

How Translation has affected me as a poet

By Zeyar Lynn (Burma/Myanmar)

I am not only a poet but also a translator. I translate from both Burmese to English and English to Burmese. My aim in translating poems from English into Burmese is primarily to inform fellow poets of not only what, but how, and why other poets in the world are writing, and also the various aspects of poetics held by individual poets, such as confessional poetry by Sylvia Plath, Personism by Frank O'Hara, and LANGUAGE Poetry by Charles Bernstein.

As I said, my main reason for translating is to try to help my fellow poets in Myanmar/Burma broaden their poetic perspectives from *Khit Por*, or mainstream modern Myanmar poetry, to international contemporary poetry, and hone their poetry-making skills. In some ways, I have succeeded. A younger generation of poets in their early 20s, whom I call 'post-'88 poets' as they were born after the 1988 people's revolution, have started looking at poetry in new, or rather, alternative ways outside *Khit Por*, freeing them from simply reproducing well-written poems of the past.

In the process of translating from English to Burmese, I found myself learning from the poems I translated, which helped me make use of new strategies, methods, and techniques, such as collage techniques, parataxis, disjunctive strategies, contemporary organizing principles, and aleatory techniques in my own poems. More than that, I was educating myself on aspects of contemporary international poetics. I learned not just the how but the why of the ways those poems were created. I strongly believe that the process of translating enriches, augments, and expands my understanding of poetry in general, making me aware that there are different kinds of poetry in the world and that I cannot hold on to any narrow and essentialist idea of poetry. I have also discovered a sense of exploring new poetic spaces in the process of translation, spaces that enlarge my mental concepts of poetry and poetry-writing skills.

In translating Burmese poems into English, I found tremendous differences between the translations and the poetry being written in much of the world. The English translations of Burmese poems paled by comparison in terms of craft, particularly in the use of language. Burmese poems seem to be lacking in the tools used in the wide spectrum of poetic devices, such as dramatic monologue, irony, or word associations, perhaps due to having to live in a closed, isolated, and xenophobic country of miserable poverty not only in the physical and material domains but also in the intellectual sphere, exacerbated by poor proficiency in English.

In terms of world literature or world poetry, Myanmar's poetry has been relatively unknown, just like the country. Ours is a minor literature in the world compared with the literatures of China or Japan. However, an anthology has now appeared on the stage and introducing our poetry to the world at large. Translated by the Burmese poet and translator ko ko thett, edited by the British poet, scholar, and editor of the *Wolf* magazine, James Byrne, with an introduction written by me, *Bones Will Crow: 15 Contemporary Burmese Poets* was first published in the UK in 2012 by Arc Publications. This anthology won the prestigious Pen award, and was published this year in the US by Northern Illinois Publishing Press.

A direct result of this anthology is my recognition, internationally, as a contemporary Burmese /Myanmar poet. I was invited to read at the Parnassus International Poetry Festival in London in 2012, and this year, at the US Pen World Voices Festival in New York. I was also privileged to read my work in Singapore for the first ever Singapore-Myanmar Poetry event. I feel I have been lucky to earn a name in the awesome panorama of world poets because of this anthology, and finally, to have this wonderful opportunity to speak to you today. Thank you very much.