<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Author</strong></th>
<th>Zawgyi</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Article Title</strong></td>
<td>A Study of the Rise of the Burmese Novel</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pagination</strong></td>
<td>p. 1 - 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Annotation</strong></td>
<td>Historical analysis of the Myanmar novel. The first two Myanmar novels appeared in 1904. &quot;Maung Yin Maung Ma Me Ma&quot; by U Hla Gyaw (1866 - 1920) and &quot;Maung Hmaing&quot; by U Kyee (1848 - 1908). This new literary form advanced the concept of being truthful to life and feelings as inherent to the novel.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Subject Terms</strong></td>
<td>1. Myanmar Fiction - History</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Key Words</strong></td>
<td>1. Myanmar Fiction - History</td>
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A STUDY OF THE RISE OF THE BURMESE NOVEL*

by

U THEIN HAN**

In the year 1904 (1966, B.E.) there appeared two Burmese novels - Maung Yin Maung - Ma Me Ma by U Hla Gyaw (1866-1920) and Maung Hmaing by U Kyee (1875-1908). In this paper it is proposed that the appearance of these two novels be regarded as a milestone in the history of Burmese literature in that they introduced a new literary form. This new literary form was none other than the novel, with its inherent concept of being truthful to life and feelings, and this new form of writing made an inroad into the pre-dominantly semi-religious literature of old Burma.

It is a well-known fact that with the rise of Western influence in Asia from the 18th century onwards, some of the Asian men of letters have been attracted by Western literature. In particular the novel played an important role in the shaping of modern Asian literature. Thus in the 18th century novels in Bengali and Assamese followed in the footsteps of the translations of Pilgrim's Progress and Robinson Crusoe, while the Chinese novel followed the lead of the translations by Lin Shu of some of the works of Hugo, Dumas, Dickens, Tolstoy and others. Also the emergence of the Japanese novel may be traced to an essay in Japanese entitled "The Essence of the Novel" by Tsubouchi Shoyo who was a famous Japanese Shakespearean scholar. Therefore the Burmese novel which appeared in the early 20th century is just a belated contribution to the general pattern of the rise of the novel in contemporary Asian literature, because Burma was favoured only in the last half of the 19th century by such conditions as the rise of a new peasant-proprietor class in Burmese Society, the introduction of printing presses and Western education, and these factors contributed towards the emergence of this new literary form.

Before the publication of Maung Yin Maung - Ma Me Ma there appeared in 1902 a Burmese translation of Defoe's Robinson Crusoe by U Po Zaw, and in the same year another translation of it was made by B.P. Latt and prescribed for use in schools by the Education Department.*

* Presidential Address delivered at the Annual General Meeting of the Burma Research Society held on the 26th February 1968.


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However it appears that these two translations failed to awaken among Burmese authors an appreciation of the concept of the modern novel. It was only after the publication of *Maung Yin Maung–Ma Me Ma*, that *Maung Hmaing* the first true Burmese novel appeared on the scene with all its virtues and defects. We should therefore study first *Maung Yin Maung–Ma Me Ma* and its influence on at least *Maung Hmaing*.

U Hla Gyaw⁵, the author of *Maung Yin Maung–Ma Me Ma* was born in the provincial town of Shwe-gyin (British Burma). He was first educated in the Anglo-vernacular school and later at Rangoon College. He started his career as a Government translator. Later he practised law, but he also found time to write *Maung Yin Maung–Ma Me Ma*.

Knowing the general outline of this novel will help us to understand the nature of this pioneer work. The plot is as follows: during the reign of King Tharawaddy (1837–1846) in Upper Burma, Maung Yin Maung a new captain of a merchant boat was thrown into the jail at Ava on account of a letter which he was carrying on behalf of his dying father. He met in the jail a wise old man named U Paw La, and learned from him about some treasure buried somewhere near Ava. Later upon the death of U Paw La in the jail, Maung Yin Maung removed the corpse of U Paw La from the burial sack and sewed himself up in its place in an attempt to escape from the jail, as he was aware that the sack would be hurled into the Irrawaddy river. As he expected Maung Yin Maung was thrown into the river and he safely swam across it towards Sagaing. From Sagaing he left for Shwebo where the daughter of the Governor fell in love with him. He later secretly returned to Ava only to learn that his beloved Ma Me Ma was about to be married to his enemy Myat Tha. The disappointed Maung Yin Maung, having discovered the treasure, left Ava to take refuge in British Burma. The daughter of the Governor of Shwebo in the disguise of a young lad sailed down the Irrawaddy in Myat Tha’s boat, in search of Maung Yin Maung; and just after she had found him died of cholera. And finally after a new king had ascended the throne, Maung Yin Maung after six years’ self-exile in British Burma returned to Ava and married Ma Me Ma who had meanwhile become a widow.

Having this outline in mind, it is now appropriate to consider the observations of Prof: U Pe Maung Tin in his review of the novel. He writes, “Maung Yin Maung is none other than the Count (of Monte Cristo) in Burmese garb. Of course having reincarnated in Burma the Count must behave like a true Burman and cannot do many things that he has done in Europe.”⁶ In the book no reference was made by U Hla Gyaw to Alexandre Dumas’ novel *The Count of Monte Cristo* but the reviewer’s remark revealed the source of the novel. However a careful study of the novel will reveal that U Hla Gyaw used the French novel only up to the point where Maung Yin Maung escapes from Ava jail.

It appears that the English translation of *The Count of Monte Cristo* made before 1909, was not a perfect one, for the Publishers’ Note in the EVERYMAN’S LIBRARY edition of 1909 declares, “Monte

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Cristo — the most celebrated work of its celebrated author, — has hitherto been known to the English-speaking world only through the medium of a very imperfect translation, which from time to time has been republished without any material improvement. The great story is worthy to be presented in a better form". In the 1909 edition of the English translation, out of more than 100 chapters, only 20 deal with the first part of the story up to the escape of Edmond Dantes from the Chateau d'If; but in Maung Yin Maung-Ma Me Ma, out of the total number of 36 chapters, Maung Yin Maung escapes from Ava jail in chapter 9. Evidently U Hla Gyaw used only one fifth of the original plot. So the rest of the plot is to be taken as the creation of U Hla Gyaw himself.

At this point it is rather tempting to raise the question as to why U Hla Gyaw used only 'the Escape portion' in his novel and why he left the rest to his own imagination. We know that the French novel was first published in 1844-45. And we also know that the first English translation appeared in England in the following year, 1846. Robert Louis Stevenson in his evaluation of the translation writes, "The early part of Monte Cristo, down to the finding of the treasure, is a piece of perfect story telling."

Therefore, what U Hla Gyaw had done in his novel may be due to three points. Firstly it might be the influence of Stevenson's remark; secondly it might be due to his dislike of the revenge motive of the French novel; and lastly it might be due to his own concept of the simple character of his hero Maung Yin Maung. On the other hand it might be that U Hla Gyaw's choice was dictated by the availability of only the first part of the English translation.

One could raise a further question. The question is about the introduction of the Shwebo maiden in the disguise of a young lad. Can it be that the Shwebo maiden is a copy of Princess Puspha from I-naung Zat the court drama in Burmese of the 18th century, or is it a copy of Rosalind from Shakespeare's As You Like It? Perhaps resemblances to Princess Puspha or Rosalind are mere coincidences. Be that as it may, the fact that U Hla Gyaw probably knew them should not lead us to underrate his creative imagination, for U Hla Gyaw has told a different story with the Shwebo maiden.

Considering all these facts we may safely infer that the novel of Maung Yin Maung-Ma Me Ma is a Franco-Burmese novel, although the portrayal of its characters and their actions is flavoured by local colours and taste both in its borrowed and original sections of the main plot. And also we can say that this novel is one of the first cases of Western influence on Burmese literature, although it is neither a complete translation nor a total adaptation of the original. And it is this novel, or the concept of the modern novel that it depicted that inspired U Kyee to write his novel of Maung Hmaing.

U Kyee6 was in 1904 a member of the editorial board of the Hanthawaddy Press in Rangoon. It is still remembered that when the proprietor of the Press suggested that his editors attempt a novel


JBR\$\", LI, I, June 1968.
like U Hla Gyaw's, U Kyee instantly took up the challenge and his *Maung Hmaing Part I* appeared in print within a few months' time. The speed with which the novel was produced may appear to be astonishing at first sight, but in fact the story of Maung Hmaing was not new as we can read from U Kyee's statement in the preface to his work. It was something in the genre of the story of Saw Kay recited by a professional story-teller at one of the intimate gatherings in Mandalay Palace. It was a picaresque tale which U Kyee used to recite to entertain the King's Guards, when he was a petty officer during King Thibaw's reign. It is possible that the concept of the modern novel brought to his notice by the publication of *Maung Yin Maung-Ma Me Ma* enabled him to make use of his earlier tale and rewrite it within such a short period of time.

U Kyee started his career as a junior clerk in the office of a Burmese minister and was in Mandalay during the earlier part of his career. It was only after the annexation of Upper Burma by the British, that he moved to Rangoon and joined the editorial staff of the Hanthawaddy Press. Unlike U Hla Gyaw he knew no English and therefore he had only the Burmese literary resources to rely on for his new writing, and unlike U Hla Gyaw's *Maung Yin Maung-Ma Me Ma* which has a fairly well-knit plot, U Kyee's novel is simply a narration of events that move on like an aimless caravan. The novel of *Maung Hmaing* is an incomplete work although it went into three volumes. The first volume was published in 1904 immediately after *Maung Yin Maung-Ma Me Ma* and the second and the third in 1905 (1267 B.E.). The fourth was given much publicity by the publisher but it never came to light, probably because the reading public had lost interest in the long drawn-out tale.

The general outline of the novel of *Maung Hmaing* is as follows: Maung Hmaing, a roselle seller in Ava first won the love and the purse of Khin Lay Gyi the only daughter of the Chief of the Guards of the Eastern Palace Gate; having posed variously as a high-ranking officer, as a jeweller, and as His Majesty's Purchaser, he sailed up and down the Irrawaddy and successfully entered into fraudulent marriages at the prosperous riverine towns. He married two ladies at Minha, one at Prome, one at Rangoon and one at Dedaye, and having become a confidant of His Majesty he rose to be a Secretary of State at the Court of Ava; and later he became a much worried and flurried man when he was discovered at Ava by his wives. In fact U Kyee could have brought his story to a logical end here if he wished to do so, but U Kyee allowed Maung Hmaing to enlarge the existing army of his wives probably with the intention of enabling him to repeat the same old role full of lies and tricks. The narrative of *Maung Hmaing* is thus a series of adventures and intrigues woven into a pattern to reveal the life of an unbelievably polygamous man.

Nearly the same pattern is found in the court-drama of *Einda-wuntha Zat* by Princess Hlaing Hteik Khaung Tin, a lady dramatist of the 19th century. In that drama are described the adventures of the hero Einda-Wuntha who had the habit of building up a fine collection of beautiful

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princesses from several countries as he moves from place to place. However since Einda-Wuntha's model is the court-drama of I-naung Zat (I-Nao) which is a Thai version of a medieval Javanese romance of Panji¹⁰ rendered into Burmese in the 18th century, it can be seen that the novel of Maung Hmaing has followed the tradition of I-naung.

By I-naung tradition is meant the tradition of a dramatic hero that reflects the life of a typical aristocrat in the polygamous society of old South-East Asia. So when the roseller seller Maung Hmaing is said to have followed that tradition, it means that he behaves like Prince I-naung or Einda-Wuntha. The only difference is that Maung Hmaing, being an ordinary roseller seller and commoner, has to use such weapons as honeyed words, an exhibition of book-learning, crocodile tears and many glittering jewels, whereas the heroes of the court-dramas, being half-divine, used such divine weapons as Indra's Thunderbolt or Chakra Flames. The novel of Maung Hmaing is extravagant. It is overwhelmed by so many roguish adventures that it deteriorates into an exaggerated caricature full of coarse jokes. On the whole the roseller seller is nothing but a mechanical figure, and in picaresque quality he vies with Gil Blas or Moll Flanders.

Undoubtedly the world of Maung Hmaing is the world of fantasy in which all the events are uncommon in actual life. However some of the characters are sometimes portrayed with such realistic effect that any reader could be deluded into believing them to be true and real. A scene at a dramatic show patronised by Maung Hmaing and his eight wives is an outstanding example. Maung Hmaing was commanded to make arrangements befitting His Majesty's pilgrimage to the Shwe-Kyet-Yet pagoda. When the arrangements were nearing completion, Maung Hmaing went for an on-the-spot inspection, and while he was enjoying a dramatic show, all his wives unexpectedly arrived in twos and threes. In this scene are described the wives' struggles for the front row, their shameless display of jealousies and vanity and ultimately their open quarrels under the auspices of their august husband Maung Hmaing. Here U Kyee succeeds in striking 'the balance between the uncommon and the ordinary so as on the one hand to give interest, on the other to give reality'.¹¹

Both Maung Yin Maung-Ma Me Ma and Maung Hmaing are truthful to contemporary Burmese life and society, but the former is romantic in spirit in that it emphasizes in the character of Maung Yin Maung the ideals of life such as chivalry, patience and self-sacrifice, whereas the latter is realistic in spirit in that it emphasizes in the characters of Maung Hmaing and of his wives, the things that could happen to many of us in everyday life under the same circumstances.

To conclude, we should recall that the first effective modern novel appeared in the form of the Franco-Burmese Maung


Yin Maung-Ma Me Ma and the first true Burmese novel as Maung Hmaing. Both first appeared in 1904. As a result two new things which can not claim any connection with old Burmese prose began to take root in the early 20th century Burmese literature viz. the new literary form that demands fidelity to real life as we see it and through this the two attitudes towards life and art, i.e., the romantic and the realistic. Fictional prose we have had in the old Burmese literature, but its theme is not man in society; it does not mirror life as we know it nor does it care for probability. It is only the agent of fancy, poetry, elegance, rhetoric and a display of learning or instruction. The 18th century Burmese romance of Yadana Kyemon by Shwe-daung Thihathu is a typical example.

In 1917 Professor U Pe Maung Tin wrote in an article entitled “The Burmese Novel”, “But with the advent of the English, inaugurating the dawn of Western culture, the old order changes and the Burmese novel, which for the reason given above has been so long delayed, at last makes its appearance. The general effect of this great change in history has been to wake the people from their dreams in the region of Romance to the crude realities of life.”12 And in 1918 Dr. Ba Han wrote in his review of Maung Hmaing Part I, “Since 1904 Burmese fiction has been in a state of flux. The new order that has emerged is not yet free of the crudities of a new found art. Yet its achievement is of positive value. Realism has invaded the romance of fancy and the grey atmosphere of oridinary every-day life has received at long last an artistic interpretation.”13

Considering these two observations, we can see that the Burmese novel had gained a respectable place in 1917. Of course to-day it is an accepted literary form like poetry or drama. But about 64 years ago, i.e., in 1904, when U Hla Gyaw and U Kyee first published their novels there was a certain section of Burmese scholars who were horrified by the newness of the novel form. They severely criticised it and expressed their displeasure. As an example we can study the two editorials and the seven articles written by four correspondents, and published in a Burmese newspaper named Zabu Kyet-Thayay in 1904.14

Among the correspondents, one was a Buddhist monk U Äthaba from the Mandalay monastery of Shweyin town and the rest were those who wrote under the pen-names of “Maung Thilo”, “Maung Sin Chin” and “Namuci”. The anonymous correspondents were not in favour of the novel. They raised two points of displeasure. One was the use of the term “Vatthu” a Pali word as an equivalent for the “NOVEL”. Hitherto only the Buddhist Jatakas such as Temi, Maha Janaka, Mahosadha etc. had been called Vatthu. One correspondent argued that the use of the word Vatthu for the novel was sacrilegious. To this contention, Rev. U Äthaba replied that the use of the term Vatthu was not improper as it denotes a story or a narrative. Therefore the word Vatthu was not to be used exclusively for the Buddhist Jatakas alone, because when it


JBRs, LI, i, June 1968.
is used in conjunction with other words, it changes its meaning according to gender, time, place, occasion or situation. However it seems that the anonymous critics were suspicious of any new writing, if it be not done as an instrument of decorative or didactic intent. Therefore they insisted that if the new writing was to be called Vattu, it would be a serious threat to Burmese society and the Buddhist religion. The next point of their displeasure was their firm belief that the new writing was like a child's talk and its description of the joys, griefs and fears of imagery Miss White and Mr. Black, foolish and only encourages the craving of life.

All these criticisms suggest the first literary battle in which the new was attacked by the old, and it made no small stir in the Burmese literary circles of the early 20th century. To-day viewed from this distance, they are boring as well as interesting. Boring, because these criticisms bring nobody to a sympathetic understanding of the new truth; because they are pedantic and measure by their old predilections a new idea which makes its inevitable appearance with changes in the political, economic and social life of the country; and because they fail to differentiate the true concept of the novel from the current Burmese love stories and because they are too obsessed to throw overboard a genuine theory on account of bad application. It is likely that in those days the condemnation of the Burmese novel received a warm applause among the Burmese scholars. Human nature, however, prevailed, because it is found that after Maung Yin Maung Ma Me Ma and Maung Hmaing, more and more Burmese novels appeared every year without interruption.

On the other hand the criticisms are interesting. Interesting because they served as a warning to the novelists and because since a novel must mirror life as we know it and since love which is a part of life must have its role in a novel, like those critics, we ought to be concerned if the subject of love is treated to the detriment of the moral character of the young people.

There is a Burmese proverb which says, "Wisdom resides in letters". To this all of us would agree, but it is obvious that the experience of man is one of the sources of wisdom or knowledge. Maung Yin Maung Ma Me Ma and Maung Hmaing may be far from being perfect aesthetically or morally. Nevertheless since U Hla Gyaw and U Kyee adopted a new literary form, i.e. the modern novel to communicate more effectively their experiences gained in the process of their conscious contact with ordinary every-day life, their two novels are to-day not only regarded as a milestone in the history of Burmese literature but also counted as a new force that heralds modern thinking in the intellectual and cultural life of the Burmese people.