is interspersed with passages of preaching on the code of conduct to be observed between the army personnel and the civilians. However, with lively dialogue and appropriate scenes well spread out in the pages, it became a best seller. It was also awarded the Sarpay Beikman Prize in 1951 and later prescribed as a high school text-book for some time.

Khin Swe Oo's *Do Taing Htar-ni* ( ) (Our Country Our Land, 1961) chronicles the role of the army as it participated in the anti-British campaigns in the early part of the Second World War, took part in the Resistance Movement against the fascist Japanese militarists, quelled the insurgents (Communists, Kayins, etc.) after Independence and finally drove out the remnants of the Kuomintang troops intruding upon the frontier areas. A love story is woven into the frame-work to add flavor and interest. As the fiancée of the heroine fell in a battle somewhere in the Shan State, she marries the deceased's elder brother, another battle-hardened soldier. As a popular novel, it was well received by the reading public.

The Union of Myanmar is founded and built upon the unanimous agreement of all the racial groups who decided to live together through thick and thin. Internal security is at stake, and the government is all set to prevent the country from disintegration. It may be said that the Myanmar novelists also are well aware of the importance of unity and harmony between the various ethnic groups in the building of a viable state.

The Bamars, the major ethnic groups, had co-operated with other racial groups, especially the Kayins in the Anti-Japanese uprising during the last war. This is borne out in such novels as Maung Htin's *Nga Ba* ( ), Saw Oo's *Ta Moe Thauk Thaw* ( ) (When Another Day Breaks, 1963) and Yaung-ni's *Hsaung* ( ) (Winter, 1963)

Naga Taundan Maung Kyi Zin's *Taung-baw Mye hnin Mye-Pyant Pan* ( ) (Mountain Land and Flower of the Plains, 1964) describes the Myanmar volunteers running health clinics and rural schools in the Naga hill. Another is Yangon Ba Swe's *Nan Havee* ( ) (Nan Havee) which depicts the heroine-a Naga nurse –fighting against the racial prejudices prevalent among the Myanmar and the hero, a medical researcher, carrying out health and ethnological surveys in the area.

In Sein Sein's *Yoe-ma Taung-gyi Tha Hpyo Like Chin Tawt* ( ) (If Only the Rakhine Yomah Hills Can Be Levelled, 1966) can be seen Buddhist missionaries spreading the Doctrine up and down the Chin hills and making efforts to remove certain outdated taboos or ideas. Although these books are fiction, they overflow with facts on local customs and beliefs of some of the Myanmar ethnic races and they can be used to get a better understanding of racial groups far from the central plains.

In regaining Independence Myanmar came into its own among the sovereign nations of the world. All services from top to bottom were filled with Myanmar. Official missions went abroad to attend meetings and to study various modern institutions. There were direct business contacts between Myanmar citizens and foreign manufacturers, because unlike colonial times commercial privileges, especially import license, were granted to Myanmar nationals. Students were sent to British and American universities to specialize in the arts and sciences. Thus Myanmar were exposed in many ways to the outside world.

At the same time the government made all out efforts in the pacification campaign against the rebels. It also used detention laws against those who allegedly did subversive activities against it. In the 1950's the government was able to hold in check all kinds of insurgents, KMT intruders and began to turn to development projects in social and economic fields. Measures for moral uplift of the people were also taken. The government did what it could with the limited financial resources and technical know-how at its disposal, but where major projects were concerned it had to seek technical skills and financial aid from abroad. For instance it formed joint

ventures with British firms in petroleum and mining sectors. It entered into an aid program with the United States of America.

Since Myanmar was a small country and a beginner in world affairs it tried to pursue a foreign policy of neutrality, without belonging to any of the two power blocks, headed by Anglo-Americans and Soviet Russia respectively. With regard to the Korean War which broke out in 1950, Myanmar supported the United Nations Resolution to fight the aggressor, i.e. North Korea. Both power blocks were interested in Myanmar and tried to use their influence by subsidizing some Myanmar writers to translate their books and periodicals and publishing them.

All these political events have had some impact upon Myanmar novels. Dagon Taya's *Kya Pan Yei Sin* ( ) (Lotus of the Pure Water, 1963) epitomizes the events of the day and probably the author's viewpoint. Dagon Taya, a leftist writer, takes a dim view of the government's co-operation with the American aid program, its support for the UN Resolution on the Korean War and the behavior of the Myanmar writers recruited by the US Embassy in Myanmar. He also describes the issue of socialist realism among the writers, deplores the government's action in using section (5) of the Public Order Preservation Act against certain journalists and finally he writes about undesirable effects of ball-room dancing on Myanmar women.

Myanmar novelists during the period in review have criticized values which they point out are contrary to Myanmar culture. Ball-room dancing especially has been criticized. It is part of the social culture prevalent in the West. Although some features of western culture such as the westerners' sense of time or the soccer game have been appreciated and adopted in Myanmar society, ball-room dancing had never enjoyed popularity among the majority of the people.

An instance of the clash of traditional and western cultures as depicted in Gyarnai Gyaw Ma Ma Lay's *Money we Ma hu* ( ) (Not Out of Hate, 1953) is relevant. The story goes back to the colonial period. The hero, a senior employee of a British paddy purchasing firm gets married to a country town girl. Although he cares much for his young wife she has to conform to his westernized manners and eating habits. In spite of her loneliness she rarely visits her aging father and relatives who follow the traditional way of life. Even when she is ill, her husband does not allow her to use indigenous medicines. During the Japanese occupation she falls a victim to tuberculosis and is treated with such western medicines as are



available at the time, and finally she dies for lack of proper medicine, though she could have been saved with traditional medicines.

*Not out of Hate* is one of the few Myanmar novels that have been translated completely into English. Anna Allott in the Introduction to the English translation points out that Daw Ma Ma Lay although writing this novel in the mid-1950's chose the colonial setting of 1939-1942, probably to heighten the underlying ideological issue, "the threat which the Western way of life poses to Burmese culture and traditional family relationships."<sup>5</sup>

With the exposure of Myanmar society to the outside world contact between the Myanmar and foreigners get closer. Myanmar have more occasions for attending reception parties held by foreigners residing in Myanmar. There are also return parties hosted by the Myanmar. On these occasions the wives also participate. The Myanmar have become accustomed to western cuisine served with alcoholic drinks. Sometimes ball-room dancing is part of these parties, and westernized Myanmar wives and college girls belonging to a small middle class are not adverse to it.

In olden days a man and a woman, unless they are man and wife, were not supposed to be seen even along the street, in company together, be they old or young. Familiarity between the sexes was frowned upon by Myanmar society. This might be said to be an extreme attitude on the part of old fashioned society; it regarded close physical contact between the sexes in a western dance as a stimulus to sexual impulses. The YMBA (founded in 1906) has always appealed to Myanmar Buddhists of both sexes to avoid ball-room dancing.

Of all the characters in *Kya Pan Yei Sin* ( ), librarians, writers journalists publishers, dockyard workers, politicians and college girls it is mostly the business people, journalists, officials and their wives who go to the ball-room dances. In Aung Lin's *Ayaing Sarbei* ( ) (Wild Jasmine, 1960) the barrister's wife and daughters belong to that class.

In the aforesaid novels they are depicted as less conscious of sexual morals than the ordinary run of people. Little do they feel bound by matrimonial ties.

Myanmar custom expects a man and a woman (whether married or not), to behave towards one another within decent bounds at social gatherings and dance

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<sup>5</sup> Allott, Anna. "Introduction," *Not Out of Hate*, by Ma Ma Lay...1991. p.xxiv.

parties. In marriage constancy has been traditionally stressed. The husband and wife are bound to one another as life partners. As such “the man carries loads on his shoulders and the woman on her head,” as the saying goes.

In post-war Myanmar society there is a laxity about conjugal relations; the married couples are less conscious of family duties. The husband who usually spends the day away from home as the breadwinner is apt to yield to the vagaries of the heart and sexual impulse. Such is the principal figure in Khin Hnin Yu's *Mya Kya Phyu* ( ) (Emerald White Lotus, 1995). He is not faithful to his wife. The novel is a eulogy to the heroine who is caught up in the cross-currents of a broken home and courageously brings up her son and daughter.

The woman's role as a housewife has become less significant than in the past. This holds true for wives of ranking officials and business men as also for career women. The official's wife, the *minkadaw*, has servants at home to keep the house and to look after her children. She goes about her household duties perfunctorily. She would rather spend her leisure time at parties where she and her like will play cards. Or she engages in business ventures earning some income like her husband because of the desire for higher material benefits. Or the wife might have a professional degree herself and turn into a career woman. The result is inadequate parental care and the children suffer. In Bhamo Tin Aung's *Ma Ma Gyi* ( ) (1960), the children are put in the care of the aunt. In Kyi Aye's *Nwan Hlya Ain Pyan* ( ) (1964) the daughter, a high school girl, leaves home and lives together with her lover for a time. In Tekkatho Hpone Naing's *Ta Pyi Thu Ma Shwe Hta* ( ) (1971) the son becomes a problem child.

Psychoanalytic description of characters combined with romance in the following two novels is symptomatic of the mental maladies that afflict people of official and business circles. The main events, according to the novels, take place during the AFPFL period and some years later.

In Tekkatho Phone Naign's *Hnin Ngwe Tahtauk Moe Ta-mhouk* ( ) (With Rain and Snow Mixed, 1972) the extra-marital relations of the parents have affected the mind of the young daughter and led her to psychoneurosis. In Maung Thar Ya's *Kadiba Phanat Si Shwe Hti Hsaung* ( ) (Wearing Velvet Slippers Under a Golden Umbrella [meaning a woman of refinement], 1969) the anxiety of the heroine for her business and for her younger sisters and also the thwarting of her natural impulses have been instrumental in causing her hysteria.

Tekkatho Phone Naing's novel won the National Literary Award (later name of Sarpay Beikman Prize) of 1972 while Maung Thar Ya's novel enjoyed wide publicity among the readers and has been filmed as a popular movie. Verbal brilliance apart, both works may be classed as fictionalized psychological case-histories. Tekkatho Phone Naing is the pen-name of a Columbia University masters graduate in psychology, U Khin Maung Tint, a former Rector of the Institute of Education in Yangon.

The above mentioned novels portray people of means with good incomes, owning cars and houses of their own; there is likely to be a piano or a Myanmar harp in their drawing rooms-both being status symbols. They like to engage a pianist or a harpist to teach their daughters to play these musical instruments as a social accomplishment.

We would now like to portray Myanmar attitude towards traditional Myanmar music and dancing, which is somewhat ambivalent. Although Buddhism frowns upon the performing arts as appealing to the senses, all classes of Myanmar society have enjoyed these pleasures. In fact classical music and dance are regarded as of great cultural value. At the same time, paradoxically, the musician or dancer were generally put outside the pale of respectable society at one time, as he or she was considered to be of low morals. They were regarded as being socially not on an equal footing with government servants, doctors, engineers and other professionals because of the uncertain nature of their income.

In Aung Lin's *Ayaing Sabei* ( ) the hero is employed as a music instructor in the household of a barrister. He falls in love with the second daughter and loses his job. The daughter then runs away from home to live with her lover, the hero, in a humble room. Eventually they come to a happy ending as the hero is found out to be the son of a ruby merchant of Mogok. The son has previously quarreled with his father on the death of the first lover and had gone down to Yangon to enter the music contest as a candidate. It may be said that the novel attains a high degree of readability but lacks of some verisimilitude.

Tekkatho Mya Sein's *Nauk Toe* ( ) (Nauk Toe, 1978) also deals with a musician's life. In this novel the hero is born outside the marriage of a government official (father) and an anyeint dancer (mother). The father has three sons and a daughter by his legitimate wife, and the hero and his half-brothers are brought up by the paternal grandmother, but they board and lodge under different roofs and

also go to different schools. Because of the ill-treatment by the half-brothers, the hero leaves the home to stay with maternal aunt, also an *anyeint* dancer. Though he has some formal education he trains himself to become a musician. Tekkatho Mya Sein skillfully winds up the story with the hero persevering in his career till he becomes successfully as leader of a *saing* Myanmar orchestra.

The people's attitudes towards musicians and dancers have now changed. With the opening of the state schools of music and dramatic arts and later the University of Culture and the patronage of the stage and Myanmar dance by successive Myanmar governments and also with the social mobility of the time, people have come to accept the musicians and artists as an integral part of Myanmar society and culture.

Probably only the grave-diggers and undertakers are still socially still looked down upon. In 1949 the Yangon Municipal Corporation had taken them on as the Public Health Department workers and put them on a regular pay-roll. In Thein Pe Myint's *Thidar Pyone* ( ) (Thidar Pyone, 1968) U Pyone Cho, headman of the grave-diggers, still regards himself as being on the fringe of society and is afraid of meeting his grown-up daughter, Thidar-Pyone, whom he had sent to the Catholic nuns for adaptation as an orphan years ago.

At the same time U Pyone Cho knows well that his is a legitimate occupation and essential in society. Crime, however, is a wrong carried out against public welfare.

In Mya Than Tint's *A-mhaung Yeik Ware* ( ) (Under Cover of Darkness, 1962) and Ludu U Hla's *Lei hnin A-tu* ( ) (Adrift with the Wind, 1957?) are sordid stories of how the principal characters, born in the later colonial period, grown up under the Japanese Occupation and started committing offences (pick-pocking, theft, burglary, pimping, etc.) and how they have become hardened criminals and convicts in the post-war years. Unsettled conditions in the country on the one hand and lack of proper parental care and education, their propensity to liquor, gambling and trying to get easy money on others, are doubtless, factors in the committing of crimes. It would seem that imprisonment is no deterrent and in spite of the government's social services and rehabilitation programs the problem of crime and punishment is no nearer to solution.

The political situation deteriorated in the late 1950's. There was the split into two factions—the Clean and the Stable—in the AFPFL, and further dissensions in the

ranks of the Clean AFPFL weakened the hold of the party over public opinion. Also Myanmar nationals of non-Buddhist faiths were disgruntled with the government's adaptation of Buddhism as the State Region thought freedom of worship was guaranteed to all faiths. At the same time there was a resurgence of KMT activities in the border areas and they joined hands with the Wa insurgent groups in poppy cultivation and drug trafficking. Lately, but most importantly, many racial groups led by the Shans demanded full federalization of the state structure and threatened to secede from the Union of Myanmar. On 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1962 the Tatmadaw staged a coup in the name of upholding unity.

The Revolutionary Council led by Gen. Ne Win launched the country on the "Burmese Way of Socialism". It established a one-party system of administration and followed a policy of self-sufficiency and contact with the outside world was limited to bare necessities. All banks and private commercial enterprises were nationalized. Some foodstuffs and agricultural products were put under government control. A new office for censorship of all publications was set-up and even fiction has to follow the guide-lines to obtain the *imprimatur*. Certain regulations were imposed upon the media to prevent anti-revolutionary activities. At the same time socialist planning and implementation for the material and spiritual happiness of the people went ahead.

The government's activities are reflected in some novels as when Kyaw Aung's *A-ye Kyi Pyee Thwe-si Kya Soe* ( ) (In Time of Importance Let us Be United, 1970) deals with the construction of a bridge amidst the hard terrain and poor working conditions when Min Kyaw's *Bai Thu Pyaing Lo Hla Ba Dawt Naing* ( ) (The Most Beautiful of All those Contesting, 1971) deals with the participation and involvement of university teaching staff and graduate students of both sexes in the nation-wide literacy campaigns and when Maung Thar Ya's *Mat-tat Yat Lo Lan Hmar Ngo* ( ) (Standing on the Road and Crying, 1969) deals with the systematic management of the Road Transport Board taxis for the comfort of passengers, to get the correct fares as revenue for the government and to uphold the rules and regulations prescribed by the Board. This novel won the National Literary Award for the best novel of 1969. The author Maung Tha Ya spent several months with the Board researching for the novel and working as a taxi driver, a bus ticket-seller (conductor) and as inspector. He was able to give a realistic picture of the lives of taxi drivers and of society viewed from the taxi driver's seat.

Mya Than Tint's *Da-taung Ko Kyaw Ywei, Mi Pinlei Ko Hpat Myi* ( ) ( *Surmounting Mountains of Swords and Crossing Over Oceans of Fire*, 1973) glorifies the working-class man in Marxist terms. According to the plot, four men are ship-wrecked and started on an islet off the coast of Myeik (Mergui) Archipelago. The villain is the owner of a motor-schooner who has smuggled machine parts and other goods from across the Thai-Myanmar border for the black market in Yangon and exploited the services of his labourers for profiteering purposes. The second man is a budding poet of Yangon, a member of the intelligentsia who has gone in search of his nephew and another boy—school drop –outs—and taken them back aboard the schooner. In spite of his book-learning he is helpless when he is face-to-face with the present plight. The third is the surviving student who has run away from home and found euphoria in drugs at the border. The fourth is the labourer- Than Gyaung – who has resourcefully made a fire and fed the second and third on oysters, sea-fish and vegetables which he procured with courage and resourcefulness.

Although, at first, there were signs of promise in production, marketing and distribution of crops, hardwoods, minerals, and so on, the planned economy began to falter sometime later. Import of consumer goods came under constraints for lack of foreign exchange. Exports declined also. There was a shortage of essential items such as pharmaceuticals, textiles, building materials, machinery and spare parts.

The government's monopoly in sale of domestic produce (tomatoes, potatoes, chillies, onions, etc.) rendered the people helpless. The Peoples' Stores were poorly managed. The demonetization of currency notes to fight inflationary pressures hit not only the rich but also the poor. We would now like to present some specimens of the social and economic conditions prevailing at the time as shown in Myanmar novels.

Naing Win Swe's *Ma Thein Shin Si Po Pay Ba* ( ) (Please Send [My Wares] to Ma Thein Shin [the Shop Woman], 1971) describes how village men and women have to bribe the railways staff to enable them to carry their load of prohibited foodstuffs to nearby towns for sale. Young girls involved in this illegal trading are subjected to sexual harassment by unscrupulous persons involved in the black market activities.

Moe Moe (Inya)'s *Pyauk Thaw Lan Hmar San-ta-war* ( ) ( *Grouping for the Way out*, 1973) is the story of a newly wed couple who cannot set up a separate home of their own, in spite of their monthly regular incomes. First they go and live in the husband's parental apartment which is already overcrowded. Living

with the husband's relations is quite an ordeal for the young wife who has to tolerate the veiled insults heaped on her by them. Worse than that she has given birth to a baby-daughter whom she cannot properly take care of. The novel ends with the husband remaining in the apartment, while the wife goes to share rooms with her former college-mates and the baby daughter is put in the care of her mother who lives in Bago (Pegu), a town about fifty miles away from Yangon.

Eventually the political and economic situation deteriorated so much that a change of government took place after twenty six years in power. Socialism was finally discarded as the state ideology.

With the taking over of the State Law and Order Restoration Council on 18<sup>th</sup> September 1988, planned economy was replaced with a market orientated one. The government built roads, bridges, embankments, hotels, etc. to develop the country and also to facilitate trade. Commercial enterprises sprang up and the government invited investments from foreign firms. Tourism was promoted. Travel restrictions for nationals and foreigners were eased.

There is a boom in housing construction which is being undertaken by the government as well as by the private sector; soon multi-storey apartment buildings spring up and dot the city's sky-line.

More and more families and individuals move into the newly built flats. Living close to one another under the same roof they are daily exposed to stress and strain as shown in Ma Sanda's *Bawa Ain-met Pan Ain-met* ( ) (Reality and Illusion, 1994) and Nu Nu Yi (Inwa)'s *Mya Sein Pya Kamaryut* ( ) (Emerald Green and Blue Kamaryut, 1993) The seventy-five year old father who has come down from the community-based Upper Myanmar town to live with his married son, feels cooped up in a flat of twelve by forty feet and long for the familiar Upper Myanmar morning snacks so palatable to his taste. The gouty western-minded tuition teacher complains of having to go up and down the stairs with pain in his joints and shouts at the cats from across the opposite window jumping into his flat. His young wife, preparing the morning meal gets annoyed at the frequent electricity break-downs. The shop-keeping spinster and her niece who occasionally go out to propitiate the *nat* spirits for better incomes are always punctual about turning on the tap for adequate supply of water which they all share with others living in the same building.

The convivial family man of three children and three others wants more occasions of exchanging greeting with the neighbors at the common stairway. The well-to-do pensioner feels lonely, neglected and un-cared-for with the son and daughter working abroad and getting married to foreigners. Two flats remain unoccupied as they had been bought for resale at a profit by the absentee-owners.

Friction there is because the occupants of the flats inadvertently run into one another often. Loneliness there is because the front door of each flat is always closed and one can only greet one another at the landing. At the same time Myanmar tradition is so embedded in their veins that when occasion arises as on seasonal festivities and gathering or during the illness of someone in the building cooperation or mutual help is not lacking amongst the occupants.

Urban living poses all kinds of social and environmental problems for the residents. Close physical contact between the sexes can sometimes lead to tragic ends. Khin San Mon's *Tan Hlyet i Ta-phet kan mhar* ( ) (On the Other Shore of the Mirage, 1996) tells the sad story of a pious girl contracting AIDS from her high-living benefactor.

The high cost of living has lured some of the lower-income people into trying their luck at the *che* lottery sweep-stakes smuggled into the country from across the Myanmar-Thai border. The woeful tale is well told in Tin Maw (Dhartu)'s *Che Hto Yin Te Hto Ya Mai* ( ) (A Stake in the Che Lottery will result in [Loss of Property] and Living in a Hut, 1988).

In fact mass gambling has become a common feature of some post-war soccer matches in Yangon. Sooner as an organized game is a social asset; the players participating in team work and the exercise of limbs in tussles with opponents. The soccer fan attains a high degree of excitement with satisfaction at the spectacle of a team beating the other fair and square. But gambling on soccer matches, as in many countries of the world, has corruptive effects on both the players and the soccer fans as depicted in Bahoe Thein Saung's *Tain Me Hlwan Thaw Ngwe Sin Kyair* ( ) (A Star Beclouded, 1979).

The historian records while the novelist creates. So are novels which are the result of the writer's imagination of any use in recreating the past, for providing material on society and culture and on social and cultural change?

In Myanmar during the last fifty years very few non-fiction books and articles have been written on Myanmar society as a whole, its many problems, some caused



by urbanization and modernization, or of change in village and rural communities. With modernization and in recent years the impact of globalization, Myanmar cultural values have been under strong attack. Since there are few non-fiction materials on these subjects we would like to suggest that perhaps the society and cultural as portrayed in some Myanmar novels could be used as supportive, supplementary material to record social and cultural change and their ensuing problems.

It is true that the novelist create the *milieu* of the society where his imagined story and characters, the people, come to life. But a good novelist will without doubt study well a certain society and culture before he writes his fiction, to get the correct setting for his story.

Thus the novels of modern Myanmar are a good source for the study of Myanmar society from simple rural folk, fishermen of the Ayeyawady delta, toddy climbers and so on to Nu Nu Yi's urban middle class living in apartments at Yangon and Mandalay.

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