

“THE TIDE’S TRUE DAUGHTER” SAYA ZAWGYI’S THE HYACINTH’S WAY (BEIDA LAN) AS AN ECOLOGICAL TEXT

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Abstract

This paper provides an ecocritical analysis of the depiction of the aquatic environment in the poetic sequence *The Hyacinth’s Way* (or *Beida lan*, comprising poems originally published separately in magazines between 1957 to 1981) by seminal Burmese writer Saya Zawgyi (born Thein Han, 1907–1990). The forty-poem sequence narrates the ebbs and flows of the feminized plant protagonist *Ma Beda* (or Miss Beda, a water hyacinth, *Eichhornia crassipes*) as she drifts along an unnamed waterway, in all probability the Pyapon River, a tributary of the Irrawaddy River in Myanmar. At various moments in the sequence, the narrative is conveyed in the first person, from *Ma Beda*’s perspective as she relates experiences of exhilaration and triumph—while negotiating fatigue and physical obstacles, such as whirlpools and logs—in her passage up and down the river. Notwithstanding the sequence’s prominent use of metaphor—principally, the alignment of the plant’s journey to Buddhist ideas of being—*The Hyacinth’s Way*, at the same time, demonstrates in-depth observational knowledge of riparian habitats, tidal rhythms, interactions between the species inhabiting the tidal ecosystem, ethnobotanical relationships between villagers and plants, and, arguably, the bioinvasive status of the hyacinth itself. Developing an ecocritical approach to contemporary Burmese poetry and applying concepts from the field of critical plant studies, the analysis characterizes *The Hyacinth’s Way* as an environmental text positioning the natural world as a chief subject of concern. While offering a persuasive allegory for the contingencies of human life from a Buddhist perspective, the poem concurrently underscores the fragility of freshwater aquatic ecosystems in South-east Asia. The paper concludes that, through the compelling voice of *Ma Beda*, Zawgyi presents a message of river conservation and the value of engendering respectful attitudes toward waterways and their ecologies through the persuasiveness of poetic narratives.

Keywords – Saya Zawgyi; *The Hyacinth’s Way*; contemporary Burmese poetry; rivers of Myanmar; ecocriticism; critical plant studies; environmental texts

Introduction

Like most countries in South-east Asia, Myanmar faces considerable problems with water quality, access, and supply. The demands of domestic and industrial activities, especially mining and aquaculture, have resulted in widespread contamination of hydrological sources. During the monsoon season each year, heavy flooding flushes sewage and chemical fertilizers into rivers, tributaries, lakes, ponds, and other vital freshwater bodies (Pink 2016, 23). Additionally, studies indicate high levels of

arsenic contamination in the Irrawaddy River, which flows from north to south and is Myanmar’s largest water course (Ravenscroft, Brammer & Richards 2011, section 8.3.3).

In conjunction with conservation, Myanmar literary works present indispensable means for promoting issues of environmental protection and, in particular, for disseminating messages about the ecological importance of rivers. Nonetheless, ecocritical studies (published in English) of

the value of Myanmar literature for engendering environmental consciousness are very few indeed. In one of the existing studies, LeLe Wynn (2013, 2) points out that Myanmar writers historically have depicted humanity and nature in a dynamic state of balance, harmony, and exchange. In classical Myanmar poetry, for instance, *tawlar-ratus* and seasonal verses, such as *moetaw-ratu*, typify the appreciation of seasonal rhythms and express human affinities for the nonhuman world (Wynn 2013, 3). In particular, *tawlar* denotes a journey through a forest, evoked in poetic language and spiritual symbols.

The poetry of Saya Zawgyi (born Thein Han, 1907–1990) similarly engenders a sense of intimacy with the country's environment through narrative verse. Regarded as one of the country's most influential contemporary poets (Wynn 2013, 5), Zawgyi was born in the Irrawaddy River delta region in the early twentieth century. His poetry reveals in-depth awareness of the tidal patterns of the Pyapon River and its tributaries, as well as the seasonal rhythms of trees, palms, reeds, fish, birds, and human inhabitants (Cac'sū 1998, 18). *Beida lan* (translated as *The Hyacinth's Way*, *The Water Hyacinth's Way*, or *Poems of the Way of Beda*) comprises forty individually-titled poems published over the years as separate pieces in literary magazines, such as the *Yangon University Annual Magazine* and *Pyapone Literary Workers' Magazine*, between 1957 to 1981. Zawgyi began composing the *beida lan* poems in the mid-1950s and completed them in 1970 (Cac'sū 1998), after which some poems were reprinted in various publications. Myawaddy Literature House issued the entire sequence—in Burmese and English—as *The Hyacinth's Way* (1997). The publisher's Preface states that Zawgyi's poetic sequence allows audiences to “draw analogies with the ways they have traversed, to the way of the hyacinth [...] highlighting the ways of the beings of the world” (in Zawgyi 1997, 1-2).

This paper asks: How does *The Hyacinth's Way* engage ecological knowledge of the river in narrative form? What techniques does the poet Zawgyi use to depict the hyacinth as an intelligent, perceptive, and sentient river being in dynamic exchange with the river? How might the hyacinth's status as an invasive weed figure into the poem and its interpretation? And, how might *The Hyacinth's Way* be understood as a contemporary environmental text supporting the conservation of water habitats in Myanmar and, more widely, in South-east Asia? This paper will speak to these questions, contributing, in the process, to English-language ecocritical investigations of Myanmar's literature and, specifically, to studies of Saya Zawgyi's poetry. The broader potential of Myanmar literature to facilitate ecological values in the region will be addressed.

Methodology

The methodology used to analyze Zawgyi's poetic sequence combined thematic textual analysis and a case study focus with an ecocritical theoretical framework. The thematic approach (also called *thematic analysis*, or *thematics*) attempts to elicit the “various thematic connotations and emotional auras” (Shcheglov 1993, 77) of a work. One of the most widely used techniques in qualitative research, thematic sets out to identify dominant patterns or themes within data, which, for literary scholars, comes in the form of textual evidence gained through close reading. *The Hyacinth's Way* was read critically for its environmental themes and connotations, particularly in relation to two non-human protagonists, the river and the hyacinth. The second methodological aspect—case study—is also prevalent in qualitative research, and involves the study of “the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (Stake 1995, xi).

Accordingly, Zawgyi's poetic sequence served as a case from which ecological themes were extracted. The theoretical framework derives from ecocriticism and its recent subfield critical plant studies (or, plant studies). Ecocriticism examines the relevance of *environmental texts* (broadly defined to include traditional literary works and artifacts of popular culture, such as film and new media productions) to issues of conservation, sustainability, human-nature relations, social justice, and indigeneity (see, for example, Garrard 2004). Within ecocriticism, critical plant studies has emerged lately as a focus area for understanding the representations of plants, human-plant relations, and ethnobotanical knowledge (Vieira, Gagliano & Ryan 2015). Zawgyi's poem was examined as an *environmental text*, defined by critic Lawrence Buell (2009, 25) as one in which "the nonhuman environment must be envisaged not merely as a framing device but as an active presence, suggesting human history's implication in natural history."

In this manner, the study carried out the first substantive (English language-based) thematic ecocritical analysis of the Myanmar-English translation of *The Hyacinth's Way* (1997). In particular, it focused on metaphor—as related to the hyacinth—as a narrative tool underpinning an environmental poem that integrates Myanmar's aquatic ecology (natural history) and Buddhist culture (human history). Through this configuration of methodology and theory, the study also considered briefly some of the problems related to the poetic representation of plants. More precisely, in this regard, water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*)—an aquatic plant native to the Amazon basin—is considered a dangerous, bioinvasive weed species in many parts of South-east Asia (Boomgaard 2007, 231).

Findings and Discussion

Based on a thematic textual analysis of *The Hyacinth's Way*, four themes were identified, which support the idea of the poetic sequence

as an environmental text: (1) *Ma Beda* as a metaphor for adaptive human being-in-the world; (2) interactions between *Ma Beda* and plants, animals, birds, and villagers as representative of human-nature equipoise; (3) practical awareness of the tidal ecosystem as a reflection of Zawgyi's actual upbringing in the environment; and (4) lyrical equivalences between the cadences of the hyacinth, river, birds, reed-piper, and poem as suggestive of the vital role of poetry in habitat conservation and sustainability today. The following discussion will touch upon each of these themes through a mostly chronological reading of some key poems in the sequence.

On the water hyacinth species, Zawgyi commented that "I learn from the '*Beida lan*' the nature of man's fear in life, of man's desire to prop up his existence and prevent it from collapse" (qtd. in Cac'sū 1998, 18). Employing a forty-part structure, *The Hyacinth's Way* reflects the poet's learning by drawing on the potency of the hyacinth as a symbol of human striving—of persisting gracefully despite the incessant tides of being—from the wandering state of *samsara* to the limitless potential of *nirvana* (or *nirvirna*, according to the poem's English edition), "where life and death [are] extinct" (footnote by translator Ah May Thar, in Zawgyi 1997, 10). Therefore, the hyacinth's tidal way—a key term used frequently by the poet throughout the sequence—denotes a habitus, a mode of being-in-the-world, analogized with a Buddhist seeker's procession to *nirvirna*. In the sequence, Zawgyi appears to re-interpret the traditional *tawlar* theme of a forest journey; instead of a human protagonist's travels, the hyacinth narrates episodes in its travels up and down the river in the first person but, at other points in the narrative, is described from the third-person perspective of the poet.

In Burmese, *beda* means hyacinth; and the elegant blue-flowering, naturalized plant is known to inhabit tidal creeks and streams, drifting with the rising and falling of the

water in highly variable, constantly fluctuating, tidal ecosystems. Referred to throughout as *Ma Beda* (Miss Beda, occasionally, Friend Beda, and by the sequence's end, "the daughter of the tide"), the hyacinth is affectionately conferred human standing in its figuration as a young female plant persona. "This Is Your Way" (Zawgyi 1997, 12) opens with the following quatrain: "Ma Beda wearing the sapphire flower, / So dainty is she, traversing up and down with the flow, / In the tidal creek on the way of the Beda, / All in a row" (ll. 1–4). The second and fourth stanzas introduce the *reed-piper*, an unnamed peasant who performs, with a reed pipe, at the riverside and, in doing so, adds an abiding element of musicality to the composition and tone of the majority of poems: "Oh! Friend reed-piper, / Ma Beda, all fresh and blue prepares to approach the / shore" (12, ll. 5–7). In this poem, dated originally from 1957, the reader learns, "This tidal way of the hyacinth, is your way" (12, l. 20). With the figure of the *reed-piper* representing the aspirations of humanity—beholding the hyacinth's journey from the safety of the shore—there is a striking empathic alignment between the way of the hyacinth and the way of human beings, between natural and cultural histories, that continues through Zawgyi's work.

"This Is My Way" builds upon the ontological assertions of the previous, "This Is Your Way [both emphases added]." This shorter poem of four stanzas and fifteen lines makes prominent use of anaphora, or the repetition of phrases at the beginning of lines, to lyrically parallel the cadenced movement of the hyacinth on the waterway. The reiteration of the phrases "rejoicing in the tidal creek" and "giving pretext" are followed by active verbs—positioned later in the stanzas—that bestow to the hyacinth a percipient capacity for intention, behavior, and decision-making: for instance, "she wants to dock" (Zawgyi 1997, 15, ll. 2–3), "she fancies to stop" (15, ll. 5–6), and "she desires to land" (15, ll. 8–9). By the poem's

end, *Ma Beda* also speaks, if not vocally then through the physical articulations of her vegetal being immersed in, and indeed on, a fluid environment: "She says, this is my way; no other" (15, l. 15). *Ma Beda*'s message is such: the way of ebbing and flowing—of working with, rather than against the grain of, intervening natural agents—is, at the same time, an indispensable, mutually dependent mode of ecological being. What is most self-evident is that the hyacinth, her nonhuman co-inhabitants, and human figures in the narrative share the riverine habitat as a common resource.

The *reed-piper* returns in "Which Village Landing Place," playing in melodic exchange with the *boke*, known as the greater coucal or crow pheasant (*Centropus sinensis*). The bird species is a cuckoo widespread in Asia and known for its deep, resounding call. Nonetheless, the "competition" is actually a balanced process of harmonizing divergent tones: "The *Boke* leads and the piper plays in antiphony, / He says, he yearned for Ma Beda, / Who comes and goes, with the tidal flows" (Zawgyi 1997, 17, ll. 9–11). The *boke* then reappears in the ensuing poem, "No Need To Guess," a notably rhythmic, three-stanza composition characterizing *Ma Beda* as "[...] happy at heart, with the tides' reflux / Miss Beda, down till she reaches the sea, / Rides the waters in glee" (19, ll. 8–10). As the female *boke* moans ominously, the piper in contrast intones sweet melodies. In sonic terms, this instance conveys a unity of opposing phenomena, toward a state of cadenced equipoise, which is characteristic of dynamic tidal ecosystems and the natural world more generally.

"Time of Rise and Time of Fall" continues the theme of interspecies harmonization prevalent in *The Hyacinth's Way* with an allusion to "[...] two *Byaing* brothers, their wings white and clean" (Zawgyi 1997, 19, l. 1). *Byaing* is the Burmese term for the little egret (*Egretta garzetta*), a species of small heron. The second stanza expresses the movement of a female crab emerging from a

hole in the mudflat to ascend a *khayar* bush, a flowering thistle (*Argemone mexicana*), as the tide begins to return. Native to Mexico, hence a species introduced to Myanmar, like the hyacinth, the *khayar* has become naturalized in a new environment, providing a haven for the crab. The poem demonstrates Zawgyi's sizeable knowledge of the tidal ecology of the river, as the "Byaing brothers, their wings white and pure, / With necks inclined broodingly, at the shore they waited, / The fishermen, again lurk for food in the water, / For the tide's now abated" (19, ll. 19–22). "With Assorted Melodies" re-introduces another nonhuman creature personified as a young woman: Miss Caucal, the crow pheasant (*Centropus sinensis*) who prompts the reed-piper to play a *mai bwe* (the song of a longing maiden) with her distinctive moan (23, ll. 1–3).

Conclusions

In concluding, the question of the broader potential of Myanmar literature to engender ecological values is salient. *The Hyacinth's Way* exemplifies the re-interpretation of traditional Myanmar poetic forms in a contemporary context. It should be noted that Zawgyi was a leader of the *khit san sarpay* literary movement of the 1930s, which drew extensive influence from modernist poetry. Posthumanist in style, eschewing a strong human-centered course, Zawgyi's narrative also intimates, with an air of hope, the capacity of seriously impacted South-east Asian environments, such as rivers, to adapt and for equipoise to be restored between so-called native and naturalized species. Rather than an aggressive, bioinvasive weed, the hyacinth in all of its grace and proliferation can achieve a state of equilibrium with other species and beings. This is perhaps the most enduring lesson of the tide's true daughter.

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