

INTERVIEW
&
POETRY
OF



U TIN MOE

One of the country's leading writers and a Poet Laureate of Burma, U Tin Moe has published over 30 books. Born in 1933, he began writing poetry and essays in 1959 and has won numerous literary awards throughout his career. U Tin Moe became involved in the pro-democracy movement during 1988. As a result, he was imprisoned in Insein jail from 1991 until February of 1995. All his published works are banned in Burma. U Tin Moe left the country in April of 1999 and currently lives abroad.

The following interview was aired on Radio Free Asia (RFA) in September 2000, and conducted by RFA correspondent Dr. Kyi May Kaung. The interview and poetry were translated for Burma Debate by Dr. Kaung. It appears here with the permission of RFA.

Sobs

An intake of breath
A sliver of glass
Old decades of years
cannot consider
In these years the bees cannot
make honey the mushrooms
cannot sprout
All the fields are out of
crops Dry.

The mist is damp
The storm is dim
The dust rising in clouds.
Along the road where
the bullock cart
has traveled.

Encircled by thorns
the *hta-naung* tree its trunk
cat's-claw scratched is trying
to bloom.

It does not rain.

When it does – it's not enough
to soak the earth.

In the monastery at
the edge of the village

bells
are not heard. If they are
they do not enter the ears
blissfully

There are no novices
orange-clad
zilch of sounds of young
voices
reciting the scriptures only the
kappii/a attendant
with his
shaved head falls between the
pillars and the columns of the
building.

The earth doesn't dare
to put forth fruit
It abandons all
and looks at me
at once feeling embarrassed
and frightened as if she
cannot talk.

When will the sobs change
and the bells ring sweetly again?

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Interview with

DR. KYI MAY KAUNG • *When did you start writing poetry?*

U TIN MOE • I first started writing poetry at about age 15 or 16. I would write and then try sending out my compositions to magazines. My main influence was reading Minthuwan *The bye nyo*. That gave me the desire to write poetry. As for how to write, I learned to compose poetry at the university. We also had selected prose samples and examples of poetry to read in [the] monastery.

I like reading historical poems, also *khitsati* poetry (contemporary poems of the colonial period). As far as contemporary work, I take great pleasure in reading the poetry of Dagon Ta Yar and Kyi Aye. Now, poetry is my main pursuit and obsession.

DR. KYI MAY KAUNG • *Have you written prose, too?*

U TIN MOE • I have written some short essays, also articles about literature for newspapers. Later on I had these essays compiled and published as *The Seven Stars*. And I've written a few short stories. I could say the genres in which I am most comfortable are essays and poetry.

DR. KYI MAY KAUNG • *When did you first consider yourself to be a poet?*

U TIN MOE • I didn't dare to call myself a poet for quite some time. It's not so easy to call oneself a poet, but in 1959 – while I was at Mandalay University – I brought out my first poetry collection. This collection was called *Poems of the Glass Lantern*. When I published this collection I was quite tentative; I had quite a bit of trepidation. In those days you didn't publish a poetry collection just like that. Peer pressure was quite strong. Saya Zawgyi, Saya Minthuwan, Ngwe Tar Yi, Daw

Nu Yin, Min Yu Wei – there were very few real poets. But I took a chance and tried publishing my poetry and this little poetry book won the National Poetry Prize of the Burma Translation Society, which had been founded by U Nu. After that I had more confidence and courage and I was able to keep writing poetry consistently.

DR. KYI MAY KAUNG • *How many poems have you written?*

U TIN MOE • Well I haven't counted them, but I write poetry all the time, even when I am traveling. And also when I was living in Rangoon. Whether I got permission to publish from the junta or not, I myself was continuously writing poetry.

DR. KYI MAY KAUNG • *Do you have time set aside to write?*

U TIN MOE • In the past I never had time specifically set aside to write – I could "write" as I went about my work, as I walked about, and so on. Then the first opportunity I had, I would sit down and use that little piece of inspiration to write a poem.

But now, the mornings have become my time for writing poetry – when I first get up, around 5 am. During the day, everything I see or feel gets stored up in my brain and then I write it down as poetry.

DR. KYI MAY KAUNG • *Has your style or subject matter changed over time?*

U TIN MOE • It has. When I was younger I wrote about my village, my neighborhood, about the place I came from. About upper Burma – the customs, the pagoda festivals. About harvesting peanuts. I was born and grew up in Taungtha Township – so I wrote about it with a sense of great affection. But as I grew older and more educated, [my] world

U Tin Moe

New Pages

With one great sigh
so early in the morning
I heave myself out
of bed.

Among the skyscrapers that hit the clouds
the car horns going *pipi pipie*
the trains full of people *la sisie*
the world that stays current with the age
with rapid rat feet
I have to find a place
where
I can reside
and be safe.

Find my own cool pot
of village water, on
a stand for strangers, by the roadside
Ye kyan sin.

Only in old age
when infirmity is catching up with me
do I have to undertake
this long journey
of many steps.

On yesterday's pages
I wrote out the history
so many instances of
so many mistakes
how bitter the taste
of all those mistakes.

Among the ruined temples
of Pagan the ox cart wheels' axles
make a squeaking
sound.

Here, the car engines cough
into action, in an airplane (have arrived
at the edge of the continent of
North America.

Will I be able
old and alone as I am
to change the course of history
to edit the past
how will I manage to do
all
this.

But old as I am
I still have the unrended flag
of my heart's spirit still
waving undaunted.

I can raise up my spirits.

Holding my hand
a lantern of light
drinking a potion to keep me
forever young, I go again to battle singing
a song
of my own
devising.

That sigh that is let out
it's not
the sign of a deep depression
it is only
the swish of another page turning
another page
of my own and my county's
dark history.

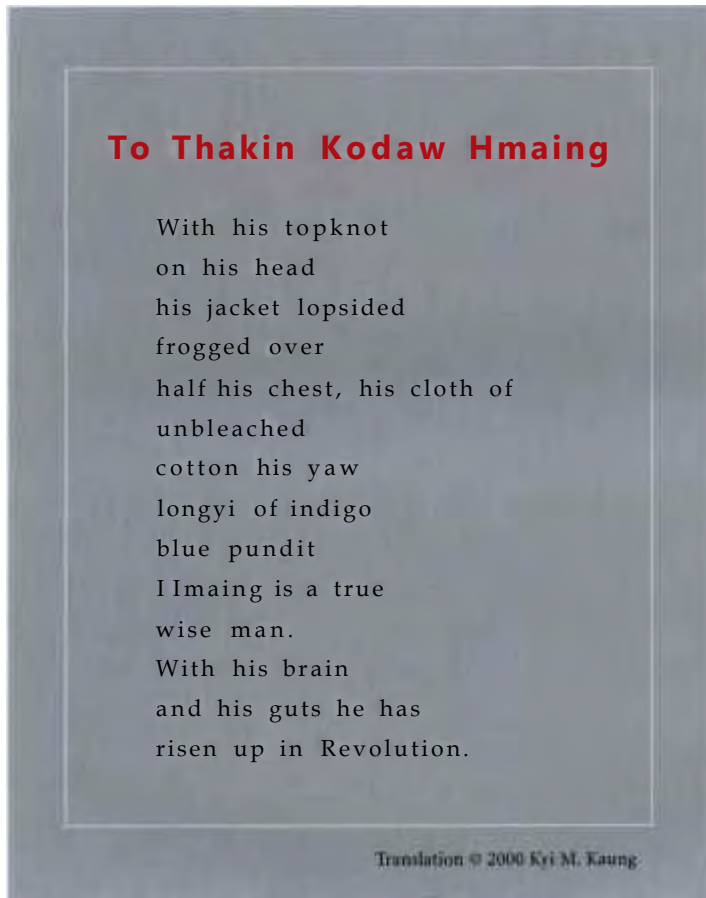
This poem was recently composed by U Tin Moe and is published for the first time in Burma Debate.

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Interview with

expanded. I started to write not only about village and rural life in Upper Burma, but about the life of the majority, about the life experiences of all the people of Burma. I wrote about politics too. All this started to become very interesting to me.

wrote the most poems because of these feelings. And till now I want to be free. I have the desire for freedom. I value freedom and peace. I want my country to develop and be prosperous. Because of these thoughts I have been writing more since 1988, and of course the subject matter has been changing.



DR. KYI MAY KAUNG • *Do you have a favorite among your poems?*

U TIN MOE • Well, I don't really have a favorite poem – it's rather hard to say. There are quite a few poems, and it's not that I like some more than others, but the poem that was presented for the 10th grade (standard) curriculum, *To Grandfather Thakin Kodaw Hmaing (Ah Hpo Thakin Kodaw Hmaing)*, I liked quite a lot.

Also the poems I wrote after 1970 – in the seventies – about 1972, *The Desert Years*. I don't know if they are good or not good, but yes, there are certain poems I like better than others.

DR. KYI MAY KAUNG • *You have devoted a portion of your creative energy to composing children's poetry. Do you have any particular inspiration in pursuing this genre?*

U TIN MOE • Yes, I have been able to write quite a bit of children's poetry. My mentors in this were Saya Zawgyi and Saya Minthuwun. For me, these two fine gentlemen are the two great poets whom I hold in the deepest respect. I grew up with their poems and I like their work so much. Minthuwun's "Younger brother get up, dawn's bright beams are here" or his poem "The seller of flowers" or poems like:

*In the months ofWasoe, Wagaung
The waters will flood
And let us pick up
Ripe Thabye fruit*

Before 1988, I did not write much that could be said to be political, but after the mass pro-democracy movement that started in 1988, politics became a part of the lives of the people of Burma. And so I, as one man, one person, amongst the people of Burma – I also wanted to be free. I was dissatisfied with the oppression. I do not like being bound up. I also wanted to breathe the zephyrs of freedom, the little fresh breezes. And in 1988,1

U Tin Moe

I always feel that Saya Minthuwun's children's poems are so pure and clean, so full of the fresh breath of *metta*. And so I, too, felt like I wanted to write such clean and wholesome poems for young children. I kept Minthuwun's work as my model, my yardstick of excellence. And I started to write children's poetry myself. I have published several collections of children's poetry. But I began to feel that I could never really measure up to Saya Minthuwun's standards of purity and transparency.

money for food and necessities for the one in prison and to earn that money. They have to struggle so hard. The life of the whole family changes, even if only one person, one family member, is imprisoned. It gives pain and suffering to the whole family.

DR. KYI MAY KAUNG • *How old were you when you were arrested?*

U TIN MOE • I was 58 or 59.1 am now 66.

DR. KYI MAY KAUNG • *Do you have plans to write about your prison experiences?*

U TIN MOE • Yes, I do, but I went through so much in prison and had so many difficult emotions, that I haven't yet written specifically about being imprisoned. If I were really going to write about it, it could be divided into categories such as: prison and students, prison and the clergy, prison and the literary community, prison and politicians, and so on. There is so much to talk about. Prison and the *yebet* camps [special prison camps]. Yes the *yebet* camps. It breaks my heart to talk about these camps. It is all so pitiful. I doubt if even during the feudal times or the middle ages it was that bad. Only when I saw it myself, did I believe it. People suffer so much.

To be imprisoned. It's not just the one person who is arrested, but it's as if the whole family were incarcerated. There is so much anguish and trouble. Not only does the family lose the support of the one person in prison – and it's worse if that person is the principal "ricewinner" and the family depends on him – but the family has to send *htung win sar* or

Miss Red with Little Umbrella

Gracefully she comes
with her little umbrella.
Come on over come on over
Teacher is calling.

With her head held up at an angle
stridently she sings
recites her lessons In her
excellent
recitations
Miss Red
is always
First.

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