

Book

Way Way's sad decision

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Ma Ma Lay's groundbreaking feminist novel finally emerges in a local edition – and little has changed since it was written

Ma Ma Lay (1917–1982) was a Burmese feminist novelist who flirted with left-wing politics through journalism and literature. Anna Allott, a renowned authority on modern Burmese writing and who contributes a substantial introduction to this work, considers this novel one of Ma Ma Lay's best.

It had a curious origin. Ma Ma Lay – a pen name for Ma Tin Hlaing – came from what might be called a well-to-do family in lower Burma. Her father was the manager of a local bank branch. Her mother had a breakdown and her daughter's education was cut short.

She wrote, though, and involved herself in politics. The editor of Shumawa magazine was constantly pressing her for something to publish for his readers. This book started off as a short story and became longer in time, until it was decided to publish it separately. There is a shift in pace: The second half is much more stretched out than the first, and includes plenty of weepy bedside scenes.

The thread of the story is slight. Way Way, a cloistered 17-year-old who stays at home and helps her rice-broker father with his accounts, is fascinated with the new neighbour, a well-off and excessively Anglophile Burmese working in the rice export business – and falls for him.

After they marry, he tries to have her abandon her "native" ways (going barefoot in the house, eating with her fingers) and in short act the part of a Westernised wife. His genuine love of her leads him to restrict her contacts with her family and friends, and above all caring for her tubercular father.

The stand-off occurs when Way Way receives a telegram informing her that her father is dangerously ill. Her husband begs her not to go to Rangoon to see him, for fear of her catching the disease from her father. She gives in. Sure enough, her father dies, and she reproaches herself bitterly for not having gone to him while he was still alive.

"Way Way was disconsolate and filled with burning remorse at not having gone the evening before, when she would have reached him in time. She was filled with regret that her karma was so bad that it had prevented her from going to see her father before he died. She did not blame U Saw Han. He was not at fault. She blamed herself. She had married U Saw Han."

Too late, though. She has caught the disease and, after a miscarriage, dies (taking a very long time to do so; one thinks of Dickens' novels being paid for by the volume of print). This is in spite of Western medicine and exaggerated care on the part of her well-meaning if ultimately unkind husband U Saw Han.

Hence the title. The intended kindness killed, or at least contributed to the heroine's death. Other characters fit into this mould, like Way Way's mother, who abandons her loving husband and family in order to be a Buddhist nun in the north. There are plenty of sickbed scenes, and the heroine's gradual decline is closely documented.

The political scene, with a Thakin (pro-independence) elder brother, Ko Nay U, and the invasion of Burma by the Japanese, is discreetly in the background, but adds to the element of uncertainty and clouded future that permeates the pages of the book.

The novel originally appeared in English in 1991. It has taken its time to be published locally, in spite of being "the first Burmese novel to be translated into English outside of Burma".

However, for anyone unfamiliar with the Burmese scene, it is difficult to appreciate fully the ground-breaking nature of this novel, here translated by Margaret Aung-Thwin into American English, and there are times when a glossary would have been helpful, with more on honorifics than appears in these pages.

There are also times when the translation fails to come through: "She mixed the ponyeygi with all the rice on her plate, added nganpyaye, sprinkled crushed hot chilli peppers over everything, and mixed it with her fingers." At least we are told in a footnote that nganpyaye is "a special kind of spicy bean sauce from the Shan hills".

Burmese feminist literature is not a genre with which many readers are familiar, and in that sense this work offers something new. With no pretensions to being great literature, it does describe a society and a way of life in many respects now perhaps gone almost completely, though one wonders if Burmese wives are still as abjectly submissive as Way Way.

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