

MAUNG Swan Yi

(U Win Pe)

Poems and Essays

Fly On O Crane!

Out from Hiroshima's flames
thou hast winged, O Crane!

Fly, fly! O my good Crane!
Go thou to all the world's places
and tell them how the
 once-prosperous
pleasant city has come to ashes,
flowing with blood,
tell this mournful tale to all the
 world and complain!

Among Hiroshima's ashes
the cherry flowers no more bloom.

Amidst Hiroshima's blood
the cherry flowers no more perfume.

Amidst the wails of Hiroshima
no birds sing.

Hiroshima's mothers
their honey milk is now poisoned;

Hiroshima's children
they do not grow and not at all
 look
like humans;

Hiroshima's food and drink,
both are poisoned, no longer clean

Hiroshima's raindrops,
they still smell gun-smoke;

Hiroshima's sheep and cows
chew the sweet grass that's stained
with blood--- they started at it;

Most of our traditional novels, and dramas were written by Buddhist monks in the form of long verses “**Pyo**” which were similar to “Epics”. Every monastery had a “**Pitaka House**” where the palm leaf books were kept. But in the **Konbang Dynasty** (1752 - 1885) Burma had contacts with southeastern countries and non-Jataka stories such as “**I-nao**” and “**Ramayana**” were said to be brought in from Cambodia and Thailand.

The prince, princess and ministers wrote most of the traditional novels and dramas in Kon-Baung period. The characters in the court novels and dramas were princes and princesses, gods and goddesses, devils and demons written in rhymed prose.

The role of the court literature ended when there was no monarchy in our country after the British army took the Burmese royal family to India. There were three Anglo-Burmese wars in 1824, 1852 and 1885. During the first war we lost two coastal regions. After the second war we lost Lower Burma, in the third war we lost the whole country. Then modern trade, modern communication and modern education were introduced by the British colonialists including Christian faith.

Before the British rule there were only **Monastic Schools**, which taught Burmese children Buddhist Literature in Pali. Some monks taught history, Burmese Literature, Astrology, Indigenous Medicine, and other things. Soon after the first war the British Government opened western style schools in Arakan and Moulmein in 1835, at Kyauk Phyu in 1837, at Akyab (Sittwe) in 1837, at Prome (Pyay) in 1886. We called the western style school ‘the science school’ or ‘man school’ (not monk school). The Burmese children were taught not only English, but also Geography, Geometry, General Science, British History and Arithmetic with the aim of doing clerical works, especially in the department of land records.

Following closely after the government schools, the Christian missionary schools came into the big cities in all parts of the country. The missionaries and merchants brought in printing machines and published newspapers, then magazines and books. In this way our scope was widened and we were ready to accept “new cultural ideas”.

Performing Dramas before Modern Drama

With the introduction of printing presses, newspapers appeared one by one continuously in **Moulmein**, the **Moulmein Chronicle** around 1836 in English, the **Morning Star** in 1841 in Karen, the **Dhamathitinsar** in 1842 in Burmese. The first Burmese newspaper in Mandalay, Upper Burma, was **Yatanabon Thatinsar** (Mandalay Gazette), which was published by King Mindon in 1874. All the presses published the drama books, which were very popular for 50 years.

The new dramas were different from court dramas preformed and read before the King. The new dramas were performed before the general public on the puppet stage. The majority of the performing dramas were of a low literary standard: reading non-religious books became largely popular.

In 1885, the British army annexed Upper Burma and the whole country became part of India in 1886. The Rangoon-Mandalay railway line was finished in 1888. All the theater

troupes, including the puppet troupes came down to Lower Burma where economic growth was rapid. The dramas, which were performed on the stage, were printed and published widely. Burmese people read the drama books widely. Therefore during 1872 and 1922 (within 50 years) about 600 drama books were published.

The plots of the popular dramas were not only based on the Jataka tales but also on the local history of the cities and pagodas. The style of writing was mixed prose and poetry, interspersed with love songs and weeping songs to be sung by the actors and actresses. The peasants also sang the drama songs in the paddy fields. Drama books were also their hit-song books.

Some drama books were about 500 pages thick, generally 80 pages, and later only 15 pages thick. Most of the drama writers were old players in the theater troupes and puppet masters. Later Journalists also came into that field. The most famous journalist who wrote about 80 dramas was Shwe Daung Saya Lum (Tha-khin Kodaw Hmaing) (1875 – 1964)¹. He became the greatest national poet and politician in Modern Burma under the British. With the rise of modern novels and modern dramas the popular drama books declined.

The Rise of Modern Drama

Some Burmese who studied at the Christian Missionary Schools got a better knowledge of English Literature than those who studied at the Anglo-vernacular schools. At first, literary minded persons of missionary schools tried to translate English books and then some men attempted to write new books. **U Shwe Kyu** (1874 – 1928) tried translations of **Shakespeare** plays into rhymed Burmese prose, including the *Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Rosalind and Orlando* in 1911-1920. In 1913 one **Maung Cham Baw** translated *Love's Labours Lost*. But the direct translations were not so popular among Burmese readers.

Round about 1930 there was the first modern literary movement in the history of Burmese literature, which began at the University of Rangoon, which came to be known as the **Khit-san Sarpay Movement** (Time-Testing Literary Movement). The platform of the movement was the **Ganhta-lawka** magazine ("The World of Books"-1924) that was published and edited by retired commissioner **Mr. J.S. Furnivall** (1878 – 1960) under the slogan "**With bricks fallen, we shall rebuild with stone,**" with the help of his scholar friends at the University of Rangoon, aiming to encourage young Burmese writers and scholars on the campus.

He held a translation contest from his magazine. In the third contest (in April 1927) **Maung Ba Thaung**, a high school student from Mandalay, Upper Burma, won first prize in the translation contest. And he then won first prize five times continuously. To limit his participating in the contest Mr. Farnivall invited him to come to Rangoon and appointed him to be the editor of his magazine. He urged his editor to try a translation of a western drama. He gave him a French drama in English version. Maung Ba Thaung translated **Moliere's** "*Le Medicin Malgre Lui*" into the Burmese, calling it "saya wun pabe" (the doctor in spite of himself). It was published in 1928. This drama became the first western style

¹ Tha-khin Kodaw Hmaing received Stalin Prize for Peace in 1954.

drama in Burma. It was an adaptation. He changed all French names into Burmese names, French songs into Burmese songs. The readers welcomed it.

Mr. Furnivall wrote an introduction to Maung Ba Thaug's translation. He said that his translation was close to the original. **Mr. J.A. Stewart** also reviewed the play, in the *Journal of Burma Research Society*¹, saying although it was an adaptation it was close to the original, but he said he did not like some Burmese words and phrases used in the dialogue between father and daughter because they were impolite and un-Burmese. In the poor woodcutter's Songs, he pointed out that the words the poor man used like 'whisky', 'brandy,' beer,' etc., were improper.

Zaw Gyi, a poet critic, a leader of the Khit-san Movement, followed Maung Ba Thaug's example, and translated Moliere's other play, "*Le Bourgeois Gentil Homme*" (Maha San chin thu) which was published in 1934. It was also an adaptation, and welcomed by Burmese readers. In his introduction he said his aim of translation was the same as that of Mr. Furnivall, that is to say to get new ideas and new thoughts from foreign literature for Burmese readers who wanted to try new works with new ideas and new thoughts.

Maung Ba Thaug left Moliere's plan with Zaw Gyi and he turned to **Ibsen**, Henrik (Johan) (1828 – 1906) a Norwegian playwright. He translated Ibsen's "*Ghosts*" in 1940 and "*The Enemy of the People*" in 1941. In the translation of "*Ghosts*" Zaw Gyi wrote a preface and Maung Ba Thaug wrote an introduction by himself. Both of them wrote a comparative study of Burmese drama and western drama. Their advice to the readers was that when you read or watch a foreign drama you should forget the nature of Burmese drama. The translators wanted the readers to know the nature of foreign drama and the book review writer emphasized the nature of good literature in the modern sense. For example, in "The World of Books" **Minthuwun** (1910 -), a leading poet in the **khitsan** literary movement wrote a book review explaining the nature of "light literature" and "Serious literature". He urged the readers to study how the writer portrayed the characters in a foreign drama and to compare with the people around the reader.

After he had translated three dramas, Maung Ba Thaug left his editor's job and organized a political party named "**Doe Bama Ahsi-ayone**" in 1930. (We Burma Association). He put "**Tha Khin**" before his name, which meant "Master". His pen name became "**Tha Khin Ba Thaug**". At that time English officers demanded Burmese servants to call them "Tha Khin". Maung Ba Thaug never called the English officers "**Tha Khin**" and he himself and his party members called themselves "**Tha Khin**". Thus Maung Nu, Maung Aung San became **Thakhin Nu** (first Prime Minister) and Thakhin Aung San (General Aung San, National Hero, Freedom Fighter, Aung San Su Kyi's Father).

Thakhin Ba Thuang, the political leader, was sent in to prison by the British Government. There he wrote a splendid novel. Then World War II broke out and he could not continue his translation of dramas until 1960. He wrote a "Comparative Study of Western and Burmese Drama" in 1957 August and September **Shumawa Magazines**, which enlarged his introduction of *Ghosts* (1940).

¹ Stewart, J.A. "Book review": JBRs, Volume XIX, p.1 1929

In 1961 he continued his translation of foreign dramas. He wrote about 20 one-act plays. Most of them were the translations of one-act plays of **Chekov, Stanley Houghton, Hugh Chesterman, Gordon Whitehead** and others. Only in 1961 after he had written 14 one-act plays did he stop his work there and return to translation of science and political subjects.

The writers who attempted to introduce western dramas to Burmese readers were Mr. Furnivall, Prof. Pe Maung Tin, J.A. Stewart, **Zaw Gyi** (Poet critic), **Theikpan Maung Wa** (Short story writer, critic, one of the leaders of the Khit-san literary movement), **Tha Khin Nu** (the first prime minister of Burma), **U Thein Pe Myint** (Tha Khin Thein Pe, the novelist, communist party leader), **Maung Htin** (novelist, journalist, etc.). Most of them are dead, only Maung Htin (now 93 years old) is left.

Just after World War II, there were no cinema-houses and theaters. The writers and the movie actors performed on the stages in Rangoon, calling their performance 'the man-bioscope.' In fact, the "man bioscope", were plays substituting for films. They wrote and performed nearly 200 plays during 1948 and 1968¹.

Nowadays the national literary prize for drama cannot be given to any one because there are no writers of drama in the Burmese literary world. Although man-bioscope plays were successful to some extent, the attempts to stage European dramas before the general public were never successful.

Modern Burmese Novels

With the rise of nationalism in Burma, more Burmese novels were written. One **James Hla Gyaw**, who was educated at St. John's Baptist School, Rangoon, adapted a French novel "*The Count of Monte Cristo*" by **Alexander Dumas** into Burmese. It was published in 1904. At first one no one knew it was an adaptation. The name of the novel was "Maung Yin Maung and Ma Mae Ma". It was written in Modern prose, without rhymes and Pali-words. There were no princes and princesses, no Gods and Ghosts, no devils and demons, no Kinnaris and kninnarars (mythical birds with human head and torso). It was a trilogy, a romance. The people in the story behaved and talked like common people around the readers. It tried to be truthful to life. The literary historians like Prof. Be Maung Tin and Zaw Gyi pointed out that it was the first Burmese novel in the modern sense.

Burmese readers did not easily accept the western novels. Before James Hla Gyaw, Maung Po Zaw translated *Robinson Crusoe* by **Daniel Defoe** from English in 1902. But Burmese readers did not like the direct translation. The first Burmese original novel Yatana Kyemon by **Shwetaung Thiha Thu** appeared about two hundred years ago. It was not based on the Jataka tales, nor on legends from neighboring countries. But the prince and princess were surrounded by Nats (gods), Nagas (Dragon) and Gallons (mythical snake and mythical birds) like the traditional novels.

¹ Tin, Dagon, Saya. "From 'man-bioscope' to staged drama": "Papers on Drama". Sarpay Beikman, Rangoon, 1970.

Two hundred years after the appearance of the first traditional but original novel, a modern novel appeared. The development of the modern Burmese novel took a long time, scholars like Prof. Pe Maung Tin and Zaw Gyi remarked that it was probably the religion that deterred the early appearance of the novel. Also the appearance of Pyo (long verse like Epics) and traditional dramas based on Jatakas might have hindered its rise. In fact the social conditions were not yet developed. Therefore new forms of literature could not change the prejudice of Burmese readers on the novel and short stories as new fangled things of idle talks and immorality.

Zaw Gyi made a thorough comparative study of the line of development of novels of Asian countries and he made some remarks on the rise of the modern novel in Burmese literature, "Therefore the Burmese novel when it appeared in the early 20th century is just a belated contribution to the general pattern of the rise of the novel in contemporary Asian literature because Burma was favored only in the first half of the 19th century by such conditions as the rise of a new peasant-proprietor class in Burmese society, the introduction of the printing press and western education, and these factors contributed towards the emergence of this new literary form."¹ When James Hla Gyaw wrote a novel, Burmese readers were ready to accept the new literature with the new idea of being truthful to life.

James Hla Gyaw (1866 – 1920) was born in the lower part of Burma. When he studied at St. John's College he might have read western novels in English. He got inspiration from his reading experience and tried writing a novel like those he read. It was "Maung Yin Maung and Ma Mae Ma". Prof. Pe Maung Tin wrote a review on it ten years after it was published in the Journal of Burma Research Society². He said that it was an adaptation of "*The Count of Monte Cristo*" and he took only "the escape portion" in his novel.

James Hla Gyaw once worked as a translator for the British Army, which marched to Upper Burma. Therefore he knew well the scenes around **Ava** and **Sagaing**. He used his experience in Upper Burma as scenes in his novel. The story begins in Upper Burma under a Burmese King. It was a transitory period before the British Army annexed Upper Burma. Later the writer moved his story to Lower Burma. The hero of the novel, Maung Yin Maung, is the captain of a merchant boat. He is taken to prison in Ava for a letter related with the rebel found on his person. He meets his long lost father in the prison.

He learns astrology from his father and also learns about the treasure buried somewhere near Ava. When his father dies, he escapes by taking the place of the body of his father sewn in the burial sack, which is thrown into the river. James Hla Gyaw took only that "escape portion" from the French novel. The most important thing he adapted was that he changed the "French Hero" who was full of a revenge motive to the "Burmese Hero" of a forgiving mind. The reason why he changed the character of the hero was not sure but it was accepted by Burmese Buddhist readers who believed that "revenge causes an endless cycle of vice".

¹ Zaw Gyi. Presidential Address delivered at the Annual Meeting of Burma Research Society held on Rangoon. 26th February, 1968

² Pe Maung Tin, Prof. "The Burmese Novels": JBRS, Vol. VII, p.ii, August 1917.

While this novel was very popular among Burmese readers, soon after its appearance there appeared one more novel in 1904, with some reflection of the society of Mandalay, which was the capital of the Burmese King. The novel was “**Maung Hmine the rosselle leaf seller**” written by **U Kyee** who was a petty officer during King Thibaw’s reign. When there was no king in Mandalay he moved to Rangoon to work as an editor at **Hanthawaddy Press**. The proprietor of the press suggested his editors write a novel like “Maung Yin Maung and Ma Mae Ma”. U Kyee accepted his boss’s suggestion and wrote about Maung Hmine, a polygamist, a few months after the appearance of “Maung Yin Maung” in 1904.

Some Burmese scholars bitterly criticized the two new novels in the newspapers. (For example Zabu Kyetthayay, 1904.) Some objected to the use of the term “Wut-htu” (Pali Vathu) in naming the new genre, because “Vathu” was used to call the stories of Buddha. Another reason they did not like it was that the novels only encouraged “tanha” (the craving of life).

Zaw Gyi observed the criticism as follows: “All these criticisms suggest the first literary battle in which the new was attacked by the old, and it made no small stir in the Burmese literary circles of early 20th century.”¹

Dr. Ba Han a modern scholar wrote a review in the Journal of Burma Research Society. It says, “The new order that has emerged is not yet free of the crudities of a new found art. Yet, its achievement is of positive value. Realism has invaded the romance of Fancy and the gray atmosphere of ordinary every-day life has received at long last an artistic interpretation.”²

After the two pioneer novels, more and more Myanmar novels appeared every year without interruption. After these two pioneer novels, between 1904 and 1916, there were about 50 novels which appeared. The majority of them emphasized love affairs and wanted to show their knowledge of Buddhist prayers and directives such as ‘Five wifely duties’, ‘Ten precepts of a King’ etc. But **U Latt**’s ‘Sapepin’ (1912), ‘Shwe Pyi Soe’ (1914) and **Saya Lum**’s a ‘Hmar Taw Pon’ (the message) (1916) were outstanding in portraying the characters. Of the two writers, U Latt read western novels like Sir Walter Scott’s. He was influenced by western novels. Until now the readers were remembering the awkward manners of an England returned Lawyer Maung Thaung Pe who pretended to forget the Burmese way of life.

The Journal of Burma Research Society now became the medium to write the reviews of Burmese novels. J.A. Stewart became the first review writer for Burmese novels. Dr. Ba Han and Prof. Pe Maung Tin also watched Burmese writers carefully and criticized their works from a western point of view.

J.A. Stewart wrote a review of U Latt’s (1866 – 1921) Shwe Pyi Soe in JBRS. He said, “It is superior to most novels, hitherto published in coherence and interest but it is

¹ Zaw Gyi “Presidential Address”: JBRS, Vol. LI, p. i. 1968.

² Ba Han, Dr. “Book Review”: JRBS, Vol. II, p. ii. 1918.

especially distinguished by a marvelous accuracy of observation and vividness of expression.”¹

After James Hla Gyaw, the most important adapter and translator was **Shwe U Daung** (1889 – 1973). His famous novel “**Ya Ta Na Pon**” (1916) was an adaptation of “**East Lynne**” by Mrs. Henny Wood. “**Yu Pa Nan Di**” which he published in 1918 was an adaptation of “**She**” by Sir Rider Haggard (1856 – 1925).

Shwe U Daung admitted in his autobiography (1968) that he wrote his first novel under the influence of his favorite English writers **Reynolds** and **Macaulay**. He translated 14 novels and adapted 15 novels and wrote about 300 short stories. He wrote 5 original novels. His novels were said to be more close to the western type than the novels of James Hla Gyaw and U Latt. He cut off unnecessary information, which we might find in traditional novels. Although the plots and the prose were no longer traditional, his novels did not reflect social life.

P. Monin (1883 – 1940) born and brought up in a Christian family worked together with Shwe U Daung in **The Sun** (Thuriya) Press. They were pioneer novelists and in the same time famous journalists. P. Monin also translated and adapted English novels. “**Ne Yi Yi**” (1920) was his famous adaptation work from “**Just a Girl**” by **Charles Garvicice**, “**Ne Nyo Nyo**” (1920) from “**Innocent**” by **Marie Corelli** (1855 – 1924). The influence of English novel made him a good prose writer like Shwe U Daung.

Zayya (1900 – 1982), like P. Monin, was born and brought up in a Christian family. Therefore he had the experience of English literature. He became a famous novelist and the best essayist. His famous novel, “**Mya Lay Shwe Dar Bo**” (*The Swordsman*) (1920) was written after he had read the *Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905) by **Baroness Orezy** (1865 – 1947). Zayya wrote about 500 short stories of which some were adaptations.

Another famous translator was **Dagon Shwe Mhyar** (1895 – 1982). His first novel was “**Htoo Tar Twe**” (1926) which was an adaptation of “*The Sign of Silence*” by William Lequae. He used plain prose without other information. He wrote about 15 novels and 40 translations, out of which 20 were of **Rider Haggard’s** work. He wrote a thousand short stories, some of them adaptations and translations.

The first Lady writer was **Dagon Khin Khin Lay** (1904 – 1981), born and brought up in Mandalay. She was a granddaughter of a minister of the last King. Her famous translation was “**The Good Earth**” by **Pearl S. Buck**. Almost all of her novels were adaptations.

Tha-khin Ba Thaung (1901 – 1981) who was the first playwright of modern dramas adapted “*Tess of the D’Ubervilles*” by **Thomas Hardy** (1884 – 1928) published while he was in jail. He named it “**Pan Thar Mar Sar Oo**” (1936). It was very famous for the Burmeseness of his language

¹ Stewart, J.A. “Book Review”: JBRs, Vol. IV, p.ii. August 1914.

Modern Burmese Short Stories

Shwe U Daung, P. Monin, Dagon Shwe Hmyar, Dagon Khin Khin Lay, Zeya and **Leti-pandita U Maung Gyi** were the most responsible writers in the development of Burmese short stories. Except U Maung Gyi (1878 – 1939), an ex-monk, who received only monastic education, all the above-mentioned writers entered the literary field by adapting foreign works.

Even U Maung Gyi adapted some English fictions. “The Dreams of Maung Thaw Ka” (1912) which serialized in “Pyin-nya Ahlin Magazine” was an adaptation of **John Bunyan’s** “The Pilgrim’s Progress” and “Maung Gyi and Maung Nge” was an adaptation of Shakespeare’s “The Comedy of Errors”. His friends read the English books and retold him.

The first short story we found is “Myitta and Thurer” (Love and Liquor) in “The Pyin Nya Ahlin” (1914). Although the author’s name was not mentioned, P. Monin was familiar with the English stories and was working there as an editor staff of the magazine might be the author. Later, U Maung Gyi, the editor, admitted that some stories were written by himself. The magazine used one story one month. Some short stories reflected contemporary social life of Burmese society.

Thuriya Magazine (1917) and Dagon Magazine (1920) invited short story contests. When the stories did not come, the editors wrote without mentioning the authors’ names. Shwe U Daung, the editor of Thuria Magazine adapted one detective story of Sherlock Holmes by **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle**. Sherlock Holmes reincarnated in Rangoon as U San Sher wearing gaung baung (turban) and longyi (Sarong)¹. That short story was the first one in the magazine and also the first detective story in Burmese literature.

Although we have no private detectives even today but in the reader’s mind there was one in those days. Shwe U Daung adapted almost all Sherlock Holmes stories until post-war days. “The Collected Stories about U San Sher” is reprinted even today and U San Sher is the one and only detective best loved by Burmese readers. Every magazine tried to include one detective story every month since 1917 to post war days.

Round about 1930, at the University of Rangoon, the first batch of Burmese B.A. (Honors) students tried their pen in the Campus magazine and The World of Books magazine which was established by Mr. Furnivall.

Most of them came from the National Schools. As young nationalists, they loved the Burmese language and literature. When they joined the university they were welcomed by U Pe Maung Tin, the first Burmese professor, who had been trying to prescribe Burmese language and literature in the University of Rangoon. The students received a wide knowledge of Burmese literature and English literature there.

The Literary contests of The World of Books encouraged them to try new forms of prose and poetry. Prof. Pe Maung Tin selected and edited their new works and were

²¹ Thuriya Magazine. Vol. 1, pt. 11. 1917

published by the Burma Education Extension Association established in 1928 and three booklets, “Khit San Pon Pyin Myar” (Time Testing Tales) Vol. I in 1934, Vol. II in 1938 and “Khit San Ka Byar Myar” (Time Testing Poems) in 1934 which were welcomed by young readers. **The Dagon Magazine** (established in 1920 edited by famous writer Letipandita U Maung Gyi) and **Kyi Pwa Yay** magazine (established in 1933 by **U Hla**) became their platform outside the campus. P. Monin, one of the leaders of a new literary trend outside the campus, soon supported and welcomed the new campus writers. Later it was called “Khit-san sarpay Movement”.

U Po Kyar (1890 – 1942) (the inspector of the National Schools and the Student Strike Leader 1920) wrote short stories and supported them. “The time testing movement” (Khit San) was thus speeded up and extended to the post war days.

Theik-pan Maung Wa became a short story writer and critic. He wrote one act plays under another pen name Tint Tint in Kyi Pwar Yay Magazine. Zaw Gyi, and Minthu Wun became modern major poets. They also wrote short stories in neat forms in simple prose.

Maung Htin (Maung Htin Fat) (1910 -) an unsuccessful medical student joined them by writing satirical short stories. Maung Thein Pe (Thein Pe Myint), Maung Htay Myaing (1920 -) (**Dagon Taya**), Ma Ah Mar (1915 -) (**Ludu Daw Ahmar**), the later university students, followed their way. Maung Thein Pe became a successful short story writer and novelist just before the War.

Some young Burmese people who believed that translation was essential for Burma. Tha-Khin Nu, Tha-Kin Than Tun, Tha-Khin Soe and other young leftists established “**Nagani Book Club**” (Red Dragon Book Club) in 1937 in Rangoon under the aim of distribution of anti-imperialist (Marxist) ideas. They published novels, dramas, biographies of political heroes and political theories, etc. It became “**The Translation Society**” when Burma gained freedom. It was directly sponsored by U Nu (Tha-Khin Nu) one founder of the Nagani book club then who became the first Prime Minister of Burma.

After the independence of Burma, direct translations became popular and translated the novels from Russia, China and India. Tolstoy, Pushkin, Gorky, Chekhov, Lao She, Lushun, Annand, etc., were translated. Books of leftist ideas were favorable for about 20 years.

Tet Toe, who himself was a translator, criticized those old writers who adapted foreign literature. He accused them of plagiarism. The old writers defended by saying that they adapted foreign works to persuade the readers who were strangers to foreign culture. Their reason was acceptable for the development of Burmese literature for one duration.

In 1957, Thuria Kanti (1901 – 1958) (**Dr. Sein Ban**) made a list of adaptations in his book “How to write stories” which won a national literary prize in 1958. There are about one hundred stories of adaptations which were not known as adaptations at their first appearances.

In post war days, Maung Htay Myaing (Dagon Taya) became a famous poet and short story writer and led a “New Literature Movement” under the banner of “Socialist

Realism". He adapted **Anton Chekhov** stories. **Tint De** (once BBC announcer, U Win Sein) adapted **O'Henry** short stories in Shumawa and other magazines under different pen names. In this way in post-war days two trends of styles of writing developed. One group followed O'Henry style, with "twist endings" and another followed Chekhov style with "detail touches".

Nowadays our people need more translations because we imported very little foreign books for lack of foreign exchange. And the education system since 1960 has been weakening and young Burmese cannot read English well like pre-independence day youths. In colonial days even in the National Schools which were established after the university student strike (1920) against the British Government, we were taught under the slogan of "Learn English to attack English".

Nowadays, our young people are enthusiastically learning foreign languages not only English but also Japanese, Chinese, Korean, French and German languages to gain a global knowledge and to participate in globalization successfully, not at schools but at the information centers of the embassies.

The elder veteran writers, knowing the weakness of a new generation who are not familiar with foreign literature, help them by translating foreign works.

Zaw Gyi translated the short stories of Nobel Prize Winners (1966). Ludu Daw Ah Mar who wrote short stories in Kyi Pwa Yay Magazine in prewar days under the pen name of **Mya Myint Zu** and translated short stories under the pen name of **Khin La Win** is now translating African and Asian short stories (*African Short Stories* in 1989, *Thai Short Stories*, Vol. I in 1993). Mya Than Tint (1929 – 1998) translated world classics, modern classics, short stories and essays. He was awarded national prize for translation for four times. Maung Tha Noe is translating poems from English and Russian.

Some young writers today are testing new things by reading literature of "Post-Modernism" although they get little chance to read new foreign books.

The original works of most of the elder writers have been cut and banned by the censor board of the military government for 40 years. So some turn their hands to the translations. You may say it is a blessing from the other side for the new generation. *Thus we are chewing the West or the West is chewing us.*

But, as you all know, Burma is situated between India and China, two "Cultural Giants". Since the beginning of our history we have adapted, and adopted all foreign things. Because we have a long experience of "Burmanization" we hope we will pass through "the Age of Globalization" without much trouble.

Win Pe (Maung Swan Yi) 1 December, 2002.

Writing and Politics:

What is politics? Dictionaries usually define it as “study of government” or “the activities of a government.”

What, then, is “government?”

Again, the dictionary says, “It’s a group of people who govern or rule a country or a state.” In Burmese, politics is referred to as, “Naingngan ye” which means “affairs of state.” So I want to define politics like this, “Politics is nothing but the affairs of a state,” or, “study of people under a government.”

Whatever politics may be, a writer cannot keep away from politics-- although a politician can keep away from writing. A writer lives among people. He cannot stay away from society. He lives among people and observes their lives and when he gets inspired from them, he will write. What he writes is reality, not fantasy. In dealing with reality, the writer inevitably reflects politics, directly or indirectly.

A writer does not live alone. He is a person among the people. He lives in politics. What he writes is about the people among whom he lives. Should he live alone in a forest, he might write about the tress and the animals like Rudyard Kipling’s “The Jungle,” or George Orwell’s “Animal Farm.” Although the stories are about animals, they are reflections of the people the writer once lived with. “Animal Farm” is political, an attack on socialism.

As writers differ, writings also differ. Some writing is serious and some is not. For example, many love stories are light reading, lacking seriousness. They are lesser reflections of society and have less literary value. Novels, which reflect social life, and reflect, at the same time, the political life of the people, are serious and have higher value as they are realistic in terms of our daily lives.

In our country, Burma, just after World War II, when we regained our freedom from British Rule, there existed a great debate between Literature and Politics. At that time we were debating whether to follow the road to a parliamentary democracy or the road to a socialist democracy. In literature, also, we were debating about which kind of literature should be developed. One group was led by left-leaning writers. They were student activists, influenced by Marx’s writing at the University of Rangoon. They launched a movement called, “literature for the people’s sake” or “people’s literature.” Another group was led by traditionalists as well as anti-Marxists. They launched the movement, “Art for Art’s sake.” Most of the young writers followed the leftist group. The term “people’s literature” became very popular, inspired by the current political events.

Most of the talented young writers were Marxists. They became phrasemongers for Marxist propaganda. They mixed political slogans in their writings and spoiled their talents. They read Marxist literary essays written by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Lunacharsky, Gorky, Mao Tse Tung, etc. All of these essays were written from political points of view. Usually the young writers quoted Engels’ definition of realism (from “A letter to Margret Harkness”), Gorky’s definition of “Socialist Realism,” and Mao’s speech at the Yen-an Forum (one chapter of the speech is about propaganda and literature).

By studying the Marxists literary theories, the writing of some of the young writers became more polished, and they could carry on the development of realism in literature. Other young writers, however, committed one or more of the following literary fallacies;

One: They thought that “people’s literature” was only writing about poor people. They wrote about the downtrodden masses while including political slogans. Their writings were full of political phrase mongering.

Two: They thought “Socialist Realism” needed to be spread, and so concluded their stories with a vision of political hope. Because of this, most of their endings were unrealistic and artificial. Hope was very remote.

Three: To be political, they thought, meant making slogans and propaganda essential parts of their writing. So, their writing became works of propaganda and politics rather than works of literature. They forgot the warning of the Marxists Literary theorists who said, “literature should not be political posters and party slogans.” And even now, we find this phrase mongering in the writings from both the left and the right.

Nowadays, our country is under military dictatorship. There is no freedom of expression. The military junta bitterly hates intellectuals, politicians, scholars and writers. Before publishing our books and research papers, we have to submit at least three typed copies of our work to the literary censor board (Press Scrutiny Board) along with a detailed biography which must include the writer’s wife or husband, grandparents, parents, children, grandchildren, as well as birth dates and addresses. Texts are then scrutinized with no definite rules in place. They search for “politics” in the writing. If the spelling of a word is different from the spelling which is prescribed in the government dictionary, it would need to be corrected, as it is seen as dissidence. The very names of dissidents are not allowed to appear in print, and this includes historical figures deemed to be dissidents by current standards. According to the censor’s views, all writing should be apolitical. Writing, however, cannot be free of politics-- whether intentionally or unintentionally,

Today, a publisher (sometimes with the author and the cover designer) must go the censor office at least three times, once for a printing permit, once for a cover design permit, and once for a distribution permit. To evade the censors, writers are now playing a game of hide and seek. They use new images, symbols and metaphors in their writing. So as not to be deciphered by the censors, the writers create mysterious political images. In some cases, not only the censors, but also the readers cannot decipher these mysterious writings. Some writing has become more and more abstract, which the young writers now refer to as “postmodernism.”

Some writers, even though they dislike the military government, become desperate and become anti-public. They have been retreating into a narrow abstract line of literature. Some are saying, “Literature, but not for the sake of the people,” or, again, “art for art’s sake.” Yet this still means that writing and politics are related. Denying politics is, nonetheless, a political stance. Anti-politics and apolitics are both a politics.

In my opinion, the best path for a writer is to face politics, watch politics, and feel politics but to not include political slogans and propaganda in the writing. I think it is good for a writer to keep politics in his or her brain and heart to guide the pen to good writing. If a writer keeps away from politics, politics will keep the writer away and he or she will have no contact with the public.

Both politicalization and depoliticalization of literature is harmful. Politics may be fertilizer for literature, but it might also be fertilizer for weeds. In conclusion, an old writer’s

advice is that writers should not keep away from politics, but keep in mind that politics is not the same thing as art.
