

A Study on the Characteristics of Myanmar Literary Essays

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Abstract

Essays fall into one popular genre of literature in literary studies. The present study intends to explore the characteristics of an essay with reference to the selected essays in Myanmar. Based on the five characteristics of a typical essay, the essay selected are analysed by giving proper examples. The selected essays in this study are the extracts from *Literary Tradition of Myanmar Myat Pwint* by Zay Ya, *Kant Kaw Myaing Essays* by Zaw Gyi et al., *the Butterfly and the Selected Essays* by Taik Soe, and *Ocean of My Mind Essays* by Min Kyaw et al. It can be inferred from the investigation that it is aesthetic value that distinguishes essays from articles. It is also hoped that the study can be of great help to the literary enthusiasts and alike to put their thoughts and feelings into words in essays by sticking to the characteristics of a good essay.

Key Words: essay, personality, thoughts, aesthetic value

Introduction

The word *essay* first originated from a French word *Essai* in the 16th century when Michel de Montaigne, one of the most significant philosophers of the French Renaissance, popularized the *essay* as a literary genre. Later in English literature, *essay* gained its popularity and place in English literature. In Myanmar literature, similar pieces of literary work are first vaguely termed as ordinary *articles*. It is also found that such literary works are commonly classified as similar to a number of other genres like article, paper, and short story (Myanmar Encyclopedia, Vol. 3, 1956). Myanmar Board of Study agreed that it would be appropriate to categorize an essay as a flexible small genre of literature. In fact, it is generally defined as a short piece of writing that provides the author's reflective personal thoughts and experiences on a particular subject with the integration of aesthetic value.

Aim

The present study aims at highlighting the importance of aesthetic value in writing essays, and to showcase the advantages the readers can gain such as realizing what is happening and how to perceive things in the real world by reading well-written essays which reflect the five characteristics of a good essay.

Research Questions

1. What are the characteristics of an essay as a literary genre?
2. What kind of literary genre are essays categorized as?
3. Do essays reveal the features of aesthetic literature?

Literature Review

Concerning the study of essays in aesthetic literature, the first paper reading conference on 'Essays in Literary Studies' was conducted in Sarpay Beik Man from March 18th -March 20th in 1986. The presenters were Maung Khin Min (Da Nu Phyu), Mya Zin, Collegian Win Mon, and Kyaw Aung. The papers submitted for the conference were printed in two volumes.

There were some research studies for Ph.D. dissertations on the aesthetic literature in Myanmar such as 'The Study of Taik Soe's Prose Style' by Maung Than Win (2004), and 'The Study of Aesthetic Literary Essays' by Ma Soe Soe San (2007). The first study was the discourse analysis of the prose style of Taik Soe in his original literary essays and the latter

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was the evaluation of the characteristics of literary essays focusing on the role and development of literary essays in Myanmar literature.

In the present study, the selected essays in Myanmar were analyzed based on the five characteristics of an essay proposed in Collections of Literary Essays (Vol. 1). As the essays were written following the proposed principles of good characteristics of an essay, it is hoped for the readers to make use of reading such literary essays to reprimand oneself, to contribute something good to the community, and they themselves become able to appreciate the things they enjoy doing through the author's reign of imagination.

Methodology

The data for the present study were collected from thirteen Myanmar literary essays namely *The Eva in the Dusk*, *The Butterfly*, *The Pen and Mont-Hin-Khar*, *The Burmese Kite*,

Black and White, *the Sapling*, *Darkness*, *Fine Arts*, *People from Different Worlds*, *The Old Bagan and I*, *The Maturity*, *Grace of the Spring* and *The Rhythmic Beats of Music Coming from an O-zee*. The essays under study are the excerpts from books such as Myanmar Myat Pwint (Literary Tradition), Kant Kaw Myaing Essay, The Ocean of My Mind Essays, and The Butterfly and the Selected Essays which were written by various authors in the same period of time. Each essay was analyzed based on the five salient characteristics of a literary essay.

Findings

An essay is a type of literary genre which had its first origin in France in the 16th century getting its present name from the French word 'essai' and later found its place in English literature.

In Myanmar Literature, the term 'essay' overlaps with the term 'article'. The one and the only aspect of literature that makes an essay from an article is the aesthetic value. An essay is a piece of writing by an author to put his rambling thoughts and ideas into organized words in a flexible and light-hearted manner. An essay is said to be read at one sitting as it is not long in length and is written in a reader-oriented style.

In the present study, the selected essays in Myanmar were analyzed based on the characteristics of literary essays. By definition, a literary essay –

1. reflects the author's personality,
2. emphasizes on the feelings and thoughts of the author rather than the subject matter being presented,
3. is a kind of persuasive prose writing that can appeal to the readers,
4. is brief and compact and
5. can give the readers the aesthetic value of the literature.

1. A literary essay reflects the author's personality

An author usually describes a particular thing as something lovely, something pity, or something to be blamed for based on his or her experiences in the outside world. Pi Moe Hnin, a famous Myanmar literary icon, once said that the art of good writing is not writing about a subject matter, but writing about one's own mind. Most essayists write about the perceptions they have with the integration of aesthetic value based on their thoughts and feelings and their experiences about the world. Therefore, the essays often reflect the author's mindset and character traits as his or her personality.

In the essay 'The Ava in the Dusk' by Taik Soe from Khant Kaw Myaing Essays, the author describes the old Ava which is losing its glory as a grand place while expressing his

miserable feeling for such great loss. The author compares the two contrasting picture of the place in the present days and the past days. In the old days, the Ava has been a magnificent city and the residents of the Ava have had a great time as they all manage to live on the taxes paid by the forefathers of the farmers and peasants living in their sheds and working on their farms and crop fields. When the author witnesses the present day Ava in the late evening, his writing reflects his personality of being considerate for he is able to go over a flash back about the Ava in the old days as in ‘ Those who work hard and their workforce have made the Ava land grand and splendid. Their efforts enable the welfare of all the city dwellers in the Ava.’ While recounting about the scene of Mae Nu Old Brick Monastery, the majestic building with three upper levels is still in good condition right in the middle of big tamarind trees despite the earthquakes and the terrible weather. The author personifies the building as a person saying ‘ It is like seeing someone who has been in shape in the young age is still left with the gifts of young age even after experiencing ups and downs in life.’, and this reflects the author’s personality of seeing things from positive point of view.

In the next essay ‘The Butterfly’ by Taik Soe is from his book - The Butterfly and the Selected Essays, the author is talking about butterflies. To give a colourful description of butterflies of different colours, he writes ‘The butterfly having black wings with blue spots on them, the one having yellow wings with black stripes, another one with green and black wings, and the other with all-white wings.’ This shows the author’s personality of being investigative of the nature around.

Another essay is ‘The Pen and Mont-Hin-Khar’ written by Zay Ya. The main idea of this essay is about the objective all the professionals working in the literature field should have while working as an author. Like all the things in the world must have an objective to be achieved, writing as a profession has an objective. If people write just for making a living, just for money, just for their fame, and just for producing a piece of literature, it would be the end of their pens. They need to presuppose more than that. As an author, a person has the responsibility to create a better world for human beings. If not, the guilt is something to do with the author. To prompt his thoughts, the author writes ‘It would be better to get rid of their pens into the rubbish dump, then get a shopping basket on the head with the yoke of Mont-Hnin-Khar on the shoulders and hawk from one street to another if a person who named himself or herself as an author writes something just for pleasure, just for money, just for fame without having sense of responsibility.’ This indicates that the author’s personality of his love for literature, his love for his profession, his duty-consciousness, and his ability to mock at those who are not responsible for their professionalism.

The other essay is ‘Burmese Kite’ by Collegian Win Mon. This essay is about how the powerful enjoy bullying who those are quiet and humble using different ways. Out there in the world, there are many individuals who are honest and work hard for a better life whereas there are many others who are jealous of such good hardworking people. The author expresses his dislike for such bullies by writing ‘I can’t stand seeing innocent people being bullied by those who have the upper hand.’ This depicts the author’s personality of being introvert, wanting to lead a quiet life and his frustrations towards the oppressors.

2. A literary essay emphasizes on the feelings and thoughts of the author rather than the subject matter being presented.

The subject matter of an essay can vary from a very simple and basis issue to a very vast and complicated one. Due to the nature of being reader-friendly, the authors usually convey the message they want to give to the readers thorough the subject matter presented.

In the essay 'Black and White' by Maung Khin Min (Da Nu Phyu), the author describes the nature of the co-existence of good and bad things in life. Although people expect something delightful and when it comes out to their expectation, they feel pleased. If they speculate something bad and when something opposite of what they have expected happens, then they will definitely be over-joyed. If they expect something bad and that something bad really happens to them, they will not definitely be happy. At the end of his essay, the author says, 'I must try my utmost to have a mindset to prepare for the worst despite being experiencing the best now.' He just started his essay talking about a white handkerchief stained by black ink, the black brocade umbrella, and the death of the author's aunt. But these are not the main points the author wants to highlight, but just the physical descriptions to put forwards the author's perception that it is always a good thing to hope for the worst thing.

The next essay is 'The Sapling' by Min Kyaw. In this essay, the author wants to propagate his feeling that confidence is very important to overcome the ups and downs in life to protect one's own place in the world and to contribute something back to the world around him or her. He describes this through the life cycle of a sapling growing as a big tree in the end. He writes, 'The saplings must have the courage to grow bigger through the difficult struggles.'

Moreover, such kind of writing giving emphasis on the author's feelings and thoughts can be found in the essay of 'Darkness' by Taik Soe. On the surface level, the author describes one's fear of darkness in the young age and the preference of darkness in search of accompany when one grows older. In the deeper level, the author wants to note his own thoughts and feelings about darkness. He gives an example of a person trying to solve a riddle while closing his or her eyes for some time to think deeply. From this example, he projects a link between the enlightenment and the darkness. He writes 'It's a natural phenomenon that getting enlightenment depends on the darkness.' to keep the readers in deep thoughts.

In the other essay named 'Fine Arts' by Taik Soe, the author portrays his personal feelings and thoughts to realize people having the ability of creating fine arts based on his own experiences. To describe this, the author gives wonderful examples of people's abilities such as the people who are capable of choosing a right place for a tape recorder at home, getting the potted plants arranged in a small apartment in Yangon, and the craftsmen creating their works of arts.

3. A literary essay is a kind of persuasive prose writing that can appeal to the readers.

While producing a piece of essay, it is not only the author's sensation that is the essence of a good writing, but also the author's eloquent writing to make the readers interested in the essay so that they fully get communicated with the given message. Such kind of writing style can be termed as a persuasive writing style.

In the essay 'People from Different Worlds', the author Min Thu Wun gives a contrasting differences between the east and the west by writing, 'For us, we serve the elders first according to our family traditions, **and give them the best part of the meal.** For them, they give me the food first. I sometimes cannot keep on eating as the elders have to be served with the rest of the food. What a difference!'. Without the direct use of terms such as 'the east and the west', 'English and Myanmar', the author instead makes use of the words such as 'fair and brown', 'rice and **wheat**' to point out the total distinctions between two different cultures and people.

In his essay 'The Old Bagan and I', Zaw Gyi also applies his persuasive writing style to grab the readers' attention. At the beginning of the essay, he writes 'There are many things to cherish in the Old Bagan. At this time of the year, days in Bagan are so soft and tender that

there are floating clouds here and there. Sometimes those heaps of clouds seem moving towards Shwe Zi Gone pagoda.’ He first describes the peaceful scenery of the pagoda while expressing his own thoughts and feelings. He makes use of his appealing writing style to compare his idealistic descriptions of the two sacred pagodas – Shwe Da Gone pagoda and Shwe Zi Gone pagoda.

4. A literary essay is brief and compact.

In a literary essay, a subject matter is often approached in a very rigid and compact way so as to describe only the necessary aspect of the thing being presented to keep the readers engrossed in the story. The essay ‘The Maturity’ by Maung Khin Min (Da Nu Phyu) is a good example of such writing style. The author gives a brief explanation of the two different views of his younger sister who wants to get a new handbag and of his grandmother who thinks that having one handbag is enough since a handbag is used to keep the things inside. Those contrasting views of the two different generations growing up in different socio-economic backgrounds are true to each of the speakers. The author puts forward the message that people should be considerate and have a balance between the extremes by writing briefly as in ‘I come to know that people perceive things based on their personal experiences, values, likes and dislikes.’

The essay ‘The Darkness’ by Taik Soe also reveals such characteristic of a literary essay as the author writes about the two interdependent nature of light and darkness in a very concise yet easy to understand style. He says ‘It’s a natural phenomenon that getting enlightenment depends on the darkness.’

5. A literary essay can give the readers the aesthetic value of the literature.

One characteristic of a literary essay is that it can give the readers the aesthetic value of the literature they are reading since the author is able to transmit his inner feelings and thoughts to his readers as if they are their own. Such style of writing can be traced in the essay ‘Grace of the Spring’ by Zaw Gyi which is one of the essays from Kant Kaw Myaing Essays. The author discusses the beautiful Myanmar traditions such as offering drinking water for free at the train stations on hot summer days, offering fresh and cold drinking water in earthen pots in front of houses or under the shady trees, and freeing the cattle taken for slaughter in a very straightforward and flawless way. To help the readers see those things in their sensation, he gives every detail of each event. By reading an essay written in details, the readers get a variety of aesthetic values such as a sense of pleasure, a sense of pity, a sense of envy. When describing about a gang of young maidens offering drinking water at the station, the author writes, ‘They are in their shabby cotton outfits. They look strong and stout since they are used to physical hard work. They do not look pretty. Yet, they have charming and grateful looks which might be the reflections of their loving kindness (say-da-nar) to share drinking water and their lovely willing manner of doing such a good deed.’ From this, the readers might sympathize and envy the poor young ladies who are not poor in loving kindness.

The author Min Thu Wun is also well-known for handling with his writing style to provide the readers aesthetic values of his works of art. In one of his essays ‘The Rhythmic Beats of Music Coming from an O-zee’, he describes the fact that the music produced from an O-zee is the representation of the nationality of Myanmar by writing ‘Brown is the colour of our Myanmar people’s complexion, similarly the music coming from an O-zee is the music of national instrument of Myanmar.’ This can give the readers the sense of envy for the author’s presentation of the subject matter can arouse the Myanmar people’s love for the Myanmar musical instruments and their patriotism at the same time.

Discussion

The thirteen selected literary essays in the present study were firstly recognized as ‘essays’ or ‘articles’ in the press media, or ‘contemporary writing’ Whatever term it has got, what is necessary in a literary essay is the aesthetic value it entails. In essence, an essay might be termed as the open letter or personal letter of the essayist. Thus the essays can reflect the author’s or essayist’s personality; the feelings and thoughts of the author; the author’s stream of consciousness; brief, concise yet simple style of writing; and the nature of transmission of aesthetic values of a piece of literature from the author to the readers. All these characteristics of a typical essay can be found in the examples of the selected literary essays. By reading such well-written Myanmar literary essays, the readers can become aware of seeing different walks of life in their surroundings.

Conclusion

The present study is the investigation of five characteristics of a good literary essay in some selected Myanmar literary essays. In the field of Myanmar literature, there are some controversy concerning the notion of ‘essay’ and other literary genres which are also very similar and related to essays in nature. It would be, therefore, difficult to distinguish them from one genre to another. Nevertheless, with the help of the examples presented in this paper, it is more likely to recognize the characteristics of a typical literary essay.

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