

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;

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.
