

THE LEAVE

AND COLLECTED STORIES

NI MIN SWE

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The author's note

When you read this book, perhaps, you will drift quietly into an unexpected serene world _ a world untouched and far from the maddening crowd.

In this little world, you may find strange things that may seem outwardly to be belonging to a different world where people with extreme values express the utmost feelings. Those feelings are no other than the universal ones of love, faithfulness and long suffering, yet somehow you will come to know that they are quite different from what you are experiencing around you these days.

But, a moment after a closer look, you are quite likely to discover the characters whom I would like to compare to the wonderful antiques, precious, rare and hard to be found in this present materialistic world. In these stories they have the charm of their own no matter how different and astonishing their ideas about life, love, friendship and human relationship, in general may be. Thus, in a way, they may lighten your heart, bring warmth and cherished delight.

Then, when you return to your own world, haply you may recall the world of those characters in the stories and may wish to return to it even though their world is vastly different from yours in terms of material wealth and social status.

Indeed, their world is small and their life is simple, yet there is still an enchantment of their own in that they are happy and content with what they have. And this is what I have always valued.

Prologue

'The Leave' is a collection of twelve stories, which come out from the author's own experiences and encounters with people who defined a special beauty of life within Myanmar. These short stories cover a period of forty years from the sixties to 2000.

The stories reflect the various aspects of love and humanity. It also expresses young people in love, sometimes fulfilled and sometimes unrequited. It talks about joy and sorrow of life. In fact these short stories attempt to portray the universal experiences of humanity and romance which is part of every person's life.

Universal, yet, it can be said that these stories illustrate the events and specific aspect of Myanmar's tradition and culture as they take place in Myanmar. The stories take account of contemporary Myanmar life, yet it also includes the nostalgic past of the history.

In addition, the stories take place in the rural Myanmar as well as the urban life mingled with Myanmar's values and traditions.

The author hopes to share a culture which might be still very much exotic for people outside Myanmar_ simple, yet elegant, sweet and gentle.

About the author

Ni Min Swe was born in Monywa, in Central Myanmar, the first child of a weaving factory owner. He received his bachelor's degree at Mandalay Arts and Science University.

He began his writing career with short stories in 1984. And he set his milestone with his first novel 'An Earlier Rain'. This very first novel captured the emotion and intellectual mind of the readers nationwide. This instant best seller aroused a controversy among the readers with different reaction from male and female readers reacting in different ways. Despite the different opinions, there is a general agreement among the readers--a book which brings literary fulfilment and emotional contentment.

The author won the Pakokku Library Book Award for 2003, He was presented the award at a ceremony in Pakokku in Central Myanmar on February 22, 2004. The ceremony was graced by the presence of the honourable Prime Minister. The author won the Pakokku Library Book Award for 2003, He was presented the award at a ceremony in Pakokku in Central Myanmar on February 22, 2004. The ceremony was graced by the presence of the honourable Prime Minister.

The author's interest in writing is not only in Myanmar language. The author has taken an interest in English literature and fiction since 1965, a period where the status of English language was suddenly degraded. After writing in Myanmar language for several years, the author introduced the readers to his first writing in English in 1998.

His works in Myanmar are as follows:

- An Earlier Rain (1988)
- The Leave (1989)
- Lonely as a Cloud (1989)
- Flake after Flake (1990)
- As Far as Heaven (1992)

'The Leave and Collected Stories': An Introduction

Little is known about Myanmar, formerly known as Burma. The knowledge that people might have about this country could be very limited and superficial: a country which causes debates on several issues or a country which offers the best teak of the world and the most valuable precious stones_ such as ruby, jade, sapphire and pearl. On the other hand, people might have certain factual information about the location, population or what the media have offered. But none of them truly expresses about its individuals nor the people_ their ready smiles, their habits of being contented with very little demands, their willingness to help, their loving-kindness and self-sacrificing itself means a joy for those they love.

What people of the outside world might feel about these stories, perhaps could be illustrated with the metaphor of the mango. A person might know the colour and shape of this famous tropical fruit, yet unless he has the taste of it, he may never know the real taste of this fruit. *The author, a Myanmar by birth, would like to make an attempt to offer the true taste of the Myanmar people.* The country that has eluded many an observer_ the country only such an author can unravel, transporting to the inner world of its true taste.

'The Leave and Collected Stories' is a collection of short stories written by a Myanmar author who has a fine reputation in contemporary Myanmar literature. Ni Min Swe's first novel, '*An Earlier Rain*' was an instant best seller in 1988. After the advertisement of the coming out of the book the whole nation encountered a country in turmoil. The country's infrastructure was paralysed but the readers still yearned to read this book which had been serialized in a famous magazine which had great literary reputation. Since then this novel has captured the hearts of the readers. Thus, they longed to read the book as a whole. The longer that situation remained, the more eager the readers became to read the book. Once the country's infrastructure got back to normal, all the copies of the novel were sold out and soon the book was totally out of stock in all the bookshops. In libraries, this book was always out on loan and seldom on the shelf. Such a case of a first novel

becoming an instant bestseller had never occurred in the country before. And up till now this book is very much a widely read book. Very recently, this book is being referred as a classic category in Myanmar novels. Even acclaimed editors and other accomplished writers of Myanmar recommend this book as, a book which should be read if you wish to read a good Myanmar novel.

'The Leave and Collected Stories', doubtless to say, is the author's effort to present the author's love for people, unfolding the beauties of the Myanmar people to the world. The author hopes to take his fellow lovers of literature of the world to the soul of Myanmar through his window called *'The Leave and Collected Stories'*. In other words, the author invites you to a country which has gone through so much history: from the splendour of kings and knights in shining armour, the period where it succumbed to the British domination, its struggle for independence and finally a sovereign state whose people hope for and dream of achieving *Utopia*. You will come to know *how the author tries to lay a bridge between his little hidden oasis and the world*.

'The Leave and Collected Stories' could be grouped according to the following categories:

• *The Myanmar, individuals yet universal*

• *Reflections on Literature*, i.e., the author's comparative view of his character's parallel aspects with known characters from English literature.

• *The Myanmar of Myanmar*, i.e., the author's portrayal of the Myanmar within the context of Myanmar_ how the culture and values mould the Myanmar to be a Myanmar and these short stories talk about their immense love, their joys and sorrows, etc.

The Myanmar, individuals yet universal

1.Red or Blue

This opening story depicts the complexity of human desire.

In this story the narrator recounts his infatuation and eventual marriage to Patricia, the only woman at Mandalay University to smoke. Patricia is every man's dream, from her slim body to her warm-hearted eyebrows. Patricia's destiny, however, is to die young and the narrator, a successful man of the world, has a tenuous involvement with a childhood friend. It is this involvement that induces strong feelings of guilt and despair to well up in him after the death of his beautiful wife...

One day Khin Myaing would even learn to feel gratitude for Patricia as someone who has saved her from shame and disgrace. Thanks to Patricia, Khin Myaing had narrowly escaped from doing a very wrong deed or else she would have got involved with a married man. Looking at Patricia swimming, I had thought I would surely marry Khin Myaing as soon as Patricia was dead. But now, I didn't even know where those thoughts had gone.

2.My Mother And My Only Friend

The misplaced love of a woman is narrated through the eyes of a son who loved her dearly...

When mother heard the name U Moe Zin, her eyes went round with surprise as well as with excitement. She even dropped the clothes she was about to hang. When I observed all this I was shocked and worried.

She ran downstairs at a great speed.

I followed mother but when I got to the middle of the staircase I stopped and watched her answering the phone.

She spoke softly on the phone. It took about only one minute, I thought. But she looked nervous and guilty. After hanging up the phone, she turned round and faced me. I could see nervousness on her face.

Oh, God! What has happened to mother?

3. Twenty Years In The Blues

The story portrays the sweetness of a memory of distant and treasured love which lingers on the narrator's heart...

Mortuaries are the last place on earth that people would like to do anything with, but this mortuary was the worst, unlike those modern ones where bodies are kept unseen. It was a fifteen by twenty feet yellow cottage which had only a door at the front and a window at the back. The window faced my school and apprehensively I had to pass the mortuary everyday.

From the fifth standard till matriculation, that was altogether six years, I had to see what I didn't want to see---those blood-stained dreadful dead bodies in front of the mortuary and on a small brick platform in the centre of the cottage.

But one day something took place in my class-room which would later change my views on the mortuary.

4. The Blemish That Cannot be Cleansed

Sandar's words made me remember what my father had frequently told me.

He said, "Son, my boy, it doesn't matter if one doesn't do a lot of things one should do. But, if he does only once something that he should not do, he could earn an irreversible lifelong disgrace."

5. Pernicious Negligence

The author reflects on the horror brought by AIDS, comparing with a scene from the arena of Rocky Marciano vs Jersey Joe Walcott's boxing match...

6. Wave of A Woman

The joy and sorrow of love of young people in the nostalgic setting of Mandalay University campus is the context of this story.

By now Eva and her friends might be already gloating over their victory on me. Or bursting into laughter talking about me? I simply shuddered to go on thinking. Nobody but me could have ever suffered such a mixed feeling of shame and sadness. Now, there was only one thing that I would like Eva and her friends to do for me ...

Reflections on Literature

1. No Man Remembers Me

The author reflects the nature of the main character as a comparison to Thomas Hardy's anti-hero...

Her sad eyes were saying a lot of things. He could not bear to see them any longer.

The train had started to run on a long bridge when he turned and walked away. The train made a lot of noises while passing the bridge but above the noises he could hear a religious article being chanted by a man over the radio.

}}Those who forgive the misdeeds of their wives and children will be blessed forever.}}

His tears just rolled down from his eyes uncontrollably.

Then he saw an old man walking towards him along the aisle of the train. He was quite old and walking very feebly with the help of a walking stick. His back already hunched. His hat and clothes were torn and tattered, obviously the old man himself and his attire were weather-beaten and worn out.

For some reasons he was totally captured by this old man. As he watched the old man, the old man slowly raised his head.

His heart was frozen- }Oh my goodness, it is the Mayor of Casterbridge.}

2.A Hunger That Shouldn't Be Fed

The story develops with parallel events from D. H. Lawrence's ' Lady Chatterly's Lover ' and portrays that the Myanmar values]till death do us part} once they get married.

Even now... just imagine...

It was raining a bit heavily without being very windy. The night was dark but because of the lightning the large trees in the garden could be seen.

Under those trees stood a young lady without any clothes on.

She was holding up her hands and welcoming the rain drops that fell from between the leaves. She was having a rain bath.

Her body was flawless. It was a masterpiece sculpture made of a creamy coloured stone.

All that he could remember was her beauty, a beauty that was flaring with flames and he almost felt that it could cause the rain drops to evaporate.

The Myanmar of Myanmar

1.A Fragrant Tamar Flower

This story is a portrayal of the delicate nature of a young Myanmar woman. It is the bitter sweet sorrow of an inexperienced young woman who fell in love with the wrong man who betrayed her. She was torn as she could not hate the man whom her whole family detested for what he had done to her. The family would like her to feel the same. The girl suffered between the dilemma of the classic situation of the battle of the head and the heart. The head knew that she should comply with her family's wish yet the heart still yearned for this man_ somehow she was very much faithful to her nightmare of the heart.

This young woman represents the young Myanmar girls who could not escape from the influences of either the family or the social environment.

When I got to my bed-room_ I noticed that I was overwhelmed with a great sense of loss and sorrow. I tried to breathe in very strongly, and then I sobbed. Tears rolled down from my eyes. I had never felt like this before.

Aunty Nilar was wiping away my tears tenderly.

After sometime, I came round and then asked Aunty Nilar what had happened to me.

*Aunty Nilar's answer was just,]] Well, *Thamee, this is what love is.}}*

2.Dark cloud over the south

This short story is an abstract from the author's best seller, 'An Earlier Rain'.

*'Life is like a thorny bamboo.' So they say.
Alone it comes out and begins stretching about in every way.
Then later on, entangled with others, and cannot escape.
Two branches of thorny bamboo in his life always,
Have sprouted for two women who had made his days.*

3.Better Late Than Never

The next late evening, while the girls were enjoying themselves chatting together upstairs in the gentle breeze, we were having a good time together in front of the house, singing and playing the mandolin. Doctor Than Win, perhaps wishing to impress his wife, sang a series of love-songs by well-known songsters. He knew a large number of songs, but never learnt to sing well. When he had sung three songs, a little girl came down to us and gave him a tiny packet. It was from Dr. Than Win's wife. We opened it, and found a teasing line: "Please sing 'Winter Comes Round Again' just to relieve the heat we're suffering down here." And with it, there was a gift of two small roasted peas. We two laughed. "See, she is really a 'My Fire Lady' for me", He said.

