

TRAGEDY AND THE BURMESE DRAMA*

I

One critic in India writing on my work on the Burmese drama felt that the value of the book had been lowered by the fact that I was always attempting to find parallels between the Burmese and Elizabethan dramas, being obsessed by my English studies as a candidate for a University degree. The book was written in the form of a thesis seven years ago when I was still in my early twenties, and it was but natural that it should bear traces of a misguided and misspent youth. However, I still hold the view first put forward in the thesis, that the Burmese drama is nearer in nature and in theme to the Elizabethan drama rather than to the Sanskrit drama; and I still feel that the standard of judgment for the Burmese drama should be the English drama and no other. Literary criticism as we now know it was unknown to the Burmese, as it was unknown to other Oriental literatures, until modern times, and I feel that the present-day Burmese scholar should never be reluctant to introduce into the study of his nation's own literature the Western methods and canons of literary criticism, as far as it is practicable. In the following pages, I shall endeavour to find out how far the Western, especially the Elizabethan, conceptions of tragedy were applicable to the Burmese drama, and my intention is not to prove that the Burmese and the Elizabethan dramas were exactly similar but to show how much better we could understand and appreciate our own dramatic themes if we compared them to the themes and conventions of the Elizabethan drama.

It is usually assumed now-a-days that the Burmese as a nation dislike tragic themes and unhappy endings, and therefore it will be surprising to many to learn that most of the Burmese plays which flourished before the fall of the kingdom in 1886 had unhappy endings. Burmese drama had no theory either of tragedy or comedy, and there was no differentiation between a tragic play and a comic play, although each scene of a play was classified either as being tragic or comic. Although thus there was no theory of tragedy in existence, in actual practice the Burmese dramatists were very fond of using tragic themes. As a result, the Burmese drama contained many plays which could be termed full-formed tragedies. This fact is the more interesting when one remembers that the Sanskrit drama, in spite of its high level of artistic achievement, contained no tragedies, and that even in the "No" plays of Japan the tragic note was seldom well-sustained.

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As with the conceptions of tragedy in Ancient Greece, Medieval Europe and Renaissance England, the conceptions of tragic themes in Burmese drama had a religious background. Buddhism was part of the social life of the Burmese people, and Buddhist religious doctrines were accepted by all, but naturally there were modifications to suit popular beliefs. The Buddhist emphasis on the emptiness of the human world was accepted everywhere, and this idea was always present in the minds of all Burmese dramatists. The Buddhist exhortation to lead an ascetic life was accepted by all in theory, but in practice the flesh as usual was weak, and some Burmese dramatists found it difficult to reconcile their aesthetic appreciation of this world with the religious teaching. As a result, as during the time of the Renaissance in Europe, there was a clash between worldliness and other-worldliness. The doctrine of "karma" also found a place in Burmese drama. Whatever the true Buddhist doctrine of "karma" might be, the doctrine as modified by popular belief did not preach a blind submissiveness to the workings of "karma," and one of the most well-known Burmese sayings was: "Do not leave too much to "karma" and tread on a bush of thorns."

The Medieval conception of tragedy was summed up by Chaucer in his Prologue to the *Monk's Tale* thus:—

"Tragedie is to seyne a certeyn storie . .
Of him that stood in greet prosperitee
And is y-fallen out of heigh degree
Into myserie, and endeth wretchedly."

According to medieval thought, tragedy should deal with the fall of princes from their high estate through no fault of their own, but through the workings of capricious Fortune. The medieval mind was concerned mainly with the contempt for this world. This contempt was in many ways similar to the contempt felt for this world by the Burman Buddhist; and this contempt served as the tragic material for both medieval literature and the Burmese drama. Yet the medieval tragedy of the fall of princes found no place in Burmese drama.

The medieval mind was disturbed by two things in life, capricious Fortune and Death. According to the then prevailing notions, this contemptible human world was contemptible because of these two evils, which were absent in the Garden of Eden from which mankind had been expelled. Fortune was conceived as a capricious goddess, who played heartlessly with the affairs of men. Death to the medieval mind was the beginning of torment in purgatory for the soul, and as such death was a thing of terror from which none could hope to escape. Both these conceptions of Fortune and of

Death found no parallels in the Burmese mind. Although the workings of one's "karma" could not be foreseen and although the heart-rending cry, "For what sins in previous lives do we perish thus?" occurred repeatedly in Burmese plays, the conception of "karma" could not be compared to the conception of Fortune, because "karma" was neither blind nor capricious, and was the result of one's own actions. The Burmese Buddhist did not visualize Hell as the medieval European did, and the idea of purgatory was unknown to Buddhism. Moreover, the Burmese had always clung to their pre-Buddhist belief in the transmigration of souls, and as a result the sting of death was somewhat lessened by the belief that death was not really the end of life.

The Elizabethan drama in England inherited from medieval tragedy something of its conception of Fortune, and something of its emphasis on death. But to the Renaissance mind with its love of sensual beauty and human endeavour and achievement, the medieval contempt of the world seemed unjustified. As a result, death appeared to be a hateful thing, not because it was the beginning of suffering of the soul in purgatory, but because it was the end of worldly glory. This attitude towards death was best seen in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*. But during the decadent period of the Elizabethan drama, death was no longer feared but welcomed. In other words, when the Renaissance had spent itself out, the final conclusion reached was that life was empty and death a relief. Burmese drama showed something of the Elizabethan protest against the contempt for this world, but until its own decadent period, the drama did not concern itself very much with death. In the decadent period, however, the dramatists were mainly concerned with death, and they would endeavour to show that death was a tragedy because it was the end of life.

The Elizabethan drama accepted the conception of capricious Fortune but modified it by a new conception that the vagaries of Fortune could be prevented to a certain extent by strength of character, and a victim of Fortune came to be in her power partly because of certain defects in his character. In other words, the idea that "character to a certain extent was destiny" was born. Hegel and his followers were of the opinion that in Shakesperian tragedy, character was destiny, and that tragedy was caused entirely by the defects in the hero's character. But the balance of opinion at the present day is that in Shakesperian tragedy, the catastrophe was caused to a great extent by character but not entirely, because capricious Fortune had some hand in the tragedy. Such a conception of tragedy had a parallel in Burmese drama where although "karma" was the main agent of a tragic happening, the character of the hero contributed something towards it.

The medieval tragedy dealt with kings and princes, and Renaissance scholars would hold that the Greek drama and Aristotle limited the persons of tragedy to princes or men of high rank. Although there was a revolt against this conception of tragedy which could be seen in the popularity of the Domestic play, on the whole the persons of Elizabethan tragedy were people of illustrious rank. Thus, Kyd in *The Spanish Tragedie* put forward the theory:—

“Tragedia Cothurnata, fitting Kings,
Containing matter, and not common things.”

The Burmese drama also dealt with kings and queens, although in the decadent period, the heroine was usually of common stock, who later rose to be queen.

II

Of the plays of U Kyin U, the first play *Mahaw* alone had a happy ending. But *Mahaw* was by no means a comedy, and in spite of its happy ending, the theme was tragic. In the Jataka story of *Mahaw*, the minister Kaywut, the rival and enemy of Mahaw was shown to be as silly as he was evil. But in U Kyin U's play, Kaywut became a worthy rival of the hero, whose heroic struggle against Mahaw and the inevitable defeat made him a tragic character. Just as with the writers of Elizabethan tragedy, the problem of evil engaged the mind of U Kyin U. He would show that the tragedy of life was not the struggle between good and evil but between good and the less good. The problem of evil was further considered in *Daywagonban* in which the hero had certain villainous traits in his character and again in *Parpahein* where both the heroes were not perfect in their characters, and where the struggle was between the less good and the lesser, the lesser emerging victorious.

But the main theme of U Kyin U's tragedy was the conflicting conceptions that the world was a beautiful place to live in and that this world was to be treated with contempt. In *Daywagonban* U Kyin U inclined towards the non-religious view of life and would question the justification of the exhortation to give up this world and to lead the life of an ascetic. In the play the world was shown to be a place for romance and high endeavour, and it was difficult to reconcile *Daywagonban's* becoming a hermit with his previous life of adventure. Above all, *Daywagonban*, had he remained on the throne, would have been able to work for the good of his kingdom and the propagation of his religion, and in the circumstances, was not *Daywagonban's* final decision to retire to the cloister, an act of great

selfishness? His brother also, on becoming a hermit, left his princess to wander forlorn in the wilderness . . . was not that also an act of pure selfishness? In *Parpahein*, too, when the wrong man Parpahein had become king, was it right of Zayathein to reject his magic weapons and the help of the alchemist, to retire to the peace of the forest, leaving his unhappy kingdom to the rule of a drunken king? U Kyin U would maintain at least in *Daywagonban* that a king should sacrifice his soul and work for the good of his kingdom rather than seek selfishly his own peace and salvation.

On the other hand, even in *Daywagonban* the mood of tiredness of this world was present. We were shown how the irony of life played tricks with poor mortals, and how empty human strife could be: Daywagonban was fighting against an enemy, who unknown to him was his own brother, to win the hand of the princess who had been betrothed to him since childhood but whose identity was unknown to him. In *Parpahein*, this theme of the futility of human life and endeavour was further developed, and U Kyin U felt the tragedy that beauty had to fade and man had to die. In such a mood, U Kyin U found that religion was no real consolation, and Zayathein bewailed the death of his brother thus:—

“Yes, we all have to suffer, we all have to die. Until we reach Nirvana, we shall go through again and again this torture of grief, this torture of having to lose always the ones we love. But this knowledge does not stay my tears. I am king, I am lord, I am above my wisest ministers. I am wise, I know my religion, I have studied, and I have learned wisdom. But when it comes to grief, my experience and my learning cannot help me drowning in the ocean of my sorrow. Athumbain, where are you, my brother? Yes, you and I, brother, are now burnt out and destroyed as if ten suns had burnt us. For what sins in previous lives do we perish thus? Athumbain, my brother, in this forest glade, adorned with handsome-stemmed trees perfumed with jasmine smells, we play our drama of tears.”

U Kyin U then would seek an escape from the empty strife of this world, but although he made his hero Zayathein become a hermit at the end of the play, he himself did not consider the monastery as the right means of escape, for there were certain things in life that appeared to him to be beautiful, and his aesthetic sense was in direct conflict with the ascetic ideal. To an intellectual as U Kyin U, the popular belief in the transmigration of souls did not give consolation, and therefore to him decay and death were the end of beauty. In these circumstances, it was not surprising that U Kyin U was attracted by the pre-Buddhist ideal of the “Zawgyi”-alchemist. The Burmese alchemist, aimed at an immortal and

eternally youthful body and this ideal of a "Zawgyi", U Kyin U seized with great eagerness to give him consolation towards the end of the play :—

"At last I have achieved what I desired. I have obtained the 'stone of live metal', and I have also become a 'zawgyee'. My stone can turn lead into silver, brass into gold. I have eaten that compound of alchemy, which makes me above nature—above this earthliness. I cannot be hit by bullets and bombs, and swords and spears wound me not at all. . . . I can be king. But what care I for worldly power? Make way, make way, I wish to leave the abode of human beings and retire to the forest. . . . I have reached a lovely part of the forest. . . . Look at the flower-stems, look at the water-fall. Here is a streamlet, there is a little pond. Here are pebbles, and silvery sand. Green moss covers that rock, green water flows silently down that stone. The heat of the noonday sun has no effect on the peaceful place. Short trees and tall trees, big trees and small trees, they stand side by side and greet the wanderer in the forest. That fern clings to its lover, that tree is defiant. This bush looks inviting, this bamboo looks charming. That place under that tree is smooth-lawned. Did some fairy play there before I came and disturbed and frightened it away? What a peaceful place! A poet can live here for ever writing verses on its beauty".

U Pon Nya was more varied in his tragic themes, and had he concerned himself less with politics and more with the drama, it seemed certain he would have left to posterity many plays which could vie with the best Elizabethan tragedies. Although a poet and therefore aesthetic in his outlook on life, he was at the same time a monk, and he did not question the religious doctrines as much as U Kyin U did. In *Paduma* his first play, where the tragic note was well-sustained throughout he upheld the doctrine of the contempt of the world, by taking for his theme the moral that beauty was merely meant to ensnare good souls, and as such, earthly beauty was to be distrusted. The story of the play dealt with the utter faithlessness of Paduma's wife, and the resulting disillusionment for Paduma. The faithlessness of beauty as represented by the faithlessness of women had been a popular theme for medieval European tragedy, and even Shakespeare took up the medieval story of *Troilus and Cressida* for one of his tragedies. The same theme of contempt for this world was followed in *The Water-Seller*, where, unlike U Kyin U, U Pon Nya upheld the doctrine that the hermit's life was the only possible escape from the snares of the world. The

hero, from being a mere water-seller became the joint-king, but the resulting greed and ambition made him attempt the murder of his benefactor, the rightful king. At the end of the play, U Pon Nya succeeded in making the audience feel that the water-seller's final choice to exchange his throne for the life of a hermit was justified. In *Kawthala*, U Pon Nya hit on the theme of revenge, a theme which had made rich contributions to the Elizabethan drama. *Kawthala* died and became a tree-god, and he wanted his son to avenge his death. But the son delayed in working out his assigned task of revenge. Here was a theme which had enabled Shakespeare to produce his great tragedy *Hamlet*, but one could not help feeling in reading *Kawthala* that U Pon Nya threw away his opportunities, and his heart was not seriously in the drama when he wrote the play. As usual his interest was more in using the drama as propaganda for his political ideas.

However, in *Wizaya* U Pon Nya reached great heights in dramatic craftsmanship and in many ways the play was the best tragedy in the Burmese drama. Throughout the play there was an atmosphere of an all-conquering destiny. The persons in the play were destined to contribute their share towards the establishment of Ceylon as a kingdom, for on it depended the maintenance and spread of the religion. Duty and destiny were given as the same thing in the play, and against them everybody was powerless to struggle. The realization of this fact caused the chief characters of the play to suppress all personal feelings and desires. Duty and destiny must be served at all costs. The moment the erring *Wizaya* realized his duty towards his followers, he changed his character. Later he gave up the ogre-princess, whom he really loved, and the two children, because he must fulfil his destiny and obtain for Ceylon the full status of a sovereign state. The princess who later became *Wizaya's* queen, did not wish to leave her own country to go to a foreign land, and to take an unknown king as consort, but the moment she was made to realize that duty and destiny demanded that she must depart for Ceylon, she dried her tears and embarked on her voyage. His brother wished to see again *Wizaya* whom he dearly loved, but he refrained from leaving his own kingdom, for he thought that his duty towards it was more important than his longing to see his brother. He loved his son, but sent him to his uncle, for *Wizaya* needed an heir. This son, *Wizaya's* nephew, from the few glimpses of him that the audience had, was shown to be coldly efficient, without any sign of personal feeling or emotion. Other characters in the play had to sacrifice their personal desires to duty or destiny, but this prince promised to be the most successful and most willing servant of the kingdom. The ogre-princess was the most human of all the royal personages in the play. To her, duty did not mean anything, and

she had no idea what destiny meant to Wizaya and his kingdom. All she knew was love, and for that love, she sacrificed her own people and her own country. In contrast to the kings in the play who could send their sons and daughters to unknown lands for reasons of state, her children mattered greatly to her, she loved them even more than she loved Wizaya, and she refused to go without them. Her tragedy lay in the fact that unconsciously she was also the servant of the destiny which Wizaya and his kind willingly served. In his conception of destiny in the play, U Pon Nya could be compared with the ancient and Elizabethan writers of tragedy who would maintain that the tragedy of human life was caused not by character but by outward forces over which human beings had no control.

III

In Elizabethan drama most plays ended with death. Although actually the death of the hero was not essential to tragedy, there was no doubt that the tragic effect of a play was enhanced by death. Thus Kyd, in *Solimon and Perseda* wrote :—

“And I commaund to forbear this place;
For heere the mouth of sad Melpomene
Is wholly bent to tragedies discourse :
And what are tragedies but acts of death ?”

and even with Shakespeare, the play ended usually with death, and Professor Bradley points out :—

“On the other hand (whatever may be true of tragedy elsewhere), no play at the end of which the hero remains alive is, in the full Shakespearian sense, a tragedy.”

In contrast however, in all the plays of U Kyin U and U Pon Nya, the hero never died, and the tragic play ended with the entry of the hero to the monastery. And apart from this ending, in U Kyin U there was only one instance of a main character dying, namely the execution of Athumbain in *Parpahein* and also in U Pon Nya there was only one instance, namely the suicide of Kawthala. Both the dramatists were ever reluctant to rouse the emotion of horror in the audience. Thus U Pon Nya when he made Kawthala commit suicide made him do so not by steel or poison but by the doubtful method of “willing oneself to die”; Kawthala bade farewell to his queen, retired to his chamber, and just willed himself to die. In other words, neither U Kyin U nor U Pon Nya used violent death for their themes.

In contrast, during the period of the decadent drama, violent deaths were common, and a tragic decadent play ended with the death of the heroine or the hero leaving the other to mourn either his or her loss. And the more unusual and violent the death of a character was, the greater was the pathos. When a queen was executed she had to be slowly beaten; when a hero was put to death he had to be trodden on by the elephants; when a princess was banished the order of banishment had to come to her when she was in travail. The more dead bodies there were on the stage the more popular was the play and in one play a scene even occurred where the hero was shown eating his new-born heir.

To the decadent dramatist, death was the end of life. Unlike in the decadent Elizabethan drama, death was not welcomed, but at least its coming was accepted as inevitable. The hero or the heroine when death came to them bewailed their fate, but never made any attempt either to protest or to struggle against on-coming death. The belief in the transmigration of the soul was considered and rejected as not being adequate enough to give consolation. In most decadent plays, the heroine or sometimes the hero died swearing to come back to their beloved ones after death, and she did come back as a spirit. But she discovered that old ties and old loves could not be revived, and after one visit, the spirit bade a tearful farewell and disappeared for ever. In other words, the decadent dramatists would point out that although one would be reborn in a new existence, this life, this existence was dead for ever. The result was an atmosphere of the deepest gloom in decadent tragedy.

This change in the character of the drama was caused by the realization that the end of the Burmese kingdom was swiftly approaching, and that there could be no revival. The decadent drama flourished in Lower Burma under another's rule during the period 1878—1886, but both the playwrights and the audience looked longingly back at the past glories of the Burmese kingdom, and awaited the inevitable and final fall with feelings of intense despair. With the Elizabethan decadent drama, the atmosphere of gloom was caused by a surfeit of the Renaissance joy of life, but the atmosphere of intense gloom in the Burmese decadent drama was caused by the shadow of coming events. In other words, the tragedy of the Burmese kingdom that was to take place in 1886, was foreshadowed in the tragedies of the decadent period.

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