

Khin Maung Nyo

Why Do I Write the Way I Write

I come from a very large Burmese family. I lived in my grandfather's house, together with dozens of his other grandchildren, where food was scarce and books were indispensable. When new shipments arrived at the bookstore, we all chipped in money to buy two or three books or a few monthly magazines. My mother used to tell us Western stories like Little Red Riding Hood or Alice in Wonderland. While she never told us Burmese folk tales because she graduated from a Christian Missionary School, one of my aunts would tell me stories about the writers of these stories. I wished that I could become a writer even though I had no idea what a writer was.

In third grade, my teacher, Daw Aye Kyaing, explained to my class the difference between medical doctors and Ph.D. doctorate degrees. The teacher asked us who would like to be a Ph.D. doctor and I shot up my hand and said that I wanted to be one. Everybody in my class laughed at me but the ambition was already lodged deeply in my heart. I knew what I wanted.

In those days, I had neither shoes nor slippers. We didn't even have a table to write on in school, but I knew that I didn't need to have a pair of shoes to get a Ph.D. In fact, 20 years after we discussed doctorate degrees in class, I won a scholarship to go to the U.K. It was there that I received my Ph.D. in Chemistry from Salford University at Greater Manchester.

I became a lecturer at Rangoon University. I was teaching and doing research, during which time I wrote several novels and short stories. My articles were compiled and published. One of my books was instantly famous and the deputy minister of the Education Department was so angry about what I had written that he banned my book. He was angry because I was employed as a teacher at the university and my book was considered educational material for the students. This teaching material was not allowed during that time in the Burmese education system. I was not surprised because after the democratic government was overthrown by the Military Junta, there were wars between students and the government. The students demonstrated against the junta and eventually the government planted explosives in the famous student union building and demolished certain parts of the educational system. The political science department was removed from the university and all the books related to democracy were put under lock and key.

The junta introduced a plan to control the students. Associations were not allowed to organize and books and leaflets were not allowed to be published or distributed. The students had to learn from the textbooks written and selected by a textbook committee. I was not allowed to write so I quit my job and wrote books and articles while I taught as a private teacher.

In 1991 I went to Japan. There, I became an editor of a journal published in Burmese for the Burmese community. I wrote under a pen name, Dr. Maung Ba Chit, and it was a great success. My book, called *Lu-ba-wa ne Dathana -amyin* which, in translation, is *Life and*

Perceptions, is still famous and the publisher is preparing to publish another edition. Back home in Burma, I continued to write many novels and articles and published over twenty books.

In America, I found that my pen name, Dr. Maung Ba Chit, was well established and I had a chance to write in online journals. Here I found that there were many audiences for my work. I was granted a weekly program on Radio Free Asia (RFA) and had a few talks arranged by the Burmese community. Why I was successful abroad? Well, as you know, in Burma I was not free. My pen was not free, nor was my brain. Here in the U.S. I changed my pen name to my own true name. Here, I am free in many ways: I can write whatever I think. I can write whatever I want. No censorship, no scrutiny, no review board, nothing like that whatsoever.

I did not realize all of this until one of the editors of an online magazine brought it to my attention. "Our audiences are waiting for your articles and they like the way you write." He said, "I want you to write in our magazine every week."

So, why do I write?

I went through history. I read about a man from Germany named Gutenberg who invented the printing press in the 15th century. At that time, books were scarce and very expensive, as they were hand written. To make a book you had to copy it word for word with your hands, which of course took a long time. In Burma, we used to write books on palm leaves or gold leaves. Gutenberg, a goldsmith, created type-setting and was able to print books. His first book was a 42-line bible, each page containing 42 lines.

Burma has had its independence for 60 years, and yet it's still not entirely liberated in the sense of freedom of speech. People there do not have access to books either, yet younger generations need this, in order to advance. I write day and night., both inside and outside the country. I encourage people to read books in order to liberate themselves.