



Literary Landscapes

Literary Landscapes is a monthly column by Indra Wussow, a writer, translator and director of the Sylt Foundation.

How does the transformation of a society really work? This is one of those incredibly intriguing but almost unanswerable questions. What makes the process successful and what hinders a true change?

Some special people and their positive attitudes can make a difference. While I am once again staying in Yangon, I experience the power of stamina and open-mindedness through the minds, lives and works of artists.

It is a Sunday afternoon in one of the many parks in Yangon. Close to the harbour, this part of the city was neglected for many years but there is renewed interest and the neighbourhood's housing, which is still affordable, has become popular again.

Alongside young couples, who sit behind umbrellas so that other people do not see them kissing (which is considered very rude in Myanmar society) and children playing on the lawn, a group, mostly made up of young people, gather. It is time for a major poetry reading, with ten poets reciting their works. A well-known band is performing too.

The large audience is as excited as the poets involved. They have been sitting patiently on the lawn, waiting for the event to start, for the past hour.

As I am waiting, I start a conversation with one of the older poets. He is very excited about the event. 'Look, before the change, it was not possible to gather here and do an event like this. There would have been police, you had to be careful what to say and what to read and events like this were considered subversive and dangerous.'

His generation, today's 50 to 70-year-olds, experienced the brutal dictatorship and its relentless methods to keep resistance and dissent silent and unheard. Their fight for freedom of expression and human rights saw many of this generation's fearless writers and poets imprisoned during their lifetime.

One of the younger poets performing is 31-year-old lawyer Kyi Thar Phone Myint or Di Lu Galay, his pen name.

His generation is young enough to hopefully make a real change happen, but still old enough to have grown up in a difficult time, under a harsh system. It is his generation that could, for the first time, openly reflect on the wounds of the past and make them the starting point for investigating new ideas and a new social utopia.

'Myanmar is still in a hybrid condition. It has not changed much as yet. People overrate the amount of change. The new malls and the consumerism do not mean that there is more freedom involved,' says Kyi Thar critically.

Kyi Thar grew up in the 1990s in the small town of Thandwe in the Rakhine State in the west of Myanmar. With his love and passion for reading, he felt very alone in a place like this. There was a public library, though, and in it, he found everything that he was longing for: books, literary magazines and even foreign translations that made the outside world a major part of his life experiences. Later, after the first cautious opening of the country, tourists began to visit Myanmar's beaches and through them, Kyi Thar began to learn English.

It is this dichotomy of the isolation of his own life and the magnitude of opportunities introduced through literature that informed his own writing. Kyi Thar started writing as a young boy and wrote his first poem at the age of ten. It was a lonely venture that he was not able to share with anyone.

After finishing high school, Kyi Thar came to Yangon to study law and to share his poetry. Here he was able to talk about literature, to read, to write essays and to study the interfaces of literature and life. Here he became Di Lu Galay, the poet whose work has been published extensively and who has been engaged in major initiatives to support young poets, to build networks and to enable intellectual debate about art and writing.

Being a careful and critical observer, Di Lu Galay's poetry is recognised for his meticulous use of language, his



Take a Good Aim at Your Enemy

empathy for the human plight and a deeply rooted sympathy for the outsider. His poems often animate a surrealist collection of many different kinds of curios. Objects, people and animals all become ghosts in a ghastly awkward environment that they have been mistakenly alienated from. An inner wasteland whose void is filled with fear, anger, violence and impotence.

'I chose to be a poet but the lawyer role chose me, so I try to combine both roles and as it is they both influence one another,' Di says and points out that his accuracy of language and his sensitivity for situations and their consequences are of major importance for both of his professions.

The freedom he had experienced, if only theoretically, in the literary works that he read during his adolescence, ingrained in him an understanding for the necessity of human rights and social justice. This is a fight he is dedicated to as a lawyer, trying to make a difference and trying to change the social and political landscapes of his country.

The absurdities and anxieties of this lawyer life and experience, on the other hand, became the starting point of a truly Kafkaesque search for truthfulness, humanity and justice through the means of poetry.

Di Lu Galay is surely an important writer of his generation and when he performs in the park, his older colleague, who is still sitting next to me, is thoroughly impressed by his performance. 'It makes me proud that our literary fight for freedom, which made us suffer so long, brought such gifted young poets to life... It shows us that our sacrifice was worth it and that we as a country are on our way to a better future.' CF

A guy in my neighborhood died the other day. He had little spats with his neighbor for years. After hearing the news, his neighbor cried And said: It's me next, my friend.

In boxing, both the winner and the loser Will be asked to leave the ring in the end.

Time and again, I wake up on battlefields, Surrounded by dead bodies. I wake up with a great sense of loneliness, And survival has become completely tiring. In the end, battlefields always bend like rainbows.

You know a crow when you see one Because a crow will always be a crow. But when you know someone to be your enemy, He is never your enemy.

Baby, this hand, which is touching you right now, Has failed to keep its hold on human civility The same way your laughter has eluded Public decipherments. We look at each other. In our eyes, smoke from gunpowder Which I call 'adversities of life' Falls like red flowers from a Flamboyant tree. I take pride in this art of happiness.

Di Lu Galay
Translated from the Burmese by Maung Day

"ငှာ ရန်သူ ကို သေခွာ မှီနပ်ကြံပေါ့တဲ့"

ဟိုနေ့က အိမ်နီးနားချင်း တစ်ဦးသေတယ် သူ့နဲ့ နှစ်ပေါင်းများစွာ ရန်ဖြစ်နေ့က အိမ်နီးချင်းက ဝိုက်တယ် "မင်းပြန်တော့ ဝါပေါ့တဲ့"

လက်ပေ့ စင်ဆိုတာ ဘယ်သူနဲ့နဲ့ နှစ်ယောက်လုံး စင်ပေါ်က ဆင်းရတော့

လူတစ်ယောက် ဝါ တစ်ယောက်ထဲ ဖွင်းစရာ စစ်မြေပြင်မှာ သေဆုံးသွားကြ သူများကြားက ဝါ အခါဝါ ပြန်ထလာခဲ့ တဲ့ အထီးကုန်နဲ့ နဲ့ စစ်မြေပြင်ဟာ သင်္ဘောတစ်ခုလို ကွေညာတာ ပြီးဆုံးပြီ

တိုက်ခန်း ကို တိုက်ခန်းမှန်း သိသည့်တိုင် တိုက်ခန်းကတော့ တိုက်ခန်းပဲ ရန်သူဆိုတာတော့ ရန်သူမှန်းသိရင်ကို ရန်သူ မဟုတ်တော့ပါဘူး

နှစ်လေးရေ ...မင်းကိုခတ်ထားတဲ့ လက်ဟာ လူ့ ယဉ်ကျေးမှု က အမြဲ ကွဲထွက်သွားမိ မင်းရယ်သိတာ အများသား အမိဂြိုဟ်ကနေ အမြဲ ချောထွက်သွားမိ ဝါတို့ အပြန်အလှန် ကြည့်တဲ့ အကြည့်မှာ လောကဓံ အမည်ရှိ လမ်းခွေ မှားက စိန်ပန်းလို့ နီနီရဲ့ရဲ့ တစ်ဖွဲ့ ခြေကွာ... မှီကွဲမြဲမြဲ အတတ်ကြောင့် ဝိုက်ယူရပါတယ် ။

ဒီလူကလေး