



EXILIC PERSPECTIVE OF THE 1980S PHASE OF BURMESE CIVIL WAR: A STUDY OF SELECT POEMS BY TIN MOE

Parvathy Rajeev, Dr. Preetha Vasan

Abstract

The research aims to explore the 1980s phase of the Burmese Civil War written from the perspective of the Burmese exilic writer, Tin Moe. His poetry specifically focuses on the human rights violations perpetrated by the Burmese government and the majoritarian state's persecution of minorities. In order to explore this, the research has interpolated exilic methodology and historiographic accounts that have represented the dominant perspective. The research also aims to analyze the exilic position of the writer that enabled him to provide alternate accounts of history to question and challenge the hegemony of official narratives.

Keywords: Civil War, Burma, Exilic identity, exilic perspective, 1980s phase

The civil war in Burma which commenced after the country won independence from the British in 1948 has been labelled as the “world’s longest running civil war”, by Patrick Winn. The culmination of British rule resulted in a series of conflicts that targeted the ethnic minorities of the country. The post-colonial Burma saw the rise of two major political groups in Burma namely, The Communist Party of Burma and the Karen Nationalists’ Party. While the Communists gloated over their success of getting their country freed from the British, the Karens were anxious to ensure equality to the minorities- a problem that loomed large after the British forces left and the country’s governance was dominated by majoritarian Buddhists who formed the larger part of the Communist Party of Burma.

Instances of unrest started affecting Burma, when the Karens demanded for an independent state with fair Karen representation, regional autonomy and equal rights in governance of the country. As observed by A. M Thwanghmung in his work *The Karen Revolution in Burma: Diverse Voices, Uncertain Ends*, the Karens also insisted on keeping weapons for self- defense because of the threat from The Armed Forces of Myanmar also called the Tatmadaw, that largely favored the Buddhist groups and targeted the minorities who dared to question the government decisions (68). This bone of contention became the root cause of the Civil War that broke out. After

three successive attempts by parliamentary governments to rule Burma failed due to the continued troubles between the Karen and the Buddhist groups, General NeWin led the Tatmadaw and took over Burma through a coup d'état in 1962. This saw the birth of the totalitarian military junta rule in Burma. As explained by Aung-Thwin, the treaty called the "Burmese way of Socialism" which was introduced in April 1962, acted as a blueprint for economic development, reducing foreign influence and increasing the role of the military. This in turn gave immense, unquestioned freedom and power to the military junta, leading to rampant human rights violations during the rule of the Ne Win government. August 8, 1988, witnessed the 8888 Uprising in Burma, when the protests started off by students in Rangoon, against General Ne Win's rule and his ideas of Burmese way to Socialism, spread across the country. M.A Thwin further explains that irrespective of ethnicity, the common agenda was to fight for basic human rights, which were being denied by the military junta. The Civil war which began due to ethnic differences soon became a war cry for democracy.

Edward Said in his "Reflections on Exile" states that "Our age- with its modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers- is the age of the refugee, the displaced person and mass migration" (357). Further, Jana Evans Braziel in her book *Diaspora: an Introduction* explains the various circumstances under which one has to leave the homeland. She states, "Exiles and refugees flee their countries due to political violence or ethnic cleansing, religious persecution, genocidal pogroms, hunger and starvation in homeland and many other life threatening factors" (56). These statements are particularly true in the context of the Burmese Civil war of 1980s. The 1980s phase of the Civil War had led to the mass exodus of the ethnic and religious minorities due to the atrocities perpetrated by the Ne Win Government. Anyone who went against the government was systematically targeted and made to flee for their lives. Additionally, the government also made sure that what happened in Burma stayed in Burma. As explained by Alan D. DeSantis in his essay, "Caught Between Two Worlds: Bakhtin's Dialogism in the Exile Experience", "exiles are pushed from their homeland on personal grounds and are compelled to leave their country on account of well founded fears of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality or political opinion"(1). This statement sums up the plight of the ethnic minorities in Burma under the tyrannical dictatorship of the Ne Win government.

The Burmese writers in exile capture the experiences of growing up in Burma and the pain of having had to flee their homeland later on in their lives. These Burmese writings in exile can be located within the larger area of diasporic writings which repeatedly make use of the tropes of homeland and memory to intensify the anguish of loss.

Salman Rushdie explains in his essay, "Imaginary Homelands", that "the homeland in the mind of an exilic writer is an imaginary one... a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time" (10). These writers can only recollect fragmented memories of their homeland, described as "broken mirrors" and "broken pots" in the same essay. (11-12). These precious bits of memories of homeland, a constant longing to go back to the homeland in the imagination and the unresolved sense of displacement are few of the major themes that are often repeated in exilic writings. As a result of the fragmented memory and the difference in experiences of an exile, exilic writings give rise to varied perspectives about the lost homeland, the sense of alienation and lack of belonging experienced in the host land.

Exilic writings based on such memories can also become a symbol of resistance and act as alternate historiographies to the grand narratives created by people in power to justify the causes of the oppression in a country. As Rushdie puts it “description is itself a political act” and this creates alternative realities of art (14). The exilic writings also play the major role of denying the official, politician’s version of truth and break the centrality of a single, hegemonic discourse, thus making it clear that there is no “single truth” as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie states in her speech “The Danger of a Single Story”. This also means that each truth is just a version of the hundreds of millions of versions available, as Rushdie states in his essay (10).

The paper looks at the exilic perspective of the poet Tin Moe in the portrayal of 1980s Civil War. This paper also reflects how his ideological position played a major role in his portrayal of the homeland and how he chose to resist and fight the callousness of the military junta through the power of his words. The paper thus intends to explore how the writer used Literature to reach out to the people of the world and describe the despotism of the Ne Win Government

II

This section looks at select poems of Tin Moe, namely- “The Years We didn’t See Dawn”, “Sobs”, “Meeting with Buddha”, “New Pages”, “Awake from a Homesick Dream” and “Lantern of Hope” to understand the exilic perspective of the poet.

Born in 1933 in Kanmye, in central Burma, Tin Moe dedicated his entire life to poetry and the search for truth. Tin Moe considered the British colonial phase as the time when Burmese culture was under threat. Tin Moe believed that “Culture is the heritage of the people, indestructible and forever and hence must be strongly held on to”. Tin Moe was elated when the country had won independence from the British regime. However, the political turmoil of 1988 served as a turning point for Tin Moe.

The scene of hundreds and thousands of people demanding for democracy, and the violent suppression of this uprising affected his writing. Tin Moe started writing political poetry which also acted as his version of alternate historiography to portray the war torn Burma. As stated in the text *Bones Will Crow*, Tin Moe had a good reputation “as a writer and journalist of a leading Burmese newspaper, until he started using poetry as a weapon to criticize the military rule in the country” (25). In the *Interview and Poetry of U Tin Moe*, a radio interview conducted by the journalist Kyi May Kaung, Tin Moe explained that, “I learned how influential my works were when I was arrested for my role in politics in 1991 and detained in a police station prior to trial. I became an Intellectual Committee member of Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy, the winning party of the 1990 general elections, although the elections results were not honored by the ruling military”. Due to Tin Moe’s political opposition, he was arrested in 1991 and held without charge for six months, then confined to four years in prison under the 1962 Printers and Publishers Registration Law. According to the brief biography of Tin Moe written by S. T Zhang for *The Poetry International Web*, “Tin Moe managed to escape Burma right before a possible arrest in 1999, after obtaining a passport under his original name, Ba Gyan. He never returned to Burma, living in political asylum in the United

States. In 2007, just months before the historic people's uprising known as the Saffron Revolution, he died in Los Angeles on January 22."

While in Burma, Tin Moe used nature imagery to disguise the political statements that he made through his poems. Tin Moe was highly critical of the military junta rule and could never assent to the atrocities committed by the government. He felt a sense of estrangement within his homeland and became a critical insider, making him "an intellectual exile", a term used by Edward Said in his essay, "Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals." In the essay, Said explains that, in order to become an exile, it is not necessary that the person has to be geographically displaced. Any individual, who feels a psychological displacement, a metaphoric exile because he/she cannot agree with the ideologies or practices followed in the homeland, also faces a mental/intellectual exile (39). Despite being a Buddhist, Tin Moe had started facing a metaphorical exile long before he actually left Burma; he felt psychologically alienated towards the government policies that encouraged rampant violation of the humanitarian rights of the ethnic minorities.

In poems like "The Years We didn't See Dawn" and "Sobs", written before he was forced to seek political asylum in U.S, Tin Moe creates a homeland where dark elements of power politics had changed the entire landscape of Burma. Tin Moe resorts to the use of nature imagery to show how the land of Burma is slowly dying in the hands of the dictatorship.

In the poem "The Years We didn't See Dawn", Tin Moe gives an alternative perspective to the Civil war and makes a political statement, as explained by Rushdie in "Imaginary Homelands" (14). Written after the 8888 uprising, Tin Moe explains how the military government forced prominent literary figures like him, to "Submitting reports/ loaded with lies. / Recording 'yes sir, certainly sir' / On to tapes filled with misinformation." (*Bones Will Crow* 30-31). This information was then released as official documents that narrated the hegemonic perspective. In his poem "Sobs", he gives the alternate perspective to the dominant narrative that "the Civil War was only a fight between the Buddhists and the ethnic minorities" (Thwin). Tin Moe conveys through the poem that the military junta suppressed anyone who questioned the government. They did not spare even the Buddhist monks who came forth and joined the protest movement because the military rule was oppressive to each individual in Burma, irrespective of their differences. The poet throws light on the fact that the Ne Win government suppressed everyone, and thus, the Civil war was no longer just a product of ethnic and religious strains but also the need for a democratic jurisdiction. The lines, "There are no novices/ orange-clad/ zilch of sounds..in the monastery at/ the edge of the village/bells/are no longer heard" (Kaung 21) alludes to the infamous White Bridge incident which led to the massacre of a large number of protesters including Buddhist monks. According to a report published in the *Ottawa Citizen*, "The government tried to depict this as an ethnic violence between the Buddhists and the minorities" (16), while in reality it was the Tatmadaw's suppression of citizens who dared to raise their voices against the Ne Win Government.

Both the poems use imagery very specifically derived from the landscape of Burma, to depict the homeland as a place of happiness which no longer exists, owing to the military junta. As seen in "Sobs", the poet also uses the description of a "helpless earth" and "joyless padauk flowers" (Kaung 21) to draw parallels with his situation: censored and prohibited from speaking against the government. In "The Years We didn't See Dawn", he further

explains that the Burmese people wanted to fight against the military junta and put an end to the atrocities of the government, but they did not know how to do it. The military rule has converted his homeland into a place of misfortune and suffering, where right and wrong no longer mattered and “false doctrines” were propagated (*Bones Will Crow* 29). He wonders if those times must be officially described as the “years we didn’t see dawn” (33), because there was absolutely no sunshine of hope during the military junta rule. He sums up his thoughts on the Civil War in one line, as seen in the poem, “The Years We didn’t See Dawn” by writing that, when he was young, he had looked up to Lenin and his principles of Marxism and Communism; but the Burmese Civil war has affected his psyche to such an extent that he has now grown to desire for a leader like Lincoln (29) who would assure that Burma can hope for freedom, equality and most importantly, democracy. He strongly believed that the Civil War in Burma would only come to an end, when democracy came into existence; more than a Lenin, Burma needed a Lincoln.

Right after he was forced to take political asylum in the US, the tone of his poems shifts from a lament for the dying Burma, to that of sorrow and hatred, for being driven out of his homeland. These poems which demarcate the second phase of his literary writings also delineate his pain of becoming a mere asylum seeker in a foreign land that neither understood his cultural practices nor made him feel accepted. During this phase, Tin Moe wrote poems every day, without restrictions, making overt comments on the political barbarities of the government and the violence perpetrated by the military junta. His thoughts and poems reached Burma through shortwave radio, and were received by an audience longing for freedom of speech and expression.

His poems, “Meeting with the Buddha” and “New Pages” are open criticisms against the military dictatorship. His position as a writer condemning the government from an exilic location aids him to describe the atrocities of the military rule. Thus his poetry also becomes the vehicle of his anger, grief and pain for being expelled from the land he was born in.

In the poem “New Pages”, the poet writes from his position as an “illegal alien” a term used by Jana Evans Braziel to describe the predicament of exiles in a foreign land who cannot blend in with the culture of the host land and are often seen as illegal immigrants(31). He feels isolated in New York hailing from a country with a “dark” history (Kaung 23). He experiences a sense of rootlessness when he cannot assimilate into the foreign culture and at the same time, not return to the homeland until the military dictatorship ends. Both the rootlessness and the military dictatorship are unwelcome and disturbing for him. This problem is further seen in the poem “Meeting with Buddha”, where he compares himself to a Buddha statue that is treated as an exotic antiquity in Europe, while in Burma, it is a symbol of veneration. However, the Burma that he knows will only revere a person if he supports cruelty and dishonesty. He experiences a sense of loss of homeland but he knows that the homeland that he wishes to go back to, no longer exists. Tin Moe, again becomes what Said calls, “an intellectual exile” when he shows the “double perspective”, and is critical of both his homeland that has become a land of lies, and the host land which refuses to acknowledge his suffering, calls the Civil War of his country a “scandal” and treats him as an inferior from the East (“Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals, 44).

The Civil war and the military regime first intellectually alienated him and now, have left him physically displaced as well. He lashes out against the military regime and states that, “An army exists to oppress people/...it’s a haven for thugs/ the king of master gangsters/ Bo Ne Win’s army/ only knows how to shoot and cheat” (*Bones Will Crow*, 39).

Tin Moe’s perception of homeland changes significantly after spending many years as an asylum seeker. The earlier poems written in exile depict his exilic perspective as critical of the military regime that was destroying Burma, bit by bit. But later on, in what can be described as the third phase of his poetry, his poems portray a desire for the end of his exilic state and liberty to go back to his homeland; a hope that everything will fall in place and he will get back the Burma of his imagination. He makes use of nature imagery once more, to paint the picture of the homeland that he dearly misses.

In the poem, “Awake from a Homesick Dream”, the poet calls for action. He is fed up of wandering in different places and being in a stateless position literally and metaphorically. He was deprived of his homeland and his identity. He constantly misses everything about his homeland, but it has become a nightmare due to the military regime; his homeland has become dull and bleak without the glory that it used to possess. He is tired of being a refugee in the US and wishes to support the millions in Burma, in their fight for democracy. And for this, he chooses to write as an act of rebellion, even if it costs his life. He undertakes to sacrifice his wishes for the cause of freedom for the people and the distressed, so that his homeland can be saved and he can regain his lost identity.

However, the poem “With a lantern of hope”, written just a few years before his death, captures the poet’s irrevocable desire to go back to his homeland. The poet makes clear that though he resides somewhere else, he is still attached to the souvenirs from his homeland. He nurses the optimistic thought that the darkness engulfing his homeland will be short lived. Though he wishes to go back, he knows he can’t. Like the “broken pots” referred to, in Rushdie’s “Imaginary Homeland” (12), he keeps the bits and pieces of the picturesque imaginary landscape of Burma in his mind and hopes the military regime ends so that he can return to his homeland someday in the future. However he could never make it back, thus leaving his dream of return, a dream.

III

Tin Moe used his poetry as an act of opposition to comment on the totalitarian regime of Burma under General Ne Win. The transition in his poems as seen in the three different phases discussed in the paper brings to light the fragmentation inflicted on Tin Moe’s identity as an exile writer who was forced to give up his homeland and confine the memories of his country within his mind while simultaneously striving to build a new identity in a foreign land. For an exile writer whose identity has been reduced to that of a stateless, asylum seeker in foreign country, his entire existence hangs like a Damocles’ sword on the hope that he can return to the homeland of his memories and become a part of his own kind failing which, he will have to die a death in a foreign land as an exotic, strange immigrant from the East. Despite the fact that the exiles have managed to physically escape persecution, they end up facing multiple levels of maltreatment in the foreign lands that refuse to accept them or their culture and identity. The fact they had to undergo all these torments for no fault of theirs other than being born into a particular society or

deciding to exercise their freedom of expression further aggravates the agony of loss of the land that they were born into but could not hold on to because of the repercussions of certain decisions made by a faction of the population based on blind, unquestioned beliefs.

The 1980s phase of Civil War was the war for democracy. The ethnic minorities had a hope that democracy would usher in a new era of peace and equality under the leadership of Aung San Su Kyi. This was when the next phase of ethnic conflicts- the Rohingya Genocide started gaining momentum. The Rohingya Genocide had begun as a silent ethnic cleansing to wipe out the Rohingya Muslims who were considered as illegal Bengali migrants. While the Rohingyas constantly kept trying to prove that they were the citizens of Burma, the Buddhist population refused to believe them. The Rohingyas still continue to lead a traumatic life with no rights of citizenship, no rights to give birth to a new generation and no records of existence in a land that was once their home (Ibrahim 17). The world had been oblivious of the plight of Rohingya Muslims for quite some time until the United Nations finally acknowledged of the Rohingya issue as an instance of genocide and ethnic cleansing.

What is interesting to note is that, while the exiles of the 1980s phase of the Civil War described about the fragmentation of identity that they had to face as immigrants in the foreign nations, the Rohingyas have been deprived of their identity of being a Burmese citizen- the land that has been their home for generations. Rohingyas have been reduced to the status of illegal immigrants in their own homeland, with the complete knowledge of the democratic government. The mass murders and exodus of the Rohingyas still continue to persist, with literary works slowly surfacing and capturing the plethora of traumatic experiences that the Rohingyas have had to undergo and still carry on with.

In both the cases, literature has played the major role of putting forth the multiplicity of narratives and breaking the hegemony of the official records. The Rohingya Genocide came to the notice of the world through multiple documentaries and digital texts combined with the books written by scholars, volunteers from the non-governmental organizations who were in close contact with the Rohingya refugees and refugees themselves who had the opportunity to escape and narrate their experiences of misery through literature. Here, these literary and digital platforms provided the voice for the voiceless to speak for their own community and let the world know about the “hidden Burmese genocide” (Ibrahim 33). The literary works that emerged out of the 1980s phase of the Civil War and the ongoing Rohingya Genocide act as the testimony to the fact that such writings hold the power to shatter the hegemony of a narrative projected as the truth and helps the readers understand that there can never be a single truth; one can only have a multitude of narratives that acts like a kaleidoscope to show a different view every single time.

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