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Portrait of the Poet as a Foolish Man

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Panel: Why I Write...

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Portrait of the Poet as a Foolish Man

I'm going to talk about myself publicly here, like a kind of confession. I hope that this will help you see the life of a poet from Burma (Myanmar) and his attitude towards poetry.

I'm 45 years old. My three daughters are students and my wife is a junior government employee. I've worked as an editor on and off for various monthly magazines and weekly news journals for about 15 years. I currently work as the chief editor of a magazine named "Junior".

I was born in 1964 in Pa An, Kayin State. My father was a mechanical engineer and my mother was a nurse. Because they were government employees, my parents had to move from one town to another. In my childhood, I lived in four different towns in the Ayeyarwady delta, the region that was devastated by Cyclone Nargis in 2008.

I learned Burmese during my years at school, by means of textbooks that contained poems, stories and essays. I was thus exposed to imaginative and creative literature in the classroom, as well as at home. Despite the fact that he is an engineer, my father loves to read. He was a member of the Sarpay Beikman Literary Association, and books published by the Association arrived at my home every month. I had access to fiction and non-fiction and came to love reading. My parents also bought me comics and illustrated books.

I became addicted to imaginative literature and very interested in poetry. I read all of the poems published in the country's monthly magazines and copied those I liked into a notebook. Although I could enjoy some poems, I did not understand others very well. After reading the work of other people, I wanted to write my own. I started writing at 16, a time of puberty and of hearts beating for love affairs. I became crazy for poems and literature at that age, and my journey of stupidity has continued ever since!

After avidly reading the work of other poets, I realized that I wanted to be a poet. So I just wrote poems and ignored my schoolwork. At first, it was very difficult for me to write as I did not know any specific techniques. How could the poems I wrote be any good? I wrote them because I just wanted to write. It would be very funny to read those poems now. I wrote mostly about love. Love poems were very popular at the time. The then-popular poets were those who wrote beautiful love poems. I wanted to be popular like them, so I wrote love poems.

In 1983, at a time when I was concentrating only on poetry, ignoring other matters and failing the matriculation exam twice, a poem of mine was first published in a popular magazine. I was very happy. I think I would not have been that happy even if I passed my matriculation exam

with flying colors. I became a poet because the poem I wrote was published under the pen name I had. In other words, it was the beginning of the stupid journey of the pen name “Min Htet Maung”.

My first published poem was a love poem. I then sent more love poems to that magazine and other magazines. The more poems I sent, the more were published. Later I wrote poems about life and my philosophy on life. Most of these were rejected and only a few were published. But I kept writing. About 25 of my poems were published in 2 years. I was living in Patheingyi in the delta and competed in literary contests held at township and division levels. I won one prize after another. At first I was happy, because I became famous and many people praised my work. But later I stopped taking part in the competitions. I could not write the way I wanted to, but had to write the way the Prize Selection Committee wanted me to. I had to write about the topics they assigned and had to follow classic writing techniques. At the time, I did not want to follow the rules. I just wanted to write free verse with free thought.

I became involved with a group of young men from Patheingyi made up of artists, poets, musicians, singers, literary critics and film directors. Although we were interested in various types of art, we shared a love for fresh ideas. We met at tea shops or pubs and exchanged our views about art. There were five self-published poets in the group. We wrote modern poems in free verse. Modern poetry was emerging in Burma at the time, but most people refused to accept it, especially older people who could not escape the influence of the classics. Most literary magazines did not welcome modern poetry. This was during the one-party system era, when we lived with the ideology of the Burmese Way to Socialism. Young people did things that the majority of people found unacceptable.

In 1986, I passed the matriculation exam, moved to Rangoon (Yangon) with my family, and majored in Burmese at Rangoon University. There, I wrote not only poetry but also many short stories, essays and literary articles. I became friends with poets, writers, journalists, editors, cartoonists and illustrators and unintentionally joined the literary world.

The 1988 uprisings took place in Burma while I was at university. Students started the demonstrations, which spread across the country and became public uprisings. Many lives were sacrificed. 1988 was a black spot in Burmese history. The Burma Socialist Program Party, which had ruled the country for 26 years, was toppled. The military seized power and has ruled ever since. Although there was an election in 1990, the military regime did not recognize the winning party. The regime has prepared to hold elections again in 2010. We don't know what will happen!

I continued to write poetry as a university student through these waves, winds and storms. I wrote modern poems that reflected the traps of the system and the concerns of the age. My poems addressed the worries and suffering of the public, pointed out justices and injustices, and made fun of the hypocrisies of the world. My poems reflected depressions, disappointments and hopes. A poet from our country once remarked, “Read the poems written by the youth if you want to know the current age!”

After I graduated, I chose to work in fields of literature and journalism. I have worked as an editor, journalist and agent. These jobs are very hard but their salaries are very low, and you have to work strictly within government policy. So these jobs are very dangerous but not well paid – much like writing poetry! You get very little royalties for your work, much less than what you would get for writing short stories, articles and news. And the likelihood of getting a poem published in a magazine is also very low. Every time anything is published, it must first be approved by the censor. The scrutiny board allows one out of ten poems to be published.

So, why do I cling to writing poetry? The simple answer is because of my “trust”. Yes! I write with self-confidence. It will take a long time to explain about exactly what I mean by “trust”. In brief I mean a “trust in truth” and a “trust in poetry”. In my country, we believe in the ideal of the “truth”, partly because so much of what is true has been lost. So when we write, we aspire to that. I trust that the truth of what I am writing comes through in my work. For example, I use the tools of poetry to indirectly reflect the suffering of my people and to convey the sentiments of grassroots movements, such as in this poem:

The interviewer responds to every question raised by the interviewees.
The readership guides the press how to do journalism.
The womankind leads the meek men.
The customer is always wrong.
The passengers pay respects to the bus conductor.
The young are mature and the adults are naive.
The meaning of love is better hatred.
The imitations are more expensive than the originals.
The banks sink in the swamps of debts.
The modern rich man is an uneducated scoundrel.

I don't know how poets from other countries write poems. I think most of us poets write with that kind of trust and confidence. I hope my friends here understand my explanation.

I also write environmental poetry and children's poetry, as they are needed by my country. Environmental conservation activities have been carried out in the United States for years. But we first heard the word “environment” in a developing country like Burma quite recently. There is not

much public awareness about the environment. But many trees have been cut down in Burma and the country is now suffering from the impact of climate change. I think you must know about Cyclone Nargis, which devastated the country in 2008. In order to motivate people to love and value the environment, I write environmental poetry. I also take part in Green Hearts Environment Network campaigns staged by literati, artists and photographers.

I write children's poetry, as well. When I was young, children's literature was a thriving genre in Burma. But today, we have few writers of children's literature. I think the children's literature is very important for a country. We need many books that are truly useful for children, not just for the market. It is very important for children to know justice from injustice.

The last thing I want to say is...

I now write poetry

Because...I can't help writing poetry

Like a drug addict.