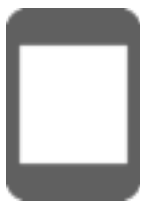


Verses of Resistance: The Activist Poetry of Myanmar



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ABSTRACT

Since 2011, the liberalization of the media in Myanmar has prompted the rapid expansion of Internet-enabled mobile telephony and social media usage, which has made possible the global dissemination of media accounts of Myanmar's repression of poets and other writers who critique the sociopolitical inequalities of the country. Poets active during the last decade continue to use a variety of formal strategies—namely, parody, satire, obscurity, acrostics, cultural imagery, and classical references—to disseminate messages of political dissent and promote the potential for creative freedom. Although these techniques are not new to Burmese poetry, the speed at which they function through social media is unprecedented. This article examines three case studies that demonstrate the influence of social media on the contemporary activist poetry of Myanmar. These three examples underscore the Janus-faced character of social media in Myanmar as both a tool of liberation and expression as well as a medium of repression and censorship under the current National League for Democracy administration.

Keywords: digital poetry, Facebook, literary activism, Maung Saung Kha, Mayyu Ali, Myanmar, Rohingya, social media, thangyat

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INTRODUCTION: MEDIA, POETRY, AND ACTIVISM IN MYANMAR

In 1948, after one-hundred-and-twenty-four years of British colonization, Myanmar (Burma) became an independent republic (Smith 2002, 265). A military dictatorship, however, seized control of the country from 1962 until 2011 when the junta was dissolved following a general election and the formation of a civilian government. In 2016, the National League for Democracy (NLD) assumed power and a new parliament convened under the leadership of Htin Kyaw and Aung San Suu Kyi (Farrelly, Holliday, and Simpson 2017, 3). In the wake of the Burmese coup d'état of 1962, a program of state censorship intensified under Ne Win's authoritarianism. The junta regulated the flow of information and determined media content in an effort to assert strict control over the populace (Farrelly et al. 2017, 4). This post-coup period involved, for instance, the closing down the Myanmar's independent Press Council, the nationalization of newspapers, and the banning of any form of writing deemed critical of the regime (Wiles 2015, 23). For nearly fifty years, the implementation of totalitarian laws severely constrained the free expression of journalists, poets, novelists, performers, comedians, cartoonists, musicians, and other artists and writers. In particular, state censorship operated at the prepublication level in which a board would approve, block, or demand the modification of material prior to public dissemination (Wiles 2015, 22). The Registration Law of 1962 required presses to submit copies of books, magazines, and periodicals to censorship boards in advance of production and often at great financial loss if the committees judged certain material objectionable (Holliday 2011, 73). Offending publishers were shut down, and individuals jailed for up to three years.

During the forty-nine-year military junta, the censoring and imprisoning of poets occurred widely (Lin and Bowman 2009, para. 15). In Myanmar, according to James Byrne (2012), "poetry remains the most censored form of literature" (35). Illustrative of the junta's persecution of poets is the life of Tin Moe (1933–2007), one of the leading Burmese literary voices of the twenty-first century. Under Ne Win's regime, he refused to participate in the Burmese Way to Socialism, a decision that placed him under the increasing scrutiny of the government from the late 1960s until his exile in the late 1990s. After national pro-democracy demonstrations in 1988, Tin Moe became an "Intellectual Committee" member of the National League for Democracy. This appointment resulted initially in his detention without charge for six months in 1991 followed by his incarceration for four years in Yangon's notorious Insein Prison under the Printers and Publishers Registration Law of 1962 (Words Without Borders n.d.). Anticipating another detention in 1999, he fled Myanmar under his lesser-known name U Ba Gyan and gained political asylum in the United States in 2000 (Words Without Borders n.d.). The life of Tin Moe is representative of the stories of other Burmese poets during the military junta era. As a case in point, in 2008, authorities arrested the poet, performer, and activist Saw Wai for publishing an eight-line acrostic poem covertly critical of Senior General Than Shwe, the head of the junta from 1992 to 2011. In the late 1980s, Saw Wai was removed from his government post for participating in the 8888 Nationwide Popular Pro-Democracy Protests. Around this time, he joined White Rainbow, a collective of writers and artists fundraising for children left orphaned by AIDS.

Saw Wai's controversial Valentine's Day verse "February 14" appeared in the popular Yangon-based *Achit Journal* (*The Love Journal*) and was subsequently published in *Pen America* and reprinted in *Harper's Magazine* (Lehman 2010, xiv). On its surface, the romantic poem is about the poet's jilting by a fashion model. Closer analysis, however, reveals a caustic political message as the first words of the lines—read vertically—compose the declarative "General Than Shwe is power crazy" (Lehman 2010, xv). Imprisoned after the censorship board deciphered the hidden meaning, Saw Wai was released in 2010 and became a founding member of the PEN Myanmar Center (PEN Myanmar 2019). Poets such as Saw Wai and Zeyar Lynn have adopted and devised techniques to embed scathing political messages in poems and, at times, circumvent the gaze of government censorship boards. First published in the international journal *Poetry Review*, Lynn's "The Ways of the Beards" evaded the scrutiny of bureaucrats who concluded the poem was simply a jocular disquisition on the phenomenon of beards. Nonetheless, the poem narrates the plight of the Chin, among the most persecuted and dispossessed ethnic groups in Myanmar (Byrne in Bery 2013, 54):

Beards looking for a chin like words for a poem
 Beard is the war-torn town of the chin in civil war
 In the history of chin, beard is the defeated truth
 [...]
 Into the scene of the beard on trial, many myths are said to be trafficked in
 Probing at the word, the scar of the beard was found
 "Don't let the flag fall, Fight until only your beard remains"
 say the Bansai T-shirts
 [...]
 History will forgive my beard
 To install electric power all over the country,
 To establish beard power all over the land.
 (Lynn 2012, 3, ll. 4–6, 22–24, 35–37)

In translation by Ko Ko Thett, the poem adeptly manipulates the anatomical association between beard and chin to centralize the extrajudicial killing, forced labor, unlawful detention, and mass displacement of Chin people. *Beard* is thus a multifaceted metonym for dictatorial power as well as Indigenous resistance.

Poetry and politics have a close historical relationship in Myanmar (Wong 2016). In the early part of the twentieth century, nationalist poets used verse to inspire those who fought for independence from Britain (Leigh 2018). Many activists who took part in the widespread 8888 Pro-Democracy Protests were also poets (Freeman 2016, para. 3). In the general election of 2015, poet-activist Maung Tin Thit—who was jailed by the regime for seven years following the 8888 protests—defeated former military general U Wai Lwin as a candidate for Parliament. Maung Tin Thit was among the many university students who employed poetry as a means to propel the movement for democratic reform. Students at the Rangoon Arts and Sciences University and the Rangoon Institute of Technology were largely responsible for organizing the 8888 Pro-Democracy Protests. Follow-

ing the protests, in November 1988, the All Burma Students Democratic Front was formed. Between 1988–90, moreover, about 10,000 students from the uprising fled to border regions controlled by Mon, Karen, and Kachin forces where they received basic military instruction (South 2008). As an example of the political-literary intersection in Myanmar, the following poem comes from a collection entitled *Battle for Peace* published in 1992 by the Revolutionary Students of Burma:

The Hands of History
(Never think of drifting downstream,
But always determined to go upstream,
To break free.
As true youths,
Our spirits are as high as the sky.
We'll march on boldly,
Along the rough and thorny road.)
Don't let your smile go,
Holding hand in hand together,
Let us be united.
There will never be a permanent defeat.
For the blood in our hearts
Is still radiantly red.
Our hands that make the history
Are ready for the sake of freedom.
At this moment of our lifetime,
Students, let us be united.
(in Smith 2002, 267)

With its unambiguous diction and liberatory metaphors—moving upstream, marching boldly, making history—the performative poem constitutes an appeal for unity, victory, and freedom from the oppressive regime. Since the dissolution of the junta in 2011, poetry continues to serve a vital sociopolitical function in Myanmar. The shift from print to online media, including Facebook, Instagram, Viber, and blogs, has enabled a broader range of poetic voices to emerge, especially from members of ethnic minority groups such as the Rohingya.

In recent years, media liberalization—specifically the ostensible abolishment of pre-publication censorship and the deregulation of the telecommunications sector—has prompted the rapid growth of Internet-enabled mobile telephony in the country (Ling et al. 2015). According to the report *Unfinished Freedom: A Blueprint for the Future of Free Expression in Myanmar* (2015), published by the PEN American Center, the nation is considered the “fastest growing Internet market in Asia, with at least 15 million online—about 29 percent of the total population of 51.5 million—most often via their mobile phones” (7). In contrast, prior to the reforms initiated in 2011, Myanmar had the lowest rate of mobile technology uptake in the world (McCarthy 2017, 93). The PEN report estimates that more than half the population now has access to low-cost, web-enabled mobile phones. In 2014, SIM cards be-

came affordable after two foreign telecommunications companies—Qatar’s Ooredoo and Norway’s Telenor—launched networks competing with state-owned Myanma Posts and Telecommunications. In particular, the use of social media has grown dramatically following the liberalization of telecommunications (McCarthy 2017). Facebook remains the most popular Internet-based platform among writers, journalists, civic groups, and individuals, with about 7 million active users per month (PEN American Center 2015, 7). According to the website StatCounter (2019), between April 2018 and April 2019, Facebook constituted 94 percent of Myanmar’s social media usage followed by Pinterest, V Kontakte, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram at about 1 percent each. Deregulation has led to new possibilities for advocacy, activism, and creative practice through the interaction of online and offline communities. The emergence of new cyberspheres encourages audiences to participate in debates about nationalism, citizenship, community, and identity (McCarthy 2017, 93). Media scholar Gerard McCarthy (2017) argues that “Facebook’s popularity in Myanmar—as in many other social contexts—may derive at least partly from the similarity of the platform to casual, in-person interactions with kin and local community members” (94). In 2016, Facebook introduced Free Basics, an app ensuring that free Internet connections are via Facebook, as other services require fees. Although a platform for free expression in post-junta Myanmar, however, Facebook has been deployed by Buddhist nationalists to circulate rumors of a Muslim conspiracy, to advocate widespread boycotts of Muslim-owned businesses, to urge the outlawing of interfaith marriages, and to support general limitations on the rights of Muslims in the country (Vaidhyathan 2018, 194–95).

As the examples of the Oway Voice troupe thangyat performances and the satirical Facebook poetry of Maung Saung Kha will demonstrate, the post-junta period has been characterized by the increasing prosecution of individuals because of statements posted online. Since the NLD assumed office in 2016, defamation cases against politicians, activists, volunteers, writers, and journalists under Article 66(d) of the Telecommunications Act have escalated considerably across Myanmar (McCarthy 2017, 101). Passed in 2013, vaguely-worded Article 66(d) specifies fines and maximum three-year prison sentences for “[e]xtorting, coercing, restraining wrongfully, defaming, disturbing, causing undue influence or threatening [...] any person by using any Telecommunications Network” (Government of Myanmar 2013, 21). Since its inception, the law has been invoked to legitimize defamation charges against over seventy individuals, with only seven cases occurring between 2013 and 2015. Hence, since the NLD took office in April 2016, there has been an marked upsurge of lawsuits under the guise of enforcing Article 66(d) (Abrahamian 2019). This tacit censorship of writers impacts a new generation of poets—represented by Pandora, Moe Way, Maung Yu Py, Than Toe Aung, and Mayyu Ali—whose work has been formative to a blog-poetry publication movement fostering dialogue between poets in Myanmar and members of the Burmese diaspora (Byrne 2012, 37). Thus, while the proliferation of mobile phones and expansion of social media in Myanmar has opened up opportunities for publication, new regulations under the Telecommunications Act threaten to continue eroding the free expression of poets and performers. Nevertheless, as in the military junta era, poets active since the NLD assumed power adopt and adapt a range of formal strategies—digital anonymity, parody, acrostics, obscure imagery, ambiguous references, and linguistic techniques associated with language poetry—to disseminate messages of political critique and promote possibilities for crea-

tive liberation. To be certain, social media present new opportunities and risks for poets due to the high degree of public exposure coupled to the rapid dissemination of messages of political critique.

THANGYAT SATIRE IN POST-JUNTA MYANMAR

In 2019, during the Thingyan New Year Water Festival from April 13–16, five members of the thangyat troupe, Peacock Generation Thangyat—also translated as the Generation of the Peacocks—were detained at Insein Prison after refusing to submit their lyrics for censorship and for live-streaming on Facebook their performance outside a tea shop in Yangon’s Mayangon Township (*The Irrawaddy* 2019). Authorities charged the troupe members under both Article 66(d) and Article 505(a) for using the country’s telecommunications network to criticize the prominent role of the military—or Tatmadaw—in Burmese politics. During the satirical act, some performers wore military uniforms and chanted “it’s time to say goodbye” (qtd. in Reuters 2019). Consisting of former student activists who have performed together for the past nine years, the troupe has had shows shut down and interrupted previously, but 2019 marks the first arrests of its members (Mann 2019). As Yangon police continue to pressure local venues not to host troupes who refuse to submit lyrics to censorship boards, the performers have decided to take their act instead to the streets, public locations, and social media where they face detention, fines, and other consequences (Nang and Ives 2019). In a performance recorded two months before their Thingyan New Year ordeal, Peacock Generation urge reformation of the political system in Myanmar, strengthening of educational opportunities for young people, and placing of limits on the influence of the military on the civilian government:

Students. We are students!
Every home has at least one student
But not every soldier belongs to one
Every home has at least one student
You can’t create a new era without changing the system
Everything will be lost if we remain unchanged
You can’t create a new era without changing the system
Everything will be lost if we remain unchanged
New system, old system, new era, old era
All is connected to education
New system, old system, new era, old era
All is connected to education
Education must be cured
But not with old wives’ tales
Education must be cured
But not with old wives’ tales
It must be cured completely
Education has been weakened
For our generation and the ones before

Education for young people has been neglected
For our generation and the ones before
Wisdom has been ruined and the cause of it is simple
Education for young people has been neglected.
(The Generation of the Peacocks 2019, unpaginated)

The chant-like recitation of direct, emotive lyrics and swaying of performers back and forth produce a potent yet elegant appeal for political change.

The case of Peacock Generation Thangyat indicates that, notwithstanding the democratic reforms initiated in 2011, prepublication censorship endures—albeit in a different form, that is, mediated through the recent Telecommunications Act—just as it did during the repressive military junta era. Emerging in the mid-nineteenth century during the rule of King Mindon Min, thangyat has been an essential feature of Myanmar’s Thingyan New Year festivities during which performer-poets chant satirical verses in response to the nation’s current political, economic, environmental, and humanitarian issues (Aung 2019). These anti-establishment “chorus songs” are a form of role reversal composed each year in advance of Thingyan to mock the authority of the government and military (Fink 2001, x). Thangyat performances center on rhyming couplets sung against a *hsaing waing* ensemble of gongs and drums (Bamla 2016). The folk art form integrates a range of traditional theatrical techniques—such as tone modulation to produce ironic melodies—as performers recite lyrics called out by a lead singer, or respond to the leader in a question and answer format. Acts often combine elements of *ka-byar loot* (free verse), unrhymed lyric poetry, slam poetry, beatboxing, hip-hop music, and contemporary dance. When presented in a call and response configuration, the questioner is referred to as *ah-tain*, or the caller, whereas the responders are *ah-puak*, or the joke-crackers (Bamla 2016, 358–59). An indispensable characteristic of thangyat is the satirizing of political events, current issues, and social conventions. As Christina Fink (2001) observes, “[s]uch songs provide a vehicle for the expression of popular dissatisfaction with government officials and abuses of authority and have been performed since the pre-colonial period” (207).

During the junta era, the military government permitted thangyat within certain limits. Following the 8888 Pro-Democracy Protests, however, the regime banned the performances entirely in an effort to prevent citizens from disseminating slogans considered detrimental to the authority of the regime. Although the performances were outlawed for more than two decades, students who retreated to India and neighboring countries after 1988 made regular tape recordings denouncing the junta’s policies on narcotics, labor, trade, human rights, and other issues. Smuggled into the country, these recordings were broadcast on internationally-based Burmese-language radio stations (Fink 2001, 207). The easing of restrictions on thangyat performances resulted from the dissolution of the junta. In 2012, U Pa Pa Lay of the Moustache Brothers performed thangyat during parades in Mandalay, home to approximately forty troupes in previous years (Roper 2013) (see figure 1). The junta imprisoned U Pa Pa Lay three times for mocking government corruption. Fellow troupe members, Par Par Lay and Lu Zaw, were jailed for seven years from 1996 to 2003 after performing outside Aung San Suu Kyi’s home (Menendez and Hodgson 2013, para. 6). Nonetheless, in order to circum-

vent the civilian government's current regulations on thangyat acts in public, the Moustache Brothers currently perform to small audiences of foreign tourists in an empty ground floor room in their house (Menendez and Hodgson 2013, para. 3). In 2013, moreover, Burma held the first thangyat competition in twenty-five years. The Myanmar television company Sky Net sponsored the contest and broadcast the performances nationwide but required that participating troupes submit their scripts for pre-censorship (Farrington 2013, para. 3). The satirical performances called attention to threats to Burmese economy, culture, and environment, including the perils of the Chinese-operated Letpadaung Copper Mine in the Sagaing Division and Myitsone Dam on the Irawaddy River in the north of the country.



Figure 1. The Moustache Brothers, Lu Zaw and Lu Maw, Mandalay, Myanmar. 2014 (Image credit: Clay Gilliland, Wikimedia Commons).

Another Yangon-based thangyat troupe, Oway Voice, led by U Min Thwe Thit, critiques a range of urgent sociopolitical matters—prepublication censorship, crony capitalism, timber, jade, and drug smuggling, the increasingly negative influence of China, and the public murder of prominent lawyer U Ko Ni, advisor to Aung San Suu Kyi (Nang and Ives, 2019). In an interview published in *The Irrawaddy*, U Min Thwe Thit comments that:

The slogan of our group is Oway, representing the people's voices. As in previous years, our Than Gyat will reflect social problems facing the people and shortcomings of the executive branch, as per our slogan. We speak up for the people on their behalf and reflect social, political and economic issues. (qtd. in Kha 2018, para. 3)

Troupes such as Oway Voice risk incarceration and penalties in order to speak on behalf of the people whose voices continue to be repressed by the excessive military sway over the civilian government. U Min Thwe Thit continues:

Than Gyat were allowed without restrictions since the time of the monarchy. They are not loaded political speeches. By nature they are satirical and constructive criticism and reflect public opinion. They are not a problem. Requiring to submit Than Gyat is destroying their nature. Because of this we didn't submit our Than Gyat scripts to the censorship committee. We don't want to submit them and we think that regulation is unnecessary. (qtd. in Kha 2018, para. 14)

Prepublication censorship contravenes thangyat as a long-standing tradition of political role reversal, especially during the Thingyan New Year festival, which encourages reflection on the country's future. In the junta era, another troupe leader, Ko Myittar of the Thardu-par-byar Thangyat Troupe, recalls being prohibited "from engaging in art for ten years for no apparent reason. And it was not a written ban, but an oral ban" (qtd. in Kha 2018, para. 7). In response to a recent massive drug seizure in which no one was prosecuted, Ko Myittar wrote chants employing two homonyms in Burmese—"the outer wheel is for driving, the inner dope is for selling" (qtd. in Kha 2018, para. 7)—in order to imply the culpability of the government in covering up the issue. In 2018, neither U Min Thwe Thit nor Ko Myittar submitted lyrics to the censorship board for approval.

With its emphasis on the composition and delivery of lyrical critique—making use of homonyms, acrostics, puns, and other devices—thangyat is a mode of performance poetry of growing significance in post-junta Myanmar. Troupes such as Oway Voice use Facebook to reach audiences, interact with other users and troupes, livestream their performances, and circumvent pre-censorship impositions (Oway Voice 2019). Yet, in response to social media's continual ascendancy in Myanmar, authorities invoke Article 66(d) of the Telecommunications Act to prosecute troupe members for online material assessed as "defaming, disturbing, causing undue influence or threatening" and so forth. The example of thangyat underscores the Janus-faced nature of social media as both a tool of liberation and medium of repression. In his study *Antisocial Media* (2018), Siva Vaidhyanathan implicates Facebook in "the rise of authoritarianism and the alarming erosion of democracy around the world" (2). In particular, Vaidhyanathan critiques the rapid spread of misinformation through Facebook; the strong emotional registers of content, provoking extreme responses; and the manner in which the company rewards users with more of the same, creating "echo chambers of reinforced belief" (6). In the case of Myanmar, Facebook enables an unprecedented form of government-military surveillance of the general population as well as groups, such as thangyat troupes, whose activities were controlled

tightly by the junta. The dominance of Facebook in Myanmar also ensures the channeling of information through a single platform. Those identified as in violation of the telecommunications law have little recourse in defending themselves from allegations of undermining social stability. In this manner, the medium of Facebook operates counterproductively by impeding the potential for genuine democratic discourse based on free expression.

MAUNG SAUNG KHA'S PARODIC FACEBOOK VERSE

In 2016, a 23-year-old poet became one of the first political activists in Myanmar to be sentenced under the newly elected National League for Democracy (Reuters in Yangon 2016). In October 2015, Maung Saung Kha (birth name Si Thu Aung) used his personal Facebook account to publish a short parodic poem entitled “Image” about having a tattoo of “Mr. President”—presumably then-President U Then Sein—on his genitalia:

On my manhood rests a tattooed
portrait of Mr. President
My beloved found that out after
we wed
She was utterly gutted,
Inconsolable. (Saung Kha qtd. in Freeman 2016, para. 1)

A more explicit alternate translation reads: “I have the President’s portrait tattooed on my penis / How disgusted my wife is” (Saung Kha qtd. in Freeman 2016, para. 1). The incident took place one month before the NLD won a supermajority of seats in the national parliament. Zaw Htay (Hmuu Zaw), spokesperson for Thein Sein at the time and avid Facebook user, noticed the poem and brought Saung Kha’s post to the attention of prosecutors. Although he went into hiding shortly after, the young poet-activist continued to post defiant lyrical statements to Facebook such as “You can arrest only the poets / Not the poems / Never” (qtd. in Freeman 2016, para. 6). Authorities charged Saung Kha with online defamation under Article 66(d) of the Telecommunications Act and sentenced him to six months in prison for the salacious limerick (Phippen, 2016). In mid-2016, he was freed on account of having already spent six months in jail during his trial. Although involving social media—rather than traditional print publishing—Saung Kha’s incarceration represents the continuation of junta-era restraints on poetic freedom.

Maung Saung Kha is exemplary of young poets engaged in digital media activism in Myanmar (see figure 2). Born in Kyaukpadaung, Mandalay Region, Central Myanmar, in 1993, he graduated from West Yangon University in 2013 with a Bachelor of Science in Industrial Chemistry (Saung Kha n.d.). At the time of the Facebook ordeal, he was living with his parents in Shwepyitha Township, Northwest Yangon, and studying English at the British Council. In 2015, Saung Kha was involved in the “white armband” campaign against deadly police clashes with student activists in Letpadaung, Pegu Division, one-hundred-and-forty kilometers north of Yangon (Tha 2015, para. 17). Without official approval, the students began a long march in January 2015 from Mandalay to Yangon in

opposition to a bill that would ensure more government control of universities and higher education institutions. The protestors insisted, for instance, on their right to form student unions and for professors to teach in the languages of ethnic minority groups (BBC News 2015). Saung Kha is also a founding member of Athan, an activist group aiming “to promote freedom of expression in a more systematic and wide-spreading manner” (Athan 2019). The group was one of twenty-two organizations that collaborated under the name Digital Rights Coalition to produce the #SayNoTo66(d) website cataloguing charges and convictions under the anti-defamation section of the Telecommunications Act. The bilingual English-Burmese website reports one-hundred-and-eighty-five cases between November 2015 and April 2019 with more than eighty percent occurring under the NLD government (Coalition on the Movement for the Telecommunications Law Reform and Art.66D Abolishment 2018). Saung Kha, moreover, is the director of the Poetry Lovers’ Association of Myanmar, which aims to promote social harmony through literature and organizes poetry-related events around the country (Poetry Lovers’ Association of Myanmar 2019; Tha 2015, para. 3). Furthermore, his Burmese-language poetry collection, *Multi-coloured Rain Drops* (2017), was published by the LUMA Foundation as part of the 89plus exhibition *Poetry Will Be Made By All!* held from 30 January to 30 March 2014 in Zurich.



Figure 2. Burmese poet Maung Saung Kha. 2018 (Image credit: Zaw Htet (VOA), Wikimedia Commons).

Maung Saung Kha has admitted that, in fact, he does not have such an inappropriate tattoo of “Mr. President” but was stimulated to write the comical verse by the proliferation of images of political figures, such as Aung San Suu Kyi, inked on supporters’ bodies (Staff 2016, para. 6). Accordingly, the poet-activist extends the longstanding tradition of political satire in Burmese literature as a covert means to critique colonial and neocolonial power structures (Wiles 2015, 31). Regarded as one of the most influential Burmese poets, for example, Thakin Kodaw Hmaing (1876–1964) made extensive

use of satire in his literary work. The political philosophy and social commentary expressed in his writing greatly influenced the Dobama Asiayone (DAA or We Burmans Association), the Burmese independence movement of the 1930s and 1940s founded by young activist intellectuals, including future prime minister U Nu and future premier Aung San, father of Aung San Suu Kyi (Walton 2016, 26, 93). In an assertion of their will to govern a nation liberated from colonial rule, members of the nationalist organization referred to themselves as *thakin* or “masters” (Walton 2016, 26). More specifically, Kodaw Hmaing defended students and other activists by developing a religious rationale for the use of boycott as an effective political tool (Walton 2016, 26). Characterized by four stanzas with a classical rhyme scheme, his *lay-gyo gyi* verses became famous for their satirical, patriotic content (Lin and Bowman 2009, para. 4). Mixing poetry and prose, additionally, his religious commentaries known as *htika* chastised politicians for infighting rather than attending to the inequities of British colonialism.

Although the medium has changed, the political message in the digital-activist poetry of post-junta Myanmar remains the same: protest (of constraints on free expression) and boycott (of rules such as 66(d) and the institutions associated with pre-censorship) are necessary to actualizing a liberated state in which poets, novelists, journalists, performers, artists, and other public figures will not need to fear incarceration for speaking out against the ruling party. On a related note, Gerard McCarthy (2017) maintains that “increasing digital connectivity allows citizens to continue to satirically push the boundaries of acceptable speech in the same way many did for decades under military rule” (101). While Gerard’s assertion holds true in many ways for poet-activists like Maung Saung Kha and performer-activists like Peacock Generation Thangyat, the preeminence of Facebook in Myanmar has also resulted in dramatic constraints on free expression as well as the disruption of satirical traditions through the censorship of content, imprisonment of writers, and crackdown on student activism. Notwithstanding the personal and social risks in the new era of NLD governance, digital connectivity does make possible the rapid global dissemination of media accounts of Myanmar’s continued repression of poet-activists who critique the disproportionate influence of the military on everyday life. As a case in point, shortly before Saung Kha’s trial, *The New Yorker* published the story “The bizarre trial of a poet in Myanmar” featuring the offending poem translated to English and reprinted in full (Freeman 2016). Hence, the sheer oddity of an ex-president offended by the penis joke of a 23-year-old poet was exposed to an international audience. To be certain, the civilian regime would have preferred to cover up such an incident that mocks their authority and also highlights their misuse of power; but such erasure becomes less possible in the age of digital connectivity into which Myanmar has plunged headlong since the liberalization of the media only eight years ago.

At the same time, Maung Saung Kha’s parodic Facebook verse and subsequent six-month detention underscore the central place of online media—websites, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram in particular—to the development of a new generation of Burmese poets active during the last decade. Indeed, many poets have started their careers on blogs. Born in 1974, Pandora—one of Myanmar’s most widely recognized female poets—began literary blogging in 2007 while living for an extended period in Singapore (Aung Aye and Lom 2017). She later edited *Tuning*, the first anthology of female Burmese poets (Pandora 2012). Her experimental style engages social concerns and tradi-

tional motifs in a direct and realistic manner that is less overtly political than Maung Saung Kha's Facebook limerick (Wiles 2015, 188). Published on *The Dissident Blog*, for example, her poem "Wash your hands" employs the titular command as a refrain to call attention to the social, cultural, and political ills corrupting Myanmar:

Wash your hands
As the insect called suspicion is increasingly active
Among friends
Wash your hands
[...]
Wash your hands
As the hostage King Saw Luu, smoking recklessly,
told the rescuer Prince Kyan Sit Thar
"This is my life and none of your business"
Wash your hands
[...]
Wash your hands
Wash your hands with soap to make sure they are clean
Forearms, forehands, palms
Tip of the fingers, between the fingers, knuckles and wrists
Including skin, flesh, blood, bones, veins and fat
Wash your hands.
(Pandora 2014, unpaginated, ll. 15–18, 26–30, 36–41)

The second stanza excerpted above alludes to Saw Luu, king of Burma's Pagan Dynasty from 1077 to 1084 who was taken hostage during a rebellion in Lower Burma and eventually murdered by his friend Yamankan. His successor, Prince Kyan Sit Thar or Kyansittha, attempted to rescue the king from captivity but Saw Luu refused for fear that the prince would murder him to gain the throne. Pandora's blog-based poetry thus brings royal figures and classical themes from Burmese history to bear on current concerns in the post-junta context.

MAYYU ALI AND THE SOCIAL MEDIA POETRY OF ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS

Born in 1991 in Maungdaw Township in Rakhine State, western Myanmar, Mayyu Ali is a Rohingya poet, writer, editor, blogger, and activist who leads the Youth Empowerment Center at Kutupalong, the world's largest refugee camp, located in the city of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh (Byrne 2019, 26) (see figure 3). In August 2018, there were an estimated 919,000 refugees in Cox's Bazar with 626,000 of them living at the Kutupalong site (Mercy Corps 2019). As a refugee at Kutupalong, Ali has organized poetry workshops for other young displaced people. He also created a Facebook page called Art Garden as a platform for publishing the poetry of Rohingya youth but recently reports being overwhelmed by the volume of submissions received (McPherson and Lewis 2019, sect. "Each of Us Has Trauma," para. 3). Before fleeing Myanmar on September 6, 2017, Ali worked in Rakhine for the

France-based non-governmental organization Action Contre la Faim (ACF, or Action Against Hunger) (Ali 2018b). In 2012, during his second year as a Bachelor of Arts student in English at Sittway (Sittwe) University, the government blocked then-21-year-old Ali from completing the program. He subsequently applied for a primary school teaching role but was rejected because the stateless Rohingya people are considered ineligible for government positions in Myanmar (Ali 2018b). Since fleeing his homeland, Ali has written for the online news portal Rohingya Blogger (later renamed Rohingya Today) and has published articles and interviews in *Dhaka Tribune* (2017a), *Al Jazeera* (2017c), *World Literature Today* (2019a), and on *CNN* (2018b). What's more, he published the chapbook *The Blossom* (2018a) for circulation around Kutupalong and nearby refugee camps. Some of his writing will be featured in a forthcoming anthology of Rohingya poetry and folk songs edited by James Byrne for release in 2019.



Figure 3. Kutupalong Refugee Camp, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. 2017 (Image credit: John Owens (VOA), Wikimedia Commons).

Unrecognized by the Myanmar government as citizens according to the Citizenship Law of 1982 and the Constitution of 2008, the Rohingya remain among “the most persecuted populations in the world” (Alam 2018, 180). When Ali was one year old in 1993, his birth certificate was seized by Nasaka, the Myanmar border security force in Rakhine State abolished by Thein Sein in 2013—a subject about which he wrote twenty-four years later in the poem “The Nasaka and a Rohingya” (Ali 2017b). On the morning of August 25, 2017, the Burmese military joined by Buddhist nationalists commenced broad-scale ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya Muslim population of Rakhine in response to coordinated attacks on security forces by the insurgent group ARSA, or Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (Ibrahim 2018, 143–50). The genocidal campaign resulted in the deaths of more than 10,000 people, the devastation of close to four-hundred predominantly Rohingya villages, and

displacement of an estimated 650,000 individuals, or over two-thirds of the entire Burmese Rohingya population, who escaped to Bangladesh (Human Rights Watch 2019; Ibrahim 2018, 143). While state-sponsored repression of the Rohingya has occurred periodically since the 1970s, the escalation of deadly violence since 2012 represents Myanmar's most concerted attempt to resettle or remove the ethnic minority group permanently (Howe 2018). During the Rakhine State riots beginning in June 2012, conflict exploded between Arakanese Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims, followed by the launch of operations by the Myanmar Army and Border Guard Police against the Rohingya resulting in the displacement of more than 90,000 people. After his village was razed and neighbors killed in August 2017, Ali fled to Bangladesh (Ali 2018b; Refugees International 2018). Before he left Rakhine, however, he mailed poems to Burmese literary magazines using a pseudonym.

Much of Ali's writing in exile has been published on Facebook and online media such as journals and blogs. He views his poetry as a form of digital-literary activism on behalf of refugees from Rakhine State: "Writing for Rohingya people is activism. For me, being a Rohingya, victims of a slow-burning genocide in Myanmar, imagism is [not] far from activism" (Ali qtd. in Byrne 2019, 29). He also emphasizes the importance of writing poetry in English in order to communicate to international audiences the extent of the refugee crisis in Bangladesh:

Writing about being a Rohingya in such a situation is a battle between trying to survive and raising the voices of the people who are counted as forgotten in the world [...] The experiences in my life have taught me to write in English rather than in Burmese, because I want people from all over the world to understand why my people have been discriminated against for decades. (Ali qtd. in Byrne 2019, 27, 28)

Ali is committed to helping Rohingya people tell their own stories of marginalization and dispossession—an aim he accomplishes in part through his Facebook pages Art Garden (2019) and Daily Poems by Rohingyas (2019). While he advocates justice for Rohingya refugees, he also encourages individuals to speak directly for themselves through a combination of online media activism and real-time writing workshops offered through the Youth Empowerment Center: "There are a million Rohingya, each of us has an oral history. Each one of us has trauma. I want a new generation to write for themselves" (qtd. in McPherson and Lewis 2019, sect. "Each of Us Has a Trauma," para. 6). As with Maung Saung Kha and other Burmese activist-poets, Ali approaches social media as central to empowerment and identity in an era of widespread violence against Rohingya Muslims: "On social media like Facebook, Rohingya youth have been trying hard, writing poems and articles for people. They want to be the voice for their people" (Ali in Byrne 2019, 30).

In 2019, the magazine *Modern Poetry in Translation* published a section on Rohingya poetry considered the first of its kind in a UK-based literary journal. The section features Ali's poem "That's Me, A Rohingya" (2019b) in addition to "Rohingya: Collective Voices," a series of short verses compiled, translated, and edited by Ali and James Byrne. In his poem, Ali speaks of the estrangement he experienced as a child from a sociopolitical regime that refused to recognize Rohingya people as

members of equal standing and continues to deny them birth certificates, citizenship, and educational opportunities:

When I was born,
I was not a baby like you are.
Without a birth certificate,
Just like death.

When I was one,
I was not a child like you are.
Without a nation,
Just like a pet.

When I was at school,
I was not a student like you are.
Without a Burmese face,
Just like the bleakness of the future.
(Ali 2019b, ll. 1–12)

The repetition of the phrases “when I was,” “I was not,” “without a,” and just like” produces a powerful contrapuntal effect in the poem—a movement in language that tracks back and forth between the radically divergent realities of Burmese people. His “A Rohingya refugee,” moreover, reflects on issues of suicide, trafficking, kidnapping, isolation, and longing for homeland:

The world I knew has gone,
My people were killed and displaced.
It’s the fourth time I have fled Bangladesh,
My life is spent just trying to survive.

I always ask myself during repatriation:
“Is this the last time?”
“Could I be fortunate enough to escape again?”
This time it is different. My heart is asking me.
(Ali 2019a, ll. 13–20, emphasis original)

Told from the perspective of a refugee who has been forced to flee Myanmar four separate times, the narrative considers the cycle of repatriation that destroys lives, fractures families, and erodes cultures.

Outside the Rakhine context, other young Muslim poets in Myanmar have combined poetry and Facebook as a literary-digital medium for communicating experiences of discrimination by the Burmese majority in a country where Islam is practiced by about four percent of the population. Yangon-based poet, performer, and activist Than Toe Aung, for instance, learned initially of slam poetry from a Facebook video of American poet Porsha Olayiwola (Shealy 2019). Presented with his

Buddhist friend Aung Kaung Myat, his collaborative poem “It starts with you” recounts the discrimination and violence Than Toe Aung endured as a student and calls urgently for religious equality in the country (Kaung Myat and Toe Aung 2016). In early 2018, moreover, after being assaulted and detained by Yangon police, Than Toe Aung posted an account of the ordeal—including photos of his cuts and bruises—to his Facebook page. Yet, also through Facebook, police refuted the authenticity of his account of the incident. In this manner, Burmese protest poetry and online-offline communities of literary activism are mediated to a significant extent by Facebook. Social media enables poets like Than Toe Aung and Mayyu Ali to voice the struggles of ethnic minority groups in Myanmar beyond the constraints of traditional print media. Nonetheless, the exclusive use of Facebook risks enabling an unprecedented level of surveillance, repression, and incrimination for literary activities perceived as threats to the state apparatus. Thus, in this way, the proliferation of social media and Internet-enabled mobile telephones since liberalization has both stimulated and stifled poetry as a mode of free political expression.

CONCLUSION: SOCIAL MEDIA, POETRY, AND FREEDOM IN MYANMAR

The work of Mayyu Ali, Maung Saung Kha, and *thangyat* troupes Peacock Generation and Oway Voice exemplifies digital activism led by young poets and performers living under an authoritarian regime (Vlavo 2018). Social media-based poetry provides a discourse of resistance as well as a mechanism for voicing the lived experiences of individuals—their stories of displacement, dispossession, incarceration, torture, and genocide. In some instances, social media are integral to the form and structure of digital poetry; for instance, the Twitter-like brevity and directness of Maung Saung Kha’s “Image” represents the immediacy of communication in digital environments as well as the urgency of the political situation in Myanmar. Moreover, social media, such as Facebook, becomes a nexus of online-offline interaction between poets, activists, and audiences, as the case of *thangyat* performance demonstrates so well. Activist-poets move seamlessly between physical and digital spheres in an effort to provoke societal change in Myanmar. Digital media, furthermore, make it possible for poets to allow other voices to emerge; Mayyu Ali’s work with Rohingya refugees is illustrative in this respect. As poets continue to seek ways to circumvent government scrutiny in the NLD era, new digital-literary devices will be invented—and classical Burmese techniques and motifs reapportioned.

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