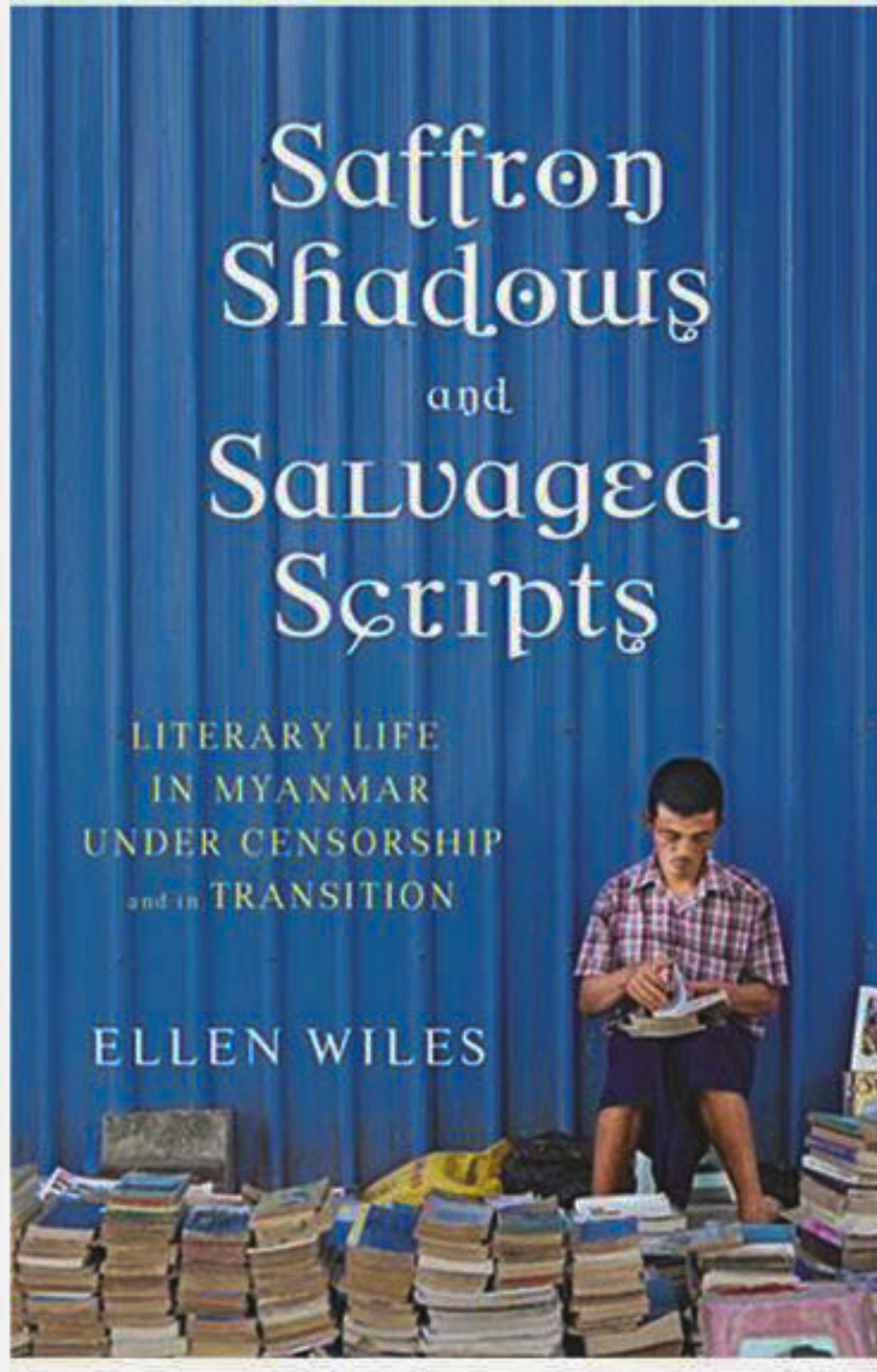


OUT OF THE SHADOWS: LITERARY LIFE IN MYANMAR

JOE TREASURE



After 50 years of brutal repression, Myanmar is in a state of transition. Since 2012, Burmese poets and fiction writers have been exploring the limits of their fragile new freedoms. In 2013, British human rights lawyer, Ellen Wiles, set out to discover how decades of censorship had affected writers and to assess the current state of literary life. The result is an engrossing and eye-opening book: *Saffron Shadows and Salvaged Scripts* (Columbia University Press, 2015).

Wiles focuses on nine writers from three generations, introducing them, letting them tell their own stories, and offering samples of their work in translation.

Win Tin was released from prison at the age of 79 and died just before the publication of this book. With Aung San Suu Kyi he co-founded the National League for Democracy in 1988, was arrested soon after on a trumped up charge and incarcerated for almost 20 years.

Tortured and isolated, he devised

painstaking ways to keep writing. With paste made from brickdust and water he wrote poems on the walls, hoping to commit them to memory. He communicated with other prisoners, hiding messages inside noodles and cheroots, and adopted a crow for company. Transcribed and edited from interviews, his account

cultural environment.

Among the middle generation, Ma Thilda is a surgeon who devotes most of her time to writing and journalism. As a literary magazine editor, she challenges the lingering preference among readers for the kind of realist stories that were favoured by the military junta. During her five years as

during her lifetime, such as the election of Indira Gandhi, she interwove an extended metaphor about "the funeral of my body parts, and about how all my body parts and organs had been dead for years". Though the female achievements were cut by the censors, the metaphor of the funeral survived their scrutiny, a telling illustration of the randomness and stupidity of censorship and the way oppressed writers are pushed towards symbolism and allegory.

Publishing is freer now but writers still distrust the authorities. 31-year-old blogger and poet, Pandora, looks forward to a time when there will be a genuine "free market" for writing. In her poem "Stuck at this Spot", a tout offers to sell anything from plastic hangers to the texts of new laws to drivers stuck in one of Yangon's interminable traffic jams. It gives a flavour of the vibrant market place for goods, information and ideas that Myanmar is still struggling to become.

Though Wiles is absent from these narratives, their seamless clarity is evidence of her skill as an interviewer and editor. Her introductions are invaluable in setting these writers in the context of their physical and cultural environment.

comes through with a clear personal voice and a steely sense of humour.

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a political prisoner during the late 90s, she was dangerously ill. Kept in solitary confinement and denied books and writing materials, she stayed sane by meditating.

In 2002 she wrote a piece called *Brief Biography*. Among journalistic accounts of female achievements

THREE POEMS

KAY

Yet another Day

Morning comes upon us, a yawn
like a languid dun of a rag,
Fog mellows a diaphanous veil of dawn.

Morning screams with twittering birds
The milk man's wake up call
The Azan, a reminder that drowns all other sounds.

Outside, the lorries doze on the stand
The sweepers swish the streets clean
Inside the tinkling of teacups
The sun rays settle on the breakfast table.

The newspaper slashes headlines
The morning has come upon me
Reluctant to shed the night,
I emerge to face the challenges
of yet another day.

Single Mother

They call you a brat,
They call you a bastard,
But you are my honey boy,
golden hair to match the sun.
Eyes that laugh in joy,
You are my lovely boy.
Throw away the lost heritage
Move on to meet the world
as a proud son of a single mother.



Mornings, Bright and Beautiful

Mornings bright and beautiful
Sunlight chintzed through bamboo screen
flower's fragrance on my right.

It's another day
The sun rays,
beckons the news,
on a breakfast tray.

News is bad as news can be
Massacre in B'bay, woman raped
families lost, a child burnt.

News is good as news can be
Global issues to be settled
A new star rises in the west
To heal the scars of years gone by.

Must I brood over this intrusion,
of bombs and blasts,
on a bright and beautiful morning,
Must I shake under the pain of the other's loss.

Do I have a choice?
On this bright and beautiful morning
In the clink of the cup and plate
I hear the shattering of glass,
on the whiteness of the serviette
I see the coffins of my mate.

On the Television
The sorrows of the bereaved
The death numbers
rising by the day.

Sums up the fact
That on this bright and beautiful morning
There are hundreds for whom
It is the beginning of an endless night.



Oh Rosie, Rosie my girl
Lift your head, show your face - brighten up the rosebush
Hey, why so shy! Sweetheart, why be so bashful!
What for this shyness, making you hide behind the leaves?
The world has fallen asleep; the moon and the stars too.
Darling, everything around us are sleeping
Gods are asleep-- so are the galaxies!
Is there a better time for hearts to speak?
Darling, lift your face
My heart is brimful of words
I shall talk softly, whisper in your ears even -
Darling, my words will sail into your heart like a dream.
So, lift your head and look; show your face to see, oh fair lady
Kiss me once - just ask for a kiss, unobserved and quiet.

“ব্যঙ্গ-সৃষ্টিতে অসাধারণ প্রতিভার প্রয়োজন। ... বন্ধু আবুল মনসুরের হাত-সাফাই দেখে বিস্মিত হলাম। ভাষার কান মলে রস সৃষ্টির ক্ষমতা আবুল মনসুরের অসাধারণ। এ যেন পাকা গুস্তাদী হাত।”

-কাজী নজরুল ইসলাম



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