Tee Noe: Karen Resistance Poetry
Translated and introduced by Violet Cho

Introduction
Tee Noe was born as M. No Noe in a village called Thavorta, Karen State, Myanmar (Burma) in 1952. After completing year 10 at a state high school in 1974, he worked as a junior clerk at a local government office in Karen State, eastern Myanmar. Later he joined the rebellion as a soldier for the Karen National Liberation Army and as a schoolteacher in Burmese refugee camps along Thai-Burma border.

With no formal knowledge of the mechanics of poetry, Tee Noe has become a leading voice of the Karen diaspora. From a young age, Tee Noe was drawn to poetry. He remembers singing a short *hta* (Karen oral poem) to thank his cousin who gave him a woollen hat as a present when he turned six: ‘To school I run when the bell rings, with a woollen hat today I went.’

Tee Noe’s passion for poetry started with exposure to Burmese nursery rhymes and kids’ poetry he learned at school in Myanmar. He grew up reading and being inspired by the work of Burmese modern poets such as Zawgyi, Min Thu Wun and Nu Yi, who wrote about Burmese politics, nature and beauty, controversially, in a simplified manner compared to the style of earlier ‘traditional’ poems. His admiration for Zawgyi and Min Thu Wun in particular motivated him to write poetry for some Burmese literary magazines such as *Shumawa* in Burmese. However, later, as he witnessed the atrocities caused by the civil war and ethnic conflict, he developed a Karen nationalist consciousness and chose to write primarily in S’gaw Karen language. In his poetry, Tee Noe is preoccupied with the themes of war, displacement, refugee, scarcity and suffering, common features of Karen life in diaspora. As a refugee himself, now living in Australia, he continues to write poetry about refugee camp, with nostalgia for his ‘old’ home.

Tee Noe’s work represents his experience in exile and the Karen revolution. The work shows a moralizing and didactic tendency common in contemporary Karen poetry, which aims to serve the Karen ethno-nationalist movement, through teaching its readership the significance of suffering in the struggle at hand. As the examples below show, this is done in a direct way.

‘Resentful Refugee Life’ is translated from Burmese. ‘I Do Need Peace’ is translated from S’gaw Karen, one of the two main Karen languages and is written in a script adapted from Burmese by an American missionary.

Resentful Refugee Life

missing mother terribly
I remember home
wanting to return to my village
but I can’t

where I now live
neither my country nor my village

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not a place for me to cultivate
with people I am not related to
who do not own me
let’s see
how long I can ignore
a feast of crows I eat everyday

do imagine
in my shoes
how you would feel
a disenchanted shame
and for this I am bitter

to rule over the nation
of people poor with suffering
for whom and because of whom?
I am not pointing to the centre of anybody’s chest—
okay, if it’s me, I will fix it:
if it’s you, think about it
a human choice

one thing to say
with willingness
is that fate exists.

**I Do Need Peace (excerpt)**

(the first phase of my life)
the village I was born
far from metropolis
my village alluring
more than any place
with mountains and forests
and rivers and streams.

in the jungle growing up
I lived a barren life
although my life was poor
I had freedom
the beauty of Karen land
my ideal location.

without notice
suffering came quick to greet us:
soldiers
rapid
they burnt our house
an annihilated place.

rice barns to ashes
our food lost
inhabiting the forest deep
from my house of ashes
as the enemy searched for us
in the basket, father took me away
my village
I can never see again.

the school where I fell in love
burnt down by a dictator
the school’s books
into the ground
for knowledge
I went to school in the jungle
made a life in the jungle
moved from place to place, day through night.