



Literary Landscapes

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

Myanmar is a country best known for its fierce dictatorship and the heroic fight of Nobel Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi to liberate her country.

After the dark years of oppression this multi-ethnic country, with its 52 million people, is in a transition to something new. Even though the parameters of this new dispensation are not yet clear, a more just and democratic state is still under threat.

Aung San Suu Kyi, whose National League of Democracy won the last election, once said, 'It is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it.'

And the fear of violence, of revenge of the oppressed, is a topic of major importance in the country's path to a peaceful transition.

The arts will be an important sector to influence how society will deal with the change and the different aspects of liberation, reconciliation and the departure to new ideas of life.

After so many years of censorship and the fear of imprisonment for any form of criticism, the arts need a renaissance to become a motor to introduce ideas, topics and artistic experiments to a broader audience.

The change in Myanmar also brought about a bigger international interest in the country and therewith a broader interest in its art and literary scenes and how their contribution might also change the foreign perception of what is happening in the country.

Last year, the young Burmese (the Burmese are the biggest ethnic group in Myanmar) poet, Han Lynn was writer-in-residence of the Sylt Foundation in Johannesburg and explained, in a literary event at the Goethe Institut, it is still difficult for a writer to be heard and to be published. Lynn also said that many art institutions are still very much formed and influenced by the old structures.

Han Lynn is just 28 years old and belongs to a new group of young and dynamic poets and writers who have

established their own structures, events and ideas. Their poetry events and initiatives are highly successful, especially among the young people. As, according to official numbers, more than 55 per cent of the population are under 30 years old, one can imagine what potential these young people hold for creating a future where the arts can flourish.

Times of transition are characterised by many uncertainties, dramatic changes and social disintegrations. They form an experimental playground for artists who can no longer rely on the dissolving structures of the ancient regime. There is the necessity to build new structures, new platforms and open up to new ideas.

Han Lynn and his three Burmese colleagues were very aware that relying on the old publishing sector in Myanmar was not possible, and understood that the way out of isolation would mean introducing the work of Burmese writers on an international platform.

'To start an English online literary journal had been our dream for a long time. It was what we were always talking about. Since it was so difficult to start one in Burma, we were not able to do anything for it for some time,' says Han Lynn about the difficult beginning of their highly appreciated new online magazine, *Be Untexed*. The first edition was launched in February 2016 and is a milestone in offering young writers and poets from Myanmar the possibility of publishing their works and sharing them with readers in the country and abroad.

'When I came back to Yangon from my residency in Johannesburg, I contacted my poet friends: web developer Nyan Lynn, graphic designer Nyi Sane, and writer/translator Phyu Hnin Phway. We bought a domain, made the site, collected the local and oversea works, and finally published the journal. Only we are the founders. We made the journal on our own. Contributors are much appreciated. And as far as we know, *Be Untexed* is the very first English online literary and visual art journal of Burma.'

The four editors of the magazine have a clear idea about their important project. 'Burmese literature foremost deals with the language barrier. Sans networks. Sans platforms.'

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This language barrier led them to choose English as the language of the magazine. This opens the publication to international readers, writers and allows them to learn more about writing in the languages of Myanmar.

It also offers local poets and writers the important chance to be heard by an international audience.

'Our intention is quite simple. Burmese literature and visual arts deserve more and more international recognition. We would like to make a platform for writers and artists here, especially youths. It will be good for overseas writers too. If the journal didn't exist, only a handful of Burmese work would have been seen by the international literary world. Network is extremely important.'

And, the networking that is happening through this magazine is the perfect chance to reach out to other literary worlds and make them part of the Myanmar experience. The first edition saw works by South African poet Phillippa Yaa de Villiers, whom Han Lynn met during his time in South Africa, and Chilean poet Enrique Winter. The second issue of this exciting quarterly was launched in May with contributions by South African writers Niq Mhlongo and Charl Pierre Naudé; South African painter Jaco van Schalkwyk contributed artworks.

Be Untexed is an incredibly experimental and crucial discussion platform that enables a long term conversation of artists and writers with each other and a new audience. It will be exciting to see how this network is growing and changing literary and artistic perceptions.

South African pianist Jill Richards will be the first artist-in-residence in Yangon and will travel to Yangon in July to work together with local poets and musicians.

We can be sure that an amazing project will be born that also finds its way into this new magazine and further to the stages in Yangon, Johannesburg and elsewhere. **CF**

www.beuntexed.com

