9-28-2007

A Key Book from My Book Shelf

Mar Khet

Panel: Most Important Book . . . (II)
A Key Book from My Book Shelf
Khet Mar

First, allow me to introduce myself: I am Khet Mar, a writer from Myanmar.

Every reader has an influential book (or several books) that leaves an indelible print in the head and heart. A book can change not only the life of a person; a book can also chart the course of a country. “Sixteen Books that Changed the World” is one such book. One can see clearly how these books have shaped the destinies of nations, and their effects still prevail in some way even today.

As a writer and a reader, I, for one, have no doubt about the influence of books written by our nation’s own Burmese authors as well as by authors from other countries, including America. I have read “Gone with the Wind” over and over again, a text that is ever giving me new inspiration.

To denote a single book as a “key book,” however, doesn’t seem natural. For a religious person, that single book would be his prayer book; for a language learner, it might be his thesaurus; for an educator, his encyclopedia, and so on. The single book, in each case, is related to the reader’s main interest or profession. Just as we don’t eat only one type of food, so also we don’t acquire knowledge and entertainment from a single book. Naturally, then, it is hard for me to refer to one book only.

Magazines, newspapers, journals offer information across a broad spectrum of interests. If a book can be considered “a well,” certainly these sources are “oceans.” In the light of this distinction, I would prefer a periodical magazine as my “key book.”

This volume takes the Burmese title “Padauk Pwint Thit,” which means “New Flower of the Red Wood Tree.” It’s our national flower. I choose it as my key book for several reasons. As you know, magazines have many distinguishing features that remain more or less the same from publication to publication. It may not be surprising, given their format, that many of the magazines printed abroad are terrific, even smashing, especially in this age of technology and globalization.

Please understand, Myanmar is a small developing country. Our nation’s media is doing its best to keep pace with its neighbors'. To appear colorful and diverse, magazines in Myanmar try to include material from all sectors. Nevertheless, many retain a focus: “Fashion Magazine” or “Business Magazines”, or simply “Tabloid.” In such specialty magazines, reader may find only a few articles or short stories of literary worth. These magazines have commercial interest only, preferring to sell well rather than to educate. “Padauk Pwint Thit” magazine is much different in scope and substance.

“Padauk Pwint Thint” was first published in 1991, and became immediately famous as a poetry magazine. Publication was stopped after a few years, however, because of financial problem and general turmoil in Myanmar. In February 2006, the magazine was started again.
Most other magazines are full of fashion and business advertisements, which show less interest in literature and more in glamour. The cost of publication, though, is covered by the advertisements. Youngsters and models even pay for their pictures and poses to appear in the magazine. Astrology and gossip-talk are staples of many readers’ diets. To keep on the “cutting edge,” these commercial magazines do offer a colorful presentation, captivating the eyes of the modernists. In an age of information of technology, such displays are indeed effective as far as format is concerned. Content is a secondary matter.

In the eyes of a casual observer “Padauk Pwint Thit” may seem primitive. But readers who appreciate good literature and fine art certainly enjoy and admire the magazine. There is much talk about and heavy praise for the stance and substance of “Padauk Pwint Thit”

Two thousand copies of the magazine are printed monthly, and the price is within the reach of all readers, an additional blessing. Its meager print run aside, the magazine is a potpourri of knowledge. Unlike other magazines, “Padauk Pwint Thint” gives priority to literature. It includes sections of poetry, novels, essays, non-fiction, literary criticism, art, cinema, education, memoir and national and international news. It also invites a sense of connection between the reader and the writer not found in other magazines.

Novelists and fiction writers whose work appears in “Padauk Pwint Thit” have found fame and widespread recognition, among them Khin Aung Wein, a fiction writer from Mandalay. Similarly, the magazine provides an opportunity for young poets to hone their craft. Myanmar, a country known for its culture, wildlife and biodiversity, also has a tradition of producing writers of international stature. This tradition will undoubtedly continue so long as a magazine with strong conviction (like “Padauk Pwint Thit”) is willing to promote the country’s literary talents.

I had an early encounter with “Padauk Pwint Thit” which, though it was a euphoric experience for me as a writer, stands out as an uncomfortable memory for me as a reader. Some ten years ago I interviewed Khin Myo Chit, an elderly intellectual journalist. I used the interview to highlight her enormous contributions to the nation. The Print Security Department must have seen something else in the article, for they censored the article for reasons known only to them. Nine months ago, the same article was published in its entirety, again by “Padauk Pwint Thit.” As a writer I was elated to see the article finally arrive and find justice after a long wait. But as a reader, the article came a little too late. The authorities allowed the article to be printed only after the death of Khin Myo Chit.

The tradition of writing, reading, and censorship (self-censorship or censorship from elsewhere) is relevant and complementary only if when censorship is done positively.
In his analysis of the French structuralist and post-structuralist Jacques Derrida (*Structuralism and Since*, Oxford University Press, 1979, page 155), Jonathan Culler reiterated: “This new practice of reading and writing is making itself felt particularly in the realm of literary criticism.”

I suppose the relationship between writer and reader can be seen as both subtle and symbiotic. It is, in itself, a foregone conclusion: one can never hide one’s hands after throwing the stone. The relationship between writer and reader invokes the term “continuity,” and by cultivating this relationship, the writer may learn of another term: “perfection.”