

Zeyar LYNN

Poems and prose

My History Is Not My History

I am already dead, I can say this unreservedly
It wasn't me who wrote my history
Eleven out of ten people don't know me
Historians have no idea about
My history written by historians
I have no souvenir whatever for sale
PhD scholars, journalists
They might have written my history (but I don't remember it)
No stone inscription
No tomb, no bone
Not even ash
I have not written my history
They have written it for me, those academics
They have written their own versions
What they have written were mythologies sprinkled with gold dust
How many sprinkles do I amount to in there
I wasn't aware of the death pit
They have written even my own death
Amid deaths and deader deaths
I was almost death untitled
A crippled death
Even the death wasn't genuine
Even in death I was exiled
They did not fully write my supporting documents
Even in death I did not have a residence permit
They have written my death
They have written my death in air
They have... they have... they have written my death in water
I read it again... my history
Misspellings, missed grammar
I don't even know how to pronounce the word 'vocabulary'
They have written my history
Then they have airbrushed me from history
My history has just begun
I am going to write my own history.

Sundays Luxuriant As Ever

Well, if that's not the case, let's say there comes a day
Like the day on which one seems to wonder
Whether one apprehends the event exactly as it happened.
Will that day erupt from the chest
Like a swift uppercut?
In other fables too, one may find such days
The size of one's belief.
New age yellow flowers sprout
Out of history's pure white anonymous skull.
The time has come to sit face to face and make a conversation.
Tender rust coating the interior
Needs chipping and hammering off the surface
Like that of an old sea-dog ship
In the sea that turned invisible on the land at the edge of the sea.
The obsessed table is made of *padauk*.

So smooth. An upturned palm
Nailed flat on the surface of the table.
Such figurative use maybe grisly
But that's how it really is.

(Like) Dark clouds carrying rain in the womb
(As if) a hero suddenly morphed in sunlight.
If it wasn't once upon a time
It has happened many a time.
Quickly shedding off clothes in a dingy hotel room
Air freshener hissing like a serpent enraged
Which pillow is the first shot fired after the declaration
And which, the declaration before the first shot?
The peep-hole in the wall
The stain of trauma in a refugee camp
Two bodies braided
In unabated flame ---
Like a 'friendly' during a ceasefire
No matter which side shoots
The ball into the net, children clap their hands in glee.
'Goal!!!!!!!!!!!!!!' ---- itself a product of war.

A piece of news comes in 10 different designs
That's the latest power. The ash contains
The child's last cry.
Searching for the culprit among facts is forbidden.
Circumstances blindfold the times.

No war should be wasted.

One returns from war in a loose uniform
Without knowing which side won
One swinging arm just wants to salute.
The scenery slyly changes the scene past the viewer.
How to react to one who haggles
For a little extra of the war?

In one place or another, the recovery
Of corpses continue. Amidst the frenzied buzz of flies
Turns a rotting corpse on its back
Scrutinizes what's left of the face to match it with a memory
Memory fades into nothingness.
On the multi-colored bougainvillea clump
The sun unabashedly dazzles and blooms.
One buttresses oneself with a fabrication
That the moonlight folded and kept safe in the pocket
Is still in the right place, heart-side.

Oh...exploited mountain ranges.
Urban composition in deep sleep seen from an open window.
A plastic pipe in a shriveled penis
Whatever beauty that still exists
A house lizard on the ceiling catching and eating insects.
Moonlight, as if there is still
Something left to explain, falls indelicately
On the uncovered pelvic bone.

I Am A Fire Engine Going Up In Flames

I am an Asiatic deer in danger of extinction. No, that electricity is no longer my power supply. Let's assume I'm a rare Irrawaddy dolphin. I will never inhabit the Yangtze. Have I become a brick in the Great Wall of China? In the brick-making kilns, my bones are hotter than heat. That's History with a capital 'H'. I don't want to be a nation in a bundle of donated clothes for undeveloped countries. Look how they make car bodies out of my ribs. Instead of fuel, I am gutter oil. I am a brand new banking industry. Ask your grandfathers and great grandfathers to come and use our services. I am ordinary pipe water advertised and sold as purified water. I am also the villages that got submerged under the enormous deluge officially known as 'progress'. I am a womb impregnated by capitalism going on a pleasure spree. I am the victimized masses in a time of social upheaval. I am a piece of memory stuck on the boot of dictatorship. I am the hymen of the young lady who was sold to the highest bidder at an auction. I am a strip of fried gourd immersed under the rice in the lunchbox of a girl factory worker. New nation building has chopped off most of my body parts. I know what I have to do to reconstruct myself. With the kind permission of bureaucratic red tape, of course. I am Xerox copies of modern constructions swarming like locusts. I am the magnanimous law as stretchable as a rubber band. If I am one person who was released, I am also the hundreds who remain. Here I had to

print my thumb. I poked my whole head into the camera without a mind's blink. This this this is your number, and so I become a number. I am the poisoned meat ball thrown to your guard dog. I am the urgent news of an impending natural disaster transmitted through poor connection. I am a forbidden sentence silent in the parliament. No, I can't be philosophical about not owning anything, not even myself. He who climbed to the very top stamped his foot on me every step of the way. Once, I picked up Aladdin's lamp, but the genie did not speak my language. The witch in a fairy tale was once Snow White who bit into a poisoned apple. I am the heroic neigh of the great horse ridden by Prince Charming coming to save the damsel in distress. No, let me correct that. I am the prototype of the great horse ridden by the great savior prince. Just like that, I can be annihilated. Even so, I am the sponge cells that rush to reunite as soon as they are obliterated.

25 November 2012

Roses

They are all around us, amongst us, within us
Alien, animate, intimate, innate
We're rose-driven as some Symbolists might say
May the roselight of my words brighten up your amygdala
A silent scent evoking a flapping of doves taking wing
A rose on one's forehead makes one an instant martyr
Democracy's rose in the sky Terror unleashed on the ground
Does the rose sing off-key? Does terror scent its spew?
Fly me to the rose and let me sing among the wars
A lunar dust as crazy as a moon-spurned rose lunges at my lungs
Forays into the rose as a space of encounter with the Other
My mother a rose from which I arose
The rose on the other shore opens my morning eyes to day
Oh... Rose, Thou art
Naked as the luminous star as natural as nudity
Only love does it signify?
Oh, shun the dune buggy that chugs of death, Oh... Apollinaire,
O'Hara, and Reverdy around this pocket, this lake that aches of
Rosism in poetry. The rose of simple eroticism.
A subliminal rose. A subway rose. A subculture rose.
A bicycle on the skyline towards the colonial sun. A subaltern Rose. A rose blooming in a malignant
cell. A subterranean rose.
City of wine and roses. Slums of woe and revolution. Waiting for Spring. A truckload of roses leaves a
trickle of rose blood. Unwashable, the call. 'Out, Out, damned spot.' Spring dictates.
The icon of democracy is always seen wearing roses in her hair.
In a bar called Prehistoric Rose, I met a poet dressed in groomwear
Who said he'd run away from his true rose, and that was his doom.
I do not NEED to write these lines
As the rose does
Not NEED to bloom.

Ancient Fiction

I'm sure you've already thought about this. How they are
Full of trickery and set up a flaming scaffolding of fabrications
Those huge clouds of smoke.
Burning down everything and growing fatter
Getting greedier gutting and glutting with arson rings
Huge clouds of smoke blacker than generations to come
Swallowing all combustible in their net of fire.
The wind is their accomplice
Like a comrade, a driving force, red wing, with contracts
Counting its benefits
Fresh water, sea water, dams, hydro-electric power, naval bases.
Fire engine went up in a blazing fire.
What if we take a step back? Will we see everything
Transparently and as clearly as we do

The Independence Monument?

Clouds of smoke, fumes of smoke, walls of smoke.
Smoke in all eight directions
And still dare say this is the best system?
Fire of greed, fire of anger, fire of ignorance, plain fire
The world too will be consumed by fire of wars.
You already know this too well
You pour kerosene over your body and you light up
They destroyed every wisp of smoke from your charred corpse.
The wind helps to blow every powder of your ashes away.
Some people even got burnt incidentally
Which makes me think of a novel read in youth
'Peaceful and tranquil rain'
I lit my cigarette with part of your remains, dude.
The papers say enemy headquarters now surrounded
Soon incendiary cluster bombs will rain down from the sky
Legs, arms, sentences, fragments all on fire
Together with humans, adults, children
Imagine bodies on fire running helter-skelter
What a scene! What a photo op!
Come on, love, let's be faithful to each other
Temporarily, before the crowd is dispersed
Let's make love madly till our ashes merge
Before being blown away.

Telephone

Hello, please may I speak to Ko Thu Way? Sorry, wrong number.
Hello, is that the Ministry of ...? Sorry, wrong number.
Hello, this is Jade and Gems warehouse. Could you please tell Big Brother that we have what he ordered in stock? Sorry, wrong number.
Hello, is that Party Headquarters? Sorry, you have reached a roadside foodstall.
Yes, the phone number is correct, but the recipient is wrong.
Hello, darling. Which 'darling' are you calling, please?
Don't kid me, darling. This is your sweet juicy pears. Don't say you've forgotten me so soon.
Please don't make me cry, darling. Why are you breaking my heart? Was it just a one night stand?
Sorry, wrong number. Oh, isn't that you, darling? But it's your voice. I'd know it anytime.
(God!) Wrong number, wrong number.
Hello, is the Venerable Chief Abbot available for a phone message, please?
I'm sorry the Venerable Chief abbot has passed away.
How could that be? It was only just now that he returned to his monastery.
Yeah, er, sorry. Wrong number. Yes, the number's correct, but it's my phone.
Where has this phone been before it came into my hand? Was it a carpetbagger before it came to me?
Has it just come to me for bed and breakfast? Its history trailing like a faithful dog.
How many hands has it passed through? How many exchanges?
What sort of business was it involved in? In which government department did it serve loyally?
In which clandestine deals did it take part in whispers?

If only it could talk, would it divulge all its secrets? Keep mum? Lie?
Keep lips sealed till executed?
In which networks did it have intercourse with other lines?
Did it have any infatuation with the communication media of some office's private line?
With what did it fool around, have an affair, fall deeply in love, or behave wantonly?
How deep has language infiltrated into its innocent memory of the heart?

Poetry is not like a phone call

The poet sends his message from one end and the reader receives it intact from the other end
Hears it word for word, understands every syllable, and shares the same emotion.

What rot!

Poetry is not made with language

Not through the language of language
Not outside of language unmediated by language
But within language written, composed, constructed, made, read,
Understood, felt, moved
Perhaps or perhaps not

Will this poem too reach the wrong person through the wrong line and
the wrong number?
Please forgive it if it does for it is not its fault
It's only that it is certain of its own self-knowledge
How has this little poem too traversed not just political, economic, social,
Cultural, literary, and means of living but through a complex web of interrelationships?
How is it still be-ing? How is it still relating?
If a phone line is tapped, one will hear a stream of language
Poetry is related to language, but it's not a phone

Hello, hello (Here it comes again)
Hello, yes, please hold

.....
.....

Tee tee tee tee tee tee tee

Translate from Burmese by the author

Sling Bag

Wherever he goes, in his sling bag
He carries his severed. If he has to shake hands,
He takes his severed leg out from the bag,
And touches it on the other person's hand
As he says 'Nice to meet you'
He must have gone through a lot of suffering
With that severed leg in his bag,
Though he still has his two legs intact.
When he needs reassurance, he'll insert his right hand,
Like a dead hand, into the bag slung on his right shoulder,
To feel the sinews and greasy slime of the severed leg.
That's how he recharges himself.
That's how his pride is uplifted; his self-confidence restored.
The severed leg serves as his pillow when he sleeps.
The severed leg is placed on the dining table when he eats.

(Is he married? Let's say he is.)
When he makes love to his wife,
The severed leg welds their two bodies together.
(Only then does he feel the hit, he says.)
The severed leg is his life, his past, his present, and
His future, he says. 'It's truth', he says.
'It's honesty', he says.
'It's just him', (says somebody else).
Someone who claims to be a childhood friend.
He too always carries a sling bag.

From the collection BONES WILL CROW
Translated from the Burmese by ko ko thett & Vicky Bowman

Cigarette

The spirit is weak and consists of cartilage, muscles, tissues, beliefs, and blood vessels. Through temporary smoke screens he made, we observed him. He seemed to be everywhere and nowhere except where he was, where we had placed him. Positioned him. Being to Nothingness.

His remaining concreteness was the ring-like muscular tube, a passageway for air, food, and liquid. Somewhere there was also a voice box. And a supple adam's apple. The materiality of his voice had become a matter of the state. The apple was his to swallow. A solid bamboo staff Khmer Rouge style. A single deft blow.

How did he tend to his being in the taut dryness of the throat? Was that why he relished each precious puff? Was he somehow possessed by that people's chain smoker of the little red book, Chairman Mao, or by Che, a sexy cigar between his revolutionary moustache and matching beard? Castro, the castrator of capitalist Cuba?

Did he still have teeth in his mouth? Did we still need to inspect his terms of mobility with his natural term of state-owned life? We see/saw him. We swing/swung him. Through the ideological smoke apparatus, we removed him from his world(view) and his comely radicals. (We pressured them till, under pleasure, they buckled and vaporized.)

'His lungs are his throat and his phlegm, his liver,' (mis)quoted one among us. Probably a poet with an MFA. How much truth did he inhale against how much false consciousness? (How to measure this exactly had always been a theoretical thorn.) Just as his blood flushed toxins from his brain, so too did we cleanse his dissidence from his erroneous thoughts. Imperialist lackey!

Impaled by his own smoke. Sociable, impulsive, risk-taking: traits of an extropolitvert. Not a body exuding deviance but molten fear absorbed through the alveoli. This much we hoped. And hope is no less a trigger sending sociological reactions in nerve endings. The ending would come soon.

We were merciful. We could surely vouch for that. What would a few more nanograms of vinyl chloride do to his already carcinogenic body? One thing was sure though; he would never die of lung disease. Nor German measles. Hell, no. This subject was a Burmese, (now known as Myanmar). Destructive element.

I still remember distinctly the way he crashed/crushed the still burning filter in the ashtray. A decisive behavioral outburst as if to claim 'No u-turn.' He must have severed his mind from his body. A final wisp of smoke. The way his body shuddered in a confused tremor: what to catch and what to let go. That was our special effect. We were just duty-conscious citizens loyally obeying orders. Our Pater Who Art in Patriotism. He who endeth and Thou Who Endureth.

Let Freud be the prime example, Sigmund, not Lucien. Official Report.
Cause of death: oral cancer due to relentless smoking.

Avignon Thandar 11th Street:

A Sketch of a Leading Artist of Myanmar Modernism

'Done any new paintings this week, U Khin Maung Yin?'
'Only one since I finished your portrait. Among that stack behind you.'

As was his custom, he had piled his paintings upright in reverse so that the paintings could not be seen. As I turned each painting, I saw a colorful one.

'That one, that one...' his voice gestured.

I pulled it out and stood it up against the pile. A painting in red, yellow, and blue. I noticed four vertical strips of blue.

'Isn't it lovely?' he asked.
'Yes, it sure is. Is it done?'

I noticed his signature at the bottom left hand corner of the painting. While I was sitting down on the floor having a good look at the painting, he said:

'There's a book on the table. It's in French, so I can't read it. I just looked at the paintings in it.'

I took the book from the low table. It was a thin book of about 30 pages. The word 'Picasso' was on the front cover. In it were Picasso's color plates.

'Hey, you know, there's a painting by Picasso with a French title.'

I looked at the painting I had taken out from the pile. The four vertical elements of blues stood out, or my mind seemed to focus on it and saw something vaguely familiar.

'Les Desmoiselles d'Avignon, isn't it?'
'Yeah....'

So saying, he got up from his chair and sat down on the floor. Dragging his buttocks on the floor, he started to move. I held his hand.

'Don't pamper me. Let me move on my own.'
'Tell me what you want. I'll get it for you.'

After a short silence, he said: 'I've forgotten what I wanted.'

He shifted himself back towards his chair, pulled himself up, and sat down, and gazed at the street outside. It was a hot afternoon and there was no one on the street. His house was once a school where he taught English to students living in the street. The students have now all grown up with children of their own. He had stopped teaching for a long time. People who passed by would still greet him 'Sayagyi' ('Respected Teacher').

I took out the bottle I had brought with me. I found a glass and poured myself a drink. He poured a glass of water from the water container near him. He drank from the glass and looked at his painting.

'You going to drink it neat? No water?'
'Yes, I like it neat. No water.'
'You'll die soon, then.'

I shrugged my shoulders. I remembered the many evenings I would come here to drink with him. It all seemed like a very long time ago.

'I have biscuits. You can have biscuits with your drink.'
'What? Biscuits? With my drink?'
'Heh, these are not sweet biscuits.'
'It's OK. Thanks. I'm fine.'

He held the doorframe and pulled himself upright. Then he called out to the teashop next door: 'Hey, somebody. A bottle of impure water, please.' A boy came and gave him a bottle of purified drinking water. 'Put it on the bill,' he said.

I thought he had ordered it for me. I said, 'I don't need it. The water you have is good enough for me.'
He said: 'It's not for you. It's for me.'

I opened the bottle top for him and filled the glass he held in his hand. He drank from it. I held up my glass.

'Cheers, U Khin Maung Yin.'

We touched glasses. When I was about to fill his glass with water again, he said:

'That's enough. You drink the rest.'

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I had visited him the last Friday. I saw that my portrait had been done.

'I named it 'Mandarin' because of the mandarin colored shirt you're wearing and because you look like a scholar-candidate taking the Chinese Imperial Exam.'

'You never title your paintings. Why this one?'

'I just wanted to. That's all.'

'Ok.'

'You like it?'

'Yes, very much. It's nice. Thanks.'

After a moment, I stepped outside to have a smoke. I had left my empty glass on the floor. I saw him leave his chair and drag himself on the floor. A while later, not hearing anything, I peeped at him. There he was, sitting exactly at the place I was sitting. In his hand was my glass. He sniffed it, and put it down on the floor. I turned toward the street before he could catch me watching him. After he was back on his chair again, and I had tossed my cigarette stub, I went back in pretending I had seen nothing.

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I looked at the 'Avignon' painting. I took a drink. Then I looked at the painting again. I felt I had to make some small talk.

'U Khin Maung Yin. I see horses in the painting. Now, who was it? Matisse? Renoir?'

He looked at the painting from his chair as if in deep concentration.

'No. Yes, it's Degas. His painting of horses. 'Horses at the Racecourse'. Yeah, that one.'

I had succeeded in digging out a nugget of gold secret from him. The painting echoed Picasso and Degas.

'You know, the other day I read an article in Newsweek in which the writer called Picasso a thief. He said Picasso stole the subjects and styles of past Masters.'

'That's not stealing. That's honoring.'

'I thought so, too. Even if the subject matter is similar, the way it's painted is so different.'

'That's right.'

'Now that there are shapes of women and horses in this painting, don't you feel something peculiar?'

'Nope,' he said, shaking his head.

'I mean, just last week you said you didn't like a painting you had just painted because there were some human shapes in it, and that you prefer only colors and abstracts.'

'That was last week.'

'Well, okay. By the way, your paintings look so different from one another in choice of colors, brushstrokes...'

'Yeah, I just paint as I feel. If I have some tubes of paint and a wish to paint, I get a painting.'

'Who was it, the other day, was saying your paintings are posted on the website for sale throughout the world?'

'Really? I have no idea. I know nothing about it. Speaking of sale, some time ago, a young woman came to look at my paintings. She asked me about the subjects of my paintings. When I said there are no subjects in my paintings, she asked me why they are called paintings when there are no subjects. I didn't say anything. I just told her not to ask anything unless she wants to buy them. My paintings are for sale. I want to talk with people who really want to buy my paintings. I don't need to discuss aesthetics with them. If the price matches, I will sell it. As simple as that. What's more important than this?'

I kept quiet. He was talking about some of the things that irritated him.

'U Khin Maung Yin, how shall I frame my portrait?'

'Choose a black one. Half-an-inch border. It must be black so that the orange color will be distinct. When you ask someone to frame it for you, make sure you have it accurately measured first. Only then you should stick the painting into the frame so that it fits tightly. Don't hammer with nails. I hate people hammering nails into paintings.'

'Yes, Ok. I will do as you say. By the way, your paintings become more elegant when they're framed as in exhibitions. Why don't you sell your paintings with frames?'

'I sell paintings, not frames.'

At that moment, two of his young helpers arrived to massage his arms and legs. I felt he was getting tired. My bottle too was empty.

'Put your bottle behind that wooden post. If people see it, they might think I'm drinking again.'

'No, it's okay. I'll take it back with me.'

'No, no. Leave it there behind the post.'

I was puzzled, but knowing him, it was better not to ask. I placed the empty bottle behind the post so that it would be out of view.

'U Khin Maung Yin, before I leave, could you please let me have this 'Avignon'?''

He became still. He stared at the painting for a long time.

'OK. It's yours.'

I took out an envelope full of money that would cover the cost of both my portrait and 'Avignon'.

'Here,....'

'No, no, no. Take it. I don't need payment from you.'

'No, U Khin Maung Yin, I insist. I want to pay for the two paintings, please.'

I put the envelope in the place where he hid his money. There, I found another envelope of money. I felt happy for him. I placed the two paintings face to face and prepared to leave. As he was sitting on his chair at the doorway, I had to walk past him, I kissed him on his cheeks. And then the ritual of leavetaking.

'U Khin Maung Yin, Bayboothee.'

U Khin Maung Yin, my beloved artist, said: 'Bootsan Bannerjee.'

Notes

1. The title refers to the street where U Khin Maung Yin lives, Thandar 11th Street, North Okkalapa, Yangon.
2. U Khin Maung Yin's movement has been seriously impaired due to a stroke he suffered some years ago.
3. Bayboothee Bootsan Bannerjee is an Indian(?)/Bangladeshi (?) writer and movie director U Khin Maung Yin admires.

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What is 'contemporary' in the 21st Myanmar/Burmese Poetry?

Introduction to the volume *Bones Will Crow* (koko Thett and James Byrne, eds., ARC: 2012)

There are three main 'understanding's and uses of the word/term 'contemporary' in current Myanmar Poetry scene, which also reflect the noticeable/notable changes in the country's poetry landscape of the new century, with the emergence of Language-oriented Poetry, Conceptual-oriented Poetry, Performance Poetry, and on-line poetry mingling somewhat uneasily with Khit Por (KP), or Mainstream Poetry. Teasing out the differences in the use of this contested term may throw light on the current situation of Myanmar Poetry as well as sketch out the trends and tendencies of the newly emergent poeties.

The first takes the neutral view of seeing the diverse poeties and poetics as existing at the same time, 'of the time(s),' so to speak. It is neutral in the sense that while it accepts the different styles and modes of poeties that have emerged, it overlooks the underlying oppositional and conflicting ideas about poetry and the struggle faced by the new poeties to be accepted as poetry. Its espousal of 'peaceful co-existence' of Khit Por (KP) /Mainstream Poetry and the non-KP poeties in general downplays the tension and the conflicts the latter had to face in nudging some poetic space from the dominant and dominating stance of the former, a struggle which is still far from over. For the past six years of this new century, there have appeared numerous articles and interviews in which poets and critics took sides concerning the issue of the 'legitimacy' of KP over the 'illegitimate' 'anti-poetry', especially of Language-oriented Poetry (LP) in the various literary magazines. After some grudging acceptance of LP, some poets and critics have come to call for a moderate, unbiased, view of seeing all styles and modes of poetry as equally valid and contemporaneous; hence, their use of 'contemporary' in Contemporary Myanmar Poetry.

The second view of 'being contemporary' is taken by KP poets, who want to represent themselves as 'contemporary', as poets who write 'of the time(s)' in both form and content, to distinguish themselves from the non-KP poets, especially the LP poets, whom they regard as 'stunt' writers and 'word-salad'

makers rather than serious poets engaging with the political issues of the day and age. However, although mainstream, they sense a threat to their 30-or-so years of supremacy in the poetry scene while also seeing the need to revitalize their art which has clearly become more and more standardized, repetitive, and stagnant. Indeed, KP poems in magazines became mere reproductions of earlier reproductions with no innovation in sight. Some younger KP poets even want to do away with the term KP and change it to 'Contemporary Poetry'. A case in point are two poetry books that came out in 2009: 'Some Khit Pyaing ('Contemporary' in Burmese) Poems' and 'Some Khit Pyaing Long Poems' (1) compiled by Moe Zaw, a staunch KP poet. Unfortunately, he did not define his use of the term in any way, thus prompting Aung Cheimt, a highly-respected and influential leading KP poet to retort:

"Is Khit Por Poetry still Khit Por Poetry? Or is KP no longer KP?...Since these two books of poetry are conspicuously titled 'Khit Pyaing' (Contemporary), does it imply a deliberate avoidance of the term 'KP'? The poems included in these two books are clearly KP...Are KP Poetry and Khit Pyaing (Contemporary) Poetry two different things?" (2)

Aung Cheimt surely has the right to question thus as he has dedicated his whole life to start, develop, and maintain KP. Perhaps sensing a distancing of younger poets from the term KP without necessarily going against it, it seems he was trying to sound out the views of the younger generation KP poets: if they are still writing poems in the KP mode, why call them 'Contemporary' instead of KP? Has KP become so outdated that it has to rename itself 'Khit Pyaing (Contemporary)'? Or for that matter, is KP (modern) not already contemporary? Why split hairs?

Some poets, especially remnants of the leftist People's Poetry, hold the view that 'serious' poetry was the KP mode, which engaged in social/political subjects of the time, that is, contemporary subjects, and hence, KP and Khit Pyaing, being synonymous, can be used interchangeably. What is important is the subject matter and since KP dealt with contemporary social/political issues, KP is Contemporary, and this Contemporary/KP Poetry is the only respectable poetry of the time. This seems to be an echo of Dagon Tayar, our Grand Old Man of Literature and Poetry, who famously said, 'Never mind the lack of rhyme, but stick to the ideology'. This was during the time, when in its origin, KP was a site of struggle between the Marxist-Leninist Poetry for the Masses advocates and experimental-innovative minded 'Modern' poets such as Phor Way, Aung Cheimt, Maung Chaw Nwe, Thukhamein Hlaing, Myay Chit Thu, and Thitsar Ni (3). In 1968, Maung Tha Noe, an eminent linguist and literary scholar, published his influential book of translations of Western modernist and romantic poets, 'Htinn Yuu Pin Yeik' or 'Under the Shade of the Pine Tree', which, some say, led poets like Aung Cheimt do do away with the rigid 4-3-2 rhyme scheme and revolutionize Myanmar poetry with the introduction of 'rhymeless poetry' or 'free verse' or 'blank verse'. In the same year, Mya Zin, another literary scholar, brought out his 'Manifesto of Modern (Burmese) Poetry'. The term 'modern sensibility' was then added by another noted poet and scholar, Minnn Hla Nyunt Kyuu. These three people, who were soon dubbed the 'Zin-Noe-Kyuu gang' by the People's Poets, are seen to have favored experimental and innovative invigoration of the poetry at that time.(4). It was Dagon Tayar who intervened and brought about a reconciliation between the leftist poets and the experimental-conscious poets, and Khit Por took on the term of the third poetry movement in Myanmar. (Personally, I lament the loss of the experimental wing of KP, who seemed to have obeyed Dagon Tayar's call for 'ideology', i.e., leftist view of poetry as a weapon for people's

emancipation. No doubt, it was the right decision vis-a-vis the oppressive regime of General Ne Win and his military-backed Burmese Socialist Programme Party. To the old guards of People's Poetry, 'contemporary' implies a veiled anti-government sentiment, and the term could be 'ideological' if the Soviet empire had not collapsed, the Cold War had not ended, The Berlin Wall had not come down, The Tiananmen massacre had not occurred, and Myanmar's 1988 pro-democracy movement had not been brutally crushed.

The third use of the term is truly contemporary in embodying the sense of 'most recent time', having appeared around 2003-2004. There was also a sense of breaking with KP on the one hand and the 20th century on the other. Undoubtedly, Zaw Zaw Aung, the leading proponent of postmodernism, helped to bring about a wind of change by writing about and explaining the major tenets of Post-Structuralism/Postmodernism. Lyotard, Foucault, Barthes, Derrida and other continental philosophers came to be heard of for the first time to the younger generation, who before knew only the Marxist luminaries. In poetry, the Russian Futurist Mayakovsky, the Chilean poet Neruda, and the East European trio of Popa, Herbert, and Holub, were the models before the appearance of Post-Soviet poets Prigov, Rubinstein, and Dragomoshchenko, the New York school of John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara, the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets/writers Bernstein, Perelman, Silliman, Andrews, and Hejninian, the Conceptualist Goldsmith, the 'Post-Language' poets, the Flarfists, the Nobel Laureates Miłosz and Szyborska, among others. Access to the internet was definitely a major cause for international poetry to enter the Myanmar Poetry scene, which previously had been cut off from the world at large. The UNESCO World Poetry Day became an annual event in the country.

What most distinguishes these 'contemporary' poetries, according to this third use of the term currently in Myanmar Poetry is the freedom to experiment with diverse poetic styles, modes, and even across genres. In a word, 'Contemporary' poetry is non-KP. It is not 'lyric' poetry. It is not the poetry of self-expression. After excessive, 'emotionally-drenched' mainstream poetry, it has turned somewhat 'cerebral', a poetry of ideas rather than expression of feelings. It is experimental, even avant-garde in the context of Myanmar Poetry. This has all been the direct result of 'the turn to language', Contemporary Literary Theory having come to play a large part in its inception. Collages of found language, extensive use of disjunctive and polyvocal strategies, catalogue or 'List' poems, prose poems, and 'hybrid' poems abound. This is what I would call 'Contemporary', this opportunity and practice of 'freedom of forms', this 'poetic spring' of Myanmar Poetry. Moe Way, Win Myint, Lu Hsan, Maung Day, Aung Piyit Sone, and the pemscool online poets are 'contemporary' in this sense.

However, the turn to experiment and innovation in form by the loosely-connected, non-movement, non-school, non-group 'Contemporary' poets does not in any way mean that they do not engage social and political issues. Far from being apolitical, as some hardline KP poets would accuse, the poems directly display their oppositional nature in the very formation and 'making' shunning the KP-Mainstream lyric, voice-centred, epiphanic-closure mode. This opposition to mainstream (read 'dominant') mode itself is 'political' in the Myanmar/Burmese Poetry context. Subversive sentiments seep through the lines, flicker in polysemic juxtapositions, and disappear into some 'safe' area of permitted space in the poem. The indeterminacy of such poems may be anathema to KP but these poems drive poets and readers alike to make their own meanings within the given poetic context. The

drawback is that such poems/poetries cannot be translated into English or any other language without doing damage to the aesthetic, the construction of free-ranging meanings, and the potential for different ways of readings.

So, the neutral use, the KP(modern) to Khit Pyaing (contemporary) name change, and the truly contemporary gush of freedom to experiment currently reflect the situation concerning 'contemporary' in 21st century Myanmar Poetry. Where is all this leading us? What are the clearly observable trends? One is the oppositional tactics being used by KP against the non-KP poetries in its attempt to reclaim its mainstream and dominant status and to discredit the latter. The usual oppositional terms are there: authentic vs. inauthentic, original vs. imitation, lived experience vs. theory-based, mastery of language vs. uncontrolled language play, poetic language vs. unpoetic language, coherent vs. incoherent, structured vs. chaotic, emotion vs. intellect, domestic/homegrown vs. foreign/imported, organic vs. gimmick, accessible vs. difficult; the list can go on. However, some well-known KP poets such as Maung Piyt Min and Khin Aung Aye have incorporated some non-KP techniques, creating interesting 'hybrids'. Khin Aung Aye's most recent book of poetry titled "54 lines dictated by a pure mind"(2011) is a distinct departure from the KP mode.

Another trend is that of moving away from the term 'poetry' and towards 'writings.' Since the poems of the younger poets are dismissed as non-poetry, these younger poets are calling their poems 'writings.' One such poet, a younger poet in his late 20s, Lunn Sett Noe Myat, called his latest book of poems "Written Lines and Composed Sentences" rather than poetry, deliberately to demarcate his 'writings' from the mainstream KP poems. One of his poems/writings, 'These are Writings', ends with 'These are / not (poetic) compositions anymore (these are) writings such enjoyable feeling such sensation.' (5) This move in a way signals the turn from 'expression' to 'construction', from using 'transparent' language to write expressive lyrics to becoming more aware of the mediating and constituting role of language and exploring ways of constructing poems that also 'bare the device.'

A related effect of the KP-Contemporary Poetry conflict is that of some KP poets deliberately making their poems more accessible to the general reading public as a reaction against 'difficult,' 'experimental,' 'theory-based,' 'intellectual,' 'elitist' non-KP poems. Ironically, the two chief KP poets 'simplifying' their poems are Aung Cheimt and Thukhamein Hlaing, our leading Modern (KP) poets. An example is Aung Cheimt's poem, 'Hamburger Eater':

Hamburger Eater

So, you are hamburger, are you?

So, you are hamburger, are you?

So, you are hamburger, are you?

So, you are hamburger, are you?

(Aung Cheimt. ICON magazine. Sept. 2010)

If such a poem had been written by anyone of lesser stature, it would surely not be considered poetry at all. But, Aung Cheimt is Aung Cheimt, and if Aung Cheimt wrote it, it must be poetry. Period. It just means that non-KP, contemporary poetries will have to try harder to be accepted as poetry, as 'new' poetry, as 'poetry of the time'. Aza Aza fighting.

Notes

1. [ref]

2. [ref]

3. Thitsar Ni, a respected and well-known poet, critic, and writer, published his collection of articles 'Clarification of Modern Poetry and the Evolution of Myanmar Poetry'

In a bid to situate Modern Poetry (a term he consistently uses instead of Khit Por) in the historical development of 20th century Myanmar Poetry. He deems himself the pioneer of postmodern poetry with his book 'Arrow of Myinsaingthu' first published in 1978 and again in 2006. In the foreword, he wrote that he had planted the seed of postmodernism in Myanmar Literature as early as 1974. The poems included consisted of calligrammes and visual poems. Recently, he has also come up with a book startlingly titled 'The End of Poetry.'

4. "Fed up with all (these) clichés and hackneyed phrases of Socialist Realism, a search for new poetry began in earnest in the late 1960s. The veteran poet of Khitsam (Khit San) fame Min Thuwun ran a weekly poetry workshop at his home in the university campus. Mya Zin, a translator who usually renders Burmese poetry into English, and Maung Maung Nyunt a.k.a. Nyunt Kyu (Min Hla Nyunt Kyuu), a poet and a language scholar, wrote articles on modern poetry. I myself published an anthology of translated verse (English, European, and American, Romantic, as well as modernist), the first of its kind in the country. One anthology followed another. A great hullabaloo ensued --- those who opposed anything modern and were self-appointed custodians of old values railing against those who advocated modernity. Against all such odds modern Burmese poetry was embarked on a new course."

---'Modern Burmese Poetry' article by Maung Tha Noe in Moe Ma Kha, 2008 October. moemakha.org.

5. At Lunn Sett Noe Myatt's book launch, a veteran leftist poet and editor, Maung Sein Ni, called on Lunn Set to carry on the fine tradition of 'reflecting' the times in his poems, while I addressed the hope that he, and the poets of his generation, would carry on 'experimenting' in poetry and write of the 21st century. Thus, publicly, drawn were the lines between KP and Contemporary Poetry.
