



Modern Myanmar Short Stories  
*Scents of Anyar*

Short Stories  
Second Collection

**Hsai Taung Nights  
and  
Other Stories**  
**NYO HTUN LU**

Translated by  
**Yay Chan (Mandalay)**

## INTRODUCTION

Story telling is an ancient art casting spell over the hearers and readers since the dawn of human civilization, and the short story has sometimes been called the earliest form of literature. And many literary historians trace the concept of modern short to Edgar Allan Poe who expounded the nature of this art genre in his essay written in 1842; since then many forms of short story have been developed around the world that are conditioned by their respective social systems and national cultures, but not without losing sight of expressing the single dominant idea or theme.

Speaking comparatively and candidly, the growth of modern Myanmar short stories is too recent, and Myanmar literary works in general are quite unknown to foreign readership, for very few novels and short stories are translated for readers abroad. And in the South East Asian region, as Myanmar is part of it and as the region's economic potential is recognized, few works have been translated to claim as region's literary heritage.

The reading and hearing of Buddhist tales of ethical values have a long history since the introduction of Buddhism into the coun

try. But the short stories which could be claimed as modern from the aspect of technique and theme appeared in the decades before and after the Second World War. Poets and intellectuals of national standing like Zawgyi(U Thein Han) and U Wun(Min Thu Wun) have introduced many fresh ideas and forms into the local literary scene; young postwar writers born of nationalist struggles and mostly of leftist political persuasions like Thein Hpe Myint, Dagon Tayar, Mya Than Tint, Aung Lin, among many others, wrote short stories subscribing to the school of realism and a few stories of them were translated.

Novels, short stories and films are the main forms of entertainment and education in the Myanmar media before the introduction of television in the early 1980s, but quite surprisingly the short story survives in the columns of the glossy magazines, despite the dearth of long novels. And the changing structures of the Myanmar society in towns and villages become the breeding ground for the narratives in the fiction of present day writers like Nay Win Myint, Hsue Hnget, Nyo Htun Lu, Ma Yar Hto and Khin Khin Htoo among many.

Some of the core cultural values of Myanmar are disappearing, and many are still retained in the rural villages. In the countryside the whole-night entertainment of Zat(song and dance shows with comedians as fill up) troupes are dwindling, wherein the rural audience cheer their favourite male and female lead actors and da

ncers by throwing gifts of snacks onstage, and contrarily good acting portrayals of villains are greeted with pelting cheroot stubs. And now antennas and circular satellite dishes sprout up on the roofs of the houses in the villages; everywhere it is a case of the struggle of old and new. And Nyo Htun Lu, a writer by choice and a veterinary doctor by training, seems to have an observant eye as he spins yarns through the eyes of the common people in the ever changing days of Myanmar society.

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## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Nyo Htun Lu, a veterinary doctor by training, is a writer of plain people; his short stories in a way represent the relations of the common people to the society and the relationships among themselves, in this particular instance: the fabric of Myanmar society. And the themes of love and family, struggles for livelihood, superstition, old age and death are neatly and lucidly portrayed against the setting of Anyar or Upper Myanmar heartland, so the stories have a slight flavor of provincialism, but still largely depict the values of Myanmar culture.

As every general statement could not cover the whole, it is with humble timidity this translator proposes these stories as truly reflecting the psyche and core values of Myanmar. Another distinct aspect of this collection is that the stories are written in a simple and lucid prose, and of course that is for the students of Myanmar literature. And quite regrettably this translator has every reason to assume that the rich imagery, diction and rhyme of the Myanmar language may have lost to a certain extent in conveying to a foreign tongue. But for the readers this translator also humbly hopes “much” is duly retained to stimulate leisurely interest and literary

excursion into the lives of the Myanmar who inevitably have to gradually cope with the advancing values and ideals of the 21 st century.

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## NOTE ON THE THEMES OF STORIES

In Myanmar society, parents are included in the Five Holies: The Buddha, the Dhamma (Scriptures), Sangha (monks of the Buddhist Order), Parents and Teachers. And so every parent in this society, whatever stations of life they are in provides their children with boundless affection, spiritually and materially. Thus the saying runs: there's always downstream current, hardly upstream "Narrow Downstream" portrays this theme.

Human existence, with all its suffering, is still holy; in the thirty-one planes of Samsara (rounds of existences) a creature with good past Karma (action) can earn a rare human life according to the Buddhist outlook. The author weaves a story on this theme.

"Hsai Taung Nights" depicts the struggles of a doctor in the remote jade-mining hills of northern Kachin State where men pursue their wild dreams, quite similar to the "Gold Rush" episodes of Western civilization. In Myanmar, extreme form of localism still persists in some rural areas, but the powerful sweep of satellite television has replaced that rural psyche with a new brand of loyalty created by global commercialism.

In Myanmar folktales a buffalo, a benign creature (Myanmar Folktales by Mg Htin Aung), has no upper teeth; so with no “lower teeth” means an old fellow who should seek refuge in religion at the third stage of life. The author, with a sense of humour, portrays a harmless escapade of an elder Myanmar family man.

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## NARROW DOWNSTREAM

Though it was not a matter of importance it had to be done. A bout of for condensed-milk cans of rice were spread on the small circular bamboo tray to be cleaned by poking the fingers in the grains to pick out the tiny pebbles and unhusked grains of rice. At an advanced age one could only eat rice cooked tenderly; moreover, it was severely painful when one happened to chew one of the tiny pebbles while having a plate of rice.

Mum Yi (mother Yi) poked her trained fingers into the grains of white rice and felt for the tiny pebbles like searching for lice-nits in the hair. She slowly picked up the tiny stones, but the yellowish grains of unhusked paddy, spread on the half-size gunny sack beside her, were neatly reserved for the doves that usually came at daybreak. And some unhusked paddy grains eluded and disappeared under the searching look of Mum Yi's bleary eyes; though Mum Yi's nerves at her neck and back were taut and stiff she continued her chore of rice-cleaning.

“ Mya Yi, it's so exhausting. You can  
pick some up while eating”

She was too absorbed in her chore to notice her husband U Ba Nyi's compassionate words. Letting the mind wander here and there while picking up the unhusked paddy grains and tiny pebbles from a heap of white rice was hard-to-get moment for an old woman in her twilight years. It made her cheerful, but sometime her mind was wandering like the the ever-changing places of grains in a rice heap whenever it was poked and stirred. Though her muscles were numbed and painful due to lack of blood supply, she was still carried away by her stream of thought. Her stream of thought was unending as much as her worries became more and more.

Worries about her sons shuttled back and forth: from her elder son Tin Win in Mandalay to her younger one Khin Zaw in Monywa. And the more she got older, the pang of her worries more acute, like a burning flame made more intense by fuel. Whatever status her sons achieved in their lives, in her eyes they were her own young children.

As her younger son was well-behaved she could let her mind at rest. About her elder son she could not let her mind at peace wondering at the moment whether he would return straight from office back to his home. Her elder son, father of three children and at times hanging out and boozing with his many friends, had not any sense enough to be a family man, and if the old woman opened her heart to her husband he would readily snap back:

“You yourself go to Mandalay, and

live with your son”

Circumstances permitting, she would go beyond ten times doing that. Her daughter-in-law often made complaints about her elder son through mail and through chance-messengers. It was a problem; how would she shape him up at this age? It was better for her to pull his tuft of forelock and gave him a through spanking during his young days.

“Well Mum, if he gets drunk like this

I would not take up a place beside him

At the libation ceremony of our son’s

novitiation”

Mum Yi flashed a smile when she recalled the words of her daughter-in-law, and even with a brood of children the couple did not conduct well in their words and actions. Tin Win, her son, was indiscreet, a creature of impulse, and her daughter-in-law had a loose tongue knowing not where her words would get her to; rather she should use persuasive words to get her husband around.

Something flitted across Mum Yi’s wandering mind, and suddenly she remembered the novitiation ceremony about to be held in the coming month of Wazo (the start of the Buddhist Lent). Her grandson was to be initiated into the Buddhist Order, and the date of the ceremony was already fixed. Her long repressed wants were

soon to be materialized, and she was in a blissful and ecstatic mood, seeming to hear in her ears the noisy roar of laughter and the performing music of the Byaw long drums. Her elder son had two daughters and a son, and her younger son only a daughter. Her face broke into a smile as she saw in her mind's eye happy grandchildren in their ceremonial dresses, her grandsons in Shin Laung(would be novice) grab and granddaughters in ear-boring attires.

She rubbed off her hands, caked with fine particles of rice bran, with her longyi(sarong) at the edge of her pelvis, picked up the stub of cheroot ready at her side at her side and lit it.

“Mum, this year before the starting of  
the lent, a novice-initiation ceremony  
for Saw Myint will be held”

At the first instant she could not believe her own ears, hearing her elder son's words which were still ringing in her ears. She thought her son's words were spoken on impulse loosened by the effect of alcohol, but only when she saw the sober and clear face of her son she felt delighted and could let her mind at rest.

“The ceremony will be held in  
Mandalay at Venerable Eindaka's  
monastery, and some intimate friends

will be invited”

Tin Win could not finish his words as his mother stopped him instantly with her hands.

“ No, no, my son; how dare you sloppily make a plan like this. It’s once-in-a-lifetime affair, so I’ll hold the ceremony at my village.

I can’t do it in a casual manner as you say.

Do you remember how I had held a ceremony

for you? When I visit you in Mandalay

my elder grandson Saw Myint often says

about his eagerness to become a Shinlaung

(novice-to-be). Let’s do it in our village,

don’t worry about the donation expenses.

I’ll cough up some amount as much as I

could afford”

Mum Yi’s earnest manner of speaking her mind put a damper on the couple; her son and her daughter-in-law quieted down, looked at each other and knew not what to say.

“ Now, I’m going to spill the beans.

I've been secretly saving money  
for ling to hold a donation  
ceremony for my grandchildren, and  
your father doesn't even know about it.  
Chinese made 25 big bowls, 40 rough  
fabric cotton napkins and 16 fluffy  
blankets which I bought cheap when  
I visited Mandalay Zegyo market last year”

Mum Yi was in rapture while gazing at the surprised manner of her son and her daughter-in-law, and she felt at ease as she had spilled out her secret which she had kept in her for a long time. Tin Win's head dropped while listening to her mother's words, and the old woman looking straight in her son's face said:

“Well now, are you feeling sad about it?”

Even becoming a family man you only know  
how to lead a heedless life, never thinking  
back, never thinking ahead, never caring  
about your own children helping them to  
lead proper lives; you thoughtless, stupid

creature”

Mum Yi’s angry words, born out of pity for her son, did not come out from her lips, and she took comfort in the fact that her son did remember to hold novitiation and donation ceremony for the children.

But in her mind she had already fixed a plan to hold a ceremony one time or other for her grandchildren if the parents could not afford to do it. How could she let them hold a casual ceremony with a few invited guests at the monastery, just making her grandchildren wear Thingan (monk’s robes) and holding a simple libation (water-pouring into a bowl to share merit) ritual? She was anxious to see her grandson Saw Myint, at tired in a (ceremonial garb shaded by) long-handle golden umbrellas, amid the noisy vocal accompaniment of Shoue song (a folksong at ceremonial processions marked by loud chorus responses from the music band).

“ Mya Yi, they are doing what they can;

it’s good to hold it in Mandalay”,

the old woman’s husband chipped in.

“ Oh, I’m not doing it casually; I want to show the village my grandson riding around on a horse. You say as if the children were not your own flesh and blood,”

the old woman snapped back. U Ba Nyi consented as he did not want a spat with his wife at this old age; the old woman was satisfied and comforted by her husband's consent.

Every parent loved their children, whether the behavior of their offspring was approving or disapproving U Ba Nyi, wanting to lead a private life as much carefree and peaceful as possible in his twilight years, was a pensioner wise in Dhamma (Buddha's Teachings) and so he did not wish to interfere in the affairs of his children who had parted the family nest and who were struggling to lead their own lives. He and the old woman started life as a young couple and still remained a duo at this advanced age. He felt a little pity for his wife who could not as yet realize this trait of human existence.

## (ii)

Mum Yi could not rest a minute after arriving back from Mandalay and fixing the date for the novice-initiation ceremony. Oblivious of the blistering sun Mum Yi briskly went around the adjacent villages, and U Ba Nyi was surprised at his old woman's untiring efforts prompted by her affection for her grandchildren.

She had asked Mg Pyo Aung of Kyay Pan Kan village to send ten bags of rice for the initiation-donation ceremony, and Myint Tin and his brother of Minn village to cover up green bananas to get in time for there were other Ahlus (donation ceremonies) to be su

plied, and she had to visit that village the day after tomorrow again. And for the Hsaing (Myanmar orchestra) music band she would hire the band from her village, and that must also be told in advance.

U Ba Nyi watched his wife with a pitiful smile as the old woman, sitting near him, was muttering things as if to herself. Let alone helping her out in her errands, her husband did not ask anything about her doings, and her patience was wearing thin over her husband's cool manner. Yet she could not let herself become angry with her husband, for she knew full well about the cool and quiet ways of her husband.

She took a puff from the stub of her cheroot and laid it flat on the little red brick. With her heads down and while cupping the rice from the tray with her hands she thought about whether to visit Mandalay again.

Mum Yi was not totally confident of her son and her daughter-in-law, the former impulsive and the latter cool and incompetent. And there were many chores to be done: printing invitation cards and buying Tetoron rayon monk's robes, the price of which was a hundred percent higher than last year. When the old woman asked the couple to buy monk's robes in advance they readily agreed to do it; but they had a habit of giving reply in such a casual manner and never serious about it. She had not asked how would they do it

t; she had to also notify her young son in advance. Well, better to visit them by herself in Mandalay, she made up her mind, but then she remembered her husband U Ba Nyi and again she was in a dilemma.

“You’re going too far beyond the limit,  
this month you’ve been to Mandalay  
three times, and the date of ceremony  
is quite far away”

If her husband knew about it, he would certainly scold her. Though the date was quite far she wanted to end all the chores, and as the prices were rising she wanted to finish off the buying in advance.

“Mum, the estimate cost for the donation  
may reach nearly 20,000 kyats, I guess.

I’ve only about 9000 kyats,  
so can Mum put in the rest,”

Tin Win asked his mother diffidently.

“It’s all right, I’ll have to .....”

“Would it be too much a burden for  
Mum? I’ll pay back later as much as

I can bit by bit”

And as if being reminded by her mother’s words Tin Win asked  
:

“Well about gold, I’ll have to ask Mum:  
do you still have Myint Khin’s gold necklace  
and bangles?”

Looking at her son the old woman gave a positive reply.

“Mum, I’ve had an idea: isn’t it better  
to sell Myint Khin’s jewellery and donate  
it in our ceremony. She’ll also share our  
kusala(deed of merit)”

Mum Yi became downcast and tears welled up in her eyes as she remembered the death of her fateful young daughter Myint Khin who died last year from cardiac disease. Why was she stricken with such a disease, and where was she now in the cycle of existences?

The old woman’s voice was cracked with emotion when she replied to her son’s question about the gold jewellery, and thought about whether to reveal the issue of her daughter’s possessions.

About four months ago, fifth waxing day of Tabodwe month to

be exact, Ma Ma Thein Tin(elder sister Thein Tin) came to Mum Yi, though the two sister were born of the same parents and lived in the same village they hardly visited each other. As Ma Ma Thein Tin was well off it was quite natural that she hardly paid attention to her younger sister. The time came when hard luck struck the elder sister, her economic status ruined and every effort she made became a misstep for her. Amid the troubles the elder sister could not rein in her sons, once pampered by her and still indulging in alcohol without bent for hard work. Mg Mg, the youngest son, was a clerk at the village cooperative shop and seemed to be well-behaved, but before words of praise heaped on him died down, a case of embezzlement cropped up at his shop.

“Mum Yi, my young son will be in jail if he can’t pay back”

Ma Ma Thein Tin said and wept in turns, and in the end her smooth persuasive words and tears overwhelmed her younger sister who did not have the heart to see her elder one in such misery.

Then Mum Yi gave the small gold necklace and gold bangle of her late daughter to Ma Ma Thein Tin.

“This young boy is silly; he think the public money as his own. Just pawn this at Myint Saung of New Quarter”

While grasping the paper packet holding the necklace and ban

gle Ma Ma Thein Tin thanked her younger sister for saving her son, and assured that she would give back her younger sister's pawned jewellery within a month. Promises were made repeatedly, but this Wazo month it would be four months and the jewellery was still pawned. And if Tin Win came to know about this there would be blood and violence among the cousin brothers; Tin Win would certainly use these threatening words:

“What? Do we have to lose my  
sister's jewellery for the sake  
of this stupid ass, son of Gyeedaw  
(elder Aunt). Leave them to their own  
fate, and if they will not repay, I'll .....

It was unthinkable if the boozing cousin brothers confronted each other that would lead to a bloody brawl, and that was why Tin Win was kept in the dark about the jewellery. And Tin Win, unsuspecting about his late sister's jewellery, thought while looking at the sad face of his mother that she still felt the loss of her daughter.

Returning from the evening stroll, the old woman's husband asked with a loud voice at her listless wife.

“Hey, Mya Yi, what's happening to you.

You don't hear my call."

Blowing out her breath slowly, she stood up in a sluggish manner as she did not feel herself fresh and light-hearted like in the previous moments. All the anxieties and worried thoughts were stifling her.

"Dusk is falling; prepare a meal for me"

The old women took a glance at her husband who reminded her of his meal and she was quiet uncomfortable in her thoughts. Would she have to speak out her mind? But she did not want to be blamed either.

While waiting on her husband who was having a meal, she thought about going to her elder sister's house at night, and as the novitiation ceremony was approaching nearer and nearer she had to force her elder sister to get back her daughter's pawned jewellery. And because of these depressing thoughts she ended her evening meal with just one or two mouthfuls of rice.

"Well father, how did it come to the end?"

I asked. Looking at me and pausing his words, father sipped a cup of green tea while blowing it down to cool it. While waiting for my father to resume his words, I thought about Ah-Yee-Lay (young aunt) Daw Mya Yi and Gyeedaw (elder aunt) Daw Thein Tin, and those forms of addresses had become a habit of my mouth since

young. And those two were the first cousins of my father, and Gye edaw Daw Thein Tin was the most well-off among my father's siblings.

When young if we were asked to point out the most well-off family of our village we had to train our fingers at Gyeedaw Daw Thein Tin. She bought up all seasonal produce, beans, seshamum and jaggery, and sold them off when prices were at a maximum. In this way, I remembered, Gyeedaw's family had a thriving livelihood, and Tin Mg Myint, their eldest son, was dressed up in a dandified appearance with gold buttons and a gold watch.

With such a family background at his support Tin Mg Myint led a wayward life, often drunk with toddy juice and frequently involved in drunken brawls that led him to be restrained at the village headman's house. And he was referred to as the one who had moved his sleeping place to the village headman's home. Zaw Win and Toe Kyi, his younger brother, followed hard on their elder brother's heels and were also not less in their waywardness.

Gyeedaw Daw Thein Tin's sons were quite distinct in their delinquent behavior, and when the family's livelihood hit the hard times, the sons' notoriety took a heavy toll on their pitiable mother. But I got along well with Ko Tin Win, Mum Yi's son; our friendship increased as we attended school together in Mandalay and I called him Kolay Tin Win (young elder brother). Normally he had a goo

d temperament, but when he became tipsy, hot temper took the better side of him.

“ They are U Pho Dan’s grandchildren;  
it’s not surprising they have a streak of  
notoriety in them”

Such was the tribute paid to Grandfather U Pho Dan whose bones had long been decayed in his grave, and the old man, Mum Yi’s father, was also a man of considerable infamy during his time, but now people gossiped about him without any relevancy.

“Hmm.....,” My father cleared his throat and continued:

“First, Ma Ma Mya Yi tired to manage  
by herself, and the date of the novitiation  
ceremony became nearer and nearer. And  
Ma Ma Thein Tin could not take out  
the pawned Jewellery, moving the repayment  
from day to day”

“They could change the date of ceremony”, I interjected.

“No son, they couldn’t .... Tin Win and  
his father would come to know about it”, my father resumed

his words:

“Well, in fact, Ma Ma Thein Tin was broke; she merely gave assurances that she would take out the pawned pieces, for fear of her son Mg Mg being jailed. All her money were blown to the four winds by her stupid sons”

While speaking my father poured green tea into a cup near me and said:

“Drink it. These green tea leaves are a gift given by Myo Nyunt, son of Ma Saw Shin. He brought it from Kyauk-me (a town on Shan Highlands) last week.”

I slowly picked up the cup of green tea and the scent of tea leaves wafted around my nostrils.

“ In the end Ma Ma Mya Yi came to me; she did not want problems to crop up near the ceremony. If her elder son

knew about it all would be messed up,  
and she had some 5000 kyats left in her  
hands; for the required amount she would  
sell her late young daughter's. . . What's her name?"

"Myint Khin", I answered.

"Yes, Ma ma Mya Yi's idea is quite  
goos. She would sell her daughter's  
jewellery and use it for donation  
expenses. But Ma Ma Thein Tin  
took her jewellery and pawned it,  
and that's where it all messed up.  
I had about 8000 Kyats from the  
recent sale of my groundnut, and  
I couldn't help feeling a sense of  
pity looking at the about to weep  
face of Ma Ma Mya Yi.

So I handed that money, so short

lived not enough to warm my hands”, my father concluded.

I gazed at the main road of the village in front of my house, and it was quiet under the cool, clear moonlight. The village was in deep slumber and I heard the hooting of an owl on the tree further in the distance. The cloying scent of the Nya-Hmway-Pan flowers (Queen of night/ *Cestrum Nocturnum*) wafted along in the gentle breeze.

“ Hmmm . . . parental love is quite amazing; for the sake of their children parents could not think out, a thing should be or should not be. They are to be pitied. Not wanting to see her son in jail Ma Ma Thein Tin readily made promises that could not be honoured, and she did not think of the loss of her name and trust. And Ma Ma Mya Yi made every effort to hold a novitiation ceremony for her grandson at her village though her son said he would hold it in Mandalay. Well, she wanted to see it done at her own village”.

I was in daze and found myself unable to give comments on my father's words. While sitting on the couch in front of the house, my father and I engaged in a conversation and our talks turned to Mum Yi, but still I had not said about the purpose of my visit.

Since arriving at the village I was burdened with my own cares, and coming Sunday I had to go down to Yangon accompanying my son. My son had passed the Tenth standard and got permission to attend the Technical Institute in that town and I was short of about 2000 Kyats for his expenses. And as my son was a student away from home I had to manage every convenience for him. Compounding my worries, my wife had to be hospitalized, and so my savings were unexpectedly depleted.

While racking my brains to send my son to school, I ran into a native of my village at Zeygyo market. From him I heard that the village had a bumper harvest brought on by favourable weather conditions, and my father also enjoyed a good harvest of his ground nut crop. As soon as I heard that I ran back to my village, but when I came to know that money was no longer in his hands now, how could I tell about the purpose of my visit? If my father knew about my plight he would have made something up for the promising future of his young grandson.

“ Son, have your green tea with grilled  
dried mutton. When you were young

you had a hearty meal with this mutton”

I could not pay much attention to my father’s words and gazed at the road in front of my house thinking how to start the words to explain the purpose of my visit. And I was racking my brains out.

“Father, it’s very difficult to get rail tickets at this time of the year when colleges are starting to open. I have asked help from my friend Han Htay who lives near station; he once visited our house and you know him. He’ll queue up to buy the tickets. Don’t forget father; we’ll leave by  
Sunday night train”

My son reminded me worriedly when I was about to leave for the village. He might not know why I abruptly left for the village, and I also not want him to know about it. I did not want to put a damper on his vivacious spirit and blemish the purity of a young heart. Whatever the circumstances I must try to cope with it. When I secretly heaved a sigh my father pushed the plate of grilled dried mutton in front of me and urged me to have it.

“Have it son”

“Yes, father”

Though I nodded my head I still did not touch the plate as yet; I slightly stole a glance at my father, half-lit by moonlight, and took a fan from the corner of the couch and fanned myself.

“Is it too hot?”,

my father asked me and I failed to answer him.

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