

Maung DAY

**A Rotting Whale in a Tiny Room: The Issues of Censorship
in Contemporary Burmese Literature**

Fish are fish. Rivers are rivers. Mountains are mountains. And cacti are cacti. They self-publish their works and are not censored.

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A character in a Burmese novel called *Sticks on Fire* is a gay boy mocked for wearing lipstick and women's clothes. His family suffers from shame. A girl living next door is also gay and mocked for having a man's haircut and wearing men's clothes. She is a disgrace for her family. The two families plot a marriage for their two abnormal children. The boy and the girl go through a series of awkward and painful situations together, and finally realize they aren't meant to be gay for gay is not normal. The story ends with a happy wedding with the two characters becoming their normal selves, meaning a normal boy and a normal girl. And this book is a comedy. Somebody made a movie based on this novel and people liked it. They laughed themselves sick in the cinema. Meanwhile so many gay men and women in the country move further into the closet with fright and cold sweats.

Ni Ni is a twenty-year-old girl full of life and colour. One night she came back home late from her work and got attacked by two men. She was raped and seriously injured. Her neighbours thought that served her right. "She likes to wear hot pants and make-up. So this is the price she pays, that little slut," they said. This kind of comment outrages some women who have started to really dislike the prejudice and self-censorship imposed on them by the society.

Mi Kaday is a young female poet who wrote a poem about an uncle molesting his young niece. She gave the details of the nightly horror the young girl has to go through: the cold hand moving under her skirt; a greasy face looking at her with brutal hunger of some sort; and the weight of fear on her mind. Mi Kaday posted this poem on Facebook and met with jeers and anger from Facebook users—both male and female. Many of them viciously attacked her with comments for writing such sexual matters so openly.

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Over the past 50 years, the military government had censored everything that they considered was "against the Burmese cultural values" and "against the regime." The quasi-civilian government that came to power in 2011 lifted the censorship and closed down the Press Scrutiny and Registration Department. But it does not mean that censorship is abolished entirely. There are still governmental mechanisms that scrutinize publications, film screenings, and art exhibitions. The only difference is the censors just stopped calling themselves 'censors.' Another form of censorship comes from the people. Poets and writers who in their writings show their sympathy for the persecuted religious and ethnic minorities are likely to get abuses from the majority Buddhists. If they criticize the actions of fundamentalist monks and even Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, they will be targeted by Ma-Ba-Tha, a group of nationalist monks, that were instrumental in establishing ban on interfaith-marriages. This has forced poets and writers to resort to self-censorship. With the rise of social media, a lot of young Burmese writers and poets have been trying to publish their works that challenge the traditional literary norms. Their works often upset

the readers with their use of sexual references. Female poets and writers are also trying to tell their side of the story in this extremely patriarchal society. Their works have been responded with outrage from the majority of the readership, and many local publishers and magazines have tried to stay away from them.

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Burma is a very tiny room and the walls have numerous eyes watching everyone who lives inside, while the sexist, racist, and nationalist narratives float around in the air like a rotting whale.

End.