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'A Hundred Loves', 'A Thousand Lovers': Portrayals of Sexuality in the Work of Thidaa Bunnaak

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As issues of gender and sexuality become an increasingly important focus in cultural studies, the work of the once popular woman writer of the 1950s and 1960s, Thidaa Bunnaak, draws Thai literature into the debate. This paper investigates the sexually explicit nature of Thidaa's fiction and the multiple meanings that erotic references might hold.

Western academic approaches to cultural, gender and literary studies have, for the past thirty years or more, engaged profoundly in the debates surrounding feminism, the body and female sexuality. These issues are consequently well established as a focus for research in contemporary European, North American and Australian academe. They are reflected not only in a plethora of broadly theoretical publications, but also in more specific studies of particular literatures and cultures.¹ Toril Moi has, for example, brought together issues of sexuality and feminist literary theory in her invaluable work, *Sexual/Textual Politics*; Elaine Showalter has produced a stimulating text on feminism, literature and sexuality; and Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott have published an informative reader on *Feminism and Sexuality*.² Such key texts as these have been followed up by Rachel Harrison is a Lecturer in Thai with the Department of South East Asia, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG United Kingdom. Her e-mail address is rh6@soas.ac.uk.

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The transcription system for Thai words used in this article preserves the distinction between the long and short *a*, *i* and *u* vowels and between aspirated and non-aspirated consonants such as *th / t* and *ph / p*. An attempt has been made, as far as this allows accessibility to the reader, to transcribe Thai vocabulary as it would be pronounced in Thai rather than to transcribe the spelling.

1 See, for example, George Bataille, *Eroticism* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1962); Hélène Cixous, 'Difficult Joys', in *The Body and the Text*, ed. Helen Wilcox *et al.* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), pp. 5-30; *The Sexual Imagination*, ed. Harriett Gilbert (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993); *Bloomsbury Guide to Erotic Literature*, ed. Jane Mills (London: Bloomsbury, 1993); Lynne Segal, *Straight Sex. The Politics of Pleasure* (London: Virago Press, 1994); and Catherine Salmon and Donald Symons, *Warrior Lovers. Erotic Fiction, Evolution and Female Sexuality* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001).

2 Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985); Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Viking Penguin, 1990); *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader*, ed. Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996.)

numerous other, more narrowly focused works: Carla Kaplan's book, for example, on women's writing and feminist paradigms; Sidonie Smith on *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body*; and John Phillips's discussion of pornography and censorship in twentieth-century French literature.³

This vast collection of material is evidence of the fact that the lens of gender, feminism and sexuality has been established as an important one in understanding and interpreting Western literature. Nor has this focus been confined to studies of Western fiction, for it has impacted upon research in Asian literatures, too. In 1991, for example, Fedhwa Malti-Douglas' work on gender and discourse in Arabo-Islamic writing was published; five years later came the publication of *The Woman's Hand*, a collection of papers dealing with gender and theory in Japanese women's writing, which includes chapters on the body, translation and reproduction, and the quest for *jouissance*.⁴

To some degree, the trends established in Western literary criticism (and in the analysis of world literatures influenced by these trends) are not reflected in studies of Thai literature. This is understandably so to the extent that these trends have grown out of certain cultural and philosophical concerns specific to the West. Moreover, the majority of work on Thai literature has been done in Thailand itself and has consequently mirrored local issues and perspectives, rather than those from beyond. While this stands to reason, one new direction in which Thai literary studies might fruitfully be taken is to allow it to engage in a dialogue with the comparative study of Asian, African, American and European texts through the perspective of gender and sexuality. For it certainly has something to say to this field of teaching and research and has things to learn from it as well.

It is in the context outlined above that discussions of Thai women's writing and of literary texts dealing with sexuality have a place. To date a relatively small amount of work has been undertaken on this topic by Rachel Harrison,⁵ Susan Kepner, Niels Mulder and Orathai Panya.⁶ This article investigates the fiction and writing career of the Thai journalist, novelist, short story writer, poet and agony aunt, Thidaa Bunnaak, in order to

3 Carla Kaplan, *The Erotics of Talk: Women's Writing and Feminist Paradigms* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body. Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993); John Phillips, *Forbidden Fictions* (London and Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 1999).

4 Fedhwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Paul Gordon Schalow and Janet A. Walker, *The Woman's Hand* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

5 Rachel Harrison, 'The Good, the Bad and the Pregnant. Why the Thai Prostitute as Literary Heroine Cannot Be Seen to Give Birth', in *Women, Gender Relations and Development in Thai Society*, ed. Virada Somsawasdi and Sally Theobald (Chiangmai: Chiangmai University Press, 1997), pp. 323-48; Harrison, 'Sense and Sensuality: Thai Women's Writing of Erotica', paper presented at the Centre of South East Asian Studies, SOAS, June 1998; Harrison, 'The Madonna and the Whore: Self/"Other" Tensions in the Characterization of the Prostitute by Thai Female Authors', in *Genders and Sexualities in Modern Thailand*, ed. Peter A. Jackson and Nerida M. Cook (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 1999), pp. 168-90; and Harrison, 'The Disruption of Female Desire and the Thai Literary Tradition of Eroticism, Literature and Aesthetics', *Tenggara*, 41 (2000): 88-125.

6 Susan Fulop Kepner, *The Lioness in Bloom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Kepner, 'Dropping the Towel: Images of the Body in Contemporary Thai Women's Writing', in *Transnational Asia Pacific: Gender, Culture and the Public Sphere*, ed. Shirley Geok-lin Lim et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), pp. 159-79; Niels Mulder, *Southeast Asian Images: Towards a Civil Society?* (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, forthcoming); Orathai Panya, 'Gender and Sexuality in the Work of Thai Women Writers' (M.Phil/Ph.D. diss., University of London, forthcoming).

explain her significance. Despite the fact that Thidaa produced some ten novels and short story collections between the 1940s and 1960s, relatively little is now remembered or known of this once popular writer – even the simplest of information, such as her date of birth and whether she remains alive today.⁷ As a result, Thidaa's publications are themselves now extremely rare and, while it is not uncommon for even quite recent Thai fictional works to go out of print and not be republished, her texts have not been preserved in public or university libraries, nationally or further afield.⁸ This current research has therefore only been made possible through the generous support of the private collector and literary editor, Suchaat Sawatsii, who made available his own personal copies of Thidaa's fiction.⁹

The texts in question include *Baap thii saam* [The third sin], a short story collection published in 1966, the title of which refers to the third Buddhist precept – a prohibition on sexual misconduct;¹⁰ the sinisterly titled *Mum meut khong dichan* [The darker parts of my life] from 1964, which, rather oddly, also includes a much longer second novel, *Phan chuu* [A thousand lovers];¹¹ and the 1950 novel *Roi phitsawaat* [A hundred loves], which additionally includes a short story collection under the general rubric of *Bantheuk phiset* [Special report], together with an article by the literary critic Jetsadaa na Baangluang cataloguing Thidaa's personal and professional life.¹² The latter, though rather heavily dramatised in style, nevertheless provides one of the few sources of information about

7 Interview with Suchaat Sawatsii, March 1997. Thidaa's earliest short stories were published when she was only fourteen years old. According to one source, she produced numerous novels, serialised on the pages of daily newspapers and weekly and monthly magazines; see *Bon thanon reuang san: 26 reuang 26 nakphraphan* [On the short story road: twenty-six short stories, twenty-six authors], ed. Warun Chatrakun na Ayutthaya and Thawii Ketawandii (Bangkok: Samnakphim Phadung seuksaa, 1962), p. 155. The titles of eight of Thidaa's books are: *Kham saaraphaap rak khong ying saao* [Confessions of a young woman's love life], *Roi phitsawaat* [A hundred loves], *Mum meut khong dichan* [The darker parts of my life], *Baap thii saam* [The third sin], *Saen sawaat soophii* [The passions of a young woman], *Kinnarii raai ram* [The dance of the Kinnari], *Jumphit sii chomphuu* [The rose-tinted kiss] and *Reuduu rak pheung ja phli* [The season of love has only just arrived]. A novel entitled *Wimaan loi naam* [The floating chamber] is advertised in the first edition of *Roi phitsawaat* and appears to be by Thidaa, though this is not clearly stated. According to Warun and Thawii (p. 156), Thidaa also wrote under the pseudonyms of 'Pink Tulip' and 'Aasaariti'.

8 The only publicly accessible library that possesses any examples of Thidaa's work is that of Cornell University, which catalogues a single copy of *Baap thii saam*. No other copies appear to be available in public or university libraries, either inside or outside Thailand. Despite references to both *Baap thii saam* and *Mum meut khong dichan* in the card index of the National Library of Thailand, copies of the texts are not in fact to be found on the shelves. During field research for this article in 1997, library officials explained that this was because the books in question had been sent away for rebinding, though over a three-month research period they were never reshelved. It is possible that the books were removed from the open collection due to their sexually explicit or socially controversial content; but it is more likely that, as with so much of the literature collection, they have simply been misfiled or lost.

9 Indeed, it was Suchaat Sawatsii who first brought to my attention the existence of Thidaa Bunnaak as a writer of erotica, in our discussions on the treatment of prostitution in Thai short stories; see Harrison, 'The Madonna and the Whore'.

10 Thidaa Bunnaak, *Baap thii saam* [The third sin] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Laeng phim reua bai, 1966).

11 Thidaa Bunnaak, *Mum meut khong dichan* [The darker parts of my life] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Phadung seuksaa, 1964).

12 Thidaa Bunnaak, *Roi phitsawaat* [A hundred loves] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Chokchai thewet, 1950). This novel is sometimes referred to as *Roi paet phitsawaat* [One hundred and eight loves], possibly because at least one edition was published under this revised title. The number 108 has a broader meaning in Thai as simply 'miscellaneous' or 'multifarious'.

the writer from the perspective of both her private and professional lives.

Thidaa's dramatic rise to success and her subsequent disappearance from the public view inevitably raise interesting questions regarding the part played by the sexually explicit nature of her fiction. One of the aims of this article is therefore to postulate reasons for the ephemeral nature of her popularity, which stands in contrast to male erotic writers of her generation, such as Rong Wongsawan (b. 1932) and Ustanaa Phloengtham (1920-88).¹³ As with their work, much of Thidaa's fictional writing deals with the relationships established between male and female protagonists, making frequent and often explicit reference to the taboo topic of sexual relations between partners. Not only was the sexually explicit nature of Thidaa's fiction non-conformist for its day, it was even more shocking to Thai audiences because it was authored by a woman. This article discusses Thidaa's work in the context of traditional Thai views pertaining to female sexuality and of the cultural prescriptions for 'good' female behaviour. In this it is careful to draw certain distinctions concerning social class and sexuality and, more broadly, to relate its findings to contemporary debates on genders and sexualities in Thailand in the twentieth (and twenty-first) centuries.¹⁴

Drawing links between Thidaa's fiction and the data presented in Jetsadaa's biographical essay, the article posits explanations as to why Thidaa chose to break with conventional morality and write sexually explicit prose, and about the philosophical position she adopted to arrive at this choice. In making these postulations, the article examines the career of the erotic writer through the lens of the cultural division of women into 'good' (the Madonna and the Mother figure) and 'bad' (the whore). It suggests a similarity between the social perception of the erotic writer and that of the prostitute, in that both are deemed to have transgressed against accepted sexual mores. In order to test these assumptions, a representative selection of Thidaa's literary texts are analysed, with particular attention paid to the relationships established between the male and female protagonists, and specifically to the portrayal of female sexuality within these relationships.

Although Thidaa Bunnaak was primarily renowned as a writer of erotic fiction, the broader social commentary incorporated in her works, and the political implications of this commentary, are also discussed. The pointed criticisms of society's widespread sexual hypocrisy which abound in some of Thidaa's fiction suggest that its sexually explicit passages may have served a purpose beyond that of titillation, namely to detract from the political sensitivity of her remarks. Doubtless this technique would have been particularly valuable at a time of strict censorship like that imposed by the regime of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1958-63), under which Thidaa wrote during the late 1950s and early 1960s.¹⁵

13 Something of the male-dominated nature of the Thai literary world in which Thidaa operated is suggested by the particular phrasing of the 1962 commentary on her career in Warun and Thawii ed., *Bon thanon*, namely that Thidaa was one among 'a group of women writers of a certain era that were able to write such insightful stories that even male writers had to acknowledge as successful in their genre [*yom kom hua hai nai naew khian*]' (p. 154, emphasis added).

14 Most notably, it takes up some of the strands of debates raised in Jackson and Cook ed., *Genders and Sexualities*, and in Penny Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2000).

15 When Sarit came to power in 1958, Article 17 of his interim constitution in effect placed a ban on the publication of material, fictional or otherwise, that was deemed supportive of any broadly 'leftist' ideology. In such a climate, creative literature lost all traces of social and political commentary and instead turned its attentions to themes deemed by radical critics as escapist and bourgeois. See, for example, the

The element of social and political consciousness clearly discernible in Thidaa's writing is one that sits uncomfortably with contemporary Western conventions of erotic writing, especially that produced for the popular market. The didactic and realistic features present in Thai erotica appear to lend it a less tangible connection with fantasy, a defining feature of Western erotica. These deceptively extraneous characteristics serve to generate questions about the precise function that sexually explicit fiction/poetry plays for Thai audiences, from pre-modern times to the present.

Implied in the interrogation of the role of erotic episodes in Thai literature is a more specific question relating to the degree of liberation from sexual or other conventions experienced by women writers of the genre. Does their choice to write such material represent an insubordinate or recalcitrant act of female/feminist emancipation? Or does it in fact merely replicate traditional characterisations of Thai women and their relationship to their own sexuality, by reduplicating the 'good'/'bad' dichotomy? To what extent do women writers of erotica, such as Thidaa Bunnaak, escape patriarchally dominated definitions of and prescriptions for female sexuality and sexual behaviour? Are the heroines invented by such writers sexually liberated, not only in the sense that they defy moral norms, but also in that they experience and reveal active female sexual desire? Or is it that these authors, although transgressive in their choice of subject matter, nevertheless remain subjugated by deeply embedded Thai cultural inscriptions of female sexuality – inscriptions that prevent them from creating female characters that experience, reveal or even acknowledge the existence of female sexual desire in its own right? May it also be the case that the most sexually liberated and actively desiring heroines are not necessarily to be found in erotic works at all, but in more conventional texts such as those of Suwannii Sukhonthaa (1932-84) and Sidaoreuang (b. 1941)?¹⁶

The answers to these questions are multi-layered and also varied, in part according to the times in which texts were produced. The work of contemporary female erotic writers, for example, such as Sujindaa Khantayaalongkot,¹⁷ Sumitraa Jan-ngao,¹⁸ Arayaa

comments made by the literary critic Suchaat Sawatsii, referred to in Sidaoru'ang, *A Drop of Glass* (Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1994), p. 18.

16 See, for example, Suwannii Sukhonthaa, *Khwaam rak khrang sut thaai* [Love for the last time] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Saamsii, 1997 reprint); Sukhonthaa, *Khon roeng meuang* [The story of Phring] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Dok yaa, 1997 reprint); and Sidaoreuang's short story 'Fan rak khong Saai Rung' [Saai Rung's dream of love], available in English translation by Susan Kepner in *The Lioness in Bloom: Modern Thai Fiction about Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 218-27. The sensuous elements of Suwannii's work are discussed to a limited extent in the same volume, pp. 107-14, which also includes a translation of her short story 'Nguu rong hai dokmaai yim' [Snakes weep, flowers smile]; in Harrison, 'Sense and Sensuality'; and, in detail, in Orathai Panya, 'Gender and Sexuality'. The topic of sensuality in Sidaoreuang's short stories is covered in greater depth in Rachel Harrison, 'Writing and Identity in the Short Stories of Sidaoru'ang' (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1996).

17 See, for example, the novels by Sujindaa Khantayaalongkot: *Jai duang pliaw* [A lonely heart] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Baan nangseu, 1994); *Daet naao* [The cool sun] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Baan nangseu, 1995); *Daet sii khaao* [The white sun] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Baan nangseu, 1995); and *Phaap raang meuan jing* [A seemingly true picture] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Baan nangseu, 1997). Sujindaa (b. 1951) is a prolific and well-established writer of sexually explicit fiction of the 1990s. The definition of her work as erotic by some and pornographic by others is a topic discussed in detail in Harrison, 'Disruption of Female Desire'. Sujindaa's approach to female sexuality in her work is too complex a subject to be dealt with effectively in this article and is instead to be discussed separately in future publications.

18 See, for example, Sumitraa Jan-ngao, 'Khon baap' [Sinners], in *Reuang rak nak khian ying* [Love stories by women writers] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Dok yaa, 1996), pp. 183-202. Having worked as a journalist for the *Matichon* group throughout her career, Sumitraa (b. 1959) began publishing erotic short stories in the

Raatjamroensuk,¹⁹ Rawiwaan²⁰ and Praathanaa Ratthana,²¹ is suggestive of certain changes in Thai women's views of sexuality. While this article addresses these issues with specific regard to the work of Thidaa Bunnaak, it forms part of a larger project to locate her work along a trajectory of attitudinal change depicted in the sexually explicit fiction of Thai women writers.²²

Female sexualities in modern Thailand: an overview

One of the reasons why little work has been done to date on issues pertaining to female sexuality in Thai literature is because of the enduring taboos on the public discussion of female sexual desire within Thai culture. The sensitivity surrounding open discussions of sexual issues, particularly with reference to women, is contrastingly obfuscated by the popular Western mythologies of Thai female sexuality that have arisen from the country's reputation as a prominent sex-tour destination in the wake of the Vietnam War. The widely held misconception in the West – perpetrated by the sex-tourist industry – that all Thai women are potentially buyable and beddable has added further sensitivity to academic analysis of female sexual practice and desire, particularly when conducted by outside/Western observers. Suffice it to say that in reality popular Western constructions of Thai womanhood bear about as close a relationship to the truth as the idiosyncratic Western supermarket brands of Thai green curry do to authentic Thai cuisine, flavoured as they so often are with spices more at home in a *tikka masala*. As Ryan Bishop and Lillian S. Robinson put it, 'The orientalist-Western discursive tradition has created a very powerful fantasy about Thai sexuality, both individual and cultural, that has little to do with the reality of Thai sexuality and everything to do with Western desire.'²³

In contrast to this fantasy of Thai female sexuality, an alternative view can be constructed of a somewhat conservative and rigid binary division of Thai women as sexually 'good' or 'bad'. The former category comprises virginal daughters and 1990s; '*Khon baap*' provides a good example of her style. By comparison with Thidaa's work, Sumittra's text is much more sexually explicit and erotically charged and the female protagonist contrastingly less cynical and more romantic. Similar to Thidaa's writing in its liberal interpretation of sexual morality, the story deals with an apparently loving relationship between a married man and his mistress, brought to a premature end on the orders of the man's wife.

19 Arayaa (b. 1957) is a well-known contemporary artist and a lecturer in art at Chiangmai University. She wrote her first short story in 1981 and is the author of two short story collections discussing aspects of Thai female sexuality. Her style is defined by the editor of her 2000 collection as *pleuay tae mai po* (revealing but not pornographic). See, for example, *Phuuying tawan ok* [Eastern women] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Khlet thai, 1993); and *Kheun sin klin kaamarot* [The night that sexual desire ended] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Saamsii, 2000).

20 It has not been possible to discover any further information on this author, other than that her short story 'Feminiin' [Feminine] was published in the literary magazine *Cho' Kaaraket* (31 [1997]: 108-18), edited by Suchat Sawatsii, and provoked considerable controversy. For further details of this text see also Harrison, 'Sense and Sensuality'.

21 Praathanaa is a young, feminist columnist writing for the weekly journal *Matichon sut sapadaa* [Matichon Weekly]. The opinions expressed in her column have proved highly contentious and solicited numerous letters of complaint. She is the author of a short story in Thai with the English title 'Fake Orgasm', published in *Sanaam Yaa* [The grass patch] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Kokaandii, 2000).

22 See also Harrison, 'Sense and Sensuality' and 'Disruption of Female Desire' and Orathai, 'Gender and Sexuality'.

23 Ryan Bishop and Lillian S. Robinson, 'Genealogies of Western Desire: The Thai Night Market in the Western Imagination', in Jackson and Cook ed., *Genders and Sexualities*, p. 191.

monogamous wives, while the latter is composed of women who have allowed more than one man to have access to their bodies, whatever the circumstance, be it as a result of divorce/widowhood and remarriage, rape, promiscuity or prostitution.²⁴ To qualify as 'good', Thai women are expected to remain virgins until marriage, whereupon their expression of sexuality is generally confined to their potential for motherhood and to the cultural expectation that they will service their husband's mainstream sexual needs. As Penny Van Esterik observes, Thai wives are not on the whole expected or even desired to be sexually experienced, nor should they need to practise in order to perform.²⁵ Yet while so much of Thai cultural prescription appears aimed at the suppression of female sexuality, it takes a contrastingly different attitude to male sexual expression. Based on notions that male sexuality always requires an outlet, men are perceived as having a natural and driving 'need' for sex – this in contrast with women, who 'are viewed as having far less intense sexual urges than men and as being in control of them'.²⁶ As Van Esterik summarises it, Thai women have been socialised into seeing sexual desire as 'stains upon the soul'.²⁷

Van Esterik goes on to remark, however, that although Thailand does produce a 'sex-positive culture for men', it is 'without a culturally elaborated erotic tradition'. Her argument appears to be based on the observation that the 'non-utilitarian dimensions of sexuality, those concerned with mutual pleasure, are particularly underdeveloped'.²⁸ While the evidence of anthropological and sociological research would support this assumption, it does not account for the long-established tradition of eroticism in classical Thai literature. For although it is true that Thai painting and sculpture do not encompass the erotic themes of the Indian and Japanese traditions, Thai literature has included erotic tracts or *bot atsajan* from as early as the fifteenth century, as exemplified in the well-known epic poem *Lilit Phra Lo* [The handsome Prince Lo].

The history of eroticism in Thai traditional literature is traced more fully in another study; suffice it to note here that all examples of this genre of classical literature appear to have been produced by male writers.²⁹ The first instance of a female poet touching on issues relating to sexuality is provided by the late nineteenth-century court poet Khun Suwan, whose work *Phra Malethethai* [Prince Malethethai] is interpreted by Kepner below:

24 This theme is studied in detail in Harrison, 'The Good, the Bad, and the Pregnant', 'The Madonna and the Whore', and 'Disruption of Female Desire'. The topic of women with multiple partners and those with experience of widowhood is well catalogued in the novels of Suwannii Sukhonthaa, such as *Khwaam rak khrang sut thaai* and *Khon roeng meuang*.

25 Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, p. 189.

26 John Knodel *et al.*, 'Sexuality, Sexual Experience, and the Good Spouse: Views of Married Thai Men and Women', in Jackson and Cook ed., *Genders and Sexualities*, p. 96.

27 Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, p. 193.

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 192, 194.

29 For an overview of Thai literary eroticism, see Harrison, 'Disruption of Female Desire'. Wibha Kongkananda argues that *Lilit Phra Lo* may well have been written by a female courtier owing to the sensitivity of its understanding of motherhood and the emphasis on the beauty of Phra Lo as opposed to the princesses he seduces; her evidence has not been substantial enough to achieve widespread acceptance among her peers. See Wibha Kongkananda, *Khomuun sammutithaan lae tritsadii mai kiawkap kawiiiniphon Reuang Yuan Phaa lae Lilit Phra Lo* [Some new speculations and theories relating to the poetic works *Yuan Phaa* and *Lilit Phra Lo*] (Nakhon Phathom: Silpakorn University Press, 1995).

In *Phra Malethethai*, the prince, on a forest tour, awakens in the night to find a beautiful woman lying asleep at his side. He admires her body, awakens her, woos her, and finds her willing, and they make love. Neither of them knows that the god Indra has taken the woman from her bedchamber and put her by the prince's side. Although the story, theme, plot, and characters are conventional, the concept of a woman being spirited away in her sleep to meet a man, to love and be loved, is anything but conventional. *Phra Malethethai* is a female fantasy of sexual adventure and escape from repression; the intervention of the god Indra absolves her of responsibility. The name of this heroine, 'Talaeng-gaeng', can be literally translated as 'the place where the prisoner is to be executed,' by which Khun Suwan suggests that a woman's safe, chaste bedchamber is a prison.³⁰

Although many considered Khun Sawan to be a brilliant poetess, she and her work were effectively discredited by assertions that she was insane. As far as it has been possible to ascertain, no women chose to risk broaching the dangerous topic of female sexuality in their writing again – until Thidaa Bunnaak arrived on the Bangkok literary scene, some time during the 1940s.

Thidaa Bunnaak

Thidaa's biographer, Jetsadaa na Baangluang, opens his article with an extract from one of her earliest works, *Kham saraphaap rak khong ying saao* [Confessions from a young woman's love life]. The piece was considered to be so sexually provocative (*yua yuan*), pornographic (*po'*) and damaging to public morality (*thamlaai sinlatham khong prachachon*) that the police brought a court case against its author for writing and publishing such a work:³¹

'Take your top off, Wiyadaa, or it'll get creased. And your skirt. Then you can wear my pyjama bottoms.'

Wiyadaa did as he said, asking no questions and showing no embarrassment. She removed both her top and her skirt, leaving only her skimpy pink bra and pants beneath, clinging to her luxuriant curves.

'My God, Wiyadaa, you look absolutely gorgeous. You have simply no idea how much I've been longing to look at you without your clothes.'

'Well go ahead and take a good look then. I'm all yours. And no one else can see me.'

He was powerless to prevent himself from pulling her almost naked body up close, drawing her tightly to him and rolling down onto the bed.

'Oh yes, yes. Now I can kiss you to my heart's desire,' he moaned as he kissed her madly all over her body, on every part of it, from her black hair, her beautiful, big eyes, her tear-drop ears, her full mouth and radiant cheeks, from her bulging breasts to the tops of her arms, from her stomach to her fleshy thighs and every other part of her beyond.

Wiyadaa pulled him towards her by the neck and kissed him passionately as though she were the Hollywood diva, Maria Montez. Pressing her lips closely to his, she kissed

30 Kepner, *Lioness in Bloom*, p.10.

31 Jetsadaa na Baangluang, 'Chiiwit Thidaa Bunnaak' [The life of Thidaa Bunnaak], in Thidaa, *Roi phitsawaat*, p. 293.

him over and over again. Then, finally, when she withdrew, she asked him,

‘Do you think my kissing has improved?’ And again she kissed him, pressing her lips up to his and darting her tongue back and forth, sweeping it around his mouth from left to right and twisting it round and round from top to the bottom of his mouth.

‘Oh ... that’s fantastic. And you taste so beautiful. Just where have you been learning how to kiss like that? Seriously, I’m asking you? Who’s been teaching you to kiss while you’ve been away from me? Come on, even the most experienced of lovers would die if they were kissed like that.’

‘Die? How come? You mean because they’d choke to death?’

Nature was in unison with the young couple as they lay in each other’s embrace. The sky clouded over and there was a sudden chill in the air. Then came the sound of thunder, so loud that it made Wiyadaa feel like a frightened child. And soon the rain would pour down madly.³²

As Jetsadaa points out, Thidaa was clearly an audacious woman to have produced material as sexually explicit and morally challenging as the above extract. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that her writing is not entirely without reserve and that, as in the example of the final paragraph above, she stops short of describing actual intercourse. (Although this was the case in the 1940s, it is not so in the work of women writers of erotica from the 1990s onwards.) Instead, Thidaa has recourse to the time-honoured convention of using metaphors drawn from the world of nature to suggest the sexual encounter.

As a result of its erotic sensibilities, Thidaa’s work brought her to quick recognition as a rising star in the Thai literary world and also earned her a steady and considerable income. Various descriptions by Jetsadaa as *sawing sawaat phet ron* (erotic and rather spicy), *sawing sawaat samnuan po noi noi* (erotic and a little explicit at times) and *klam koen phet khong thoe* (more explicit than one would expect from a woman), Thidaa’s style of writing earned her novels and short stories a dedicated following of largely male readers.³³ What is of particular interest, however, is that despite her apparent popularity until at least the mid-1960s, Thidaa’s work enjoyed only an ephemeral claim to fame and is currently little known. Moreover, it has been strangely difficult to find reliable data on Thidaa herself beyond that recorded by Jetsadaa, and therefore impossible to ascertain what became of her after the 1960s. The Thai newspaper *The Daily News*, where she had a regular column as an agony aunt for many years, retains no record of what became of her after she stopped working there, and friends and contemporaries such as the renowned male writer Rong Wongsawan appear to have lost all contact with her.³⁴ This is somewhat unusual given the close-knit nature of Thai communities and the fairly constant social contact normally maintained among peer groups of journalists and

32 Ibid., pp. 289-91. Thidaa’s choice of reference to Maria Montez (1912-51) is an interesting one, doubtless inspired by showings of films starring the Dominican-born actress, who was popular in Thailand at the time. Known as an exotic and tempestuous leading lady, Montez was also called ‘The Queen of Technicolor’ and ‘Dominican Dynamite’. She appeared in a number of films about the ‘Orient’, playing the part of Asian women from both the Middle and Far East.

33 This is substantiated by both Jetsadaa (ibid., p. 344) and Orathai, ‘Gender and Sexuality’. It has not been possible, owing to the paucity of material available, to ascertain how many times her work was reprinted and in what quantity. The first edition of *Roi phitsawaat* had a print run of 2000 copies, standard for most Thai literary works.

34 Personal interviews with Suchaat Sawatsii and the librarian of *Daily News*, April 1997.

writers.

The fact that Thidaa rose to the heights of popularity with her erotic writing but was then forgotten by the literary world suggests something of the double standard, noted in other areas of gender-related research on Thailand, with which the topic of female sexuality is received. Contemporaries of Thidaa comment on the extensive and loyal readership to whom her work appealed during the height of her fame. Warun Chatrakun na Ayutthaya and Thawii Ketawandii note that her novel *Roi phitsawaat* – the best-known of her works – was so popular that it was also made into a film, with Thidaa herself cast in the leading role, an accolade then unprecedented in the Thai literary and cinematic worlds.³⁵

Nevertheless, it appears that Thidaa's fiction still failed to earn the lasting respect of its readers, despite its initial popularity derived from its irreverence towards sexual mores. This reception stands in contrast to that given to male writers of erotic fiction, both in history – such as Sunthon Phu, the master of *niraat* love poetry – and in modern prose writing, where literary reputations have been much more enduring. Rong Wongsawan, for example, is a highly respected writer of the same generation as Thidaa, now nicknamed in Thai literary circles as the Eagle of the North (*Phayaa insii haeng Lanna*), having made his home in the province of Chiangmai. The only novel by Utsanaa Phloengtham, a tale of erotic adventure and misadventure entitled *Reuang khong Jan Daraa* [The story of Jan Daraa], currently on sale in Thai bookshops in its sixth edition, is also available in English translation as part of a project naming it one of the twenty best novels in Thailand, and is being reproduced in a film version by one of Thailand's best-known film directors, Nonzee Nimibutr.³⁶

The contrastingly ephemeral popularity of Thidaa as a novelist suggests parallels between the career of the sexually explicit woman writer and that of a commercial sex worker: admired for their abilities to sexually stimulate and please, but not respected – and likely even despised – owing to their contravention of common moral codes. As with a prostitute, male readers appeared to enjoy a certain titillation and sexual fantasy from reading Thidaa's stories, but without offering long-term commitment to or genuine respect for her work.

Despite this analogy, it appears – at least from Jetsadaa's catalogue of Thidaa's private life – that ironically, one of her key motivations in writing erotica was in fact her lack of success in forming a lasting relationship with any of the men with whom she fell in love. As a young woman who had recently moved to Bangkok from her home province of Ratchaburi, Thidaa began a relationship with a doctor several years her senior, and was heartbroken to discover that he was already married. Once recovered, she became the lover of a well-known writer, Itsara Amantakuun, only to find out that he too already had a wife. Amidst widespread rumours and gossip, Thidaa returned to Ratchaburi to nurse

35 Warun and Thawii ed., *Bon thanon*, p. 155; for full details on her readership, see Orathai, 'Gender and Sexuality'.

36 See Utsanaa Phloengtham, *Reuang khong Jan Daraa* [The story of Jan Daraa], 6th edn (Bangkok: Phraew Samnakphim, 2000); and Utsana Phloengtham, *The Story of Jan Daraa*, tr. Phongdeit Jiangphatthanarkit and ed. Marcel Barang (Bangkok: Thai Modern Classics, 1995). See also Marcel Barang, *The Twenty Best Novels of Thailand. An Anthology* (Bangkok: TMC, 1994). The film director Nonzee Nimibutr established an international reputation with his 1997 film *2499 – anthaphaan khrong meuang* [known in English by the title 'Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters'] and *Naang Naak*, made in 1999.

her wounds for several months, only venturing back to the capital once she had steeled herself for inevitable disappointments in love. Thidaa appeared at this point to have become less ingenuous and more cynical about relationships with men.

'The Forest Rose and the City Carpenter Bee'

The fact that something of Thidaa's innocence as a girl from the provinces was lost in her contact with the city is reflected as a theme in one of her 1966 short stories, '*Kulaap paa lae malaeng phu meuang*' [The forest rose and the city carpenter bee]. Referring to a type of bee that bores into things, the title draws on a traditional Thai analogy between men and insects, alluding to women as flowers to be 'pollinated'. 'You are like a forest flower', the man from the city opines to the beautiful, eighteen-year-old Jan Pho (her name literally meaning 'the envy of the moon'), who lives a totally secluded life in the forest with her father:

... so sweet-scented and spreading its scent far and wide across the forest, attracting an insect to come and drink its sweet nectar and settle on it. But once it has tasted its fill it simply flies away. The flower's beauty fades, its petals drop away and the insect moves on to other, sweeter smelling flowers.³⁷

One day while out in the forest, Jan Pho experiences the first pangs of sexual desire when she encounters a wounded hunter from the city who has lost his way and fallen unconscious from malaria. Unable to move him by herself, she recalls the way her father carries home animals he has killed. Accordingly she ties him up by the hands and feet and attempts to drag him home. This image of a pure and beautiful young woman tying up a man and taking him home would certainly have been a shocking one for its day. Sexually suggestive though not sexually explicit, the image is used as a presentation of the innocence, naturalness and acceptability of nascent female sexuality.

When Jan Pho collects some herbs as medicine for her captive hunter, her act of chewing them and spitting them into his mouth takes on a sensual overtone in Thidaa's description:

She placed her clean, soft pink lips close up to those of the young man. Jan Pho thought nothing of it, but as she moved her mouth away, she became aware of the soft and gentle sensation of touch. She pulled away from him quickly, even though her heart was totally overcome.

... She did not know why she was in such a state of turmoil and anxiety but when she sank down onto her knees and caressed his head on her lap, she found the answer – he meant more to her than her very own heart.³⁸

Once home, Jan Pho sets about untying the young man. Her father, however, sees the danger that this man poses to his daughter's purity and he intervenes. He tells her to leave him tied up in the fear that it may be a matter of helping a 'city animal', like a cobra who can always swing round and bite. Jan Pho has to wait until her father has gone out before

37 Thidaa, '*Kulaap paa lae malaeng phu meuang*' [The forest rose and the city carpenter bee] in *Baap thii saam*, p. 129. The insect allusion is extremely well established, noted as early as the fifteenth century in the *niraat* poem *Khlong thawaathotsamaat* [Verses of the twelve months]. For fuller details of this symbolism see Harrison, 'Disruption of Female Desire', pp. 95-6.

38 Thidaa, '*Kulaap paa*', pp. 122-3.

she can release her captive. Her own innate desires are clearly stronger than those of her obligations as a dutiful daughter.

When the visitor regains consciousness, he is struck by Jan Pho's beauty and requests to leave as soon as he possibly can, the implication being that the only way in which he can resist seducing her is by completely removing himself from the scene. He must avoid becoming the cobra that turns round and bites the hand of those who have saved him, though this appears to be an honour he owes to Jan Pho's father rather than to Jan Pho herself. In the text the hunter claims that he does not want to make Jan Pho cry. (Evidently he is aware that seducing her could only lead to her unhappiness.) But she fails to understand why being beautiful should be a cause of pain to her. Despite the fact that she does not wish him to leave, her father returns him to the city the following day. For the first time since her childhood, Jan Pho cries:

But it was best just to let her cry. She would soon forget, when she met a young man from the forest who could dedicate his life and soul to her. And even if she didn't, the young man from the city did not want her to be like any old flower by the wayside. At least, he wanted her to be a forest rose which blossoms and fades by itself in the full course of time.³⁹

As in a number of modern Thai literary works that deal with the topic of sexuality, a contrast is established in this short story between the natural environment and that of the city. In this particular text the forest is depicted as an environment of pure, unsullied sexuality, the city as one of sexual corruption and depravity. Although not sexually explicit, the eroticism of the story exists at the level of the potential for sexual exchange suggested in the narrative. Thidaa's depiction of a young woman whose desire is awakened by her encounter with the lost man from the city is unconventional in that there is absolutely no suggestion on the part of the author that female sexuality is in any way impure. On the contrary, Thidaa argues that it has a rightful place in the natural environment – but that it is also vulnerable to abuse. So, despite the author's positive attitude toward the existence of female sexuality, she still assures her reader that sensuality must be restrained and directed by good sense, in much the same way that the heroines of the early eighteenth-century British author Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* must temper their sensibilities in order not to expose themselves to seduction without marriage. For Thidaa, female sensuality does have a place, but it is not with the married man whose time with her can only be long enough for him to seduce and then discard her, like a carpenter bee on a forest rose. Instead Jan Pho must wait for the moment when she can meet 'a young man from the forest who could dedicate his life and soul to her'.⁴⁰

It is interesting to note with regard to the place this story holds in the context of Thidaa's *oeuvre* that it is one of the few pieces that refer to female desire for and of itself. While much of Thidaa's writing is sexually explicit or provocative, the majority of her texts present a much more cynical view of sexual exchange, portraying more disingenuous female characters determined not to be the losers in the sexual power game.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

Sex for sale: writing erotica, going on the game

By the time of Thidaa's return to Bangkok, she had adopted an alternative philosophy for life and despite occasional thoughts of suicide, she was largely free of the emotional turmoil of the past. Her confirmed view of men was now as a *phet pralaat* ('a strange and weird sex') who took advantage of women and had far greater potential to hurt than to care for them. As a result, Thidaa had instead grown confident of her own sexual behaviour, flaunting her new approach to love 'as a delightful confection that we may choose to eat as we please, without having to worry about whether, once eaten, it would cause a stomach upset or be dangerous in any way'.⁴¹ Thidaa was also conscious of the lessons to be learned from female prostitutes and their attitudes to sexual encounters with men, paid for in hard cash rather than with false promises of love and commitment. Jetsadaa records an interview where Thidaa remembers having once driven past a brothel in a moment of emotional crisis and experiencing a sense of envy for the women working there because of their apparent contentment with life and lack of worries in the world.⁴²

A picture therefore emerges at this stage in her life of a woman who turned to writing sexually explicit fiction partly as a challenge to male society and partly in response to her disappointment in love. Furthermore, it might be argued that Thidaa had resigned herself to the loss of her virginity not having resulted in marriage, a factor that pushed her across the border between the sexually 'good' and the sexually 'bad'. As with the prostitute, therefore, what reputation did she have to lose?⁴³

Given this perspective, it becomes possible to comprehend the empathy Thidaa felt for the prostitute characters she created in her fictional works, such as her 1966 short story '*Naam taa jaak hua jai*' [Tears from the heart]. It is the tale of an escort named Soi, who works in order to provide for her two small children and elderly mother. As Soi dances with her clients, many of whom (like Thidaa's own lovers) are already married, she quietly fantasises about settling down with one of them and leading a happy family life:

Why, oh why did she not have the good fortune to meet a man who loved her enough to forget her terrible past and forgive her for all the errors of her ways, rather than simply 'keeping' her for a while and then kicking her out when he was bored? So far, that was all she knew, for everyone simply thought that a woman such as Soi could have no heart, nor love anyone; and nor would she ever change. Yet although deeply hurt by all their insults, she carried on hoping, hoping against all hope.

But no one was ever going to help Soi out of her predicament, that was a fact; and so Soi asked only to dream her way into happiness. And there it was, what she wished for

41 Jetsadaa, 'Chiiwit Thidaa Bunnaak', pp. 337-8; the comment on *phet pralaat* is on p. 346.

42 Ibid., p. 336.

43 In the link established here between writing erotica and prostitution, one is reminded of the early experiences of the well-known Western writer of erotica, Anais Nin. Of Cuban, Spanish, Danish and French descent, and working from Paris in the 1940s, Nin wrote her first erotic pieces for a private collector for the commercial fee of a dollar a page. In a postscript to her diaries, written in 1976, she made the important observation with regard to women's writing of erotica that 'At the time we were all writing erotica at a dollar a page, I realised that for centuries we had only one model for this literary genre – the writing of men'; Anais Nin, 'Postscript', in *Delta of Venus* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 13. Nin goes on to comment that 'I was already conscious of a difference between the masculine and the feminine treatment of sexual experience I had a feeling that Pandora's box contained the mysteries of woman's sensuality, so different from man's and for which man's language was inadequate' (pp. 13-14).

– a neat little house set amidst a garden of fragrant flowers; Soi standing there with ‘his’ arm around her waist and watching the children play happily together.⁴⁴

Whereas Soi is presented as a victim of circumstance longing for a better life, others among Thidaa’s tales of prostitution portray much more feisty and potent heroines. The fourth chapter of her novella *Phan chuu* [A thousand lovers], for example – separately titled as ‘*Sote na sote tae mai sot*’ [Single maybe, celibate not], introduces the exotically named character of Ritchong:

Her name was Ritchong. What her family background was, Athiraat had no idea. All he knew was that she was very feminine and thoroughly desirable because of it. From what he could tell, Ritchong was extravagant with money, dressed absolutely beautifully and was perfectly forward enough to take the initiative and approach a man for herself.⁴⁵

From this description, Ritchong is clearly an active rather than a passive player in the sexual encounter, thus breaking with social convention. Her initial meeting with the handsome journalist, the hilariously named Athiraat Thepthai (literally, ‘Great-king Thai-god’), comes about when she enters a restaurant where there is no free table and invites herself to sit down with him. Having struck up a conversation with Athiraat and his male companion, Ritchong pays the bill for all three and lights up a cigarette, each action again marking her independence and unconventionality. This takes Athiraat by surprise, as he had expressed an initial concern to his male friend that Ritchong’s presence at their table would oblige him to settle the substantial bill for her orders. Now, having allowed her to pay instead, he feels the social pressure to complain about how embarrassing he finds it, likening himself to a pimp who does nothing other than take advantage of a woman. Thidaa’s subtle exposure of male hypocrisy reflects something of the humour of her cynicism.

Athiraat’s reference to a pimp is apposite, for Ritchong does in fact have a background as a high-class prostitute – though she appears to work totally independently, with all the agency and power being her own. Having taken a liking to Athiraat, she propositions him, suggesting an arrangement whereby she will spend two to three nights with him a week – providing he forgoes having sexual relations with anyone else for the duration of their relationship so as not to put her at risk of catching an STD and that he undergoes a complete check-up first to prove he is currently disease-free. Ritchong’s criteria for a sexual relationship are entirely practical ones, though they must have been completely shocking to the readers of this text because of their forthright nature. Described as cunning (*jen jat*) and streetwise (*choke chone*), Ritchong – though clearly not a morally ‘good’ Thai woman – is presented as an awe-inspiring heroine, a survivor who knows how to negotiate in order to get what she wants. While working in Singapore and Malaysia, she also became the wife of a Chinese businessman from whom

44 Thidaa, ‘*Naam taa jaak hua ja?*’ [Tears from the heart] in *Baap thii saam*, pp. 171-2; the story is discussed in greater detail in Harrison, ‘The Madonna and the Whore’.

45 Thidaa, ‘*Phan chuu*’ [A thousand lovers] in *Meum meut*, p. 203. The name Ritchong has no obvious meaning in Thai and sounds as though it may even have been adapted from a foreign language such as French. As Athiraat himself comments in the text, the name Ritchong sounds beautiful (*phro?*) and has a chic (*ke*) and stylish (*ko*) ring to it, ‘like the name of a woman in a fantasy novel that he could repeat to himself over and over again in his dreams’ (p.106).

she ran away back to Thailand, taking much of his money with her. For, as Thidaa assures her readers through the words of Ritchong herself:

The world is never as pure as people think. If you take a closer look there's filth everywhere. And sex is the great leveller – government ministers want it just the same as the beggars on the street. The highly respected and influential father of one young man once tried to stop his son from mixing with women like me.

'Bah ... Those high class call girls, since when have they ever cared about what people thought?', he [the young man's father] complained [to his son]. 'Don't you know they'll fall in love with anyone who has the money? What on earth are you doing paying your attention to them when all those society girls are doing is waiting for you to take them out and smother them with love...'

That was what he said in front of his wife and children – and yet only days later he was herding a whole gang of us into his gentlemen's club and there they all were, he and his friends, walking around stark naked and not in the least embarrassed. He said...

'Well, it's all just nature isn't it ... nothing to feel ashamed about.' And he laid his head in the lap of one of us 'women', totally unaware of the fact that call girls like us knew what they were doing when they chose to go with a man. And how to choose the place and the time ... most important of all, on a soft bed. Not like [his and his friends'] daughters, the shining stars of the social circle, who were all rushing off to assignations at Thailand's top hotels with young Filipino dancers. Or starting romances on the back seats of cars, or in their summerhouses by the coast. And then, when anyone disturbed them, moving out on the beach or deep in amongst the trees. It never crossed those bigwigs' minds that their own daughters' womanhood was terribly wasted because they never earned a single penny out of it.⁴⁶

Ritchong lives with three or four other women, all of whom work as high-class prostitutes. They are from wealthy backgrounds but have for some reason lost their social respectability: one has come from an upper-class, titled family and has simply rebelled against too strict an upbringing; another is from a broken family, making it easy for her to lie to one parent or the other about where she is spending the night. All are addicted to gambling.

Athiraat himself had seen many important men fall victim to the unbelievable power of sexual desire. Their speech was full of nothing but dirty words and all one saw was their shiny bald heads and their stuck-up expressions as they drove past in their cars or sat around together in their luxurious government offices. He had seen Ritchong's friends playfully kissing the bald pates of all these important men. And he had seen these same men pulling off the girls' bras and whipping their knickers down. That was the shocking truth that lay behind these scenes of glory.⁴⁷

46 Ibid., p. 213.

47 Ibid., p. 215.

It is clear from both the previous extracts that Thidaa's stories not only propound an anti-romantic philosophy of the importance of power over love, but also aim to brutally expose the sexual hypocrisy which Thidaa felt abounded in the Bangkok society in which she had come to mix. While noting that the sexual practice of high society women was deeply promiscuous, she appears to promote the view that the only way in which female agency could be asserted is through cash payment for sexual services. Again, an analogy can be drawn between the prostitute and the writer of sexually explicit fiction, both attaining a sense of power from trading their wares.

The fact that Thidaa's novels and short stories aim to expose the double moral standards of Bangkok's elite complicates the issue of labelling her work as simple erotica. For her texts clearly include important elements of political and social consciousness not normally associated with the genre, at least the Western definition of it. In this sense it is important to highlight the fact that Thidaa was, for much of her career, writing at a time of heavy right-wing censorship, particularly under the Sarit regime. That her work was sexually explicit made it possible to label it in one way and detract attention from it as politically controversial. Nevertheless, Thidaa's work is shockingly outspoken in the way it decries those in power, and the descriptions of balding men may even be interpreted as a direct attack on the womanising Sarit himself.

Nor is this approach to political commentary disguised as erotica without parallel in Thai fiction: Utsanaa Phloengtham's *Reuang khong Jan Daraa* [The story of Jan Daraa] has also been interpreted by some Thai critics as a masked attack on the lascivious behaviour of the country's elite.⁴⁸ Although highly sexually explicit and comprising page after page of detailed sexual adventure, 'The Story of Jan Daraa' is as much about Buddhism and retribution as it is about sexual fantasy.

It can therefore be postulated that erotic fiction bears the same hallmarks as so many other Thai literary texts, in that it too can be didactic. This is in a sense unsurprising, given that much of traditional literature, including erotic tracts, appears to have had a primary function of instilling lessons on morality in an aesthetically sophisticated form. Examples are provided by the earliest works of classical Thai literature, such as *Lilit Phra Lo*, interpreted by Wibha Kongkananda as a Buddhist lesson on the perils of unrestrained desire.⁴⁹ What this serves to indicate is that the sexually explicit fiction of the modern period, although apparently representing a reaction against accepted moral codes, in fact has strong links with Thailand's literary past. Both Utsanaa and Thidaa teach a moral message through their narratives, as the phrasing of the advertisements on the reverse cover of Thidaa's *Mum meut khong dichan* serves to indicate: the novel is described here as 'having been written from real life experience which both male and female readers alike should (*khuan*) learn about and take as a lesson (*bot rian*) in life so as to gain a profound understanding of every aspect of life'.

It is clear, then, that the role of sexually explicit scenes in Thai literary works, including those of Thidaa, is more complex and multi-layered than might be concluded from a ready assumption that they serve an identical purpose to the Western tradition of popular erotica. This being so, it becomes doubly important to question more closely what the specific role of sexuality is in such works, and particularly how this is shaped in

48 For further details see Harrison, 'Disruption of Female Desire'.

49 Wibha Kongkananda, 'A Study of the Hero in *Lilit Phra Lo*', paper presented at UNESCO, Paris, November 1982, p. 21.

texts authored by women. Undoubtedly, the erotic interludes in Thidaa's work aim to stimulate and perhaps even to sexually shock their readership. They might even be accused at times of somewhat sadistically luring their male readers into the realm of fantasy, only to chastise them through pointed social criticism for the hypocrisy of these very fantasies. For female readers, the sexually progressive heroines may additionally function as morally defiant role models, suggesting new alternatives for conducting relations with men. In relation to this the texts might strangely serve to achieve two functions which, from the dogmatic perspectives of a Western feminist approach, appear mutually exclusive: as so many of Thidaa's texts capably illustrate, they pander to the male fantasy regarding the attractive and sexually available woman, while at the same time endowing their heroines with considerable power, agency and control. The question then remains of the extent to which Thidaa's texts actually raise the issue of female sexual desire.

Both Wiyadaa in 'Confessions from a Young Woman's Love Life' and Ritchong in 'A Thousand Lovers' meet the expectations of male desire, being described as visually attractive, glamorous and sexually available women:

Ritchong was stunningly dressed in a blouse with multi-layered sleeves and a flowery skirt tied at the back with a bow. She was wearing silver shoes not altogether suitable for daytime wear and revealing her sharp toenails, varnished in bright red. Ritchong's eyebrows were so fine as to give the impression there was nothing natural about them, only thin pencil lines ... She was like a glamorous movie star, though there was nothing unnerving about this, but for her sense of self-possession.⁵⁰

By contrast with the description of Ritchong, Wiyadaa, though also sexually adventurous, is slightly less in control of the situation where she finds herself. Clearly an object of the male gaze, Wiyadaa acts primarily to fulfil her lover's desires and we are given a sense of her vulnerability in the reference to her as 'a frightened child' at the close of the sexual exchange. It is difficult to ascertain from this extract of 'Confessions of a Young Woman's Love Life' the extent to which Wiyadaa's passionate kisses express her own sensuality as much as they mimic the glamour of Maria Montez and service the fantasies of her male partner.

The lack of an expression of female sexual desire in its own right in Thidaa's literary work raises the possibility that though non-conformist in very many senses, the author still stops short of underscoring the existence of female sexuality for and of itself. Perhaps this issue of female desire, albeit in combination with the use of sexuality as a tool with which to broker power in relationships with men, is best illustrated in a 1966 short story called '*Saneh?*' [Charisma? or Sexual charm?]. The story focuses on a relationship between a wealthy older man and his young mistress, Nut Noi. It opens with a rapturous tribute to Nut Noi's body, described through the eyes of her male lover as 'enticing, alluring and alive with her very sense of the joy of living'. As with Wiyadaa, the man looks at his mistress with all the power of the gaze, starting from the tips of her toes; he observes her toenails which are quite unusual, being painted in five different colours – pale pink, bright purple, bright yellow, bright blue and bright green. Fastened around her ankles, which are described as 'delicate, clean and gently tapering', she wears a small gold

50 Thidaa, '*Phan chuu*', p. 204.

chain which, he teases her, looks like a cat's collar with a tinkling bell and which reveals she has an owner.

Sadly, the promise of Nut Noi's wild toenails as an initial indication of a sense of freedom of expression becomes diverted in this extract into a depiction of ownership and subordination and the story goes on to portray Nut Noi as something of a pussycat to the lover she calls her 'uncle'. Like so many of Thidaa's heroines, Nut Noi provides a combination of erotic fantasy and servitude to her lover, in this instance mixing exotic cocktails for him whilst clad in scanty and alluring attire:

And then Nut Noi picked up a fine crystal cocktail glass, which had been kept on ice because she knew very well that the flavour of the cocktail would be better if the glass was ice cold to start with. He looked on in utter devotion.

'It's not like with my Mrs', he muttered. 'Whatever I touch she complains, whether it's beer, cocktails, wine or champagne. She says it all makes you drunk ... Oh God! ... So how can she blame me if I try and find a bit of pleasure elsewhere? I work really hard, so can't I have a bit of relaxation and peace and quiet ... She can moan if she wants to, but when I can't stand listening to it any longer, I drive off to see you, so she can think it's because I'm annoyed with her, and not because I've made a second home somewhere else.'

The sound of the ice being shaken broke his reverie ... but it heralded a break in the gloom and a return to a sense of refreshment. He knew that she was mixing him a martini, because he had seen her mix the gin with the French vermouth. Soon she would be serving it to him, complete with a stuffed olive.

'You can try a hula-hula next if you like. I've had it before and it tastes lovely.' She was referring to another type of cocktail, as if wanting to show off her abilities to the full.

'Everything you make tastes absolutely delicious...' he answered touchingly. 'But don't you bother about that now, Nut. Just come and sit down here. Come and sit next to Uncle. My goodness. What a beautiful colour you've painted your lips...'

'I went shopping yesterday. This colour's just come out so I bought it to try it out ... Do you like it?'

He nodded and looked at her flirtatiously. 'It's not just the colour of your lips I like. It's all of you..... I like you, I love you, and I'm crazy about you. Do you believe me, Nut?' 'Oh, yaaees,' she replied, dragging out the word as she promptly fed the martini into his mouth.⁵¹

Yet, like Ritchong, Thidaa's heroine Nut Noi is no unwitting victim of male power, but is instead a skilful player in the game of manipulation. Her concoction of cocktails for her lover, for example, is no demonstration of genuine love or devotion, but a shrewd and sugary act of seduction, made for commercial gain:

'Nut darling, Nut my love, my dear little thing...' he whined, whined hurriedly, as if flustered, causing her to stifle a giggle to herself at his expense. For sure, even though she was only nineteen, Nut Noi was a clever girl – spirited and quick to work out what was really going on. Why else would she be the owner of a beautiful diamond ring, a beautiful luxury sports car and a lovely little house of her own? ... She did not just

51 Thidaa, 'Saneh?' in *Baap thii saam*, pp. 183-4.

have 'him', and 'he' was simply a great big 'bag of gold', which she could help herself to for as long as he remained infatuated with her, and then that would be that. 'He' was simply one aspect of her life, the part that allowed her to live in a certain style and comfort, to acquire a bit of status in society because she 'had' what others 'had', and perhaps sometimes even more.⁵²

Despite her tender years, Nut Noi is wise enough to understand that the material advantages of her relationship with 'Uncle' have a shelf life that lasts only as long as his infatuation with her persists. Rather than following the unwritten social rules of such a liaison, Nut Noi rewrites them in her own terms, taking what she can while she can and at the same time refusing to acknowledge this as a barrier to any further relationships in which she might wish to engage. In short, she defiantly chooses to ignore the patriarchal implication of her liaison with this man as a mark of his possession of her and of her sexuality. As a result, when 'Uncle' calls round one day to discover Nut Noi in bed with another man, he is driven to such rage that he momentarily considers murdering both of them on the spot. But instead he sees the error of his ways, leaves the young couple to it and promptly resumes a happier relationship with a wife he subsequently better appreciates.

For Thai readers of this text with a conventional moral view, the character of Nut Noi is probably quite reprehensible: she has agreed to become the mistress of a married man, therefore holding a low moral status just slightly better than that of a prostitute and only compensated for in social terms by the fact she has derived from it a certain economic gain. Yet more reprehensible is the way in which she breaks the unwritten sexual code by taking on a second partner herself. For Thidaa, however, Nut Noi is something of a heroine by dint of her ability and willingness to play the patriarchal system of concubinage to her own ends. She is clearly no shining example of purity, chastity or 'good girl' behaviour, but a woman who recognises and aims to fulfil both her own economic needs and her sexual desires. Thidaa's support of Nut Noi's conduct may be suggested by the happy ending she gives this story: although the enraged lover-uncle momentarily considers murdering his mistress, he eventually returns to an improved relationship with his wife. At the same time, however, one must also acknowledge the underlying conservatism of its message: the family is viewed as essentially sacrosanct and the breakdown of this institution as a result of the immutably wayward male philanderer.

Conclusion

Thidaa's fictional writing is undoubtedly non-conformist in terms of its themes, characterisation and inclusion of sexually explicit scenes – most significantly so given the period in which it was written, often marked by strict political censorship. Beneath this exterior, however, lies a more conservative, traditional, even conventional sub-text with reference to both content and form. Thidaa's heroines (whom one might also read as possible reflections of the author herself) are largely engaged in indulging male desires and appear often strangely oblivious to the existence of their own sensualities. Concomitantly, it would seem that at least at a certain level, their 'bad girl' behaviour comes only in bitter, almost masochistic response to their frustrated wishes to become 'good' mothers and wives. Most significantly, perhaps, is the sense in which so few of

52 Ibid., pp. 183-4.

Thidaa's texts foreground the existence and display of female sexual desire in and of itself. For although Thidaa's writing may include scenes of female sexual participation, they are frequently coloured with overriding issues of the power and gender politics at play.

One of the few stories in which anything approaching female sexual desire is depicted as a simple and natural emotion, refers significantly to the life of a virginal country girl, one untouched by the impurities of city life – or of the city male. It is difficult not to conclude that so much of Thidaa's fiction is implicitly autobiographical, hence strongly cross-referenced by the author's own experiences in her relationships with city men and as much an expression of defiant, emotional bitterness as it is a straightforward exploration of female sensuality.