

The University of Sydney

Depictions of Thailand in Australian and Thai Writings:  
Reflections of the Self and Other

Isaraporn Pissa-ard

A thesis submitted in  
fulfilment of the  
requirements of the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

March 2009

## Abstract

This thesis offers both an examination of the depiction of Thailand in Australian novels, short stories and poems written in the 1980s and after, and an analysis of modern Thai novels and short stories that reflect similar themes to those covered in the Australian literature. One Australian film is also examined as the film provides an important framework for the analysis of some of the short stories and novels under consideration.

The thesis establishes a dialogue between Thai and Australian literatures and demonstrates that the comparison of Australian representations of Thailand with Thai representations challenges constructively certain dominant political and social ideologies that enhance conservatism and the status quo in Thailand. The author acknowledges that the discussion of the representations of Thailand in contemporary Australian novels and short stories needs to take into account the colonial legacy and the discourse of Orientalism that tends to posit the 'East' as the 'West's' 'Other'. Textual analysis is thus informed by post-colonial and cross-cultural theories, starting from Edward Said's powerful and controversial critique of Western representation of the East in *Orientalism*. The first part of the thesis examines Australian crime stories and shows how certain Orientalist images and perceptions persist and help reinforce the image of the East and its people as the antithesis of the West. From Chapters Three through Six, however, more literary works by Australian authors are examined. The important finding is that most of the Australian authors under consideration attempt, though not always successfully, to resist and challenge the Eurocentric stereotypes of Asia and Asians that dominated Australian literature in earlier periods.

This difference between contemporary Australian authors and their predecessors seems to reflect modern Australia's endeavor to distinguish itself from the rest of the Western world and to redefine its relationship with Asia.

As literary representations cannot be separated from socio-political contexts, the thesis also includes discussion of the Thai social and political history and, where appropriate, shows how colonialism and neo-colonialism exert their impact on modern Thailand.

## **Acknowledgements**

The writing of this thesis would not have been possible without the guidance, encouragement, patience and understanding of my late supervisor, Dr Noel Rowe, who also contributed immensely to the expansions of my academic and personal horizons. His poems and his interest in Thailand are the most important source of my inspiration. His poetry and his writing will continue to provide me with insights and guidance after I leave Sydney and return to my home country.

My heartfelt thanks also go to my current supervisor, Dr Bernadette Brennan, who has shown great interest and given me so much of her time to help criticize, shape, edit and proofread this work. Her keen interest in the writer's role in, and influence on, society inspires me to investigate further the political aspect of Thai works so as to foreground their potential in challenging existing verities and contributing to a more democratic, pluralistic and open Thailand.

Many thanks are due my parents, Jason Zhao and my sister for their unwavering support, encouragement and patience. To Tim, Kaweeeka, Dr J and Somsak, I would like to express my deep appreciation for their insightful comments about Thailand and their enthusiasm for serious debates and discussions. I would also like to thank Helena Poropat for her help with proof-reading.

## Contents

<b>Chapter one: Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter two: Crime</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Chapter three: Politics</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>Chapter four: Buddhism</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>Chapter five: Women</b>	<b>176</b>
<b>Chapter six: Gay Men</b>	<b>239</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>295</b>
<b>Works Cited</b>	<b>310</b>

### **Presentation and Referencing Convention**

This thesis follows the *MLA Handbook* 6th edition for matters of presentation, using parenthetical documentation. References cited in the text appear in the list of works cited.

## **Notes on Thai language**

Thai is a member of a distinct language family, Tai- Kadai. Spoken Thai uses five tones (middle, high, low, rising, and falling) and the modern Thai alphabet contains forty consonants and twenty-four vowels. Although Thai has its own phonetic script, the representation of Thai words in English presents several problems because there is no generally agreed system of transliteration. In this thesis, I adopt the modified version of the Thai Royal Institute System since this system is the one most commonly adopted by official usage within Thailand. Many Thais, however, do not normally transcribe their names in accordance with the principles outlined by the Royal Institute. In this thesis, the English spelling of Thai names reflects the owners' preference if it is known.

The use of surnames was introduced in Thailand at the beginning of the twentieth century and all Thai titles are prefixed to given names. Lists of Thai names, such as in Thai telephone books, are arranged alphabetically by first name, not surname. Thai language publications also list Thai authors alphabetically by first name. In this thesis citations of works by Thai authors refer to authors by given name.

## Chapter one: Introduction

As with other Southeast Asian nations, Western colonialism forced Thailand (formerly Siam) to undergo a number of drastic political and social changes. Thailand nonetheless was able to avoid the grip of direct colonial rule and this has always been a source of national pride. One of the strategies that Thai leaders in the past perceived as instrumental to avoid colonisation was the construction of a ‘modern’ and ‘civilised’ image to present to Western powers. In “Slavery and Modernity: Freedom in the Making of Modern Siam” Thanet Aphornsuvan maintains that during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Western colonialism was perceived as a crucial threat to the political power of the Thai ruling class (179). The then Thai kings, Mongkut (r.1851-68) and his successor, Chulalongkorn (r.1868-1910), carried out extensive plans to ‘modernise’ the country in the hope of achieving more equal negotiations with Western powers and maintain national sovereignty. A number of changes were also made to indigenous cultural and social practices, particularly regarding the institution of slavery. During the reign of King Mongkut, noblemen were forbidden to whip their slaves in the presence of Westerners. The king feared that Siam would be regarded as a barbarian society by Westerners if they witnessed his subjects physically abusing their slaves in public, and this might be used to justify Western colonialism. More changes took place when King Chulalongkorn ascended the throne in 1868. The king decided to abolish slavery, an institution he perceived as unsuited for a civilised nation (Thanet, “Slavery and Modernity” 171-76).<sup>1</sup> Prince

---

<sup>1</sup> See Kwai Jok Foong for an interesting critique of King Chulalongkorn’s attempts to ‘revolutionise’ Siam. Kwai Jok Foong also discusses how a number of the king’s arguments can be related to contemporary political discourses in Thailand (09.12.08: <http://khikwai.com/blog/2008/12/09/democracy-thai-style/>).

Damrong, the king's brother, provided an intellectual reflection on slavery and rewrote the history of slavery as something borrowed from Khmer tradition and thus un-Thai. In Prince Damrong's version of Thai history, the old Siamese kingdom of Sukhothai (mid-thirteenth to mid-fifteenth centuries) was governed by egalitarian values and slavery was non-existent. When the new Thai Kingdom was established in Ayudhaya (1351-1767) the palace began to absorb the Khmer feudal tradition and adopted the practice of slavery. Even after slavery was institutionalised in Ayudhaya and later Bangkok, Prince Damrong argued that Thai paternalism had significantly altered and diluted harsh aspects of slavery and rendered the relationship between the master and his slaves as that between a benign patron and his dependents. In representing Thai history in this light, the prince paved the way for the emergence of modern Thai nationalism while at the same time constructing a 'civilised' image of Thai indigenous culture in the hope of de-legitimizing colonial conquest (Thanet, "Slavery and Modernity" 176-178). When King Chulalongkorn's son, Vajiravudh, succeeded his father in 1910, he continued the process of 'modernising' Siam through the attempts to reorganise Thai sexual aesthetics, behaviours and gender roles to be more in line with Western notions of 'civilisation'. King Vajiravudh was also conventionally recognised as the first promoter of Siamese nationalism.<sup>2</sup> As Fishel maintains:

In the study of nationalism and sexuality in Siam, King Vajiravudh emerges as the predominant figure, given his multiple roles as leading actor, director and author of nationalism. Whether ruling as a modern monarchy, creating and promoting organizations like the Wild Tiger Corps and the football league, or writing numerous plays, stories, and polemical pamphlets, Vajiravudh stirred up nationalistic feelings in his subjects, drawing on the West both as

---

<sup>2</sup> See works by Greene (1971) and Vella (1978) which examine the role of Vajiravudh in promoting Siamese nationalism.



inspiration and audience.<sup>3</sup> (155)

In contemporary Thailand, the issue of constructing and promoting favourable images of the country is of no less importance for the ruling elite. However, while it is true that today's ruling class still endeavors to create respectable images of the country so as to legitimize their leadership, for many ordinary Thais, images of the country overseas have come to serve other purposes. Representations of the country by foreign media are frequently deployed as a means to counter the power of the ruling government or political enemies. A good example of this is the way the international community's disapproval of military takeover was used by Thais who were against the 19 September 2006 coup as one of the reasons to underscore the coup leaders' lack of legitimacy to intervene in the political affairs. In "Thai Coup in the Eyes of Foreign Media" Pakwadee Weerapatpong investigates the foreign media coverage of the reactions of Western governments and agencies towards the 2006 coup in Thailand, and shows how the coup group's justification of military takeover as a means to solve political problems was not well-accepted overseas. She illustrated how the coup was viewed negatively as an impediment to democratic progress by the United Nation Secretary General, the European Union, Human Rights Watch, and the US, Australian and Japanese governments (233-34). Similarly, in his attempt to delegitimize the 2006 coup Suthachai Yimprasert remarks that the coup was represented in a highly negative light in developed countries and adds how the military regime in countries like Burma, Fiji and Pakistan are condemned and boycotted by developed nations (205-06).

---

<sup>3</sup> For a study of the development of official and popular Thai nationalism, see also works by Barmé (1993), Wyatt (1984), Pasuk and Baker (2005), Anderson (1978), Reynolds (1984, 1993, 1999), Thongchai (1994), Kobkua (1995) and Sunait (1992).

Apart from actual negative representations of military takeover in foreign media, concern and anxiety about how the country will be represented can also be employed for political purpose. In February 1991 a military group seized power from the civilian government of Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhaven and later appointed one of its generals as prime minister. The appointment aroused outrage nationwide as Suchinda Khraprayoon, the general who was promoted to the position of prime minister by the coup group, was seen as unsuited to be national leader, not only because he was not popularly elected, but also because he was part of a military group which staged a coup against a democratically elected government. National newspapers and business magazines provided vehement critiques of the coup and expressed concerns and embarrassment about the means through which the prime minister rose to power and how Thailand might be perceived abroad. By early May 1992, there were nationwide mass rallies demanding the resignation of the military appointed prime minister. The coup leaders responded by heavy-handed suppression of protestors, resulting in severe casualties (Morris 250-53). This eventually led to royal intervention and the resignation of Suchinda Kraprayoon (Basham 13).<sup>4</sup>

Of note is that where democracy is concerned, popular Thai attitudes look to the West which is often constructed as the motherland of democracy. Foreign media whose coverage usually stirs up political concerns or controversy within Thailand are often, though not always Western. For some Thai writers, the West or 'Western democracy' also functions to counter the discourse of oppression propagated by the traditional Thai political system and various military regimes which have exerted immense influence on Thai politics since the abolition of the absolute monarchy in

---

<sup>4</sup> For analyses of the 1991 coup in Thailand, see Murray (1991), Basham (1992: 10-13), Baker and Pasuk (2005: 240-46) and Ji Giles Ungpakorn (1996).

June 1932. In his essays and novel, prominent Thai author, Kulap Saipradit (1905-1974), portrayed Australia as a nation where democratic and egalitarian values are an intrinsic part of people's everyday lives as opposed to the superficiality of Thai democracy which is largely employed as a tool of military dictatorship. A more recent Thai writer, Pira Sudham (1942-), also depicts Thai society as class-ridden and oppressive while the West is shown as more egalitarian and open.<sup>5</sup> This construction of the West is similar to what Xiaomei Chen refers to as Occidentalism, defined as “a discursive practice that, by constructing its Western Other, has allowed the Orient to participate actively and with indigenous creativity on the process of self appropriation, even after being appropriated by Western others” (4-5). Chen claims that this form of Occidentalism reflects the possibility of an anti-official discourse which employs an Occidentalism to combat the official cultural hegemony dominating a given non-Western culture. The Western Other can and often does become a metaphor for political liberation against indigenous forms of ideological oppression (8).

Apart from overtly political purposes, Thai Occidentalism and representations of Thailand by foreign media can also become a tool for encouraging self-criticism and opening up further investigations into social problems. Recently, there was a controversy in Thailand over a Thai temple that cares for a large number of destitute AIDS patients after *The Sunday Times* published an article by Andrew Marshall on 13 April 2008. The article claimed that the temple unethically makes money from death and suffering, misuses public donations and does not provide proper care for patients. Marshall refers to the temple as “a hugely successful money-making operation,

---

<sup>5</sup> See Kulap's translated essays and novel in Barmé (1995). Pira and his works are discussed in chapter five.

attracting thousands of tourists with its displays of mummified corpses” (1). He also remarks how the abbot of the temple has spent large amounts of donated money for purposes other than improving the welfare of the patients, increasing the number of nurses, or raising wages for poorly paid staff. Quoting an interview with some Thai staff and Michael Bassano, the American priest who used to work as a volunteer at the temple, Marshall describes the patients as unprofessionally cared for and claims that their medical, emotional and psychological needs were hardly met:

The Thai staff oversee the suffering but are ‘not really hands-on’, says Bassano. He partly blames the Buddhist notion of karma. “When anyone’s near death, usually the staff will tell me, ‘Don’t bother with them. The next life will be better.’” When one dying man screamed like an animal, some Thai staff believed he was being punished for his former profession: he had worked in a slaughterhouse....

The staff are also poorly paid (3,500 to 7,000 baht, or £55 to £110, a month) and poorly trained for what is gruelling work. “I work 12 hours a day,” says Wilaiwan Khantiwong, 26, the slender, no-nonsense woman who runs the ward. “Often I can’t do much for the patients and I feel like giving up. But if I leave, who will take care of them?” Wilaiwan is a licensed nurse who has worked here since she was 17. “I do every job, from cleaner to doctor,” she says. Today, she carries not a stethoscope but a tube of Toblerone, a donation from a Swiss tourist. Paracetamol is her strongest painkiller. “We have some morphine, but it might have expired by now. Without a doctor around, I don’t dare use it.” (2)<sup>6</sup>

On 27 April 2008, two weeks after Marshall’s article was published in *The Sunday Times*, Nation Channel’s *Kom-Chad-Luek*, a televised forum which focuses on topical social and political issues, invited Alongkot Dikkapanyo, the abbot of the temple, and a number of Thai social activists and NGO workers to discuss the controversy. The abbot claimed that the patients’ medication was provided by a government hospital and the monks and staff at the temple always tried their best to care for the patients. While the abbot was defensive of the way the temple managed the welfare of patients

---

<sup>6</sup> See more from Marshall (13.04.08):  
<<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article3721675.ece>>

and how the donations were spent, other Thais who participated in the forum gave constructive recommendations by encouraging more transparency in the temple's financial management. They also proposed that problems regarding AIDS-afflicted patients be tackled more efficiently by the government so that the patients could be properly cared for rather than being abandoned at the temple ("Wat Prabaht Nampu [The Temple of Buddha's Footprints]" 27.04.08). Another recent example of the way Western media helps to spark interest in social problems within Thailand was the news coverage about the arrest of Thai human traffickers and women who were lured into the sex industry in the U.K. on 20 April 2008.<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, newspapers in Thailand widely published the news and updates of the investigation.<sup>8</sup> On 25 April 2008 *Kom-Chad-Luek* invited a number of people to discuss the news and try to find a way to help Thai women who are caught up in the sex trade. Kawipan Montriwong the program moderator, raised the issue of human rights and the protection of victims of the sex trade by comparing the way the arrested Thai women were treated in the U.K. with the way Thai police treat women who suffered similar plight. Describing the West as the place where human rights and confidentiality regarding the identity of the victims are of crucial importance, the moderator commented that perhaps Thai police and all those involved could learn something from this so that women who fell victim to the human trafficking trade could be better treated ("U.K. Police Arrested Five Thai Human Smugglers" 25.04.08).

Western representations of Thailand and Thai Occidentalism can play a part in countering political authoritarianism within Thailand and encouraging more openness,

---

<sup>7</sup> See for example *Sky News* (20.04.08).

<sup>8</sup> For updates of the investigation, see *Pattaya Daily News* (22.05.08) and *The Nation* (25.01.09).

transparency and self-criticism within the country. However, there is the need to take into account the history of East-West interaction, particularly the power relations between the West and the rest of the world. In the colonial period, the images of the East as circulated in Western discourses were largely aimed to depict the East and its people as inferior, backward, barbarian and thus deserving to be colonised. Such images still persist in the post-colonial era although some might take subtle forms and may not be easily recognizable as the legacy of colonial attitudes. One of the most powerful and controversial critiques of Western representation of the East is Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). In this seminal work, Said launched an attack on Orientalism and remarked that the first meaning of Orientalism is an academic one: "Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient—and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist—either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism" (2). The second meaning of Orientalism, according to Said, is more general. It is "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident' " (2). Said noted that there was a regular interchange between the academic and more general meanings of Orientalism and a great number of writers had subscribed to the basic difference between East and West "as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, 'mind,' destiny and so on" (2-3). It is, however, the third meaning of Orientalism which he put greater emphasis on and considered it as "more historically and materially defined" than the previous two designations (3). Regarding the late eighteenth century as the approximate starting point, Said described this third meaning of Orientalism as "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient by

making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, settling it and ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). Said employed Michel Foucault’s notion of discourse to identify Orientalism as he believed that without examining Orientalism as a discourse “one cannot understand the systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period (3). He also maintained that “no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism. In brief, because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action”(3). The Orient also serves as a “surrogate and underground self”(3) for European culture and the relationship between the Orient and the Occident is that of “power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (5).

Said’s orientalism provoked an extraordinary and mixed response, as Macfie notes:

Opinion regarding the critique of orientalism, contained in Said’s *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978), was from the beginning deeply divided between those who, though occasionally critical, were generally convinced of its validity (Clifford, Inden, Hourani, Gran, Talal Asad, Earnest J. Wilson III), those who for a variety of reasons considered it to be for the most part invalid (Lewis, Geertz, Butterworth, Beckingham, Richardson, Mackenzie) and those who, though generally sympathetic, called in question certain aspects of Said’s approach (Jalal al Azm, Aijaz Ahmad, al Bitar, Halliday). (*Orientalism* 108-109)

Among the criticisms mounted against Said’s thesis in *Orientalism* is his essentialization of Europe, his arbitrary rearrangement of historical background and his failure to take account of some Orientalists’ attack on colonial domination. Said’s conception of the intercultural relations of East and West exclusively in terms of

domination and subordination has also been challenged by a number of critics, such as Aijaz Ahmad, John Mackenzie and Michael Richardson who argue against the reductionism and binarism of his thesis. Homi Bhabha is also among the influential theorists who provide critique on the over-simplification of the supposedly binary opposition between the coloniser and the colonised in Said's work.<sup>9</sup> Bhabha has also developed the concept of hybridity which transforms the configuration of cross-cultural relationships "from models of domination to those of mutual contamination and ambivalence" (Gilbert, Khoo and Lo 5). Hybridity is viewed in a positive light as the 'Third Space' that "constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity" (*Location*

---

<sup>9</sup> For critiques of Said's thesis in *Orientalism*, see Macfie (2000). In the mid-1980s, at a conference held at the University of Essex, Said looked at the issues raised by his book and strongly defended his original thesis although he admitted that he had yet to fully consider some of the criticisms of his work. In the Afterword of the 1995 Penguin edition of *Orientalism* Said also attempted to correct what he referred to as the misreadings and misinterpretations of *Orientalism* namely, the book's alleged anti-Westernism and support for Islamic fundamentalism. Said, however, acknowledged that after nearly twenty years of *Orientalism*'s first publication and so much attention and controversy it had raised, his work seemed to him a collective book that superseded him as its author much more than he could have expected when he began working on it (330). To date, the latest critique of Said's thesis in *Orientalism* is Ibn Warraq's *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism* (2008). Warraq argues that Said's methodology is questionable and that his historical understanding is erroneous and inadequate. He also criticizes Said for misrepresenting the works of many Orientalists, and that *Orientalism* has been used by Said's supporters to discourage and inhibit critical studies of the Islamic world. Said died on 25 September 2003. In order to honour his legacy as an activist and intellectual, a group of intellectuals who had been Said's long time friends and collaborators looked back at their past dialogues with Said and took up the issues that seemed unresolved or in need of further elaborations. This resulted in a special issue of *Cultural Inquiry*, *Edward Said: Continuing the Conversation* (2005), edited by Homi K. Bhabha and W.J.T. Mitchell. See also *Edward Said and After: Toward a new Humanism* (2007), a special issue of *Cultural Critique* which seeks to explore what Said's humanist legacy has provided to contemporary intellectuals especially after the increased policing of academic life that began shortly after September 11. See Abram and Rubin (2007) for more details.



*of Culture* 37). Hybridity thus makes it possible for a society to challenge and problematize existing verities and to reconstruct itself in a more liberating and creative way. Bhabha remarks:

for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace to two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. (Rutherford, “Interview with Homi Bhabha” 211)

The other important critique of *Orientalism* is mounted by J.J. Clarke, whose *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* acknowledges the value of Said’s critique of East-West power relations, but at the same time brings to the fore its limitations. While conceding that Orientalism is intricately linked with colonialism and Western imperialism, Clarke avoids regarding Orientalism as a mere mask for racism and a purely Western construct which functions to legitimise colonial domination. According to Clarke, in the West, Eastern thoughts have been used as a catalyst for self-criticism and self-renewal, and Orientalism “represents a counter-movement, a subversive entelechy, albeit not a unified or consciously organised one, which in various ways has often tended to subvert rather than to confirm the discursive structures of imperial power”(9). He attributes the limitations of Said’s critique to the inclination towards reductionism and the tendency to ignore the rich and complex nature of Orientalism (8).

In this thesis I examine representations of Thailand in contemporary Australian novels and short stories and demonstrate that East-West relations cannot be confined within domination-subordination models. Hybridity is a useful concept to account for complicated experiences of East-West encounters, however, the concept of hybridity should not be idealised or sensationally celebrated as utopian or

unproblematic. In “The Poetics of Cultural Theory” Dean Chan is highly suspicious of the rhetoric of hybridity that unproblematically suggests a doctrine of conflation, equivalency and functions to package difference for popular consumption in the form of a sanitized and uncomplicated product. Chan warns against simplistic evocations of hybridity that do not sufficiently recognize the diversity of hybridity in terms of its various models and experiences (53). Quoting Ian McLean, Chan cautions against the rhetorical deployment of the term hybridity that overemphasizes its positive and creative side but obscures its colonial legacy (55).

Jacqueline Lo also maintains that the term hybridity in popular usage has come to signify a fusion of unlike elements and the permeability of cultural and political boundaries at the cost of sensitivity to local specificities and unequal power structures. She refers to a form of hybridization that bypasses the complexities and historicity of Bhabha’s theory as ‘happy hybridity’ and raises questions about its celebration of cultural difference that masks and preserves the status quo (152-54). Lo argues that there is nonetheless another approach to hybridity that holds the potential to contest and destabilize hegemonic relations. Quoting Bakhtin’s concept of hybridity, Lo illustrates that the form of hybridity termed by Bakhtin as ‘intentional hybridity’ is the one she finds most interesting as it can be used as an effective tool to disrupt and contest stereotypes and the status quo. According to Lo:

What distinguishes intentional hybridity from the happy hybridity model is its motivation and location within an identified field of contesting power relations. The happy hybridity model celebrates the proliferation of difference as unbounded culture. The end result is harmonious fusion, whereupon difference is reabsorbed into the status quo. In contrast to this, intentional hybridity stresses its strategic use as a mode of intervention and politicization. (166-167)

As with Lo, Ien Ang is concerned about the celebration stance of hybridity which has

sparked criticism of the concept. According to Ang, many of the anti-hybridity critics regard the celebration of hybridity as “an elitist posture promoted by privileged diasporic and postcolonial intellectuals located in the West who can afford the postmodern cosmopolitan ideology of mixture and transcultural exchange” (70). Ang, however, disagrees with the restriction of hybridity to postcolonial elites and argues for the usefulness of hybridity for non-western societies. According to her:

conflating hybridity with the privileged celebration of hybridity with first world modern flux and cosmopolitan freedom... is particularly misleading.... a critical validity of hybridity is an urgent necessity in a postcolonial context such as Indonesia. (70)

Commenting on the outbreaks of violence against Chinese-Indonesians by local Indonesians, she traces the history of relations between locals and the Chinese-Indonesians to colonial times and demonstrates how Western colonialism caused the conflicts between these two groups that persist into the present and continuously fuel antagonism and hatred between them. Ang writes:

The undoing of the divide that has been so entrenched in the Indonesian national imaginary since colonial times and that has only been further solidified in postcolonial Indonesia can only be a slow process, involving the *longue dure'e* of cultural change and gradual reconciliation in ordinary social relationships. In short, it is a matter of the micro-politics of everyday life as much as the macro-politics of structural change.

Hybridity is crucial to such micro-politics. A politics of hybridity which emphasizes an accommodation of cultures and peoples at the local level is a *necessary condition* for the very possibility of larger social and political reformation. After all, the latter can only be based on a belief in the continued viability of Chinese-Indonesian interconnections and mutual entanglements in the face of pressures which stress the mounting incommensurability between ‘Chinese’, on the one hand, and ‘Indonesian’, on the other hand. (71, italics in original)

The approach to hybridity adopted by the above three critics is of significance to my purpose as Thailand is one among many of the non-Western societies where colonialism and neo-colonialism exert a profound impact on socio-political structures

as well as people's everyday experiences. In this thesis, apart from examining Australian representations of Thailand, I also compare and contrast Australian representations of Thailand with Thai authors' representations of their country. In Thai society there are different forms of hybridity resulting from Thai-Western encounters. There are cases in which contact with the West leads to the emergence of the form of hybridity that largely functions to preserve the power of the elitist class and maintain unequal social and political structure. There are also other more productive forms of hybridity that may work to create opportunities for political intervention for ordinary Thais, contest stereotypes and bridge cultural divides.

As Australian representation of Thailand needs to be viewed in historical and cultural contexts of Australian-Asian relations, I begin by exploring the history of Australian imagining of Asia.<sup>10</sup> As testified by the White Australia policy, which was enforced from the early twentieth century through to the 1960s, it was not until recently that Asia was recognised as crucial to Australian identity and culture. In *Hotel Asia* which traces Australian imagining of Asia from the colonial era, Robin Gerster comments that in the nineteenth century white Australians' affinity with British identity and heritage was extremely powerful and they tended to view Asia largely in terms of the glory and heroism of British colonial power (30). Nineteenth century Australian travel writing was largely a product of professional journeys to Asia and it was exclusively a male province. Gerster remarks that these writers were "men on missions, not given to flippancies and more reticent about Asia's potential

---

<sup>10</sup> As Alison Broinowski remarks, the word 'Asia' is not a meaningful category of humans. There is a great difficulty in defining where 'Asia' begins and ends and the word does not convey the diversity of various Asian countries. 'Asia' therefore, should always be read as if written between quotation marks to avoid perpetuating homogenisation and generalisation about Asia as a whole. Words such as 'white', 'race' and a number of others which lack specificity carry similar limitation (xii-xiii).

for erotic escape than their European counterparts” (31).

In the late nineteenth century Australia started to distance itself from its identity as a British outpost and there was a celebration of “an ideal of ‘native’ egalitarianism in opposition to class-riddled imperial England” (Gerster 11). This egalitarianism, however, excluded Aboriginal people and Asians (McQueen 21). The latter were not merely excluded but also figured as a threat to Australian national security, as most evidently conveyed through invasion stories (Walker 3-7, 98-112).<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the rapid expansion of mass tourism in the early twentieth century ushered in certain changes in the Australian perception of Asia. Gerster notes:

...in this period, there is a portentous sense of the importance of Asia, not as an arena in which the Australian traveler could pronounce his or her cultural difference and superiority, but as the region which could determine national destiny. (108)

Australia’s major shift of attitude towards Asia, however, began in the 1960s when Australia became engaged in the Vietnam War. This war aroused a lot of anti-government sentiment, particularly among some of the younger population, and there was much sympathy for the Vietnamese. After the war, Australian contact with Asia increased significantly. Mass tourism to Asian destinations has grown significantly and many Australian tourists head for Asia instead of Europe (Gerster 5-6). The demise of British colonialism and the retreat of the United States from Vietnam made Australia aware of the importance of Asia. Contact with Asian Eastern religions and educational exchange also made Australia become much more engaged and interested in Asian countries.

In the two decades between 1965-1985 there were more than 50 novels set in

---

<sup>11</sup> Invasion stories and the perception of Asia as a threat are discussed in chapter two.

Asia which show the attempt to resist and contest the old images of Asia or reformulate Asian-Australian relations. Among them are Glenda Adams's *Games of the Strong* (1982), Robert Macklin's *The Paper Castle* (1977), Robert Drewe's *A Cry in the Jungle Bar* (1979) and Blanche d'Alpuget's *Monkeys in the Dark* (1980). In the 1980s and early 1990s novelists such as David Foster, Gerald Lee and Kevin Brophy also satirised nearly all the stock themes related to Asia. Foster's *Plumbum* (1983) makes fun of the stereotypical sources of 'cultural shock' experienced by Australians in Asia—crowded and unhygienic Asian cities, corruption and crime. The novel also mocks tourists' quest for exotic travel destinations and spirituality. Lee's *Troppo Man* (1990) also satirises the Australian abroad cultural cringe, naivety and ignorance about Asia, while Brophy's *The Hole through the Centre of the World* (1991) is a send-up of Orientalist construction of Asia and old clichés about Asian women. The 1980s also saw works by Australians of Asian origin whose characters reflect their creators rather than acting as the other as in works by white Australian authors. These Asian-Australian writers include Brian Castro<sup>12</sup>, Don'o Kim, Dewi Anggraeni, Achdiat K. Mihadja, Idrus, Sang Ye, John Lee Joo For, Ernest MacIntyre and Yasmine Gooneratne (Broinowski 194-214).

While the Vietnam War and its consequences crucially contributed to changed perceptions of Asia among some Australians, they by no means obliterate age-old Orientalist images of Asia, particularly the association of the East with erotic fulfilment. Statistics reveal that single men comprise more than two-thirds of the

---

<sup>12</sup>Brian Castro is a particularly interesting writer. Born of Portuguese/English-Chinese parentage, Castro is highly conscious of his own hybridity and marginality and he prefers to break away from the influences of both Chinese and Australian culture. Hybridity and marginality are among the crucial characteristics of Castro's ideological position and writing (Ouyang 352-366). See Bernadette Brennan (1999, 2000, 2008) and Miriam Lo (2000) for more detailed analyses of Castro's works.

foreigners who visit Thailand, a country which figures prominently in Western imagining as a sexual paradise (Hall 99-100).<sup>13</sup> As Annette Hamilton argues, in the years after the Vietnam War South East Asian nations such as Thailand and the Philippines function more as a site of desire where white males discover a new source of power in the figure of the accommodating, submissive and child-like Asian woman. Hamilton notes that the allure of the Asian woman lies in her constructed difference from Western woman and this facilitates her perceived ability to heal white males' threatened masculinity against the rise of feminism in the West (25-26). Rachel Harrison also notes that Western association of Thailand with erotic fantasy and licentiousness is particularly strong from the late 1960s onwards. According to Harrison, both Thai and Western popular discourses tend to see the Vietnam War, which left Thailand with the legacy of go-go bars and massage parlours that used to cater for the American GIs, as the emerging point of the proliferation of the Thai sex industry. The association between the foreign and promiscuity appeals to both Thai and Western discourses on prostitution. For many Thais, this association provides an easy explanation for the problem of prostitution by attributing it to foreign influence. For many Western males, the association between sexual immorality and the Oriental

---

<sup>13</sup>Further statistics show that each year 60,000 Australian men travel to Thailand for the purpose of sex, although the AIDS epidemic appears to have negative impact on this kind of tourism. See Sandilands (1992) and O'Neill (1993). Nevertheless, the problem of prostitution in Thailand cannot be attributed to sex tourism alone. The big gap between the rich and the poor and the highly unequal gender relations in Thai society should be equally blamed. For insightful discussions of gender relations and patriarchal culture in Thailand, see Virada Somswasdi (1997, 2000) and Rachel Harrison (1999, 2001). See also Kwai Jok Foong's critique of Thai gender relations and status quo that oppress and exploit women, especially those from a poor and rural background. The urban, upper-middle Thais, however, are hardly willing to go to the root of the problem and prefer to find scapegoats on whom they could place all the blame (03.12.08: <http://khikwai.com/blog/2008/12/03/thailand-for-sale-by-whom-exactly/>, 22.02.09: <http://khikwai.com/blog/2009/02/22/dont-call-me-daughter/>).

other reaffirms the Orientalist construction of the East as the heaven of erotic pleasures and sexual abandonment (Harrison, "Prostitution, Politics and Power" 139-43).

In the 1970s the new move towards Asia was institutionalised in the promotion of multiculturalism as Australia's official state policy. This new governmental move seems to mark modern Australia as distinct from old Australia with its former discriminatory Immigration Restriction Act. As critics have noted, the theory and practice of multiculturalism are somewhat problematic. In *White Nation* Ghassan Hage argues that Australian multiculturalism by no means guarantees that Australia's perceptions of 'the other' have totally changed. The most evident indication of this is that some sections of the Anglo-Australian population feel threatened by governmental promotion of multiculturalism and this has given rise to anti-Asian sentiments as exemplified by the populist support of One Nation in 1998. Hage also maintains that even among the Australians who support multiculturalism, whiteness is seen as central to Australian national imaginary. He points out that there are more similarities than differences between the two groups whom he refers to as 'evil nationalists', who explicitly convey their anti-Asian attitudes, and the 'good multiculturalists', who appear to be 'pro-Asia', because both groups similarly see themselves as the manager of national space who can decide who they want to include or exclude or where to position the others so as to maintain what they perceive as security, peace and harmony within the nation state. The only difference between the 'evil nationalists' and 'good multiculturalists' is that the former is deeply anxious about losing control over the management of the nation while the latter is still able to maintain the fantasy that they are still in control (16-18). Hage also notes that Australia's promotion of cultural diversity is more the diversity of 'to have' rather



than 'to be'. For the 'white multiculturalists', cultural diversity's major function is to distance Australia from its colonialist and racist past and to define the nation as a more tolerant society that values cultural diversity and difference. Hage emphasises that this function of cultural diversity delineates the difference in power between the subject (who has) and the object (who is possessed) and positions the one 'who has/possesses' as the one in power (139-140).

While Hage's arguments related to Australian multiculturalism are interesting and may serve as a caution against the sentimental celebration of this policy, it does not mean that multiculturalism only functions to mask subtle unequal power structure between the majority and minority group and thus has no real value. The examination of the images of Thailand in Australian works written in the era when multiculturalism was officially promoted reveals that many of the Australian writers consciously distance themselves from Australia's racially discriminatory past. This distancing is an undeniably a positive sign. Still, in Australian popular genres such as crime stories, certain Orientalist images are frequently revisited and the enthusiasm for contact with Asia sometimes obscures unequal power relations between East and West and may largely serve to address the West's threatened self. In a number of cases we see how Western desire to be sympathetic or to form identification unwittingly leads to the imposition of the self's subjectivity on the other. Towards the end of the thesis, however, I examine some Australian works whose representations of Thailand suggest a breakthrough of cultural stereotypes and thus envisage better prospects of cross-cultural encounters.

While the focus of this thesis remains on the fictional representation of Thailand, it is neither possible nor desirable to divorce that interpretation from the contemporary political and social realities of Thai life. For this reason I have, where

necessary, included commentary on contemporary issues facing the Thai people. The thesis begins with the examination of a number of Australian crime stories set in Thailand. As a popular genre that appeals to readers through sensations and thrills, crime stories persistently utilise traditional images of the East to create such effects. Thailand in Australian crime stories largely figures as a locale where anything can happen and moral codes can be abandoned. Crime and illicit activities appear to be the norm, and there some white men are shown as reaching the worst of their evil nature. Interestingly, some of these writings reveal the kind of anxiety that is somehow linked to the fear of the other's potential to disrupt the security and peace of the Australian nation state which Hage discusses in *White Nation*. In these crime stories, however, the fear is not so much about the actual presence of the other in the nation state, but the influence of the other on some Westerners' morality or ability to exert control over themselves. In most of these Australian crime stories, the worst criminals or most fearful figures are not Thai, but white men or women whose contact with the East spurs and enhances the dark side of their nature. Thailand's threat to the Western world is thus largely made possible through Western villains.

While utilising old images of the East, some of these Australian stories also critique the unequal power relations between East and West and denounce Western exploitation of the East. In doing so, these stories partly undermine the colonial assumptions they subscribe to although they have yet to break free from a number of Orientalist stereotypes that inform their construction of the East.

Thai crime stories are remarkably similar to Australian invasion stories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the tendency to see ethnic others as a threat to national security. In order to create the Thai world which is governed by moral order, peace and harmony, the Thai writer under consideration promotes

cultural hegemony and perpetuates negative stereotypes of the cultural and ethnic others such as the highlanders, the Sino-Thais and the Cambodian and Burmese refugees. Such a negative depiction of the highlanders and the refugees has a potential to worsen the already marginalised and disempowered status of minority groups in Thailand who can hardly have their voices heard. As Hage notes, while everyone is capable of being racist, the more crucial issue is when a certain group of people who is in a position of power is empowered or made to feel empowered to exercise their racist attitude and put it into practice against the marginalised others (33-36).

The following chapter moves from the realm of crime to politics. In this chapter my focus is the representation of Thai politics in the Australian novel, *Freedom Highway* (1999), which conveys great sympathy for ordinary Thai people and depicts them as being exploited and victimized by Western powers' quest for world supremacy. As its title suggests, the novel criticises the intervention of Western governments in the political affairs of poor countries under the name of 'freedom'. In the second part of the chapter, I examine a number of Thai political stories and illustrate that Thai authors are also highly suspicious of the way 'freedom' is manipulated to serve the interest of power-seeking governments. However, close reading of the Australian and Thai stories reveals that while certain meanings of freedom are shared, others are culturally specific. Unlike the modern West's concept of freedom, which emerges as an antithesis to slavery, the development of the modern Thai concept of freedom does not spring from ordinary people's desire to free themselves from the oppression of the institution of slavery, but is a result of the Thai elite's attempt to evade Western colonialism. Interestingly, while the Thai elite's political entanglements with Western imperialism has produced the concept of 'freedom' that largely functions to preserve the power of the Thai ruling class,

contemporary Thailand has also seen the new, hybridised form of freedom which may help pave the way for a more democratic Thailand.

Chapter four looks at Lynette Chataway's *Noble Sindhu Horses* (2005) which, as with *Freedom Highway*, is a sympathetic portrayal of Thai villagers and a vehement critique of the unequal power relations between East and West. The novel, however, universalises the Western perspective of religion and largely makes Thai characters speak in a Western voice. This Western perspective is even more visible when we compare the depiction of Buddhism in *Noble Sindhu Horses* with Thai views and representations of Buddhism. Additionally, while the impression of Buddhism given in *Noble Sindhu Horses* is that of an oppressive and dogmatic religion which hardly changes over time, examination of Thai representations of Buddhism reveal that contemporary Thailand has seen the emergence of a Buddhist movement that attempts to modernise religion through the incorporation of Western democratic ideals, science and rationality. This new Buddhist movement, however, is not without a downside.

Chapter five moves from the religious realm to a secular one: the representation of Thai women in Australian writings. In this chapter I employ the controversy surrounding Dennis O'Rourke's film, *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991), as the starting point as it interestingly reveals contemporary Australia's ambivalent attitude towards Asia, particularly in relation to the move to reorient Asian-Australian relations. As Chris Berry argues, *The Good Woman of Bangkok* not only serves as a metaphor for male-female relations, but also as collective metaphor. In the film, the relationship between the filmmaker and Oi, the Thai prostitute, mirrors that of modern Australia and its neighbouring Asian neighbours which largely function as the fetishised other for contemporary Australia in its attempt to distance

itself from its colonialist past. *The Good Woman Of Bangkok*, however, problematizes such a utilisation of the other through its portrayal of the filmmaker's failure to uphold the white saviour myth and Oi's refusal to assume the role of passive and grateful victim. While acknowledging the exploitative side of the film, Berry notes that the film is important as it foregrounds the need to dismantle the reliance on the self-confirming other as the basis for the construction of the new self-identity ("Dennis O'Rourke's Original Sin" 35-55). Berry's approach mirrors that of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a prominent post-colonial critic who develops the notion of the 'complete other' as distinct from the 'self-confirming other' ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 271-313). Spivak also develops the concept of cultural difference alongside class and gender when she remarks that "knowledge is made possible and sustained by irreducible difference, not identity" (*In Other Worlds* 254).

The second part of Chapter five looks at the representations of women and East-West relations in a number of Thai short stories and novels. The most interesting stories are those of the Thai-American writer, Rattawut Lapcharoensap, as they demonstrate the attempt to reconfigure Thai-Western relations and destabilize stereotypes surrounding Thai women and their relationship with Western men. Rattawut's stories also expose the racism at work in Thai-Western relations and strive to make an exit from cultural stereotypes from both the Thai and Western worlds. Of note is that while Rattawut's stories are set in Thailand, his main characters are those whose lives are deeply impacted by different forms of Thai-Western encounter, some of which are not of their choice. In one of these stories, the American protagonist's struggle to find a meaningful way to live his life in Thailand leads him to a more active participation in the daily activities of his Thai daughter-in-law and her young children, who also need to adjust themselves to their foreign father-in-law and

grandfather. Such mutual cultural accommodations and physical and emotional entanglements echo Ien Ang's promotion of hybridity as a necessary tool in people's everyday lives in a post-colonial society.

The last chapter of the thesis examines Peter A. Jackson's *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* (1994), a novel which seeks to contest Western hegemony and foregrounds the recognition of difference and cultural specificities. *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* depicts the sexual adventures of an Australian gay man in Thailand and his attempt to negotiate his Western understandings of masculinities and sexualities with his desire for Thai men.

The second part of this chapter explores Thai gay stories and in doing so helps to confirm Jackson's thesis that the Western concepts of gender and sexuality are culturally constructed and by no means universal. The Thai works examined nonetheless demonstrate the impact of the Western gay model on the indigenous Thai gender system and how this leads to the proliferation of 'new' gender identities of men who love men in contemporary Thailand.

The thesis concludes by looking at some of the poems about Thailand by Australian poet, Noel Rowe. Although there are other Australian poets who write about Thailand, Rowe's poetry exemplifies how, when authors reach out to those who are culturally and racially different, it is possible to have empathy with them without fetishising or constructing them as the projection of one's own subjectivity. Rowe's humility and respect for difference coupled with his wit, piercing intelligence and keen interest in both the mundane and the spiritual enable him to represent the other

in a highly unique and sensitive way.

## Chapter two: Crime

Late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Australia saw the proliferation of invasion stories in which Asia figures primarily as a threat to Australia. As Alison Broinowski remarks: “For more than a century most settler Australians defined Asia not as many diverse countries but as one and as a generalised source of threat” (16). Asia’s overflowing population was perceived as possessing the potential to overwhelm Australia. According to David Walker, the influx of Chinese workers in Australia in the 1850s spurred such a fear. The Chinese came to Australia to work on the goldfields and they were regarded as a highly adaptable people with exceptional survival skills, but negative stereotypes were also attached to them. Walker remarks that the Chinese presence was generally treated as a source of vices and physical contamination and Chinese males were seen as competitors for job opportunities and white women (36). In 1888 a cartoon in the *Bulletin* depicted Asians as a Mongolian octopus whose tentacles greedily grasp to get hold of white men’s jobs, daughters and wives. Images of Asian as an insect plague and an Oriental dragon were also common in the *Bulletin* (Broinowski 19).

In 1893 Charles Pearson’s *National Life and Character: A Forecast* predicted that the European world was endangered by the rise of Asia and Australia’s proximity to Asia made it highly susceptible to Asian invasion. China was seen as Australia’s dangerous threat and Pearson believed that the Chinese would aggressively compete for the position of dominance in the world (Walker 45). According to Walker, from around the 1870s there was a tendency to perceive Asia in general as an awakening male eager to take revenge on the Western world. The masculine East brought to mind ruthless hordes with flashing weapons and cruel warriors like Genghis Khan.



From the late nineteenth century on, Asia was regularly depicted as home to intelligent, unscrupulous opponents, perhaps best exemplified by the fictional Dr Fu Manchu, an educated and profound thinker whose quest is to bring about the end of Western prominence (Walker 3-7). The evil doctor first appeared in a series of novels by English author Sax Rohmer during the first half of the twentieth century. Examples of the Fu Manchu series include *The Insidious Dr Fu Manchu* (1913), *The Hand of Fu Manchu* (1917), *Daughter of Fu Manchu* (1917), *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932) and *The Bride of Fu Manchu* (1933). Fu Manchu also figured prominently in films, television, radio, comic strips and comic books for over ninety years and is the model for villains in later invasion stories.<sup>15</sup>

Around the 1890s, the image of Japan began to change from that of a society with refined and fascinating culture to that of an enemy with high military capacities and territorial ambitions (Walker 3). In T.R. Roydhouse's *The Coloured Conquest* (1903), the Japanese defeat white men and invade Sydney. There is also a misogynist suggestion in Roydhouse's novel that some Australian women may collude with the Japanese and betray Australian national interest. A similar misogynist message was conveyed in the *Bulletin* which associated the fascination with Japan and the enthusiastic welcome accorded to the 1906 Japanese Training Squadron with feminine impulse. The *Bulletin* disapproved of such a reception and believed that manly resistance was vital to the survival of a white Australia (qtd. in Walker 128-131). In a cartoon which appeared in 1923 in the journal *Millions Magazine*, China, India, Japan

---

<sup>15</sup> More comprehensive information about the Fu Manchu series and their modern variants is available from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fu\\_Manchu](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fu_Manchu)

and a few other Asian countries are represented by men with fierce looks glaring down at the map of Australia. In the middle of the map, a man is asleep, carefree and unaware that his Northern neighbours are monitoring his movement and scheming to take away his vast, under-populated land (Walker 8-9).

For some Australians today, a ‘yellow peril’, or a perception of Asia as an enemy intent on conquering or invading, might seem to be irrational, even paranoid. Nonetheless, it could be argued that modern variants of invasion fear persist. In 1989, the anxiety over Japanese economic colonialism was conveyed through a cartoon which depicted Australian real estate businesses and tourism firmly in the clutches of a malicious Japanese octopus (Broinowski 19). The other manifestation of such a fear can be discerned in the concern over migration, particularly in the number of Asian migrants to be allowed into Australia. As Ghassan Hage argues, the rise of Pauline Hanson in the late 1990s was a sign of the anxiety over the rising Asian population and the loss of control of the nation state felt by certain sections of white Australians (186-89). It should be noted, however, that the popularity of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party was short-lived and the Party is no longer a force in the Australian political scene. Still for some Australians, Asia is not yet free of associations with danger, evil or threat and Australian crime stories still utilize Asia as a setting for crime scenes. In many of these stories and Asian males are not infrequently imagined in terms of treachery, evil, danger and sexual immorality.

This chapter begins with the examination of four Australian short stories which concentrate on the experiences of Australian and Western tourists in Thailand. The stories are Geoffrey Bewley’s “After the Storm” (1984) and “The Visitors on the Beach” (1986), Peter Corris’s “Bit Parts” (1992) and Anna Mandoki’s “Night Swimming” (1995). The first three stories depict Thailand as a dangerous place where

evil can occur at anytime. These stories can be viewed as anti-tourist and they all portray travelling in a negative light. “After the Storm” and “The Visitors on the Beach” show that tourists’ search for a relaxing and carefree holiday in crime-ridden Thailand is an impossible quest. “Bit Parts” is a horror story about an Australian Vietnam War veteran who is murdered in Thailand. In the story Australian soldiers in Vietnam are shown as little different from tourists. They frequent local bars and indulge themselves with alcohol, drugs and bar girls. In all three stories, Thai males are either fearful and ruthless criminals or untrustworthy, opportunistic and cunning locals. The fourth story, “Night Swimming”, is markedly different from the other stories in that it seeks to show that an Australian tourist's fear and mistrust of the Thais he meets are based on stereotypes and eventually proved groundless.

The second part of this chapter examines four Australian novels: Blanche D’Alpuget’s *White Eye* (1993), Tom Beauford’s *Whatever Happened to Rosie Dunn?* (1989), R.F. Brissenden’s *Poor Boy* (1987) and Peter Yeldham’s *Two Sides of a Triangle* (1996). As with the first three of the short stories mentioned previously, in these novels Thailand is constructed as the seedy realm of crime and illicit activities and Thai males are either characterized as mischievous and cunning or savage and brutal. All four novels rely heavily on the equation of the Thai military and political system with crime and evil. Thai military officers, policemen and government officials are predominantly depicted as overwhelmingly powerful, greedy and unscrupulous.

Of note in these novels is the depiction of Thailand as having a great potential to breed, induce or fuel evil and immorality in Westerners. This imagining of non-Western cultures is prevalent in colonial discourses which perceive the world of the other as closely resembling a natural world of which barbarism and violence are an

intrinsic part.<sup>16</sup> In the West, traditionally associated with culture and civilization, it is perceived as more difficult to follow primitive urges due to the restraining layer of civilization. However, European travel writing also tends to view civilization and culture as a source of hypocrisy and the prohibition of eroticism (Bishop and Robinson 193-194). Such attitudes towards Western culture are also evident in some of the Australian crime novels under consideration.

While subscribing to a number of colonial assumptions, these Australian novels nonetheless attempt to criticise the West's exploitation of Thailand. The unequal power structure between East and West is seen as one of the major reasons for Westerners' moral corruption in Thailand. Western villains in the East are usually shown as having immense power over the locals. Even ruthless Thai men are portrayed as being at the beck and call of criminal-minded Westerners. The latter's overwhelming power allows them to indulge in evil more freely than when they are back home. *White Eye*, in particular, underlines the exploitation of Thailand by self-serving and morally degraded Westerners.

In all of these Australian novels the drug trade operated in Thailand is seen as the most evil form of crime with the potential to disrupt the peace and well-being of the Western world. Popular discourses in Thailand also perceive drug trafficking as one the most disastrous social problems. A good example is Vasit Dejkunchorn's writing in which the drug trade is portrayed as a threat against the nation and drug traffickers and their collaborators are condemned as traitors. On close reading, Vasit's

---

<sup>16</sup> See for example Maxwell (1995: 196-199) who explores the racial function of colonial exhibitions and discusses fairs as a means to promote racial hierarchy and superiority of white America while relegating non-Western societies to the realm of barbarism and primitiveness.

drug narrative resembles invasion stories in its overt expression of xenophobia and paranoia. In Australian invasion literature Asia is depicted as a greedy and opportunistic male awaiting a chance to grab Australia from the white race. To counter this threat, a race hero is created and his characteristics are largely drawn from the bushman. There are Australians who are seen as lacking the ability to protect the nation and even suspected of colluding with the enemy. These people are mainly city people and they are perceived as the opposite of the heroic bushmen (Walker 4-5). In Vasi's drug narrative, there is also an intense concern for national security; racialised people such as the ethnic Chinese, Burmese migrants and highlanders are seen as posing a crucial threat to the nation. The heroes, men with a military background, take the role of the nation's protectors, fighting against racialised others and morally degraded Thais who collude with the enemy. The last part of this chapter will concentrate on Vasi's drug narrative in comparison with the Australian crime stories.

### **The Short Stories**

#### **“The Visitors on the Beach” and “After the Storm”**

Geoffrey Bewley's “After the Storm” (1984) and “The Visitors on the Beach” (1986) are set on an island beach in Thailand in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Thailand in Bewley's stories is far from being a tourist's paradise. Rather, it is a place of lurking danger and brutality. The locals, and sometimes the tourists themselves, are depicted in a negative light. Travel is not shown as an eye-opening, worthwhile or fulfilling experience. Hostility, mistrust and suspicion among tourists or between tourists and the locals are quite common.

“The Visitors on the Beach” concentrates on Shane, an Australian tourist whose vacation on an island beach comes to an abrupt end with the arrival of a group of Thai men. The unpleasant end of Shane's holiday is not really unexpected. From the beginning, the story highlights Shane's low opinion of the locals and his complete lack of interest in them. Shane is not depicted as an open-minded person. He is self-righteous, naïve and very proud of being a white male:

The Thais weren't much, generally. Their national sport was kicking each other in the face, and that told you everything you needed to know.

Now he knew the Chinese were the best people in Thailand. Wee Khun's family has a chemist's shop in Bangkok, and they'd sent her to study at the Women's College in Manila. She was a terrific girl. He knew all about Asian girls looking for white husbands. But he was happy with Wee Khun and if she wanted him, that suited him. (458)

Shane's mistrust and suspicion of the Thais are also clear although he believes that he is not atypical:

Shane issued the padlocks for the cabin doors. Visitors had heard of thefts at beaches and some brought their own locks. Visitors needing locks were often happier taking them from a white man than from a Thai. That was part of his value to Mr Prem. (457)

Although he shuns the locals, Shane is deeply attracted to the island's natural and pristine beauty. The sea, in particular, is clean and abundant with marine creatures. Shane is depicted as a tourist who is in search of an easy, relaxing and rather escapist way of life. He does odd jobs for a guesthouse owner in return for accommodation, food and a small wage. Other than that, he has a lot of free time to do things he enjoys, mainly diving and jogging along the beach. In spite of his girlfriend's uneasiness and desire to leave, Shane postpones his departure time and again.

The story shows that such a quest for an idyllic life is doomed to failure and disappointment. One day a group of Thai men appears and immediately destroys the

island's tranquil atmosphere. Shane notices that their clothes are shabby. One of them wears 'dirty denims and rubber sandals' (462) and has a pistol with him. For Shane, the men seem to embody taint, disease and danger and he 'almost shook at the idea of going back into the daylight, with the Thais there' (461). The association of these men with vulgarity and sexual immorality is also clear, while Shane appears to be quite naïve and unworldly:

One Thai raised his eyebrows at Shane, and made a circle of his left finger and thumb and poked his right finger through it, in and out a few times. "You, good, good," he said. "You like?"

Shane thought of Wee Khun, a few yards away. But he had to go along with it. He smiled back.

"Good," he said. "Very good."

All the Thais yelled with laughter. It sounded as if he'd agreed to more than the simple question. (462)

Later on, the men take out their guns and enjoy a shooting spree, which can be seen as the act of ravaging and violating Shane's Eden. The men therefore, embody an aggressive, violent and ruthless Eastern masculinity which evokes both fear and revulsion in the Western protagonist:

Then they stood thirty yards from the targets and took it in turns to shoot. Now and then, a bottle shattered or a coconut flicked away. Whining bullets punched white stars in the rock faces. Shane had heard that an Armalite bullet could tear a man's arm or leg off. He wondered where all the shots were going....

They gave a gun to Shane. He fired short bursts, aiming low, not at any target, just to be done with it. The gun shook in his hands, trying to jerk up. He was afraid of it and he hated it. One shot in a plastic bucket, and the Thais cheered again. He was glad when the trigger clicked empty at last. (464-65)

The crime that these Thai men have recently engaged in is later recounted by Shane's Chinese-Thai girlfriend who has overheard them boast about their latest act of brutality. The men are pirates and they have just robbed and killed some Vietnamese boat people. Shane's girlfriend is full of fear. Her previous unease and eagerness to

leave the island most likely stem from her awareness of its danger. Shane, however, does not realize this until he comes face to face with the criminals themselves. The story ends with Shane's decision to leave the island which no longer holds any attraction for him.

“After the Storm” depicts the brutality that Thai pirates inflict on the Vietnamese who flee their country. Five slain Vietnamese, among them women and a child, are washed ashore after a night of strong winds. As with “The Visitors on the Beach”, “After the Storm” suggests the impossibility of a pleasurable holiday in Thailand, even in a place which appears to be quiet and peaceful. The tourists are upset by the unexpected appearance of the gruesome dead. However, there are two groups of people who appear to be unperturbed by the presence of the dead: the local Thais and the Germans. As will be illustrated shortly, the story depicts them as outsiders and they act in a way that other tourists disapprove of but do not find surprising. The Thai and German reactions fit the stereotypes that the other tourists have of them.

A Thai guesthouse caretaker is the only local whom the tourists can communicate with since he is the only one who speaks English. He is described as ‘strongly built with tight jeans, long hair, and a fine opinion of himself’ (148) and his smile is ‘a big false smile’ (148). The man is clearly eager to please the tourists but they are aware of his insincerity and fake pleasantries. When the tourists ask him to do something with the bodies which have been left on the beach for over a day, he stubbornly refuses to take responsibility. To him, the fact that they are not Thai but Vietnamese justifies his indifference to their tragedy:

“Take them away or bury them,” the American said. “Get rid of them.”  
The boy looked as if he understood at last. “No, no,” he said. “Me, no.”



“You or anybody.”

He was shaking his head, looking amazed.

“You can’t leave them to rot,” the Dutch girl said. “That’s just horrible. You know somebody must do something.”

“But those are not Thai people.”

“But to bury them, it’s nothing. It’s the least you can do.”

“No, no, miss. We do not do that.”

He was smiling his big smile again, and making reassuring movements with hands. (148-49)

However, later the guesthouse caretaker agrees to ask other Thais to bury the dead to please the tourists. The job is done perfunctorily and the Thais show no respect or sympathy for the dead. Their indifference and insensitivity is clearly visible as contrasted to a Dutch tourist's emotional reaction. We can also see the tourists' lack of trust in the Thais from an American tourist's need to make sure that the Thais really finish the job. Earlier, some tourists also make observations about the locals' search for valuables from the pockets of the dead Vietnamese:

They were villagers in sarongs and faded old shirts, with shovels of their own. The Thai boy from the cabins was with them, wearing a big smile as they came up.

“Okay, okay, we do,” he said.

The Thais pointed at the bodies and laughed. They took over the work on the hole. While three dug, the others went to inspect the bodies more closely. Two of them prodded the woman beached face down in the sand. One pulled her arm and turned her half over, and the Dutch girl saw a dark slash down the belly and a few last ends of stuff hanging out, and she put her hands over her face.

The New Zealanders led her back to the cabins. The American stayed to see the Thais finish the job. (149-150)

The German tourists are as negatively portrayed as the Thais. They are not disturbed by the dead and can still go on having fun as if nothing has happened. The story implies that the Germans are the only people who can derive fulfilment from their vacation. However, to be like the Germans also means that one abandons concern and sympathy for other people and stays emotionally unaffected when witnessing other

people's tragedies. A German tourist who is the first one to see the bodies on the beach is just this kind of person. He goes out early every day to do his exercise on the beach. On the morning that he sees the bodies, he still continues with his activities unperturbed. He has a quick look at them and goes back to his exercise. His mind only seems to register that these dead people are all Asians and the way he moves on quickly to do his exercise shows that they mean nothing to him. His indifference towards the dead is quite similar to that of the sand crab which simply moves past the dead into its hole:

Something made him walk closer to look. They were lying still. Sprawled face up or down, and there were no footprints around them. One was dressed in a shirt, two had shorts and two were naked. They were all brown-skinned and black-haired. There were runnels at their heads and hands and feet where the water had ebbed around them

He saw a white sand crab flicker down the beach to its hole and it passed over an outstretched hand. He didn't go any nearer. After a minute he went back over the rise and some way down the other side, out of sight of them, and started his exercises there. (143)

While the first German tourist is indifferent to the dead, the other German tourists treat them as if they are a spectacle. Death of other people is a form of excitement that they want to record as part of their travel adventure:

The young Germans were coming along the beach, three guys and two girls. Three of them had cameras. They took it in turn, each photographing all the others standing in a line behind the nearest bodies. One of them insisted on a picture of him reaching down to touch one dead man's hand. One girl objected loudly and backed away, but she lined up for another group shot afterwards. (146)

In the end it turns out that only the German tourists can still gain some satisfaction from their holiday. Crime in Thailand spoils the other tourists' mood and two of them become engaged in a heated argument. The atmosphere becomes worse and soon afterwards most of the tourists leave the place in frustration and disappointment.

### **“Bit Parts” (1992)**

While the two stories discussed earlier concentrate on the dissatisfaction and frustrated mood of tourists who are in search of fun and relaxation in Thailand, “Bit Parts” is about another kind of tourist—Australian soldiers on a tour of duty in the Vietnam War. As Gerster remarks, going to war is a form of tourist experience, but travelling to war does not necessarily help broaden the mind. Instead, it can increase parochialism and a sense of racial superiority (193). This is particularly true with the Australian protagonist in Peter Corris's “Bit Parts”.

The story is essentially anti-war and the protagonist, Clive Pemberton, a war veteran, receives a very negative portrayal. He is self-righteous, narrow-minded, self-indulgent and his racism and sexism are blatant. On a plane to Bangkok during his business trip, Clive lasciviously appraises a Thai flight attendant and recalls his war time experiences with relish. Local women, drugs and alcohol are the things that he misses the most. Evidently, Clive's actions during the war were far from heroic. He is more like an exploitative tourist who goes to Asia for the sole purpose of pleasure:

Nothing wrong with Thai Air. The Slopes could do things right service-wise when they tried. He accepted a glass of champagne and a packet of cashews. Drained the first glass and took the next one slowly. Sipping and chewing as Australia slipped away beneath him, he let his mind drift back to 'Nam in 72'—the bar girls with their tiny tits and little hard arses like rock melons; the San Miguels, going down like liquid gold and the grass the nigger Yanks pushed that seemed to lift you up and leave you laughing somewhere a foot above the ground. Great mates. Great days. (121-122)

The story discloses Clive's despicable mentality further by revealing his attitude towards those he perceives as an enemy. He has no regard for other people's lives and misery. Reflecting on the defeat of the Americans in the Vietnam War, Clive is

convinced that nuclear bombs are the best way to ensure the West's victory. Clive's objectification of and desire to exterminate racialised people are evident:

Later, as he worked on the spiced chicken and drank a good Californian chablis, he told himself that he'd have to be prepared for a lot of changes. Charlie had won after all, or sort of. What Rambo said in the second movie was right: 'Can we win this time?' They'd fought with their hands tied, no doubt about it. A small nuke up in the north would have been the shot. Not so far north as to worry the chinks, but up there somewhere. Would've sorted them out. (122)

Upon landing in Bangkok, Clive takes a taxi and amidst the chaos of a violent street protest, he has a stroke, from which he recovers long enough to realize he is to be killed by Thais who trade in human organs. Clive's terrifying experience in Bangkok can be read as a punishment for his objectionable character. The story also suggests that the horror about to be inflicted on Clive is Asia's revenge for his horrid actions against the Vietnamese during the war –something that he tries to suppress and that only surfaces in his nightmare as he is about to be killed.

“Bit Parts” constructs Bangkok as a hot and crowded city full of vehemence. The taxi driver who picks up Clive from the airport is a sullen man of few words. After a short drive, the car cannot go any further because the streets are full of angry protesters who bang on the car windows and panic Clive. Afterwards, Clive faces the gang of fearful, nightmarish Thais with sharp knives ready to dissect him. One among them is described as having a flashing gold tooth, clearly an image of treachery, vice and evil. The Thai criminals are in fact a match for Clive in their lack of sympathy and compassion for others. Clive is treated in the same way that he wants to treat the Asians whom he regards as enemies. Their misery and death mean nothing to him and his fear, pain and death mean nothing to the Thai criminals who are intent on making money from his body, now reduced to objects for sale:

Clive felt his upper arm being pinched. A hand grasped his paunch, squeezing painfully. The gold teeth flashed. “Good. Strong.”

The gold teeth were only centimetres from his face. He felt his eyelids being lifted. “Cornea,” the man said “Kidney.”

Clive screamed again as the knife slid between his ribs and made a hot progress towards his heart. (126)

Clive's plight is unlikely to evoke pity from the reader. Through his violent death, the author takes the punishment for xenophobia and racism to its extreme. In its negative portrayal of a racist character, the story can be seen as conveying an anti-racist message. Yet the role of Thailand and Thai males as ruthless executioners of Clive reinforces the stereotype of the malevolent and malicious East. This story, therefore, does not deviate greatly from the two stories discussed previously in its employment of the traditional notion of the East as a place of potential risks and dangers for Westerners. In the next short story, however, we can see an attempt to challenge this image of the East and the Oriental male.

### **“Night Swimming” (1995)**

Anna Mandoki's “Night Swimming” focuses on Ryan, an Australian tourist who has run away from his unhappy marriage for a brief holiday in Thailand. Ryan's encounter with a Thai woman and a group of policemen at a local bar causes him to reassess himself and his way of relating to others. Unlike the previous stories, “Night Swimming” alerts the reader to question the mistrust and fear of Thailand by offering a more benign depiction of the place and its people. In fact, the title of the story implies that stereotypes can obscure vision in the same way as a dark night does, and this is illustrated through Ryan's experience in Thailand.

At the beginning of the story, there is a sudden power cut and Ryan has to

drive his car in the dark until he reaches a roadside bar. The power fails again when Ryan is in the bar and a Thai waitress brings a candle to his table. She sees that he is alone and tries to make conversation with him. Ryan, however, is annoyed and assumes that she is trying to find a customer. They have a brief talk and Ryan makes an insensitive remark that offends the girl. She quickly leaves him and Ryan finally realizes that she is looking for nothing but a sympathetic person to talk to. Regretting his lack of consideration, he tells himself that he will write to her to apologise.

Ryan's stereotyping of the waitress as someone who is trying to seduce him coincides with the darkness in the bar as a result of the power failure. The story therefore, seems to suggest that stereotypes are more or less equal to looking at things in the dark where you can only pick out the outline of an object, but are unable to see it for what it is. In the dark bar, Ryan is also approached by a Thai policeman who asks Ryan to follow him outside. Recalling what he has heard about dangers a lone traveller might encounter in the East, Ryan is fearful and imagines the worst:

Thoughts race through his mind, stories he's heard of travellers robbed, abducted, or simply disappearing. He is travelling alone, he is a long way from the nearest town, and the risk of this is only now apparent to him. He imagines the things that might be about to happen.

The policeman says nothing, and Ryan is too afraid to draw him into conversation. (79)

However, it turns out that the policeman just wants to take Ryan to his car because he has forgotten to turn off the headlamps. Afterwards, the policeman invites Ryan to have a drink. Unlike the intimidating and dangerous Thai men of his imagination, Ryan finds that the policeman and his friends are simply a group of cheerful, fun-loving and friendly young men.

Contrary to the travelling experiences in the stories discussed previously, Ryan's trip enables him to realize the possibility of reaching out to the other and not

allowing fear and mistrust to cloud his perception. Travelling in this story is therefore meaningful and worthwhile. The recognition of travel as a means to broaden one's perspective and destabilize pre-conceived prejudice as well as the attempt to portray Thai women and men as more than the projection of desire or fear corresponds with that in the Australian works discussed in the later chapters of this thesis. Nevertheless, the Australian novels examined in the following section strengthen the image of Thailand presented in "The Visitors on the Beach", "After the Storm" and "Bit Parts" rather than that in "Night Swimming". In these novels, Thailand is a dangerous zone politically dominated by soldiers and high-ranking officials who are corrupt and criminally-minded. It is also a place rampant with moral temptations and factors which accommodate illicit activities.

## **The Novels**

### ***White Eye* (1993)**

Blanche D'Alpuget's *White Eye* concentrates on a catastrophe that science can engender when it is misused by evil people. White Eye, the deadly bacteria of the title, is created out of human greed, selfishness and hunger for power. Siam Enterprise, a breeder of laboratory animals, has developed White Eye to infect and kill the primates of other breeding farms. Unknown to the company, a scientist who is hired to research White Eye has a different plan for the fatal bacteria and, if successful, this sinister project will exterminate the human race.

Thailand in this novel figures as a place where criminally-minded Westerners can pursue illicit activities with little inhibition. Otto Grossman, Siam Enterprise's director, smuggles Thailand's rare species to countries worldwide and later comes up

with the destructive White Eye research. Grossman's illegal activities are done with the help of a number of influential Thais, among them military officers. In a private discussion with a subordinate, an Australian senator refers to Siam Enterprise as “a bunch of crooks in Thailand” and recalls the presence of “three Thai generals and a heroin billionaire” (50) during a dinner hosted by the director of the company. The scope of the company's illegal deals and its link with corrupt Thais are later exposed in a report prepared by two animal rights activists who have kept an eye on the company's wildlife trade:

It said that Siam was exporting chimpanzees and other apes to private collectors in Europe, Japan, Australia and America, in defiance of CITES regulations governing endangered species to which Thailand was a signatory. It gave details, including some cargo receipts, of ninety-eight apes it claimed had been sent from Thailand illegally....its board was composed of a number of Thailand's 'unusually rich' men. It gave their names and went on to say that two of them were known to be engaged in illegal logging in Burma and Cambodia and were suspected of supplying arms to the Khmer Rouge. (211)

What is also of significance in this novel is the link between the East and the abandonment of moral and ethical constraints by Westerners. The author attributes this to the unequal power relation between Thailand and the West, which enables the latter to do whatever it desires with little or no resistance at all. This is illustrated most clearly in the character of John Parker, a scientist who is funded to develop White Eye vaccines. Failure after failure makes Parker a bitter and frustrated man. Parker, however, accidentally discovers what he regards as a power within him during one of his visits to Thailand. A night with a defenceless Thai prostitute leads him to believe that he is capable of doing anything once he lets primitive instincts rule. Parker feels the strong sense of 'liberation' but this 'liberation' comes at the cost of another person's suffering. His treatment of the Thai prostitute can be read as representative of white male exploitation of the Asian female who has no way to fight back or



escape. What is also interesting is Parker's justification of his actions in Thailand. He regards his debauchery as uncharacteristic of people with a background such as his, but believes that before a man can be a complete human, he must act like a 'complete animal' (28). As the novel unfolds, we will discover that the actual animals are very different from the 'complete animal' of Parker's imagination. The animals in the novel are largely harmless, gentle creatures subject to human cruelty and exploitation. What is implied here is that Parker is projecting the repulsive part of his own nature on 'the other' or the 'complete animal' of his imagination. As the novel evolves further, Parker's distorted vision becomes clearer:

one day a girl arrived who was so frightened, ugly and stupid he suddenly wanted her with a pig-sty lust. It was a revelation, this predator within. A revelation. And a liberation. "My testicles seem to be connected to my frontal lobes," he told Grossmann, who said, "Good. A man needs to relax." In Thailand Parker found himself distracted by thoughts he had not known it was possible for someone of his upbringing and education to have. To be a complete human, he told himself, one must be a complete animal first. (28)

The 'revelation' in Thailand convinces Parker that moral codes and conducts only have negative effects on him. He sees his upbringing as the main cause of his professional failure. The teaching and education he received have restrained him from exercising his real talents. He comes to the conclusion that only by breaking free of these moral and ethical rules can he rise and achieve the greatness that he deserves. Contact with the East stirs and intensifies Parker's evil side, but instead of seeing himself as plunging further and further into moral degradation, he welcomes the transformation in his character as a leap towards greatness, even a God-like status from which he can gaze down on 'the battered planet'—a planet that he sees as being exploited and abused by men until it is out of shape:

That English lower-middle class restraint had been a straightjacket not only on his emotions, but on his intellect and ambition. 'Nothing in excess' was the

dreary motto of his dreary childhood, crowded with a nag of women: widowed mother, pious maiden aunts. A tyrant invented the taboo on excess. Excess was all! From excess came vision. From excess he had learned to soar! Up there he could look down upon the battered planet and understand it. But that sort of vision one could only reach by a passage through the extreme. (30)

For Parker, White Eye is a means through which this planet can be healed. Funded by Grossman's company to research the bacteria, he soon discovers that it can bring about the destruction of men, the creatures he loathes. For him, human beings are destructive and selfish and their greed and self-serving actions will ultimately destroy the world. He envisions that once the White Eye vaccine is complete, he will be able to rid the world of the human pest and he will be worshiped as God. Parker's delusion and his mistaking of evil for heroism and greatness are stressed once more:

He closed his eyes again so he could visualise the bronze statue which would be erected in his honour one day not too far into the twentieth-first century. He would look as he did now, craggy, a little worn around the edges, and he would hold in one hand a globe etched with the continents, the oceans and archipelagos, and in the other a twist of DNA. Around the base of the statue would be inscribed the basic method, the thirteen steps, that had led to White Eye Vaccine II. (58)

In spite of Parker's intense loathing for humanity, there is a particular kind of man whom he finds fascinating. Somchai, a Thai animal keeper, is one such man. Initially, Parker dislikes and mistrusts Somchai, regarding him as nothing more than one of Otto Grossman's servants. However, after witnessing Somchai murdering a woman, Parker is deeply impressed. Somchai's characterization recalls the image of a savage, brutal Eastern male who is the embodiment of evil and cruelty. The association of the man with thunder, furious sky and 'serpents of water' evokes the image of Satan, the Devil or primitive gods. Somchai's gestures in the rain also associate him with paganism and sacrificial rituals:

Parker was hypnotised. He had seen knifing in movies but had never

realised how extraordinary the reality would be. Its speed was astonishing. One moment, a human. The next, the human had vanished. “Beautiful,” he whispered. It was beauty in the Greek sense, something mysterious, something divine....

An electric whip lashed the sky. The air beat time for a few seconds before the thunderclap; a drop of rain shattered on the ground and in less than a minute lightning and thunder clashed together. Raindrops fell so hard they bounced half a metre into the air. Somchai threw back his head, held up his arms, and let red serpents of water leap wriggling from his body to the ground, where they scurried into the earth. In minutes he was washed clean and Weasel’s blood was sluicing off the concrete. (265)

Parker's fascination with Somchai is another indicator of his abandonment of God for Satan or the God of evil. Somchai, in fact, is similar to Parker in a number of respects. Like Parker, he has no sympathy or compassion for human beings and animals. He enjoys bullying, abusing and inflicting violence on others. Somchai is also similar to Parker in his obsession with power and the desire to show off his strength. However, in Somchai's case, it is physical power while for Parker it is intellectual. Somchai's obsession with physical prowess and strength is evident from his attempt to improve on his physique and the insult he feels when his boss fails to recognize his ability to handle a gun:

In the servants’ quarters behind the house Somchai, the after-hours chauffeur, was lying on his mattress wearing only Y-front underpants. He had pictures from magazines stuck on his whitewashed walls, including some Penthouse pets, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Mike Mentzer. For the past six months, Somchai had been following Mike’s magazine advice about using Natural Life products to help build his biceps and brachials.

When the butler poked his head in the door Somchai made fists and crunched his pectorals, for the fun of seeing the look on the butler’s face. “Whatddaya want, Frogshit?” he said.

“Master wants to see you in his study?”

“Tell ‘im to wait.”

As soon as the butler left Somchai leapt up and began dressing in his white uniform, first strapping his knife to his leg. His calves were so big now the knife was becoming difficult to conceal. He had asked Khun Otto to allow him to wear a pistol, like other night chauffeurs, but the Master answered, “My life isn’t threatened. I don’t need a bodyguard.” He had patted Somchai on the shoulders, adding “Anyway, I don’t know if you can shoot.” I can

shoot, Somchai thought, flushing with the memory of insult. (213-14)

Somchai, however, is later revealed as a much less threatening and dangerous figure than Parker and his Australian boss, Otto Grossman. Although a skillful and ruthless murderer, he is completely under the power of Grossman. Somchai treats his boss with absolute loyalty and his eagerness to please him is little different from a child seeking approval from adults. Somchai is totally unaware of Otto's exploitation since he is a physical man with little intellectual power. Outside his familiar environment, he is completely at a loss. This can be seen from the vulnerability he feels when he is in urban Sydney waiting for Parker to pick him up:

Somchai had been waiting by the chimpanzee enclosure for almost two hours. The security guard, who did not like the look of him, had decided to question him. Somchai thought he was a policeman, and was terrified. I should have done exactly what Khun Otto told me, he rebuked himself. He had never seen so many *farangs*. Their horrible pale eyes would not leave him alone. (262)

In Sydney Somchai's lack of street-wise skills and poor English cause him to rely totally on Parker who uses him and later disposes of him when he is no longer useful. Somchai's ruthlessness and savagery are somewhat undermined by his subordination to and exploitation by the Western villains.

The novel also introduces another Thai character, Lek, who largely serves to underscore the unequal power relation between Thailand and the West. With Otto's assistance, Lek enters Australia illegally and once there is locked in Parker's quarters at a research centre. Here she is assigned to take care of the lab animals. There is a strong parallel between the plight of Lek and that of the animals around her. Like them, she is in a state of imprisonment. She lives in a small room shut off from the outside world and can hardly communicate with anyone. She is also little different from the animals around her in her gentleness, simplicity, naivety and powerlessness.

Lek and the animals are similarly used and then discarded inhumanly by the scientists at the research centre. The passage below depicts the intimacy and physical similarity between Lek and the chimpanzees. It serves to stress the parallel in their innocence and victimisation:

Lek was inside the shower recess with the chimpanzee, making splashing noises and squealing. Her wet brown arm shot out through the shower curtain, and Parker put a towel in her hand. The arm withdrew. A few minutes later the whole woman appeared, blouse sticking to her breasts. She held the ape by the hand and both of them stepped carefully out onto a cotton bathmat Parker had laid for their feet. Sailor was still groggy and hung on to the bathmat with his toes. Sonja stared at the two pairs of broad, strong feet. (139-40)

Through the plight of Lek and, to a lesser degree, that of Somchai, *White Eye* mounts a critique of the affluent West's exploitation of poorer countries. In *Whatever Happened to Rosie Dunn?*, the other Australian novel under consideration, there is also the criticism of the West although it is of a different kind. Nevertheless, *Whatever Happened to Rosie Dunn?* involves similar imagining of Thailand as the ideal home for evil Westerners and continues the association of Thai males with violence, savagery and corruption.

### ***Whatever Happened to Rosie Dunn?* (1989)**

Tom Beauford's *Whatever Happened to Rosie Dunn?* opens with the investigation into the mysterious death of Rosie Dunn, daughter of an affluent and respectable family. Sophie Parnell, a private detective, is hired by Rosie's father to find the cause of his daughter's death. Sophie takes a trip to Thailand, where she discovers that Rosie's death is a fabrication employed to cover up her experience of incest, as well as her involvement in the drug trade.

Thailand in this novel figures as a world in which Rosie Dunn and her lover

build an empire which supplies drugs to buyers in the Western world. It is a world ruled by licentiousness, deception, tension, violence and brutality—the kind of world that the criminally-minded Rosie Dunn takes delight in:

I preferred Darlinghurst and the whores. Things went on down there. People got done in, parties happened, someone was raped, someone got beaten up. It had more colour. (142)

Thailand is primarily revealed through Sophie Parnell's eyes. Sophie visits places which are mainly within the domain of the Thai underworld. In Bangkok Sophie and her boyfriend, Cliff, are surrounded by persistent Thai men who want to sell sexual services:

Outside the glass doors had been the crooks the notice warned against. The crooks had had a fine old time with Cliffie. “You wanna live sex show five hundred *bhat*, then massage and girl extras? You wanna boy?” Despairingly, “Maybe you want something special. You tell?”

“Australian parrot,” had said Cliff curtly. “I want an Australian parrot.” The oriental Buddhist crooks looked at the pavement and considered bad karma and the round of creation, the wheel and other esoteric matters. “You wanna girl?” they tried again. (90)

On their arrival at a bar owned by Rosie's former Thai boyfriend, Sophie gets to know a number of Westerners who hang around the place. They are a bunch of small time criminals and drug users who move from place to place. Conan, one of the Westerners, asks Sophie to go to a Thai boxing match with him, describing it as full of fabricated blood and violence. Whether Conan is telling the truth or simply making this up is difficult to tell. When Sophie goes to the boxing match, she does see blood and violence although she cannot tell whether they are real or fake. In this Thai world it is difficult to distinguish truth from deception. In this world violence and aggressiveness are also treated as a form of everyday entertainment:

“Really good show. They beat shit out of each other. Broken teeth and jaws and howl like mad, but when leave the ring, very dignified like Buddhist

monk. All passion, you see, is just dream.”

“And broken teeth and jaws?” asked Sophie.

“Also dream,” decided Conan the Barbarian, “just karma and plenty of money. They live real good those boxer boys. Blood is all chicken blood. They have in mouth then break the plastic. Have specially filed back teeth. And broken bones is just fake.” (94-95)

The discrepancy between appearance and reality and the ordinariness of violence is also personified in the character of Luk, Rosie's former Thai boyfriend, now a collaborator in her illegal operation. He puts on the appearance of a gentle, friendly and kind host, but he can easily have someone killed and behave as if nothing has happened:

Luk, inscrutable happy Luk. ‘Good’ Luk. Part Chinese, part Thai. Songs and songs he had: Bobby Dylan, The Jackson Five, The Rolling Stones, The Beatles. Luk had his book with the words copied out and the chord changes. Luk played every night with poetry swimming in his eyes as he watched the till. (94)

Sophie becomes fully aware of Luk's deception and ruthlessness after the gruesome murder of a man who knows that Rosie Dunn is still alive. The man is brutally stabbed to death after Luk discovers that he is about to disclose the truth to Sophie. The deception and violence of the Thai underworld is accompanied by intimidating Thai soldiers and corrupt government officials. During a trip to the South, Sophie comes across a group of armed Thai soldiers, apparently fearful figures for the locals:

The bus ride down to the South had been uneventful. One army search with those thin-faced, acid and angry soldiers on lethal short fuses. The Thais cowered. Sophie smiled gently, as a *farang*. Pleased too she was unarmed. (90)

Later on, Sophie witnesses the direct involvement of Thai authorities in the drug trade. The drug empire of Rosie Dunn and her lover, Rufus Stone, is backed by prominent government officials who openly misuse their power and public resources for personal interests:

Some garden lights came on, and striding through the gate was the Chief of Police and next Military Governor of the province.

“You see, important men are involved with Rufus, It's all very top drawer.”

....Three men jumped out of the helicopter as the motor cut. They walked into the house... (150)

These Thai officers' criminal involvement is not really a secret and drug trafficking is not the only crime that they partake in. A sex industry in which local women are exploited and enslaved is also a major source of income. The Thais know and gossip about it and it is also common knowledge among Westerners who hang round Luk's place. One of them supplies Sophie with the information:

“No better than India,” Allan offered. “They reckon there are fifty women in there. Most of ‘em on smack. Some, they reckon, are chained to their beds. All sorts of nasty rumours. The Thais don’t like it but they reckon the District Governor’s got shares.” (102)

While the Thai villains appear to care little about committing crime in the open, this is not the case with the Australians, who hide their evil behind the mask of respectability. Back home, Rosie Dunn and Rufus Stone disguise their criminality under the mask of decent citizens. In the eyes of many, Rosie is a nice girl from a good family who always knows how to behave herself and impress others. Ruminating over Rosie's evil, Sophie Parnell finds it hard to reconcile Rosie's angelic looks with her depraved nature:

She is a woman that I can only imagine, even having met her. It's really only her acts that tell you. To look at her you would think a nice suburban Madonna was staring back at you. But, in fact, she's a de Sade woman. One of the women who run the castle in *The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom*. (158)

Rosie's parents are as hypocritical as she is. Her father, a famed surgeon, marries for money and commits incest with his own daughter. His wife knows the shameful



secret, but determines to cover it up for the sake of the family name. As she looks at the Dunns, Sophie Parnell sees only their pretentiousness and despicable secrets:

She didn't want to speak to or acknowledge Charlie Dunn with wife Ruth mingling about; Charlie with his magnetic gaze fixed on the State Premier, no doubt an old buddy from Branston. Charlie seemed to be enjoying a joke of some kind, while Ruth smiled pleasantly to the wife and showed a good angle for the cameras should they move towards her. (162)

Rosie's lover, Rufus Stone, is also a great actor. In Thailand he is a drug dealer, but back home he is a charitable and generous millionaire. Sophie Parnell comes close to exposing his crime, but she is eventually defeated and has to accept that it is beyond her ability to bring a criminal of such a high social-standing to justice. However, the end of the novel sees Rufus Stone and Rosie Dunn ultimately punished for their sins; a stroke kills Rufus and Rosie is left alone in Thailand without financial support.

The depiction of these Australian characters can be perceived as an attack on Western hypocrisy and on social mechanisms that permit some people to engage in evil without being caught or exposed. Nonetheless, the assertion of Christian notions of good and evil at the end of the novel ensures that evil will ultimately be punished. No resolution is provided for Thailand, however. Good and evil appear to be regarded differently there. What is evil in the Christian sense might not be evil at all if regarded from a Thai worldview. From the latter's point of view, evil may be perceived as simply another way of life which is more lively and colourful. As Luk comments, Rosie Dunn is merely a creative being who wants to live her life to its full:

Luk smiled at Sophie. "So you ask me about your cousin, Rosie? Rosie find way to make white light into many colours. She live in this. Maybe like queen of old times, Rosie Dunn believes in power and strength."

"And you?"

Luk shrugged and played more chords, listening intently to his sound. "I'm Buddhist. I believe in many things different from you."

"I believe some beings are caught in lusts and go to hells. Some are pure beings like Buddha and give compassion to them. Some beings are

creative and on a journey, and Rosie Dunn went on a journey. Already prepared, Sophie, in her karma.” Luk played more. It sounded a bit like Debussy. “Sad song, happy songs, ending songs. Rosie Dunn sing them all and then new songs.”(103)

Luk's view of good and evil helps to create the image of Thailand as totally different and strange. It is a world where evil is more or less equated with beauty, adventure and excitement. Indeed such a worldview corresponds with the colonial imagining and representation of non-western societies as a ‘natural’ world in which primitive urges, sexual licentiousness, animalistic traits or violence are not seen as unusual, but as an integral part of life.<sup>17</sup> Thailand in this novel is hardly different from that natural world.

### ***Poor Boy (1987)***

The construction of Thailand as a world rife with illicit activities recurs in Robert Brissenden’s *Poor Boy*. In this novel Tom Caxton, a foreign correspondent, stops over in Bangkok and gets involved in a series of adventures that bring him face to face with Thai and Western drug dealers. To his shock, he discovers that his best mates, Dick Robertson and Jim Jones, are also involved in the drug trade.

The novel establishes a close connection between drug trafficking and military authoritarianism. Tom Caxton's arrival in Bangkok coincides with a dramatic arrest at Bangkok airport. Two people are ruthlessly dragged away from a plane by armed Thai police officers. Caxton later learns that the police chief who engineered the arrest is a notorious drug dealer and the arrest is to prevent the two people from incriminating him. Afterwards, Caxton is briefed by a fellow journalist about the intimate

---

<sup>17</sup> See Bishop and Robinson (1999), Maxwell (1995) and Hallam and Street (2000) for detailed discussion of colonial imagining and representations of non-western cultures.

relationship between the Thai ruling class and the drug trade:

“Chiang Mai is on the edge of the Golden Triangle. It's our new Prime Minister's old stamping ground too.”

“Kriangsak Chamanand?”

“The General himself. He was in command of the army on the Burmese frontier for a year or two—which probably means, if he's any sort of a soldier, that he was organising a rake-off from the opium caravans, the factories that process the stuff, and the heroin wholesalers.”

“I thought he was whiter than white, an honourable military man.”

Harrison chuckled: “He is, son, he is. But he has just led a very successful coup. And coups cost money.”(43)

Bangkok is described as a city dominated by crime and illegal transactions. The drug trade appears to hold the greatest attraction for the expatriates who want to make quick cash. Bangkok seems to tempt and encourage people to partake in immorality.

As one of the expatriates remarks:

“There's so much loose cash in Bangkok that every game you care to think of is being run, from good old-fashioned white, brown and polka-dotted slavery to smuggling drugs and gold bullion. It could even be political.”

“But if you want my considered opinion,” he said slowly, blowing a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling, “I think he might have been running the occasional cargo of cannabis or hash oil or buddha sticks down the line to Kings Cross—or over the big blue water to the US of A. Or a few k's of heroin—and in Bangkok, they tell me, you can get the very best: pure, unadulterated number four grade Double UO Globe shit, with the FDA stamp and the Good Housekeeping seal of approval. That's what puts gold in the Golden Triangle. And that's what every second Aussie barkeep in this territory seems to want to get his hooks into.” (27)

The Australians who are involved in the drug trade are not depicted as the most vicious villains. They are merely small-time criminals or poor men struggling to earn a significant sum of money to obtain a decent living. The latter are the 'poor boys' of the title and Caxton's close friends, Dick Robertson and Jim Jones are among these 'poor boys'. Robertson is a family man who gets tied up with the marijuana trade out of a need for money. Afterwards, he is forced to help facilitate the trafficking of heroin to Australia, but he refuses and is finally murdered. Jim Jones is a successful

businessman who starts from nothing. He turns to the drug trade out of a desire to make his great dream come true. In spite of his flaws, Jones is loyal and true to his friends. He tries hard to save Robertson's life, but fails and is himself eventually killed.

*Poor Boy* is a work which celebrates traditional masculine values such as purposiveness, activity, mateship and heterosexual values. Jones and Robertson embrace these masculine values and, to a certain extent, these qualities seem to redeem them from their sins. In spite of their moral weakness, Jones and Robertson are depicted in a very sympathetic light. Jones is a man who is following his dream and Robertson a husband and father who wants the best for his family. Caxton conveys this message when ruminating over his two friends' tragedy:

Caxton stood and looked up at its elegant facade, trying to imagine how Jim Jones must have felt the first time he had gazed at it and known that it was his, and how he must have thought of the distance he had travelled to get it and what in so many different ways had been the cost. "Not a bad sort of poor bastard," he murmured. "I supposed not. Just another poor boy trying to make a dishonest dollar."

We are all poor boys, he thought, remembering Sarit's gaudy Patrol surging past him on the highway into Bangkok, its name flashing like a challenge: Sarit, Robbie, Jones, Travers, Metaxas, the ambitious man in Canberra who did not know that his picture lay ticking like a time bomb in the FBI files. (253-254)

The most vicious criminals are Daycha, a Thai police chief, and Viktor Tiburzi, a Serbian-Australian businessman. Both are positioned outside the realm of human sympathy and unlike Robertson and Jones, they defy all the masculine virtues mentioned above. Daycha, the Thai police chief is an archetypal Thai authority figure who is corrupt, greedy and ruthless. His physical appearance and outward looks betray his moral degradation and corrupt nature. He is described as an excessively large man in flamboyant outfits. His huge body and ludicrously colourful clothes

distance him from well-proportioned or dignified masculine figures and associate him with greed, excess and deviance. The association of his movement and strength with that of a sumo wrestler conveys the impression that he is a dangerous man familiar with exercising physical force in a brutal manner. Apart from defying moral rules, Daycha also digresses from normative heterosexual values as evident from his homosexual preference:

He was in his holiday gear, light cotton pants and a shocking pink and gold silk shirt that makes his rotund torso look almost ovoid. Beneath the absurd shirt Caxton imagined a hairless body as smooth and solid as a hard-boiled egg. He wore an outsize pair of dark glasses and a blue baseball cap on the front of which were entwined the letters NY in orange stitching.

The fat man was not flabby. He moved lightly, carrying his great bulk of flesh with the muscular solidity and confidence of a Japanese sumo wrestler. He smiled briefly and without amusement, then murmured something to his friend. The boy giggled and rested his head for a moment on the fat man's shoulder. (125)

Daycha is strikingly different from Jim Jones and Robertson in his external appearance. While the characterization of the Thai police chief evokes revulsion and danger, the reader is invited to identify with Robertson, whose looks are quintessentially Australian:

He had a long nose that had been broken and badly reset and a slanted grin that split the lower half of his face. His skin had a weather-beaten country look, there was a scar across his chin, his eyes were a bright light blue with deep sunwrinkles at the corners, and his coarse, close-cropped dark hair was beginning to turn grey. It was a face, Caxton thought, that people would like to think of as typically Australian—a face that would look most at home under a slouch hat and with a roll-your-own cigarette hanging loose from one corner of the mouth. (49)

As with Robertson, Jim Jones is depicted as a likeable person. Jones's dashing personality easily attracts admiration:

Thrown cans glinted in the sunlight, and as the yacht nosed in the carton was tossed aboard. The weight nearly knocked the man who caught it into the water, a comic turn that was noisily applauded. Everyone was

sunburnt, weather-beaten, unshaven and mildly hysterical with fatigue. But the helmsman, a slight, blond, deeply tanned figure, wearing nothing but white shorts and a pair of large sunglasses, look trim, fit and relaxed....

White teeth flashing in his coppery stubble of beard, a can of Cascade in his right hand and his left arm round the slim, bare waist of one of the girls, Jones moved away from the drinkers and up to the bow. He looked neat, self-contained and unflustered as a cat. (68)

The other racialised villain, Viktor Tiburzi or Tibby, is also depicted as 'un-Australian'. While Dechay's character is an inversion of the traditional masculine values and attributes, Tibby is characterized as the embodiment of hypocrisy, arrogance and deceit. This is suggested through his pompous and expensive clothes and pretentious manner:

The voice was deep, musical and heavy with a harsh Slavic accent. Tibby bowed slightly as he spoke. His face was round, plump, self-indulgent, but with a harsh Slavic accent. Tibby bowed slightly as he spoke. His face was round, plump, self-indulgent, but with a hint of arrogant hardness behind the dimples and the full-lipped smile. Thick black-framed glasses gave the large head an air of academic authority. He wore an ambassadorial three-piece dark pinstripe suit, a shirt so white it looked starched, and a Winston Churchill navy polka-dot bow tie. There was a fat gold signet ring on one soft hand, and between the fingers of the other he held a torpedo-shaped cigar that made China Rourke's panatella smell like burning rubber.

"How do you do," said Caxton. He almost added 'sir'. When he was a small boy he had had a tortoiseshell kitten called Tibby, but this was no kitten this was a big cat and a dangerous one. (74)

In the following novel, the positioning of Thai and other racialised villains outside the realm of human sympathy and in defiance of virtues and values that the novel affirms can also be detected.<sup>18</sup> Also evident in the next novel is the association of the Thai ruling elite with corruption and crime.

---

<sup>18</sup> In his public lecture on racism given at the University of Sydney on 31 May 2006 Ghassan Hage discussed in detail various forms of racism in contemporary society, especially the subtle ones. He argues that the concept of racism has been 'banalised' and also elaborates on the objectification of racialised people who are often placed outside the realm of human sympathy.

***Two Sides of a Triangle (1996)***

The drug trade in Thailand is taken up once more in Peter Yeldham's *Two Sides of a Triangle*, a fast-paced and engaging thriller about a young couple lured by a mysterious United Nations representative to carry out a top-secret mission in Thailand. The novel makes some attempts to give a balanced picture of Thailand. Although there are ruthless drug warlords and corrupt government officials, ordinary people are shown as friendly and helpful. The latter, however, largely function as a backdrop to the real drama.

As with *Poor Boy* and the other works discussed previously, this novel affirms the symbiotic relationship between Thai politics and drug-trafficking. Thailand also serves as a locale in which Westerners make money through illegal means. As with *Whatever Happened to Rosie Dunn?*, Western villains are largely depicted as masterminds who disguise their evil behind the mask of respectability whereas Thai and other racialised criminals are those who follow their primitive urges to the extreme. The novel's depiction of the relationship between Asian drug warlords and the West also reveals the recognition of the West's power over Asia and how this enables Westerners and Western governments to engage in crime easily and conveniently. The novel also conveys mistrust of supposedly humanitarian and politically-neutral organizations such as the United Nations.

Thailand's drug history is provided by Edward Burrige who claims that he works for the United Nations and is assigned to make Kim Sokram, a greedy and immensely powerful Thai drug warlord, shut down his operation by offering him an extremely large amount of money. Briefing Ben Hammond and Teresa Martineau,

whom he has chosen to persuade Sokram, Burrige traces the proliferation of the drug trade in Thailand and nearby nations to corruption and political struggle. Drug trafficking is described as a primary source of income for political and military leaders in Thailand and other neighbouring countries. Western powers like America are also involved. Kim Sokram benefits from this power struggle and has set up a highly productive drug empire near the border of Thailand:

All over this area there was corruption. Governments were involved; the Americans through the CIA: as well as the puppets in Saigon, the Thais, Laotians and the Burmese; everyone financed their wars and their coups by drug-trafficking. In those halcyon days, Sokram established his fiefdom. The biggest in the Golden Triangle. He ruled it like a feudal potentate. (414-15)

The characterization of Kim Sokram neatly corresponds with the Orientalist imagining of Asian masculinity as the embodiment of immorality, despotism and excessive sensuality. The emphasis on his virility can be seen as the projection of libidinal elements onto the other. This makes otherness not merely an object of fear and abhorrence but also an embodiment of sexual immorality:

At the main banquet table, Kim Sokram sat with his family. His wives, eight in all, ranged from the eldest in her sixties, to the youngest who would soon turn eighteen. He had numerous children and a great many grandchildren, some of whom were older than the latest wife. It was the celebration of Sokram's birthday; he was eighty-two years old and, later on that night, the first and second wives would assist him to mount the new wife so he could leave his seed in young and vibrant ground. Sokram was a lusty and vigorous man who could easily perform this act without aid.... (442-443)

The other two racialised criminals who are worth comparing with Kim Sokram are Victor Mendoza, a Macao-Portuguese, and his lover, Helen Lee, a Chinese-Filipino. Like Sokram, the couple is also characterized as utterly depraved and unredeemable. Victor is a born criminal who relishes money, violence and sex. He has robbed and murdered a number of people and feels neither regret nor guilt. Helen Lee is a femme



fatale who uses her gorgeous looks to charm and deceive men. With Victor's help, she engineers the painful and horrific death of her fiancé in the hope of extracting a piece of information that might allow her access to a large amount of money. Like Victor, Helen has no regard for other people's pain and suffering.

Racialised people are not, however, the only villains in the novel. Westerners are also shown as shrewd, corrupt and unscrupulous. Even so, while the racialised villains are completely demonised, their Western counterparts are not totally deprived of humanity. The latter are shown as hypocritical, scheming and manipulative and yet they still have certain traits that discourage the reader from viewing them with complete disgust. Telling Teresa Martineau about her father whom she thought was long dead, Burrige describes him as the archetype of Westerners who are vital to the production of illicit drugs. In return for easy money, chemists like Teresa's father help drug warlords by using their knowledge and technical skills to transform raw materials into deadly drugs:

The Khmers and the hill farmers who grow the poppies, the thousands who harvest them, they're just the foot soldiers. The key figures are the chemists who manufacture the drugs. You find them in laboratories all over the world....Skilled pharmacists, with no morality, just a desire to get rich. They're the ones who refine the poppy into addictive drugs that destroy people....  
(413)

The reader is certainly not meant to sympathize with these self-serving chemists or condone their actions. Nonetheless, Roland Martineau, Teresa's father, is not totally removed from the realm of human sympathy. Out of concern for his daughter, he takes a great risk to warn her about Kim Sokram's intention to kill her and even when he is dying, he struggles to find his daughter in the hope of saving her life.

As the novel draws to its end, Edward Burrige's real motivation for getting rid of Sokram is disclosed. Burrige is not an agent of good who wants to eradicate

the drug trade for noble purposes. Instead, he turns out to be a powerful and influential figure who regulates and controls the global drug trade, but never in a way that causes its total destruction. He and people like him benefit from the drug trade although they do not participate in it directly. Burr ridge's claim that he works for the United Nations is neither confirmed nor refuted. The reader is left to wonder whether Burr ridge is telling the truth about his identity and profession. Yet Burr ridge's link with the United Nations can also be read as a critique directed at the West's corruption and hypocrisy. Indeed, Burr ridge himself personifies hypocrisy and shrewdness. He tricks Ben Hammond and Teresa Martineau to work for him and is despised by both of them. Nevertheless, in spite of Burr ridge's deceitful and unscrupulous nature, he has a great love for his close friend, Walter Chen, whom he has known since childhood. Unlike Kim Sokram, Victor Menduza and Helen Lee who are totally depraved and can elicit no sympathy from the reader, Burr ridge's genuine distress upon the discovery of his friend's violent and painful death can still move the reader to pity.

*Two Sides of a Triangle* corresponds with *Poor Boy* in its representation of racialised villains as completely amoral and degraded. While otherness is treated as the abject, Western antagonists are still allowed a small portion of humanity. This novel also shares with *Poor Boy* and the other fiction discussed earlier an equation of Thailand with military-dominated political struggle that leads to the proliferation of the drug trade. In the following section I will look at Thai crime novels, particularly the ones which concentrate on illicit drugs, and compare them with the above Australian writing.

### **Vasit Dejkunchorn's drug narrative**

All the Australian novels discussed view the drug trade as the most disastrous form of crime in Thailand. This corresponds with popular Thai discourse on crime in which the drug trade is seen as one of the most serious problems affecting the nation. Vasit Dejkunchorn's crime stories most clearly reflect the anxiety and fear associated with this problem.

The conscious attempt to create a sense of nationalism imbued with the powerful racialising and masculinising impulse in Vasit's fiction reminds us of Australian invasion stories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and is it possible to find some other parallels in the history of Thai representations of ethnic minorities and Australian representations of Asians.

The author's political ideology also appears to influence his literary expression. In 1973 Vasit was head of palace security and after his retirement he served as a royal aide to the King of Thailand for many years. Vasit is a staunch royalist and he has written a number of articles in defence of the Thai monarchy as a response to foreign media's increasing critical stance towards the palace during late 2008 and early 2009. As with his fiction, Vasit's articles advocate ultra-nationalism and reveal a highly negative attitude towards racialised others and the Thais whom he perceives as colluding with them to destroy Thailand and the monarchy.<sup>19</sup>

The most popular of Vasit's early crime series is *The Savage Police Chief* (1985) which tells the story of a secret governmental organization founded specially to fight against crime, particularly the drug trade. The organization is known as

---

<sup>19</sup> See Vasit (16.12.08, 17.03.09)

'Bravo' and is headed by a man named Thanoot Niralai who leads a group of heroic men in merciless combat with criminals. The novel is full of violence and it explicitly advocates the use of force and violence as an effective means of crime control. Vasi's later novels are also about Bravo's ruthless fight with drug dealers, but in *The Order from Satan* (2006), his latest novel, he appears to reassess and revise his earlier version of crime control. Extra-judicial killing of criminals is no longer overtly affirmed and Thanoot Niralai, Vasi's long-time hero, is no longer Bravo's leader but has become a monk in the hope of redeeming himself from the bloodshed he caused in the past. Still, on close reading *The Order from Satan* does not deviate from its predecessors in its major characteristics and I will now discuss these main features in detail, particularly in comparison with the Australian crime stories discussed earlier.

Unlike the Australian novels which equate the Thai political system with military authoritarianism and corruption and perceive it as the major cause of the drug trade, Vasi puts primary blame on racialised people within Thailand, particularly the Thais of Chinese origins and other ethnic minorities. These 'others' are shown as the ones who initiate and actively operate the drug trade, while corrupt Thai authorities act as facilitators. Arguably, this demonisation of the Thais of Chinese descent echoes the ethnic Thais' resentment against the Sino-Thais' rise to economic, social and political dominance.<sup>20</sup> In all of Vasi's novels the Thais of Chinese descent frequently receive negative depiction. There is little variation in their characterization: cunning, greedy, self-serving and unpatriotic. The highlanders and Burmese migrants also figure prominently as villains who are primarily savage and brutal but also stupid and

---

<sup>20</sup> For an analysis of the influential role of the Thais of Chinese origin in local and national political life in contemporary Thailand, see Pasuk and Sungsidh (1994: 57-107).

gullible. *The Order from Satan*, Vasiťs latest novel, sees significantly high number of criminals who are Sino-Thais or from other ethnicities. The novel also expresses concern in regard to the inflow of illegal migrants or refugees from neighboring countries. These migrants are seen as worsening social problems such as unemployment and crime. Vasiťs depiction of migrants and refugees both reflects and endorses mainstream Thai perception of these people as a burden and source of crime. The recent horrific treatment of the Rohingyas by the Thai military is a notorious example of the lack of concern for and discrimination against refugees often committed by both the Thai establishment and the Thai public in general. Thousands of Rohingyas have fled by boat sailing for Thailand and Malaysia but the Thai military have abused and forced nearly 1,000 of them who landed on Thai shores back on to their boats into the shark-infested sea with very little food, water and fuel. Many of these Rohingyas were reported missing, mostly likely dead.<sup>21</sup>

In *The Order from Satan* descendants of defected anti-Communist soldiers who fled mainland China after the victory of the Communist Party are depicted as the key masterminds of the drug trade in Thailand. Outwardly, these drug traders are highly regarded entrepreneurs who usually donate a lot of money to charity and provide financial support to political parties. These people's close connection with high-ranking government officials and other figures of authority is thus firmly established and their criminal activities are facilitated by Thai authorities who are given a share in the profits.

The villains of Chinese origin are depicted as 'un-Thai' although they are born

---

<sup>21</sup> For more details about the plight of the Rohingyas, the Thai authorities' attitude towards and treatment of ethnic minorities, refugees and asylum seekers, and the Thai perception of human rights see for example Pavin (10.02.09), Pravít (11.02.09), Bhaumik (15.01.09), *Prachatai* (19.10.09), Tharoor (18.01.09), Amnesty International (30.01.09), *AFP* (02.02.09, 12.02.09), and *The Associated Press* (06.02.09).

in Thailand and can speak impeccable Thai. The language that they use to communicate with one another while engaging in clandestine activities is Mandarin. They possess both Chinese and Thai passports and have close business connections with other overseas Chinese. They are also educated abroad, mainly in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. The author shows that these criminals' access to modern technology and knowledge as well as their overseas connections make them highly dangerous to national peace and security.

Paralleling the demonisation of racialised criminals in the Australian stories, the villains in Vasit's novels are depicted as ruthless, inhuman, violent and sexually immoral. They are also shrewd, scheming and meticulous in planning and undertaking their illicit business. Through the use of gifts and money, they are able to solicit help and cooperation from morally weak Thai authorities. Vasit depicts these Thais as traitors who deprive themselves of all dignity and honour by colluding with criminals. These betrayers are also associated with evil and depravity. *The Order From Satan* ends with a shocking revelation that the prime minister of Thailand is also among those who collaborate with the drug dealers. He is, in fact, the 'Satan' of the title. The allusions to the then prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, also of Chinese descent, are difficult for a Thai reader to miss. Of note is that as someone close to the palace, Vasit's negative depiction of the Thai prime minister suggests the rising antagonism between the royalists and Thaksin. Ironically, Vasit's support of extra-judicial killing as a way to eliminate the drug trade corresponds with the Thaksin government's ruthless suppression of those suspected of being drug dealers.<sup>22</sup>

In order to fight against criminals and corrupt Thai authorities, Vasit creates a

---

<sup>22</sup> For analyses of the relationship between Thaksin and the palace, and the Thaksin regime's violent crackdown on the drug trade, see Thak (2007: 68-76) and Pasuk and Baker (2008: 19-21).

hero who is both physically and morally superior to them. As briefly mentioned earlier, in all but one of Vasiťs novels the hero is Thanoot Niralai, an ex-soldier who leads 'Bravo', a governmental organization specializing in crime suppression. Thanoot is a patriot who devotes his life to the eradication of criminal activities, particularly drug trafficking. He is a courageous, self-sacrificing and incorruptible man with exquisitely honed fighting skills achieved through his military training.

In *The Order from Satan* Thanoot resigns from his crime control duty and becomes a monk. Paisat, the new hero, is not a new face, but one among the young men who have fought alongside Thanoot in their various campaigns against criminals. Paisat is hardly different from Thanoot. He is trained as a soldier and his personality, moral character and worldview resemble those of Thanoot. Both men, therefore, represent the model of ideal manhood while the villains, the criminally-minded Sino-Thais and corrupt Thai authorities, deviate from this model. The villains are also the ones whose looks and manner betray their depraved nature while the hero's physical appearance invites admiration and trust. Both Thanoot and Paisat are tall, well-proportioned and very good-looking. They are also dignified and gentlemanly. The Chinese-Thai villains, on the contrary, are never described as physically attractive or impressive. The features usually attributed to them are pale skin, round full face and slant eyes gleaming with cunning and evil. The highlanders and Burmese migrants are also attributed with a repulsive physical appearance. Most of them are shown as ungroomed, wearing filthy clothes and unrefined in manners.

It is also important to consider Vasiťs imagining of the West and how this allows him to construct Thailand as culturally and morally superior. Vasiťs heroes and their team are men and women who receive their education and training in the West. They plan and launch professional and efficient campaigns against drug dealers.

In Vasi't's novels the West is the world of modern technology and knowledge which enhances the superiority of the heroes over the criminals. However, Vasi't's writing also conveys a criticism of the West. In a popular Thai attitude, Western culture is seen as permissive, even licentious and Vasi't's novels echo this perception, as well as stressing the superiority of Thai culture and gender norms. For example, in an episode from *The Order From Satan*, Vasi't's hero, Paisat, sees a pretty Thai woman drinking alone in a pub and the narrator remarks that although Paisat has spent many years in America, he does not like women who drink and he feels that it is inappropriate for Thai women to abandon refined and sophisticated Thai values for "wild behaviours and moral laxity which are typical of the West" (17-18). Thus, in spite of Vasi't's admiration for Western technology and scientific knowledge, he constructs the West as inferior to Thailand in terms of cultural and moral values.

In Vasi't's novels, especially *The Order from Satan*, there is a strong sense that the only hope for the nation's survival lies in good military and police officers who must unite with one another in order to prevent criminals and their collaborators from destroying the nation. This differs from the Australian novels' depiction of Thai soldiers and policemen as only interested in securing political power and amassing wealth through drug trafficking and other illegal channels. Vasi't's heroic portrayal of men with a military background is evidently a way of dealing with an anxiety that the nation is under threat and an attempt to give hope and consolation to his audience who share the same concern.<sup>23</sup> The heroes' triumphs over the villains affirms a worldview

---

<sup>23</sup> Such a positive depiction of the military by Vasi't who had served as a royal aide to the King for many years also suggests the close relationship between the palace and the military. While the 1932 coup brought about the end of the absolute monarchy in Thailand, the year 1957 saw the rise in prestige and authority of the Thai monarchy as a result of Sarit Thanarat's rehabilitation of the monarchy as a political situation. The



that good can ultimately defeat evil. At times evil might appear powerful but there is always a hope that good will eventually defeat it. While the Australian stories discussed above seek to attract the audience by constructing Thailand as the domain of evil and moral temptation, the Thai world that Vasiṭ creates or seeks to create is one governed by peace and moral order.

The popularity of Vasiṭ's crime stories among Thai readers suggests that the ideology implicit in his writing appeals to and is shared by mainstream Thai audience. As discussed earlier, one important aspect of Vasiṭ's stories is their negative depiction of the cultural and ethnic others in Thailand. Government policy undoubtedly affects the way the ethnic minorities are treated in socio-political realities and represented in literary works and popular discourses. A good example of this is the way the Chinese in Thailand were treated under the rule of Army Commander Phibun Songkhram from 1938 to 1941. Phibun Songkhram was well-known for his admiration of the Fascist regimes in Japan, Germany and Italy and his policy was overtly anti-Chinese and sought to weaken or replace Chinese business interests with Thai enterprise (Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity* 138). The Phibun regime also advocated hypernationalism and cultural hegemony while at the same time attempted to suppress the activity of the Chinese associations, Chinese language schools and printing presses, especially those believed to engage in anti-Japanese activity (Barmé 150).<sup>24</sup> Phibun's anti-Chinese stance echoes the prejudice and discrimination against the Chinese expressed by King Vajiravudh (r.1910-1925) whose "The Jews of the Orient" (1914) and a number of his

---

Thai military have pledged loyalty to the palace and regarded themselves as the defender of the institution of the monarchy. See Thak (1974, 2007) for analyses of the symbiotic relationship between the military and the Thai monarchy. Chapter three also provides further discussion of the role of the military and the Thai monarchy in Thai politics.

<sup>24</sup> See also Skinner (1957) for detailed study about the Chinese society in Thailand.

other writings depict the Chinese as a threat to the Thai economy and Thailand as a whole.<sup>25</sup> Earlier kings such as Mongkut (r.1851-1868) and Chulalongkorn also expressed fears of the Chinese presence (Barmé *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity* 144).

In contemporary Thailand the socio-political status of Thais of Chinese descent has remarkably improved as a result of their economic dominance. Despite the persisting negative stereotypes attached to them such as the ones perpetuated in Vasi's writing, there are a large number of short stories and novels that depict the Chinese positively as industrious, practical and honest people who rise to economic and social prominence through their diligence and perseverance.<sup>26</sup> Negative representations of the highlanders and Burmese or migrants from other Asian neighbors, however, are significantly less contested. Not surprisingly, this corresponds with these groups' marginalised status. Popular discourses tend to depict Cambodian and Burmese migrants as drug-dealers, ruthless thieves and murderers. In times of economic difficulty, they are also seen as being job-stealers who increase hardship for the life of the local Thais and at the same time create an unwanted burden for the Thai nation as a whole. Nevertheless, there are also attempts on the part of some Thai writers to depict these disadvantaged groups in a sympathetic light and

---

<sup>25</sup> See also Fishel (1999) for very interesting discussion of King Vajiravudh's literary work in relation to the question of national identity and nationalism.

<sup>26</sup> A good example of such stories are Botan's *Letters from Thailand* (1969), which in 1975 was chosen by the Thai Ministry of Education as part of social studies for schoolchildren all over Thailand. The novel was also awarded the SEATO Prize for Thai Literature in 1969 and was translated into English by Susan Fulop Kepner. A more contemporary Thai author whose short stories and novels depict Thais of Chinese origin in a sympathetic light is Prapassorn Sevikul. His works include more than 50 novels, 150 short stories and 200 poems. For more details of the author and his works, visit <http://www.psevikul.com/>.

challenge negative stereotypes accorded to them.<sup>27</sup>

It is possible to draw a parallel between Thai representations of ethnic minorities and Australian representations of Asians. To a certain extent, Australian images of Asians are determined by the power and status of Asians in Australia. Political situations also play an important role in determining the images of Asians. Writing about the Chinese, who comprise the largest group of Asians in Australia, Ouyang Yu maintains that until recently many of the Chinese who came to Australia were illiterate or semi-illiterate. Those who were literate were more interested in science and technology than literature. Initially, the representations of Asians in Australian literature were largely the work of white Australians and they were predominantly negative, despite a few rare exceptions. The White Australia policy, which had been in place since 1901 and remained effective until the early 1970s, both reflected and determined the images of Asians circulated during this early chapter of Australian history. According to Ouyang, it was not until mid-1970s that Asian-Australian writers began to take up writing careers and engage in contesting and destabilizing negative stereotypes of Asians. Examples of these forerunners are Brian Castro and Don'o Kim. In contemporary Australia the governmental policy of non-discriminatory migration law and multiculturalism helped to improve the way Asians are represented. The rise in number and economic and social power of Asian-Australians who actively participated in rewriting images of Asians were also crucial to the improvement in representations of Asians (351-66). Despite this improvement, there is work to be done if Australian representation of Asians in popular genres is to

---

<sup>27</sup>A good example of such writers is Rattawut Lapcharoensap whose short story, "Priscilla the Cambodian", depicts Cambodian refugees in very sympathetic light and challenge the local Thais' prejudice and discrimination against these people. Other stories by Rattawut are discussed in chapter five.

break free from Orientalist images that frequently appear in crime fiction through the association of Thailand with danger, primitiveness and erotic fantasy.

It is, however, worth noting that whereas multiculturalism is a state policy in Australia today and racial diversity and difference are purportedly embraced, contemporary Thailand has seen the rise of the ideologies that promote racial homogeneity and conformity rather than the recognition of, and the respect for, difference. The tension in contemporary Thai politics plays a major role in enhancing ultra-nationalism, social conservatism, prejudice and hostility against the others. Blame is often placed on outsiders for causing trouble in Thailand and criticisms of Thailand by foreigners, especially when political issues are concerned, are often met with defensive and often hostile responses. Vasit Dejkunchorn is among the most ardent mouthpieces of ultranationalism. As mentioned, many of Vasit's articles both reflect and endorse xenophobia. His "Lese Majeste", for example, was written specifically to attack foreigners who criticize what is going on in Thai political life and it reveals extreme paranoia about the interference of Westerners in Thai political affairs. He sees these Westerners as ignorant of and insensitive towards Thai culture, customs and respected institutions, and argues that it is impossible for Westerners to understand Thailand and Thai people no matter how much they study the country and its people. He also condemns those Thai people who share similar views with foreign academics who are critical of Thailand.<sup>28</sup> As with Australian invasion stories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, here we can notice a very close relationship between ultra-nationalism, racial discrimination and the fear that the racialised others might endanger, disrupt or even destroy 'national security' and the

---

<sup>28</sup> See Vasit (16.12.08)

‘core social values and beliefs’. There is also a rejection of different viewpoints or any forms of criticisms that go against one’s ideology, no matter how constructive they may be. Interestingly, when criticisms come from Westerners, there is a tendency to invoke Thai uniqueness, Thai sensitivities and Thai difference that are not possible for ‘outsiders’ to understand. In my interaction with Thais who are familiar with Said’s *Orientalism*, I have noticed that there is a tendency to simply dismiss Westerners’ criticisms of Thailand as another attempt by them to show Western superiority. Ironically, while Said attacked the Orientalists for promoting Western hegemony and for creating or perpetuating a discourse that positions the West in the position of power over the East, these Thais seem to reject foreigners’ criticisms of Thailand on the same grounds, and in doing so help maintain the status quo or the unequal power relations within Thai society.

One of the purposes of this thesis is to demonstrate that ultra-nationalism and the refusal to listen to criticisms from outside on the grounds that only Thai people know what is best for Thailand is not constructive. That is not to say that all criticisms of Thailand by foreigners should be unconditionally accepted; rather to stress that criticism should not be wholly rejected simply on the grounds that it comes from ‘outsiders’. For many Thais, restrictions and dominant ideologies within Thailand seem to render it impossible for them to write about or express their political ideas openly. Foreign writers or academics living outside Thailand on the other hand, have more freedom to express their political views and thus are able to research or debate issues that people in Thailand are not able to. In the following chapter these issues will be discussed in detail. The chapter begins by trying to shed light on certain

meanings of freedom in Thailand that lead to the current Thai political dilemma<sup>29</sup>, and how such concepts of freedom impact on Thai authors' attitude towards the Thai political life. The chapter also attempts to show that the development of the modern concept of freedom in Thailand differs from that in the West and is intricately linked with the impact of Western colonialism on indigenous practice and institutions.

---

<sup>29</sup> At the time of writing (late 2006-early 2009) Thailand has entered one of its most turbulent chapters of political conflict that contributes to highly disturbing social rift. While many Thais are alarmed by social unrest and divisiveness, some see this crisis as the beginning of a great change that can bring about a better Thailand.

### **Chapter three: Politics**

In the world today the word freedom appears to assume a very positive meaning in popular discourse across cultures. Yet in spite of the widely-recognised desirability of freedom, it cannot be denied that frequently when freedom is translated into political or social ideals, it can be distorted and employed in a way that justifies exploitation and oppression. In this chapter I examine Australian and Thai political stories which take up the issue of political freedom and illustrate that Australian and Thai authors are similarly concerned about the ideological construction of freedom in a way that allows those in power to impose restrictions and oppression on ordinary people. Nevertheless, in spite of this similarity, these works show that 'freedom' in Thailand and in the West can assume quite different meanings.

The mistrust and anxiety about freedom turning into an instrument of oppression is by no means new. In a public lecture given at the University of Sydney on 17 May 2006 Duncan Ivison refers to such a concern about freedom being used to legitimize an oppressive state. Quoting Isaiah Berlin, Ivison discusses the two famous conceptions of freedom: negative and positive freedom. Negative freedom is a freedom from interference and impediment. Positive freedom is freedom in a pattern of action of a certain kind that enables one to reach self-realisation. Ivison maintains that Berlin is very suspicious of the second concept of freedom, especially when it is translated into social and political ideals. If freedom is a way of life or a certain pattern of action that can lead to self-realisation then someone else such as the state might claim that they know better than the people and force them into doing something or impose a certain system or pattern of life on them against their view. Berlin came to the conclusion that although there are also dangers of negative freedom, if taken in the extreme, they are still less threatening than those of positive

freedom.

It is indeed this ideological reinvention of positive freedom for political purpose that is the central concern in Nigel Krauth's *Freedom Highway* (1999). As discussed in the previous chapter, the dominant image of Thai political life in the Australian crime stories is one dominated by corrupt and authoritarian military men. In this Australian novel the picture of Thai politics hardly differs from the one presented in the previously discussed Australian crime writing. And yet this novel is of great interest for my purpose in its attempt to show that severe restriction on personal freedom and violence inflicted on ordinary Thais by the ruling military regime is fundamentally the outcome of the war fought in the name of 'freedom'—freedom in the sense of a particular pattern of life or system which Berlin defined as positive freedom. *Freedom Highway* dramatises how 'democracy' is regarded as synonymous with this kind of freedom while communism is seen as its deadly enemy.

*Freedom Highway* is also a very interesting work in its analysis of Thai patronage culture and religious belief. Clientism is a Thai cultural practice dating back to the pre-modern time when common people served lords or masters in exchange for help and protection, and to repay this they showed loyalty, gratitude and fulfilled a number of obligations. In *Freedom Highway* the client-patron relationship is seen as deeply permeating Thai life. On the one hand, the patronage system is shown as the major source of protection against intimidation and abuse from the State for ordinary Thais whose victimization is emphasized all along. On the other hand, this system is depicted as a means through which the ruling military regime justifies its authoritarianism. The novel also suggests that the relationship between the Thai monarchy and the military is also based on the patronage system. Such a depiction of the relationship between the military and the Thai monarchy as relying on each other



due to shared interests parallels Paul Handley's thesis in *The King Never Smiles* (2006), a highly controversial book that has been banned in Thailand. Handley argues that the Thai monarchy is a political institution that condones military dictatorship and impedes the development of democracy in Thailand.<sup>30</sup>

Besides, Buddhism, Thailand's national religion, appears to promote determinism and fatalism. Thai religion and power relations as displayed in *Freedom Highway* thus enhance absolutism and authoritarianism rather than political freedom. In the latter half of this chapter, this depiction of traditional Thai cultural, religious and political practice as a crucial impediment to political freedom will be compared and contrasted with a Thai author's portrayal of them.

In spite of the cynicism towards the promotion of 'freedom' and 'peace' through governments or big organizations' campaigns, *Freedom Highway* is a novel which reveals strong belief in ordinary people's power and commitment in bringing about social and political changes. It is an individual, not government or big institution, who is regarded as the hope for genuine peace and a happier world. I argue that this emphasis on ordinary people's capacity to initiate positive social and political reformation reflects the modern West's privileging of the conception of freedom which does not simply mean freedom from impediment or constraint but also carries with it the burden of responsibility and civic duties. In his public lecture on 17 May 2006, Duncan Ivison advocated the argument that freedom cannot be guaranteed by institutions or laws but is something that must be exercised. Ivison is not as suspicious of positive freedom as Berlin and he regards it as more closely associated with actions

---

<sup>30</sup> See also Reynolds (17.03.08), Nidhi (9-10.01.08) and Hewison (2008) for critiques of *The King Never Smiles*.

and civic virtues than negative freedom. However, Ivison argues that perhaps it is necessary to find a new language that can better define freedom rather than trying to cramp it into two limited categories as suggested by Berlin. For Ivison, the categorization of freedom into two fundamental conceptions—positive and negative—implies that freedom is either opposed to power or constraint and, worse, synonymous with power. This does not quite reflect a more complicated relation between freedom and power. He remarks that freedom without power can hollow out the meaningfulness of freedom, thus the weak and disadvantaged need to be empowered so as to enable them to exercise their freedom. In *Freedom Highway* we can also see a great emphasis on the need to empower the powerless.

As with *Freedom Highway*, a large number of Thai political stories concentrate on the theme of freedom being distorted into an instrument of oppression and exploitation, particularly by the State. Here I will focus on one Thai novel and two short stories: Lin Leawarin's *Democracies on Parallel Lines* (1994), Khamsing Srinawak's "The Politician" (1958) and Chard Kobjitti's "An Old friend" (1997). All of these Thai works criticize the way political power is used by the ruling elite under the name of freedom and democracy for self-serving purposes, but unlike in *Freedom Highway*, we find very different imagining of the role of ordinary people in contributing to positive social and political changes. Thai authors appear to be much more pessimistic about the capacity and power of an individual in asserting or following his/her social and political ideals and acting against dictatorial or exploitative states. This difference can partly be explained by investigating the origin and emergence of the modern conception of freedom in Thailand in comparison with that in the West.

***Freedom Highway (1999)***

*Freedom Highway* is mainly set in the late 1950s and tells the chilling account of Western powers' involvement with Thai politics and how this results in the suffering of a large number of Thais, particularly those who are economically and socially disadvantaged. The narrator is Howard Moss, an Australian engineer who, during his youth, spent a few years in Thailand working for the Australian secret service under the disguise of a civil engineer.

Thailand in this novel is presented as a country dominated by an American-backed military regime which claims to promote democracy but practises severe oppression and exploitation. The impression of the ordinary Thais given in the novel is that of defenceless people who are exploited, oppressed and brutalized. The extreme constraint of personal freedom placed on people in Thailand is first introduced through the eyes of the younger Howard Moss who, upon landing in Bangkok, comes face to face with uniformed Thai soldiers, guns and military tanks. Bangkok airport as presented to the newly arrived Howard is very different from the type of busy, lively and non-intimidating airport he is familiar with. The presence of soldiers and heavy artillery imbues the place with an atmosphere of tension, oppression and danger:

On landing, Moss had expected the bustle of baggage carts, refuelling tankers, gangways on wheels—but he saw instead lines of army vehicles and rows of soldiers bristling with guns in egg-white Asian sunlight. They were massed around the airfield terminal and out across the tarmac apron.

Even before the engines of the plane were cut and the propellers began their whining deceleration, several khaki trucks approached. The alighting soldiers dropped to their knees on the steaming asphalt, lifted their guns to their shoulders, and trained them on the plane's doors, on its wheels and engines, on the passengers at their windows, on anything that was likely to move. (7)

Even in places where Thai villagers and monks are going on with their ordinary routine, the presence of soldiers and tanks is oppressive. The comparison of the Thais with vegetables and cattle hints that these people have little power to determine the course of their lives:

On the road itself, vehicles were overladen with uncovered freight: high-piled baskets of vegetables and fruit, unhusked rice rich as loads of golden loam and sarong- or *panung*-clad Thais packed together under woven-cane hats. A truck full of Buddhist monks in orange robes, standing and swaying like cattle, lurched in front of them. A bicycle supporting a family of four passed narrowly by Moss's window. A bus with people and chicken and piles of melons....But most significant to Moss were the lumbering army vehicles, the groups of soldiers in muddy boots at intervals along the roadside, the tanks sitting ominously on canal banks or poking out periodically from under festooning trees. (11)

Moss's first day in Thailand coincides with the coup staged by a powerful general who disposes of all his political rivals by means of force. Under his regime, ruthlessness and violence are the common law. All sorts of actions are liable to capital punishment and people are given no right to appear in court and defend themselves. Among those who suffer the most from the coup are the rural poor who are the scapegoats of the regime's zealous support of America's anti-communist agenda. The villagers are rounded up, transported to a secluded place and then shot without any trial. Here the defencelessness and victimization of ordinary Thais is emphasized:

The prisoners got down backwards from the second army truck. They swung their legs down first, their buttocks moulding the backs of their pants. They were all awkward, lying on their chests on the tray of the truck before they dropped to the ground, because their hands were tied behind their backs and it was the way the soldiers told them to get down. (153-154)

Travelling to rural Northeastern Thailand, the American protagonist, Stephen Brasch, sees for the first time a 'secret' American air base from which deadly missiles are sent to Vietnam and other nearby Asian countries. He also witnesses the murder of a

young village boy by Thai soldiers who justify their cruel action as strictly following American policy. Brasch realizes that his country's proclamation to help third world nations and defend democracy amounts to lying, cheating and worse, sentencing poor and innocent Thais who know nothing about the political game to death:

Perhaps under communism the Isaan people would eat dung beetles forever. Perhaps with Western democracy they would get strawberries and ice-cream. But why hadn't the project been called by a truthful name: 'Freedom from Communism Defence Air Base' or the 'Non-Communist Friendship Cooperation B-52 Runway'? Why did there have to be the lie?....So who did the US government think they were keeping the secret from? The Chinese? The Laos? The KGB?....Or was it just the goddamn dung beetle villagers of north-East Thailand who were being kept in the dark? That's what it seemed to amount to the most: a pouring of more buffalo shit on the Isaan Thais, the people who could be shot at dawn because they lived near the Laotian border...because they *might* be communists. (237-238)

The novel shows that in such an oppressive political atmosphere, the only way for Thai people to secure for themselves some safety is through the traditional Thai patron-client practice. Clients are the weak and powerless ones who seek protection and help from the patrons who are viewed as stronger and more powerful. To depict the life of ordinary Thais and their status as clients, a young Thai woman is constructed to represent them all. For Stephen Brasch, the woman, Tiem Bunnaree, is not simply an individual but "the woman whose beauty and trauma represented for him the whole story and predicament of Thailand" (365). Tiem's life is a desperate flee from poverty and a long series of struggles to shield herself from government officials' abuse and intimidation. Her patrons are largely wealthy and powerful men, both Western and Thai, who are drawn to her beauty and charm. Through her affairs with them, she temporarily manages to get a more decent life than that of ordinary villagers in rural Northeastern Thailand who are not merely poverty-stricken but also victimized by the state's brutal suppression of communist insurgency. In spite of her wit, intelligence, and enthusiasm for life, Tiem's dependency on men and her lack of

agency are emphasized throughout the novel. Tiem is eventually gunned down along with one of her male patrons while they are resting in a hotel room. Before her tragic death, Tiem recalls how her life has been a series of escapes and how she has futilely placed her hopes on rich men as her potential saviours:

When they lay back, he held her hand. She heard the lengthening of his breath as he fell asleep. She stayed awake, her eyes open in the darkness, thinking of Isaan—the flatness and the dead soil and the hopeless replanting. And she thought how Isaan had haunted her all the way through her life with Henri, with Aditya, with any of the men who had promised to take her away from dung beetles and buffalo afterbirth.

And no one had taken her away.

An old motorbike started up in the compound beneath the window of their room. It backfired twice. Very loudly. The backfires echoed down the old verandas and polished hallways of the hotel.

...A white-coated boy followed the dappled sun shafts along the veranda. At the door to Room 207 he held the breakfast tray carefully on his shoulder with one hand, and knocked carefully.

The door swung open under his knock. He went in. The bed was entirely crimson. (394-395)

While ordinary Thais like Tiem rely on patron-client relationship for their survival, the novel shows that this cultural practice is used to legitimize dictatorial rule for the Thai prime minister who claims that his role is to protect not only the nation and the people of Thailand, but also to enhance the prestige and stability of the Thai monarchy and Buddhism. It is clear here that he imagines himself as the most powerful patron whose absolute power derives from the consent of his people who seek protection from him. The patronage system thus becomes a convenient tool to legitimize despotism:

I'm like the Buddha himself... Let me tell you all the things I do for my children. They want me to help them. They want me to make the King strong, to make Bangkok strong, to make the villages strong. They want me to make law and order strong, and economy and religion strong...I'm the people. I'm

their father...I love them all. I'm waiting all my life time to do all this for them. (330-331)<sup>31</sup>

Buddhism largely figures in this novel as a set of exotic beliefs. We can also detect the fascination and admiration for the way Buddhism offers ordinary Thais a unique philosophy to handle their harsh and difficult life. Nevertheless, *Freedom Highway*, shares with *Noble Sindhu Horses*, the Australian novel examined in the following chapter, an attitude that Buddhism does not enhance actions on the part of an individual to change their social, economic or political status. On the contrary, Buddhism preaches acceptance and even resignation. A person's status in this life has already been determined by his *karma* and one can only enjoy the fruits of good *karma* and endure the repercussion of bad *karma*. One of the novel's epigraphs articulates such an impression of Buddhism most clearly:

According to the belief of Thai Buddhists, life may be said to be a system of accounting. All your sins and wild oats sown by you are entered into your life's account to your debit, while your merits, that is to say the results of your good deeds, are entered to your credit. Thus the quality of one's life depends upon the balance sheet of one's own sins and merits. Liabilities you will have to pay for and assets are yours to enjoy.

Although Buddhism in Thailand has traditionally been used by the ruling class to justify its governing power, contemporary Thailand sees the emergence of a new Buddhist movement whose interpretation of *dhamma* enhances rational thinking and egalitarianism. However, it cannot be denied that mainstream or popular Buddhism plays a role in stifling critical thinking and thus leaving the status quo of corruption

---

<sup>31</sup> See Thak (1974) for a study of the political career of Sarit Thanarat (1908-1963) who is presumably the real life counterpart of Manit, the Thai prime minister in *Freedom Highway*. Thak describes Sarit as following a paternalistic style of leadership and discusses in detail how Sarit legitimized and strengthened his regime.

and social injustice unchallenged.<sup>32</sup>

While a large portion of *Freedom Highway* is devoted to criticism of the modern West's political institutions as well as the Thai political and cultural system that obstructs men's personal and political freedom, the novel is not totally overwhelmed by a dark and pessimistic mood. There remains some hope that a happier and more peaceful world is possible and to achieve this ordinary people need to take actions that can lead to social and political changes. The poor and powerless need to be empowered so that they can have a better life and strength to assert and defend their rights. A number of characters are characterized in a way that reflects such a belief. Ivan Pelz, the director of Rockefeller's Amway Bank, is a philanthropist who never allows business interests to take priority over humanitarian concerns. Dr Shan, a Chinese millionaire, is willing to invest a large amount of money in a project which hardly has any profit-making value, but can immensely improve the life of the rural poor in the third world. The narrator, Howard Moss, is also shown as engaging in a fight to help Thai women from poverty and exploitation. The assertion of ordinary people's power to bring about positive social changes in their own way in defiance of governmental and institutional hypocrisy is evident in Moss's argument for his 'private aid program':

I have devoted my life to an aid program—my own private aid program. Each year, I weave my way through Thailand, passing out cash. It's a personal, moral business. Only money works in some moral situations. I have learnt that. Each year I save up and come back to Thailand to give my money to Thai people.

---

<sup>32</sup> Pira Sudham's novels and collections of short stories, particularly *Monsoon Country* (1988) and *People of Esarn* (1991), provide vehement critique of mainstream Buddhist teaching on *karma*, especially its role in maintaining class and economic inequalities. Chapter five briefly discusses Pira's recent novel, *The Force of Karma* (2002). For more comprehensive discussion of Thai Buddhism, see chapter four.



And I ask nothing in return. No aid program by any country in the world has ever done this: ask nothing in return. And by this means, I challenge the multi-million dollar programs launched in Thailand over decades by the West, mainly the United States. I challenge the so-called assistance Australia has given to Asia in the last forty years. I challenge the colonial meddling of Britain and France, the religious meddling of corporate Christianity. I don't want anything back for my contributions. I do it because I love the Thais – or loved one of them—not because I look down on them or want them to change. I'm probably the only aid agency in the world which is actually committed to giving something away, to losing. (194)

The American protagonist, Stephen Brasch, also has a dream about contributing something to the world and helping less fortunate people. Although Brasch's naivety leads to his being used in a deadly political game he has no control over, his aspiration to do good allies him with Howard Moss, Ivan Pelz and Dr. Shan:

Perhaps Nelson's philanthropy—his love of art, his stand against racism, his support for backward economies—was the merest spark of the great good, the quest for a great new world, in American culture. Perhaps it was the link to the hope for good in Brasch's own heart. Yet Nelson was surrounded by violence and greed from the original John D. Rockefeller through to Rollo Geissmann. And Brasch also wondered about the Thai culture producing so many Manits and Samoeds and power-twisted soldiers like the officer at Ban Napho. Something was wrong with humanity, he decided, and he felt betrayed. Yet still, there was Ivan and Dr Shan. They supported his image of the good Nelson. They plucked at something in his own centre. He thought of the concert pianist's fingers handling the drilling samples; and the Chinese scholar walled up in his examination cell. Big things *could* be done without corruption and death and destruction. But they were harder that way. (249-250)

Hence, while dramatizing the ugliness of political hypocrisy and the distortion of freedom for political purpose, *Freedom Highway* does not rule out the possibility of ordinary people taking action in order to challenge the corrupted version of freedom endorsed by the State. The hope that men will be free in a certain pattern or system of life that leads to self-realisation lies in an individual or ordinary people's sense of responsibility, commitment and devotion rather than in formal political institutions.

In the following section I explore Thai political stories in comparison with

*Freedom Highway* and show that although there are parallels in the suspicion and mistrust of the State's ideological construction of freedom, Thai works offer a different perspective on how to counter this restrictive, corrupted and exploitative version of freedom imposed by the State. Unlike *Freedom Highway* which recognises the crucial role of ordinary people in challenging the State's version of freedom, contemporary Thai works do not demonstrate such a belief in the general populace as having power to solve political problems. Instead, in many Thai political stories, with some rare exceptions, we see the predominant stress on the powerlessness of ordinary people in countering political corruption and taking action to challenge it. Why do Thai writings take such a pessimistic attitude towards the role of ordinary people? This investigation into the origin and emergence of the Thai concept of freedom sheds light on this lack of faith in ordinary people to act as agents who can initiate changes for the common good.

According to Thanet Aphornsuvan, the origin of the modern Thai conception of freedom is not synonymous with its Western counterpart but emerged in a complex way from local institutions and practice, and most importantly, a reaction to colonialism. He argues that before the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932, in traditional Thai society, which was highly hierarchical and absolutist, only the king was privileged to freedom in the sense of possessing self-determination and not having to answer to superiors. Freedom for ordinary people was subsumed under the under the idea of duty and rights as determined by the authority of the king. Duties towards the king or the State were clearly carved out for commoners and certain rights were granted to them. The ruling elites were accorded with much more rights than commoners and '*sitthi*', the Thai word for rights, originally means 'authority, success' (Thanet, "Slavery and Modernity" 162-63). The tendency to see rights or freedom as

synonymous with privileges and power of the elitist class was thus predominant in the traditional Thai worldview. For commoners, the traditional Thai patronage system is the means through which they could achieve some amount of privileges, protection and financial security. In times of war many commoners evaded conscription and sought safety for themselves and their families by pledging loyalty to and becoming slaves of influential lords (Thanet “Slavery and Modernity” 170). My contention is that feudal attitudes and practice have persisted in contemporary Thailand. Many people of high social and political status usually take for granted that they have more freedom and rights than the general populace and they are frequently treated as such. Implicit here is the idea that the more power you have, the more freedom (read privileges) you can expect to have. The way the Thai democratic practice is conducted in Thailand today also shows that client-patron relation is still alive and well. Thanet also maintains that, unlike freedom in the West which emerged from the experience of slavery, it was the threat from colonialism and the Thai rulers’ political entanglements with it that led to the development of the notion of freedom in Thailand (Thanet “Slavery and Modernity” 162). In their attempt to be seen as ‘civilised’ in the eyes of Western powers so as to evade colonisation, the Thai ruling class began to incorporate the Western concept of freedom into Thai political discourse. The elite’s reinvention of the Western concept of freedom was done mainly to create a sense of nationalism in the midst of colonial threats. Gradually, ‘*tai*’, the ethnic name of Thai people, was reconstituted as both referring to the ethnicity of the people and the love for freedom. Eventually, ‘Thai-ness’ came to signify the characteristic of a race which loves freedom and would rather die than be enslaved or conquered by other nations (Thanet “Slavery and Modernity” 177-78). Thanet remarks that while the concept of freedom in this sense was widely promoted by the elite, the other notion of freedom—freedom

as a positive social value for common people—was hardly promoted (“Slavery and Modernity” 182).

The emergence of this elitist form of freedom may be seen as a good example of how East-West contact results in a form of hybridity that promotes the interest and stability of the privileged class but deprives ordinary people of their political power. To a certain extent, it was ingenious of the Thai elite to be able to turn threats from the superpowers into benefits, choosing only certain Western concepts and ideas that suit their agenda, making their interest appear like the interest of the nation as a whole.

Nevertheless, Thanet argues that, despite the hegemonic status of this form of freedom, it is by no means without contestation from the rising bourgeois and labouring classes (182). The clashes between the elitist concept of freedom and its more liberalized version are echoed throughout modern Thai political history. Thus, before a discussion of Thai political stories, it is important to trace the history of political dissent in Thailand that posed a threat to the traditional ruling class’ power.

The most significant of such early challenges against the ruling class posed by Thais from other classes resulted in the abolition of absolute monarchy in 1932. The coup group consisted of western-educated military men and civilians led by Pridi Phanomyong and Phibun Songkham. As Nakkharin Mektrairat and Mathew Copeland argue in their studies, this coup was not merely a seizure of power from the ruling class by a small group of western educated military men and civilians, but was a response to the growing popular resentment that had fermented long before the 1932

coup actually took place.<sup>33</sup>

Yet the overthrow of the absolute monarchy by no means led to the situation in which the traditional ruling class was deprived of political authority in the years to come. Years following the abolition of the absolute monarchy saw the struggle for political power among the royalist, militarist and civilian factions. Between 1945 and 1947 Pridi Phanomyong and his progressive supporters dominated the Thai political scene, real elections took place, censorship was abolished and there was intense interest and enthusiasm in socially-concerned literature. However, on 8 November 1947 a group of military officers staged a coup against civilian rule and by 1951 the new military oligarchy was able to eliminate Pridi and his supporters from the political scene (Anderson, *In the Mirror* 17). Despite the partial eclipse in status and authority of the institution of the monarchy in the years following the overthrow of the absolute monarchy, from 1957 on the prestige of the monarchy has steadily risen. This was significantly the result of Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat's rehabilitation of the monarchy as a political institution that lent legitimacy to his regime (Thak, *The Sarit Regime* 161-225). As Baker and Pasuk maintain, Sarit Thanarat was a military strongman whose power was crucially enhanced through US patronage during the Cold War. In the late 1950s, the US, in its attempt to find an ally to collaborate with its prosecution of the Cold War in Asia, brought together the military, businessmen,

---

<sup>33</sup> For a study of the social and intellectual context in which the abolition of absolute monarchy took place, see Barmé (2002). Barmé maintains that many Thai and Western intellectuals tend to emphasize the role of Thai kings and princes as agents of change but hardly mention anything about those they ruled over who were by no means passive and submissive subjects. His work aims to shed light on the activities and sentiments of ordinary people in the years leading up to the 1932 revolution and after (3).

and royalists and made them a powerful alliance.<sup>34</sup> This collaboration became increasingly oppressive, and resentment against it was growing and making itself heard. Baker and Pasuk write:

...the alliance's strength was undermined by the generals' abuse of power and their obvious subordination to American policy. Opposition to the intensity of capitalist exploitation grew. Protests emerged against American domination. Communists launched a guerrilla war which attracted the support of old intellectuals, young activists, and exploited peasants. Students became the channel through which radical, liberal, nationalist, Buddhist, and other discourses were focused against militarism, dictatorship, and unrestrained capitalism. (*A History of Thailand* 168)

Student demonstrations against military dictatorship and corruption began in early 1968 and by 1972, they became better organized and more powerful. On 13 October 1973, half a million people joined the demonstrations and took to the streets of Bangkok to demand a constitution. In other big cities, people also joined forces to show their support. Violence broke out and bloodshed took place when the military junta resorted to violence in an attempt to disperse the protestors on the morning of 14 October 1973. This eventually led to the collapse of the military regime and the three tyrants, Thanom, Praphat and Narong, were forced to leave the political scene, at least temporarily. For the next year, street protests occurred daily to maintain pressure on the government to carry out its commitment to constitutional democracy. The years 1973 and 1974 also saw significant increase in the number of strikes and rallies organized by both workers and peasants for better wages and working conditions, higher paddy prices, lower rents and fairer allocation of land. This remarkable outburst of demands from those who are normally forced to occupy the lower rung of society alarmed the traditional ruling elite and hard-liners in the military and this soon

---

<sup>34</sup> For useful accounts of the relationship between the Americans and the Thai military and police during this period, see Darling (1965).

gave rise to a number of militant organizations that sought to suppress alternative political solutions and label all those who held onto a different ideology as communists who had to be violently eliminated. From the late 1974 onwards these right-wing organizations and their allies began to intimidate, assault and murder those who called for social and political reformation. On 6 October 1976 the backlash against the cry for democracy escalated into a massacre when the military and its right-wing allies resorted to violence as a means to force radicalism into submission. Unarmed students who protested against the return of the former dictator, Thanom Kittikajorn, were brutally beaten, raped, shot and burnt alive. (Baker and Pasuk, *A History of Thailand 187-195*).<sup>35</sup> This horrific chapter of Thai political history was immediately followed by a period of repression and authoritarianism. The years 1980 to 1988 saw the rise of Prem Tinnasulanon, an appointed prime minister whose focus was on sound economic management, easing the political tension and allowing room for more political liberalism. Prem's power and support was initially derived from the army but his reign is generally regarded as a compromise between military authoritarianism and royal liberalism. Prem is a staunch royalist and his close relationship with the palace was an important factor that allowed him to remain in power for a relatively long period (Murray 9-15).<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.2519.net/> is a site dedicated to the memory of those who were slaughtered in the 1976 crackdown on protestors. The events of 6 October are also recorded in the anonymous 140 page underground pamphlet *Thung.. phu yang yu* [To... Those Who Remain], accompanied by horrifying photographs of the killings. See Benedict Anderson (1977), for a detailed study of the Thai political and social atmosphere from 1973 through to 1976. See also Kwai Jok Foong whose recent blog article, "The PAD's Real Forebears" relates the 1976 massacre to the current political unrest and violence in Thailand (07:12.08: <http://khikwai.com/blog/2008/12/07/meet-the-pads-real-forebears/>).

<sup>36</sup> See Wyatt (1984) and Handley (2006) for further discussion of Prem's political role

The persistent domination of the military and the traditional elitist class in Thai political life and the unstable state of democratically elected governments in Thai politics are also echoed in the changing definition of the word ‘right’ over time.

Thanet Aphornsuvan remarks:

the debacles of democratic governments in Thai politics and the persistence of the elite cultural domination can be seen in the official meaning of the word. From the 1940s to the 1970s *sitthi* had been defined by the Royal Institute in the Thai Official dictionary as, ‘*kwam sumret* (success), and *amnaj an chob tham* (legitimate power)’. In the 1980s, with the coming of political liberalism and economic prosperity, the definition of *sitthi* was finally liberalized to include ‘power to perform legally accepted things freely’. *Sitthi* thus emerges as an important analogue of modern ‘freedom’ not by the transposition upwards of a slave value but by the extension downwards of sovereign privilege. (“Slavery and Modernity” 163-164)

Interestingly, in spite of the persistence of feudal attitudes which privilege hierarchical social structure over egalitarianism, ‘democracy’ is always celebrated in official Thai political discourse as the best political system for Thailand and Thai people. In *Democracies on Parallel Lines*, the Thai novel under consideration in the following section, we clearly witness this attitude. In this novel we see how the concept of freedom as the nation or the Thai race’s sovereignty is highly valued while there is little mentioning of an individual’s freedom. The novel also shows that the traditional concept of governing power as originally belonging to the king, rather than as peoples’ inalienable right has by no means disappeared from contemporary Thai political discourse. Besides, as suggested by its title, the novel illustrates that in

---

and his relationship with the palace. Handley maintains that while Prem was prime minister, he continued and strengthened the preceding military regimes’ efforts to enhance and maintain the high prestige of the monarchy (*The King Never Smiles*, Ch. 15). In 1988 Prem was appointed the head of the Privy Council of King Bhumipol Adulyadej. He now serves as the chief advisor of the king. See Kwai Jok Foong for the role of Prem and the Privy Council in contemporary Thai politics (12.01.09: <http://khikwai.com/blog/2009/01/12/why-prem-won-the-day/>). For commentary on the Thai King’s high prestige and popularity among his people, see Head’s BBC article (05.12.07).



Thailand there are more than one form of ‘democracies’ and their definitions are determined by those who are in the position of authority. Ironically, even highly repressive military regimes which take no account of people’s political rights and freedom claim to promote ‘democracy’.<sup>37</sup>

Not surprisingly, in 1991 the major excuses used by the military leaders who abolished the civilian and democratically elected government of prime minister Chatichai Choonhaven, who succeeded Prem in 1988 and became the first elected member of parliament to be prime minister since 1976, were ‘the restoration of democracy’ and the ‘elimination of corrupt politicians’.<sup>38</sup> However, shortly after the military takeover, the generals’ real intention for staging the coup became clear. It was not democracy or corruption-free parliament which were their concerns but their own political and personal ambitions. The military junta refused to return electoral power to the people and appointed one of its leading members, Suchinda Kraprayoon, as prime minister. This outraged a large number of Thais who joined forces and demanded that Suchinda resign and the military return to barracks. In May 1992 mass rallies took place in the streets of Bangkok and shortly afterwards the military’s violent crackdown on civilian protestors resulted in numerous deaths and injuries. The junta’s heavy-handed suppression of the protestors was vehemently criticized both domestically and internationally (Morris 250-53). The King intervened and shortly afterwards Suchinda resigned (Basham 13). The image of the coup group and the military as a whole was severely damaged and this eventually forced them to leave the political scene temporarily. Over the next five years there was an ongoing attempt at

---

<sup>37</sup> See Kwai Jok Foong for an interesting critique of ‘democracy’ in Thailand (18.01.09: <http://khikwai.com/blog/2009/01/18/dictatorship-of-the-poo-yai/>).

<sup>38</sup> See Murray (1991) for detailed analysis of the context of the 1991 coup.

political reform. In 1997 Thailand's new constitution, which many regarded as 'the people's constitution' because there were efforts to seek opinions and contributions from people from various occupations during the drafting process, came into being. The new constitution brought hope to many Thais that democracy would, from now on, prosper without interruption from another military coup (Thitinan, "Thailand since the Coup" 141).

It seemed plausible that with the ability of Thai people to join forces to fight against the military regime in 1992, positive freedom would eventually take root in Thailand and the prospect of democracy was seemingly bright. Such an anticipation, however, was too optimistic. The years 2001 through to 2006 saw the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai party (TRT) which achieved the majority of seats in parliament, something that no other Thai political parties had succeeded in before.<sup>39</sup> Although democratically elected, Thaksin's administration was rife with large-scale corruption, abuse of power and violation of human rights. During the Thaksin era, extra-judicial killings of those suspected of being involved in drug-trafficking were rampant (Thak, "Distinctions with a Difference" 72-76, 80-88). The outburst of violence in Southern Thailand demonstrated the Thaksin government's lack of concern for ordinary people's lives and suffering and its insensitive approach to regional and religious difference. While it is true that tension and conflicts in the South existed long before the Thaksin reign, it cannot be denied that the Thaksin administration played a key role in escalating the Southern insurgency.<sup>40</sup> By 2005 the

---

<sup>39</sup> For a detailed study of Thaksin's rise to power, see Pasuk and Baker (2004). This study looks at where Thaksin comes from, how he made his money, what he is trying to do, and what his impact is on Thailand's economy, society, and democracy.

<sup>40</sup> See Thanet (2007). This study addresses the conflicts in Southern Thailand from the

royalists also began to see Thaksin as a threatening competitor for royal popularity among the rural poor. Thaksin and his party were nonetheless able to elicit strong support from a large number of the rural populace as a result of the implementation of low interest loans, low cost medical service and other attempts at income distribution to the rural sector. No matter how superficial or problematic some of these populist campaigns were, they were warmly welcomed by the rural poor who had long been neglected by preceding governments. Initially, Thaksin was also popular among middle-class Thais who perceived his talent and immense business success as key to Thailand's economic prosperity and many of them supported rather than condemned his heavy-handed suppression of the drug trade that involved significantly high numbers of 'lawful murder' (Pasuk and Baker, "Thailand: Fighting over Democracy" 18-20).

The resentment against Thaksin gave rise to the anti-Thaksin opposition, eventually led by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), which began to organize street demonstrations against Thaksin in September 2005 (Thitinan, "Thailand since the Coup" 142-43). While many people who initially joined the movement against the Thaksin government or tacitly supported it appeared to have genuine grievances against the Thaksin administration and were appalled by its corruption, the movement was soon dominated by the leadership of a self-serving and opportunistic media tycoon, Sondhi Limthongkul, who later put forward a proposal that the king should appoint a new prime minister to replace Thaksin. Together with the more conservative sections of the PAD, Sondhi helped pave the way for a military coup (Ji Giles Ungpakorn, *A Coup for the Rich* 19-20). The politics of the PAD

---

fourteenth century up to the mid-twentieth century. It seeks to explain the causes of ongoing political tension between the Malay Muslims in the three southernmost provinces and the Thai state.

clearly reflects the carry-over of the traditional Thai concept of governing power as originally belonging to the king and the reliance on moral or heroic figures to determine the political course. Not surprisingly, the military coup that brought about the end of Thaksin's prime ministership on 19 September 2006 was warmly welcomed by the PAD, the elites and many of the middle-class Thais who uphold this ideology. This preference for heroic figures as the source of political changes is also endorsed in *Democracies on Parallel Lines*, which similarly endorses traditional Thai power relations with the king at the top of the pyramid and the general populace expected to obey and take orders rather than to participate in decision-making or self-governance. Nevertheless, the ongoing political unrest in Thailand shows that contemporary Thai political problems are unable to be solved through coups or the traditional concept of governing power. While the military coup had deposed Thaksin, dissolved his political party and strived to destroy his power base, the 2007 election saw the victory of Thaksin's old party, newly badged under the name the People's Power Party (PPP) and headed by Samak Sundaravej.<sup>41</sup> Unable to take control of the parliament, the coup group exerted control over the promulgation of the new constitution, aiming to limit the power of elected members of parliament while giving more power to the judges (Chairat 18-23). Before this the coup leaders had also ensured that they and their supporters gained immense financial and business benefits from their political intervention and that a special committee approved by them was

---

<sup>41</sup>Samak is a veteran politician notorious for his sharp tongue and pugnacious manner. A number of Thais are critical of his past involvement with the 1976 violent suppression of student protestors. In an interview with *CNN*, Samak denied such an involvement and refused to acknowledge that there was a massacre in October 1976. See more details from *CNN* (19.02.08:<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/02/18/talkasia.samak/index.html>). More details about Samak are also available from Walker (26.08.07: <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/2007/08/26/samak-sundaravej/>).

set up to investigate the corruption charges pressed against Thaksin (Chairat 8 –23).<sup>42</sup> The Samak government, a self-proclaimed proxy for Thaksin's old Thai Rak Thai party, soon made a move to amend the coup-induced constitution, and not surprisingly, the PAD resumed its street rallies in late May 2008 to show their support of the judges and demanded that the government make no changes to the new constitution (Thitinan, "Thailand since the Coup" 143-44). The PAD's demand, however, changed over time from opposing the Samak government's move to amend the constitution to forcing the government to resign. The judiciary took the PAD's side and eventually disqualified Samak from his position, claiming that he broke the constitutional laws by participating in a paid cooking show. The PPP chose Somchai Wongsawat, Thaksin's brother-in-law to replace Samak as prime minister and, as expected, the PAD was not appeased by the appointment of the new prime minister. As time passed, the PAD demonstrations became increasingly militant and violent (Pasuk and Baker, "Thailand: Fighting over Democracy" 20-21). Sondhi Limthongkul, the PAD's most domineering leader, was elevated to the status of hero and martyr by his supporters. Sondhi represents himself as a staunch royalist and nationalist and, together with other PAD leaders, he politicized the Preah Vihear issue, leading to the recent Thai-Cambodian border tension.<sup>43</sup>

On 26 August 2008, the political crisis worsened when PAD demonstrators took over a state TV station, several ministries and eventually Government House, by

---

<sup>42</sup> See also Kwai Jok Foong for a critique of the 2006 coup group (02.02.09: <http://khikwai.com/blog/2009/02/02/the-thaksin-parable/>) and see Asian Legal Resource Center (18.02.09) for negative impacts of the 2006 coup on the human rights situation in Thailand.

<sup>43</sup> See Chuwat (27.06.08), Sri Dao-nuea (01.07.08) and *Prachatai* (02.08.08) for commentary and articles related to the Thai-Cambodian Preah Vihear conflict.

force. The protestors occupied Government House until the worst confrontation took place on 7 October 2008, when police fired tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse about 2,000 protestors in front of Parliament, resulting in heavy casualties. News footage and accounts by witnesses show that police hurled low-quality tear gas directly at the protestors and many believe that this explains the numerous injuries and a few deaths.<sup>44</sup> This assault, however, failed to stop the PAD leaders from mobilizing their supporters to further intimidate the government in order to force it to resign. On 25 November 2008, PAD protestors invaded and camped at Bangkok's international airport for a week, stranding a large number of airline passengers and delivering a destructive blow to Thailand's tourism industry. The army and the security forces were criticized for making no attempt to stop the demonstrators.<sup>45</sup> PAD protestors only agreed to leave the airport and disband after the Constitutional Court dissolved the ruling party and two of its coalition partners as well as banning Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat and 108 executive members and officials from the three parties from politics for five years.<sup>46</sup> This allowed the opposition Democrat Party to form government and successfully nominated Abhisit Vejjajiva as new prime minister. The Democrat Party has a long history of pro-royalist stance and some of its members tacitly supported the military coup in 2006 and took part in the PAD's rallies. Abhisit comes from a wealthy elitist family and many believe he is preferred by both the palace and the military. Earlier some of the members of the Democrat Party had made

---

<sup>44</sup> See Thitinan (02.09.08); Nostitz (11.10.08); Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International (04.12.08) for articles and commentary related to this violent confrontation between the PAD and the police.

<sup>45</sup> See Ji Giles Ungpakorn (26.11.08), Roberts (27.11.08) and Pravit (28.11.08) for related commentary about the PAD's airport siege.

<sup>46</sup> See Symonds (03.12.08) and Roberts (11.12.08) for related news articles about the Constitutional Court's ruling and the formation of the Democrat-led government.

a move to increase the harshness of lèse majesté law.<sup>47</sup> Recently a number of people, both Thai and foreign, have been charged with lèse majesté and in most cases, those charged were not granted bail and some of them have been jailed for months.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, there have been campaigns, presumably launched by the government or its supporters, to crack down on websites that are deemed critical of, or disrespectful to, the monarchy. The government's appointment of a PAD supporter to a high position further damages Prime Minister Abhisit's neutrality and commitment to national reconciliation.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, in his talk in Oxford on 14 March 2009 Abhisit vowed to do everything in his power to "advance and strengthen democracy, no matter what the challenges and obstacles are along the way". He criticized the Thaksin government for its abuse of power and noted that the military coup in September 2006 was welcomed by the majority of Thai people who were appalled by

---

<sup>47</sup> See more details from *Southeast Asian Press Alliance* (20.11.08: <http://www.seapabkk.org/newdesign/alertsdetail.php?No=994>).

<sup>48</sup> Some of these people, such as the Australian writer Harry Nicolaidis, were charged with lèse majesté before the Abhisit government came to power.

<sup>49</sup> See Kwai Jok Foong (25.01.09: <http://khikwai.com/blog/2009/01/25/the-abhisit-tragedy/>), Head (06.03.09), Asian Human Rights Commission (06.03.09), *The Nation* (07.03.09), *BBC* (05.02.09), Pravit (17.12.08, 24.12.08, 13.03.09), Macan-Markar (08.03.09), *Reporters Without Borders* (14.01.09), and *Southeast Asian Press Alliance* (06.03.09) for critiques of the Democrat Party, its close link with the military and its support for harsher enforcement of lèse majesté law and censorship. See also Hink (29.04.08), Streckfuss (13.03.08), *ABC News* (05.03.09), Jones (27.02.09), Walker and Farrelly (02.10.08, 04.03.09, 09.03.09), Farrelly (02.03.09, 05.03.09), Reilly (21.02.09), *Deutsche Presse Agentur* (17.02.09), *Matichon* (17.02.09), AHRC (12.02.09), George Hamilton (14.02.09), Evans (13.02.09), *The Straits Times* (15.02.09), *Prachatai* (09.01.08, 12.02.09), Nagpal (11.02.08), Campbell (09.02.09), Connors (21.01.09); Nidhi (19.01.09), Macan-Markar (27.01.09), *Reporters Without Borders* (19.01.09), Alampay (23.01.09), Head (09.09.08) and *The Times* (20.01.09) for criticisms of Thailand's lèse majesté law and recent updates about the people who have fallen victim to this law.

Thaksin's corruption and authoritarianism. However, he argued that despite military intervention, democracy still prevails in Thailand and that the military is unlikely to force their way to power again. Regarding Thailand's lèse majesté law, Abhisit was defensive of it although he said he is willing to accept the problem in terms of how the law should be better enforced and interpreted for protecting the monarchy. In response to a question about the PAD, Abhisit said, "they (the police) are now in the process of issuing the warrant for the case of occupying Government House. I have the police report regularly to me and I report to the parliament concerning the airport case.... I expect the action to be taken very soon".<sup>50</sup>

Remarkably, while the 1973 and 1976 student-led pro-democracy movement and the 1992 demonstrations against the military regime reveal the belief in democracy and the power of ordinary people to determine the political course, the PAD-led rallies bear little resemblance to these earlier movements. To many, if the PAD is allowed to dominate the Thai political scene and pursue its demands undemocratically, this could bring about the return of the old oligarchy and more conservative politics.<sup>51</sup>

The problem that has continually plagued Thai political life is not merely the persistent dominance of the traditional ruling class but also the problematic notion of

---

<sup>50</sup> More detail about Abhisit's talk in Oxford are available from Thorn (16.03.09: <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/2009/03/16/abhisits-talk-in-oxford-from-the-inside/>).

<sup>51</sup> See articles by McCargo (02.03.09), Connors (2008), Thitinan (2008) and Nelson (2007) which offer analyses of the PAD movement and the lead-up to the 2006 coup and its consequences. For the latest updates about the PAD, see Head (03.02.09) and Post Reporters (15.02.09). A number of Thai and Western academics and journalists have also provided analyses of the 'invisible hands' behind the PAD and the 19 September 2006 coup. See for example Thompson (12.11.08), *The Economist* (04.12.08) Ji Giles Ungpakorn (2007) and Chairat (2007).



freedom upheld by many Thais. For these Thais, an individual's freedom is seen as distinct from discipline, responsibility and self-perfection. Freedom comes to mean something close to 'licence'—the privilege to do whatever one pleases. In a sense, this notion of freedom is not completely dissociated from the origin and emergence of the modern Thai concept of freedom, not as the antithesis of slavery, but as the elite's strategy to preserve their political power amidst threats from Western colonialism. As discussed earlier, from the beginning freedom in the sense of a positive social value for ordinary people was hardly recognised and promoted. Also, the old feudal attitude that equates freedom with privileges and power is still alive and well. What is lacking, and urgently needed is a serious attempt to implant and strengthen positive freedom in the sense of ordinary people's capacity to exercise their self-determination through civic activities for the benefit of themselves and society as a whole. Such an urgency, however, is hardly recognised by the PAD leaders who aim to achieve political victory through the manipulation of people's nationalist sentiment and loyalty to the king. Of note is that many Thais who are against the PAD and advocate the return of Thaksin also rely on hero worship and pay little attention to civic virtues and the system of check and balance. They elevate Thaksin to the status of hero and saviour of the poor without taking into consideration the authoritarianism of his reign and his abuse of power for personal gain.<sup>52</sup> In the following section I will concentrate on the Thai novel, *Democracies on Parallel Lines*, and discuss how many of its underlying messages, particularly ardent royalist sentiment, hero worship and condescension

---

<sup>52</sup> Thak's "Distinctions with a Difference" (2007) is an excellent critique of Thaksin and the preference for 'strong', decisive leader in popular Thai imagining. See also Nidhi (02.03.2009) for a critique of those who call for Thaksin's return as prime minister.

towards the general populace, echo the ideologies cherished by the PAD and many of those who rally for the return of Thaksin.

*Democracies on Parallel Lines* (1994)

Lin Leawarin's *Democracies on Parallel Lines* is an historical novel which traces the political turmoil in Thailand from the abolition of the absolute monarchy in 1932 through to the early 1990s. The novel depicts the heroic struggles of two men who spend their lives trying to live up to moral and political idealism. The men, Tui and Yoi, are both highly patriotic, self-sacrificing and incorruptible. They devote their lives to the fight against corrupt and power-intoxicated bureaucrats and politicians. The two heroes can be seen as representing strength and moral power commonly regarded as severely absent in contemporary Thai political life.

Tui is a high-ranking police officer of exceptional integrity who possesses great loyalty to his superiors. He is also kind to his subordinates and the people he meets. To a certain extent, such a characterization represents the traditional belief that moral power and respect for one's duty and superiors are the assets of an officer. More importantly, the portrayal of Tui as a personality whom very few people can imitate suggests a heroic status whose burden is not easy for ordinary people to shoulder. Tui's importance lies in his exceptional moral qualities and his power to take on the responsibility that few can. His role as a hero who bravely fights a life-long war against social evils is clear in the following description:

He was a strongly-built man who looked as if he had been burdened with a heavy load of duty all through his life. His hands were long with properly-trimmed fingernails. These were powerful hands which had waged countless

wars against immoral force and injustice. (12)<sup>53</sup>

Yoi, the other protagonist, is similar to Tui in personality. He is patriotic, courageous, self-sacrificing and incorruptible. While Tui is a military official, Yoi is a rebel who is against dictatorial governments and tries every way to destroy them in order to pave the way for 'true democracy'. Born into a wealthy and influential family, Yoi gives up all he has in order to pursue his political ideals. Believing that the military officers who abolish the absolute monarchy are more concerned about securing power for themselves than promoting and establishing a democratic system as they have proclaimed, Yoi flees Bangkok and begins numerous campaigns to get rid of the military dictatorship. As with Tui, he is characterized as a courageous warrior of exceptional moral and physical strength:

Yoi was a well-built man with greying hair. The wrinkles on his face showed that he had been through tough experiences that very few had encountered. His eyes were sharp and powerful although he was by now an elderly man. (12)

Interestingly, in spite of being the one who loves 'democracy', Yoi's lack of faith in the general populace's capacity to promote and sustain democracy is evident. He does not believe that in 1932 Thai people are ready for democracy and he strongly feels that the abolition of the absolute monarchy is more destructive than constructive:

Such a hasty political change makes the governing power fall into the hands of one group of people who determine what kind and what form of 'democracy' they want. And how is this different from the old system? The power is now concentrated in the hands of a few military men. Mark my words. Even twenty years later our democratic system will still be immature because it did not begin well! (44-45)<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> All translations from *Democracies on Parallel Lines* are my own.

<sup>54</sup> Of note is that this view contradicts that of Nakkharin (1992) and Copeland (1993) whose works challenge the conventional wisdom endorsed in Thai official discourse

Yoi's attitude informs the strategy he adopts in order to fight against the coup group which ends the absolute monarchy and successive military-dominated governments. Ironically, Yoi also chooses military means as a way to fight against dictatorial regimes. His background as a military officer and his close connections with a number of military men who share the same ideology provide him with the resources to stage a number of coups against ruling regimes. 'Democracy' cannot be fought for by the people themselves, but has to be made accessible or available to them through an external form of power. In the following dialogue, Yoi, at that time a political prisoner, explains to a warden that the coup is a means to an end—'democracy'. For Yoi, the end appears to justify the means, at least for the moment, because there seems to be no other way that 'democracy' can be truly established:

"Thai politics is corrupt and immoral. It hurts both of us."

The prisoner shook his head. "No, politics is not that bad. Some politicians are immoral, but not all politicians are corrupt. Democracy can solve all problems by itself although this might take time."

"Why you choose coup to solve the problem?"

"Because those who are in power now do not keep their promise. They claimed that they seized power from the king so that a democratic system can be established, but they do nothing to build up and strengthen democracy."

"If you and your friends are successful, don't you think you will be corrupted by power just like those people whom you are denouncing now?"

"That's possible, but time will prove everything. I might be the one who is only good at words or might not." (116-17)

While centring on the lives of the two heroes and their heroic acts, lives of ordinary people are pushed to the background. The general populace largely stay on the sideline watching the political scene with interest but seeing themselves as being

---

that the 1932 abolition of the absolute monarchy was simply a replacement of one oligarchy (royalist) by another (civilian-military) and did not reflect the desire for democracy on the part of the masses. Nakkharin and Copeland argue that the 1932 revolution was a response to growing dissatisfaction among ordinary people towards absolutism and increasing populist desire for change.

outside it and hardly able to make any impact on it. Ordinary people's hope for political reformation does not lie in themselves but in heroes who might appear one day to correct the wrongs committed by dictators and corrupt politicians. In the following dialogue, we see such an image of ordinary people:

There were a few customers in the coffee shop and they were discussing the latest coup. Nothing was more engaging than talking about the coup which, for them, 'is more exciting than fiction'. The coup was the most thrilling incident for villagers whose life was quite tedious after WWII.

"I have kept an eye on politics for many years and I have never experienced anything like this. It is like watching a Hollywood movie," a middle-aged man with big paunch said while drinking his iced coffee with a straw.

"Yes, all of a sudden they took a gun out and pointed it at the prime minister."

"Well, there really should be a coup. Too bad this coup is not successful. Two years ago the Grand Palace coup staged by navy officers failed and now they try but fail again," the third man, whose voice was louder than others, remarked.

"This government is really corrupt..." the big man continued "...from the start government officials made money from trading national currency and pocketed all the profits."(166-67)

Indeed in the above dialogue we find some of the crucial justifications often used by coup leaders in Thailand. As mentioned earlier, both the 1991 and the 2006 coup groups accused the then civilian governments of being dictatorial and corrupt and claimed that the coup was done for the sake of 'true democracy' and to allow an opportunity for a more efficient and uncorrupt government to replace the old one.

Apart from relying on a form of power outside the parliamentary system such as a coup to promote democracy, the novel also constructs the Thai monarchy as the source of moralizing power that reminds those in power that they must exercise the governing right for the benefits of the people, not for themselves. If the government or those in power abuse and make use of governing power for vested interest, they are no longer qualified to remain in power since they have disobeyed the king's wishes.

From Yoi's following denouncement of the government's misuse of power, we can see clearly the construction of the monarchy as the original source of sovereign power which is later granted to the general populace.

When King Rama VII abdicated his throne, he wrote that *'I'm willing to yield the power that I formerly possessed to the general populace. However, I will not give my power to a particular individual or group to use that power at their own will without listening to the true voices of the people...'*. What is happening now is opposite to what his Royal Highness intended.' (73)

What makes our justice system degenerate into nothing more than a political tool? Are you allowing your idealism and integrity to be won over by power? Where has your moral courage gone? Are we allowing a particular group to use their power to influence the court and principles of justice? Are we being disrespectful to his Highness King Rama VII who granted us a permission to have self-rule? Are we losing our way and divided into factions? If you can answer these questions without feeling ashamed then you are worth being Thai. (74)

The traditional Thai political system is also imagined as a benevolent client-patron relationship between the king and his subject. The ruler, though possessing absolute power, does not abuse it for his own sake, but does everything to ensure the people's happiness. The king is portrayed as a compassionate and kindly paternal figure who relies on morals to govern his people. In other words, the king's great moral quality and love for his people justifies his position as a ruler. Yoi argues:

If we leaf through the pages of history, we will find that our political system since the ancient kingdom of Sukhothai was fundamentally moral and compassionate. People in those days had more access to justice than we who live in the so-called democratic age. Laws in those days were created from the sense of responsibility and love that the father had for his children. Why is it that in the present age which is much more progressive in terms of the material, the love between father and children disappears? Where has it gone? (73)

The king thus figures as the people's powerful and benevolent patron and the traditional patronage system is portrayed in an idealized term. It is seen as a contrast to military dictatorship which employs power for the sake of a small minority at the

cost of the majority. Unlike in *Freedom Highway*, the traditional patronage system in this novel is not seen as an impediment of people's access to rights and justice. The message here is that if the patron who has the greatest authority is moral and selfless, the people can live a happy and peaceful life. Again, the emphasis is on the strong and moral leader or patron who is seen as highly capable of ensuring and protecting the people's welfare.

It should be noted again that Thailand has *lèse majesté* law, a law that makes it a criminal offence to insult the monarchy and royal family that carries a maximum 15-year jail sentence and a minimum of three years imprisonment. While positive depiction of the monarchy may result from the writer's genuine love and respect for the king and the institution of the monarchy, the severity of *lèse majesté* law automatically prohibits all forms of negative portrayal of the royal family and the monarchy in general.

As *Democracies on Parallel Lines* moves on to the contemporary Thai political scene, the Thai political problems are depicted as increasingly complicated. It is not simply the problem of military dictatorship or military intervention with politics, but also of business-oriented or money politics. Although in this novel there are two heroes who endeavour to fight for democracy and justice, towards the end of the novel a mood of frustration and pessimism can be detected. The novel shows that people today, especially those in big cities are more politically active than in the past yet they have little power to determine the political course. Worse, sometimes 'the people's power' is used by the powers-that-be to get rid of political enemies, and those who reap the benefits are shrewd and corrupt politicians. Although the two heroes are never outwitted by corrupt and self-serving politicians, both are aware of the difficulty in steering Thai political life in the way they want to. Towards the end

of the novel as the two men ponder the increasingly money-oriented politics, their realisation that things are getting out of control and that they have no power to prevent the worst from happening is evident:

Thai politics was moving into another era in which business interests prevailed over all other things. Who could tell which group of people could cause more devastating effects to our country—between businessmen who became politicians so as to protect their own interests and politicians who used their political power as a basis for their business interests?

As his car began to move, Tui closed the side windows and turned on the air-conditioning. He had enough of the sweltering weather. The heat was almost unbearable. Black clouds covered the sky all over but there was still no rain. Everything was completely still. He knew that it was the stillness before a big storm struck. He was sure that soon a devastating storm would come. (393-94)

The pessimism towards Thai politics and the belief that ordinary people are hardly able to take actions that can have positive impacts on the political situation is also evident in modern Thai short stories. The first story that I want to examine is “The Politician” written by Khamsing Srinawk, one of the most well-known Thai short story writers. The story is an attack on both the State and ordinary people who, like those in *Democracies on Parallel Lines*, can hardly be seen as a hope for political reformation. Yet unlike in *Democracies on Parallel Lines*, the client-patron relation is depicted in a highly negative light in this short story. In the following section I will examine “The Politician” in detail, particularly in comparison with the Australian novel, *Freedom Highway*.

### **“The Politician” (1958)**

“The Politician” was translated into English in 1973 by Domnern Garden. Set in approximately the same period as *Freedom Highway*, Khamsing Srinawk’s “The Politician” takes up a number of themes similar to the Australian novel. The story



criticizes the self-serving form of ideology pursued by a government which claims to promote democracy and shows that the patronage system is deeply rooted in Thai culture. However, “The Politician” differs from *Freedom Highway* in a number of aspects. For one thing, the story does not depict ordinary people as the force that can challenge the State. Instead, the people are portrayed as extremely selfish and behaving in a way that undermines democratic ideals. Unlike in *Freedom Highway*, the Thais in this story are not victims who are purely acted upon by the oppressive State but are shown as greedy, opportunistic and valuing personal interests above public ones. At one level, “The Politician” seeks to convey an attitude that for many Thais, ‘freedom’ does not carry with it the burden of responsibility and self-perfection—the attributes that can make freedom a positive social value for common people. Instead, for these Thais, ‘freedom’ is equated with privileges and license and to get ‘freedom’ they need to place themselves in a network of patron-client relationships which allow them certain privileges that they might not be able to access otherwise. At another level, when taking into account the author’s middle-class background, “The Politician” can also be read as a story that conveys the Thai middle class’s mistrust in rural people’s ability to participate in the democratic process. First published in 1958, the story is not as contemporary as most of the Thai stories examined in this thesis, yet it reveals much about long-standing middle-class suspicion and lack of faith in both the politicians and the rural populace’s democratic consciousness which continue into present day Thailand.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> In *A Coup for the Rich* (2007) Ji Giles Ungpakorn criticises middle-class Thais for having a long-standing condescending attitude towards the rural poor and looking down on their ability to choose those who would represent them in parliament (7-8). See also Thongchai (10.11.08) for a similar critique of the Thai middle-class. For rural anger against middle-class condescension, see Mydans (13.10.08).

“The Politician” is set in a small provincial town around the time of a national election. The protagonist is Kerhn, a villager and a regular drunkard, who is urged by his friends to participate in an election in spite of the fact that he barely knows anything about politics. The election figures in this small town not as an occasion in which the people choose the best candidate to represent them in parliament, but as an arena in which each candidate tries to persuade the electorate that he can be the best patron. The people are attracted to the election because they know that before it all sorts of gifts will be distributed by hopeful candidates. By distributing gifts and boasting about their qualifications, candidates hope to convince voters that once elected, they can fulfill their voters’ interests and wishes:

Reputations for handing out money, whisky, tobacco, and food established by the last crop of candidates and the lack of farming to be done because it was the dry season brought a heavy stream of people down from the distant hills. The numbers grew with the approach of election day. Night after night the candidates showed their movies, some nights only one show taking place, but on others as many as three stands would compete with one another. Candidates proclaimed their virtues as though they were supermen. The crowds milled around noisily from group to group watching to see if anything was being given away and if disappointed would move on to another circle. It seemed even more festive than the annual fair.... Each of the office-seekers boasted of his boldness, ability, honours, infinite qualifications. Some boasted of having built roads, wells, monasteries, and even lavatories. One volunteered to construct houses, plant gardens, build schools and hospitals. (6)

The image of an MP as a patron is firmly rooted in the mind of the townspeople. An MP is by no means the one who works for those who choose him and tries his best to represent their interests. Instead, the MP is the one with a lot of power which gives him license to do whatever he wants as well as to distribute resources to his clients in exchange for electoral fidelity. While trying to persuade Kerhn to join in the election race, Kerhn’s friends evoke such an image of an MP who is above all laws and authority:

They say these representatives are really big. Bigger than village heads; bigger than country chiefs, bigger than district officers, bigger than provincial governors, and what really matters, bigger than the police. Now that's it. You can do anything. Booze, beat up anyone, kick the chinks in the pants. Who could stop you? You could get even with that bloody Police Sergeant Huat. Just yesterday we knocked each other around at the poker game at the house of the Police Officer's wife behind the police station. (3)

Tempted by the prospect of having unlimited privileges and power, Kerhn decides to take part in the election. As a notorious drunkard and good-for-nothing, it seems there is very little chance that Kerhn can win the election and at first no one pays much attention to him. However, when Kerhn tries to cause disturbances while other candidates are giving speeches and boasting about their qualifications, the people around him can barely contain their anger. Here we have the depiction of ordinary people so different from the powerless and victimized ones portrayed in *Freedom Highway*. These people are determined to make the best of what might be offered to them by candidates/potential patrons and they can easily turn aggressive and violent when someone appears to stand in their way:

Kerhn and his cronies floated drunkenly with the rest of the crowd. He didn't have a chance to make speeches and if he did, wouldn't have known what to say. The most he could manage was to make disturbances as things went along. But even that didn't go over so well because the people, still hoping the candidates would hand out money and fearing Kerhn would jeopardize the opportunity, became menacing. One night, two groups of candidates set up their platforms, projectors and screens in different corners of the field....Kerhn invited four or five buddies to start shouting from nearby.

“NO GOOD! SHUT UP! NONSENSE! NO...”. Before the sound was out of him, Kerhn realised he was flat on his back from the force of an unknown fist which added the commentary, “You're waiting for money as well and yet you're blasting our ears with your din”.

Kerhn, his mouth and ears swollen, an eye closed, staggered towards him with his friends, dejected. (6)

Yet shortly afterwards, Kerhn is able to twist the course of events in his favour. He comes up with the idea that he must present himself as the local boy who can be the

best patron for his people because he knows them best and is more than happy to fulfill all their wishes. To convince the townspeople, he leads them to a hotel where candidates from Bangkok are staying and demands that they give out money as proof that they can be good patrons for the people if elected. All the candidates from Bangkok are dumbstruck and at a loss of what to do. Seizing the opportunity, Kerhn announces that these candidates from the city are just boasting and do not mean to do anything they promise. He then claims that he is unlike these city people because he is determined to do whatever the townspeople want:

Dear friends, the others have done a lot of talking. Today listen to me. I'm a candidate too. Who was it a little while ago who said he really knows our poverty and troubles? Ask him. Brethren ask him. Does he know what we eat with our rice in the morning? Believe me, he doesn't know. Empty talk. Now take me. I'll do anything you want. Kick a dog, cut up a man. Anyone. Anyone you don't like, tell me....(10)

Kerhn's plan works very well. Notwithstanding his moral character and qualifications, the townspeople overwhelmingly vote for him, obviously in the belief that Kerhn is better suited as their public patron than other candidates. Immediately after the result of the election is announced, Kerhn's status miraculously changes. He is treated with great respect by authorities who used to abuse him. Just the day before, these same authorities put him in jail but they immediately released him in the middle of the night when they discovered that he had won the election. Kerhn is now accorded with privileges he hoped to get and has never enjoyed before:

"It's night already. You can leave, sir. Please wake up those two people."

"Eh, who are you talking to, lieutenant?" Kerhn asked bewildered. "I'm talking to the honourable representative, sir. Please leave. The election is over now."

Kerhn took some time to wake up the other two, then all three crawled outside. Each drank a bowl of water offered by the police, walked unsteadily out of the police station and disappeared in the darkness. Kerhn still kept to

himself the news heard a moment before from the police. His ears were ringing with the words ‘honourable representative’ spoken with humility by the authorities who had for so long bullied him. (11)

Although Kerhn has turned into a public patron who is in a position to distribute a certain amount of licence and privileges to his clients or the people who vote for him, he fails them. The prospect of change confronting him is too much and although he likes the idea of being treated as someone with privileges and license, he is not ready to bear the responsibility of being ‘the people’s representative’. What happens with Kerhn can be read as the dilemma of the notion of ‘freedom’ held by many ordinary Thai people. ‘Freedom’ is desirable when it means privileges, but when privileges come with the burden of responsibility, ‘freedom’ might no longer be pleasant to have. Kerhn’s ignorance of the world beyond his small town is evident and thinking about venturing to the big city on his own to fulfill his new role as an MP greatly alarms him. He realizes that being an MP and enjoying the privileges accorded comes at a price. The unknown responsibility that an MP has to undertake is too overwhelming for him and he eventually decides to save himself from it by escaping from the town:

...his brain agitated but confused. The drunkenness has vanished. He felt airy, as if disembodied. He began to think of things he had never thought of before, of the words ‘people’s representative’. He thought of Gurt’s words spoken in the café, “A representative is bigger than the district officer, bigger than the provincial governor”. Apart from that he knew nothing. Was that all? Doubt welled. Surely there was something more because he knew that every people’s representative had to go to Bangkok. But they must have more to do than just go to the capital. Kerhn began to reflect on Bangkok and its crazy bigness. Didn’t this mean he had to go there to live separated from his own people in a different kind of life? Now what would that be like? The outlook wasn’t bright any more. Kerhn had been to Bangkok once when still a monk. He tried to recall the name of the temple where he had stayed but couldn’t. The failure preyed on his mind. Anxiety increased as he recollected a picture of a previous representative cloaked outlandishly in an outer garment that looked like a whole blanket, with a silly shred of cloth swinging from his neck. He mumbled to himself, “What a fool. You don’t know when you’re well off.” (12)

Although Kerhn is eventually unable to fulfill the promise he has earlier given to his voters, his victory and sudden disappearance benefit some people. Newspapers and ‘big boys in fancy cars’ from Bangkok fabricate the story about ‘the people’s representative’ being kidnapped and murdered by ‘a dark power’. Kerhn is celebrated as a hero who dies for his beliefs. The falsehood of all of this and the way it easily finds its way into big news can be interpreted as a vehement attack on the greediness to make use of all incidents for political benefits. Those ‘big boys’ most likely invent Kerhn’s heroism as a way to discredit their political opponents – ‘a dark power’ referred to in the papers. In doing so they can enhance their status as being on the side of ‘the people’. To make things more convincing, they make a scapegoat out of a policeman who is Kerhn’s long-time enemy. The story ends by emphasizing that in this political culture, no one cares about the common good. All parties are solely interested in seeking personal benefits, power and privileges and there is no room for moral or social responsibility. The image of vultures circling above Kerhn’s imaginary corpse emphasizes these people’s greed and opportunism:

No one saw Mr. Kerhn again. No one in the province knows where he has gone. Those who knew turned out to be the reporters from the Bangkok newspapers. Several of the papers ran the story that fearless representative of the people had his mouth closed by a dark power and that his body was thrown over a cliff for the vultures circling under white clouds.

Now the little province is busy again. Every day fancy cars of the big boys from Bangkok investigating this mysterious case arrive and take back to the city a policeman or two. One car just went off this morning carrying away Sergeant Huat muttering, “Damn, now I’ve had it.” (13)

As with “The Politician”, Thai short stories written in the late 1990s and early 2000s predominantly depict the Thai political life as fraught with obsession with personal interests and indifference towards society as a whole. A good example of this is Chard Kobjitti’s “An Old Friend” (1997), which succinctly conveys the message that the

Thai political problem is not purely caused by dictatorial and corrupt governments. The general public, because of their self-serving notion of freedom, also play a major role in the political dilemma. As with the majority of Thai political stories, a mood of fatalism and determinism permeates “An Old Friend”.

### **“An Old Friend” (1997)**

The story is told from the perspective of San, a middle-class man who leads quite a happy and secure life. San’s life is a contrast to his friend Tui’s, a frustrated and bitter activist who is shattered by the selfishness and corruption of people today. While San represents the majority of Thai people who hold on to the notion of freedom that privileges personal interests above social and political concerns, Tui embodies the concept of freedom that places concern for the common good of society above one’s own. The latter’s tragic life and defeat conveys the message that the notion of freedom that involves responsibility and concern for the common good of society has little place in contemporary Thai society and is doomed to be obliterated.

Tui as a young man in the early 1970s was an idealistic youth who actively participated in a campaign against the then ruling military regime. To escape prosecution from the authoritarian government, he and other university students escaped into the jungle to join the Communist Party of Thailand. However, communism failed Tui and in disappointment he left the party. He soon realised with shock and bitterness that friends who used to share the same political ideals and had escaped with him to the jungle had totally changed. They turned into people who tried to acquire more and more material wealth for themselves and totally neglected social responsibility:

That night Tui was very drunk, but he didn't mourn for his time in the jungle or the communist party. He kept on raving about 'comrades' in the forest who transformed themselves into greedy capitalists. Tui complained all night in anger and frustration. He was so outraged with his former 'comrades'. He was like a man who lost hope again and again. He had nothing left.

The next morning San saw Tui lying unconscious on a dirty mat in front of the bathroom. (42)<sup>56</sup>

Tui's inability to accept the world as it is makes his life very difficult. His political activism during his student years makes him unable to graduate and he cannot find a good job. Moreover, his disillusion with politics and friends who used to share the same ideology leads to his excessive drinking. San always gives Tui some money whenever he drops by and hopes that Tui can adjust to life outside the jungle soon. However, San's hope is not to be fulfilled. Tui's emotional state deteriorates and it reaches the point when Tui is completely unable to register what is going on around him. To his shock, one day San finds Tui weeping under a tree completely absorbed in despair and unable to remember anyone, even San, his close friend. A crowd is surrounding Tui, but none among them has the slightest intention to help the raving man:

Tui is crying under the tamarind tree. Occasionally he looks up at the tamarind tree and mumbles laments about his old comrades. He wears a white shirt and puts its ends inside his trousers politely. He wears leather shoes. He dresses politely and properly just like other people and a glance at him cannot tell that he is insane. San feels that the contrast between Tui's outward appearance and his insanity is the reason people stand around to look at him. (43)

Although feeling very sorry for Tui, San hesitates to approach him, feeling embarrassed to be regarded as a friend of a crazy man. San wants to take Tui to the hospital or to his home but he soon feels that this will cause too much trouble for himself and his family. Finally, all San can do for Tui is to buy him some food and

---

<sup>56</sup>All translations from "An Old Friend" are my own.



leave it by his side. The last picture we have of Tui as the story moves to the end is that of a lonely and miserable figure who is abandoned by all, including his close friend:

“Good luck Tui,” San mumbled to his friend before he began to walk away. Is this all I can do for him? He asked himself.

He called a taxi home, thinking about his wife and children. In a taxi, he turned to look at Tui for the last time. Tui’s dark shadow was still crying alone under the tamarind tree. (46-47)

While Tui’s life stands as a metaphor for the sad plight of the pursuit of social and political ideals in the hope of society’s common good, the choice made by San as the story draws to its end and other choices he has made earlier suggest that the path to a happy and secure life can never be reconciled with the pursuit of social and political ideals. This uncompromising division of political idealism and the pursuit of happiness and security is representative of contemporary Thai political stories. You have to choose one or the other and there is no compromise between the two. In a way, this kind of dichotomous thinking also reflects the traditional notion of freedom in Thailand which hardly encourages civic virtues. If you choose ‘freedom’ for yourself and your family, then it means that you only need to pay attention to personal interests and give up other concerns. San’s life demonstrates this quite well.

Since his student years San has chosen to privilege his own safety and well-being over the fight for social and political freedom. When he was a student, San preferred to concentrate on his education and stayed away from political radicalism. When Tui decided to escape into the jungle, San disappointed his friend by choosing to stay on in the city:

“Shit! What sort of friend are you? You really let me down!” Tui was furious when he found that San had changed his mind and wouldn’t join him and others in the jungle.

“I really can’t go with you. My mum is ill so I have to go home to see her,” San lied although he knew that Tui wouldn’t believe him and perhaps could rightly guess that San backed off because he was scared. (39)

San seems to make a right decision for himself by staying away from politics. He graduates, gets a good job and settles down. Unlike Tui who is alcoholic, jobless and embittered, San leads a secure and comfortable life:

...San stepped out of a publishing house in the *Tha Prachan* area. His design work was warmly received by the publisher and he was paid handsomely. He got all the work done so he was in no rush...(38)

While criticizing people like San for paying more attention to their own well-being and their family more than that of others and society as a whole, the story does not seem to offer any better alternative way of living that balances social responsibility and personal interests. Indeed Tui’s way of life and his eventual defeat also convey the message that although you live your life in a way that places social concerns above all else, you can do very little to positively effect the political course. This attitude is also clearly enunciated through San’s memory of innocent people who participated in the demand for a more just and egalitarian political order but were unknowingly used by the powers-that-be who never reveal themselves. Protestors are compared to ‘pawns’ – those who have no control over the political game and can be brutally disposed of at any time:

San didn’t join the demonstrators who gathered in the enclosure. He chose to be an onlooker on the outside. There he saw a horrifying massacre committed in broad daylight. Even a lifeless body was spared no mercy. Those horrific images kept on haunting San until now....

San was very surprised. How did Tui know that on that day the demonstration would be violently suppressed? There had to be some people who knew beforehand that the massacre would take place. If so, protestors who were murdered must have known nothing about this until the horror began. But by then it was obviously too late. Pawns are pawns and they were usually sacrificed. (40)

The mood of pessimism in “An Old Friend” reflects the prevailing attitude towards the Thai political system in Thailand today. “An Old Friend” shares with other contemporary political stories its uncompromising criticism of both the public and those in power. While the attack on the latter parallels that in *Freedom Highway*, we see a very different representation of the general populace. “An Old Friend” and other Thai works examined earlier bring to light the problematic notion of freedom in Thailand and how such a conception of freedom leads to a predominant lack of faith in ordinary people’s ability to uphold a genuinely democratic system. Although the establishment is severely criticized for its narrow, distorted and oppressive version of freedom, the general populace is no less blamed for their self-serving conception of freedom. Unlike *Freedom Highway*, Thai works stress ordinary people’s complicity in political corruption as much as, if not more than, their victimization.

In spite of the vehement criticism of the Thai political culture, Thai writing discussed in this chapter does not offer a way out of the problem. Worse, it tends to reinforce the stereotype of Thai people as incapable of determining the political course in a democratic way. Such a stereotype runs the risk of silencing dissenting voices which successfully emerged to resist absolutism and military authoritarianism in 1932, 1973 and 1992. Such dissent has yet to develop and strengthen so as to serve as a more powerful and more enduring force against militarist and elitist dominance and client-patron relations but they offer hope for Thailand in the long run. Ordinary Thais with determination to challenge age-old hierarchical structures may ensure that the status quo within Thai society is actively contested and disrupted.<sup>57</sup> Currently,

---

<sup>57</sup> See Kwai Jok Foong’s excellent blog article, “Thailand’s Yellow Orange?” which encourages Thai people to explore the possibilities of contesting hierarchical social and political structure in order to pave way for a more pluralistic and democratic

many Thai academics and social critics have also actively engaged in a quest for solutions to Thai political problems. These intellectuals, namely Thongchai Winichakul, Ji Giles Ungpakorn, Nidhi Eowsriwong, Sulak Sivalak and Prawase Wasi, share the attitude that the persistence of traditional cultural practice and feudal attitudes in modern Thailand has done much harm to the development of democracy.<sup>58</sup>

In the attempt to offer a way out of the Thai political dilemma, Prawase Wasi, one of these intellectuals, argues for a new form of power relations based on equality as a replacement for traditional Thai power relations which are vertical and hierarchical.<sup>59</sup> People are encouraged to form a community in which members help

---

society which is still ‘uniquely’ Thai (09.02.09:<http://khikwai.com/blog/2009/02/09/thailands-orange-revolution/>).

<sup>58</sup> Prawase Wasi and Sulak Sivalak see the monarchy as crucial to modern Thai political life. Sulak, however, argues for the ‘modernisation’ of the Thai monarchy so that it can truly function as the ‘monarchy for the people’ rather than ‘the monarchy for itself’. He emphasizes that the monarchy must not allow itself to become a political tool for certain groups of people and function to serve their vested interests (“The Monarchy and the Constitution” 45). Recently, Sulak has come out to demand that the Abhisit government seeks royal advice for lese majeste law reform. See Nagpal (11.02.09). See more about Sulak from Swearer (1996). Nidhi Eowsriwong also recognises the importance of the Thai monarchy and has expressed concern about the increasing lese majeste charges against several people. He has joined a group of people who signed up for the repeal of lese majeste law so that it would not be used to as a tool for political oppression. See *Prachatai* (12.02.09). Thongchai Winichakul and Ji Giles Ungpakorn are more radically inclined and critical of the Thai monarchy. On 4 March 2009 Thongchai and over 50 well-known academics from around the world initiated a petition that calls for the reform of Thailand’s lèse majesté law. For more information, see Walker and Farrelly (04.03.09). Ji Giles Ungpakorn who has a British mother and Thai father, is an avowed Marxist. He was recently charged with lese majeste, presumably because of what he has written in his book *A Coup for the Rich*, and has fled to the U.K. His writing is available from <http://wdpress.blog.co.uk/>. Ji’s latest publication, “Red Siam Manifesto”, which has been disseminated on the Internet is seen as a threat to national security by Thai authorities. Attempts have been made to block access to this writing. See *Prachatai* (14.02.09: <http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=995>).

<sup>59</sup> For a detailed discussion of the downside of hierarchical social relations, see Prawase (*Leadership: Current Social Issues and How to Address Them*) 26-32.

one another and maintain a balance between personal and collective good. Such a community must promote moral and civic virtues so that people can live together harmoniously and at the same time are capable of defending their rights and actively participating in the checks and balances of the state (*The Journey of Thoughts* 102-104,108). Implicit in this argument is that what is missing and needs to be promoted in Thai society is the conception of freedom that is closely associated with the concept of freedom defined by Isaiah Berlin as positive freedom. In a public lecture on contemporary Italy given at Sydney University on 30 August 2006, Paul Ginsborg defined positive freedom as ‘a freedom to’: a possibility of a community to establish in the name of a collective good a necessary framework in which a search for self-realisation can take place, in which there must be self-discipline, limits and controls. As with Duncan Ivison, Ginsborg does not share Berlin’s mistrust of positive freedom. On the contrary, he sees positive freedom as a necessity for the development of democracy and regards the Italian political problem as crucially stemming from the overwhelming privileging of negative freedom over positive freedom. Ginsborg also sees the Italian patronage system as the cause of political corruption and inseparable from the Italians’ preference for negative freedom over positive freedom.

Prawase appears to share Ginsborg’s view that positive freedom must be seriously promoted as a way to deal with political patronage, corruption and dictatorship. Positive freedom in this sense requires an individual to take responsibility and exercise self-discipline so as to maintain self-governance. An individual is thus a source of power that can prevent or counter the corrupt or oppressive state. However, for Prawase, an individual on his/her own is powerless. He/she needs to form a compassionate and harmonious relationship with his/her community and other external surroundings so as to make possible socio-political

reform (*The Journey of Thoughts* 102). This attitude crucially reflects a Buddhist worldview in which an individual is regarded as an intrinsic part of the world around him/her and cannot be separated from it. Indeed for Prawase, Buddhism, particularly reformist Buddhism, is the fundamental source of his social and political visions. While still retaining some core Buddhist beliefs and teachings, the reformist Buddhists do not hesitate to reconstruct and reinvent others to suit their socio-political aspirations. In other words, these intellectuals criticise and reject some aspects of traditional Thai cultural and religious practices deemed inappropriate or detrimental to the development of a more democratic and egalitarian society and at the same time reconstitute and highlight others which can serve as a potential solution to current social and political problems. Prawase's criticism of traditional Thai power relations and his promotion of communal morals and civic activities as a way to counter the State's power are good examples of this. Modern Western political thoughts exert great influence on Prawase's social and political visions, but they are integrated with a Buddhist world view and from this emerges the idea of freedom with the potential to serve as an impetus for social and political reformation.<sup>60</sup> Prawase's ideas here can be seen as a result of the hybridisation of Eastern and Western philosophy, when contact with Western political thought leads to alternative ways of solving social and political problems. Unlike the ruling Thai elite's form of hybridisation regarding the Western concept of freedom which was created primarily to maintain their authority and power, Prawase's hybridised solution to the Thai political dilemma aims to help ordinary Thais, and at the same time preserve some traditional institutions and practices while reforming Thai Buddhism in a way that does not obstruct the progress

---

<sup>60</sup> Prawase's philosophy and social, political and religious views are also conveyed through many of his lectures and articles available from [www.prawase.com](http://www.prawase.com).

of democratic development. His solution aims for gradual and continuing social change at a micro-politics level and does not seek to totally destroy existing traditional institutions, presumably in the hope of preventing the social chaos that abrupt change may cause.

Prawase's political philosophy is generally well-received among the politically neutral segment of the populace, however in some ways it can also be seen as contributing to the preservation of the status quo of unequal power structure in Thai society. For example, Prawase's stance towards the PAD and the monarchy has come under criticism by Duncan McCargo in his "Thai Politics as Reality TV" where he argues that Prawase is one of the members of 'network monarchy', which includes "elements of the military, the bureaucracy, and even nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), academics, and civil society activists. Most members of the network have no direct contact with the King himself, but act out of loyalty to what they see as his intentions." McCargo disagrees with Prawase's proposal that a government of national unity be set up as a way out for the current Thai political crisis, seeing this as a desire to weaken political parties and prevent them from emerging as 'major powerbrokers' which could undermine the dominance of the Thai monarchy.<sup>61</sup>

Despite some criticism of Prawase's political stance, his recognition of the importance of religion in Thai society is shared by a number of other Thai intellectuals, social critics and writers. It is important to ask then: Why does religion appear to play such a vital role in the socio-political sphere in Thai society? In the following chapter I will discuss in more detail the way Buddhism informs the social and political outlooks of many Thais. The chapter also addresses the difference in the

---

<sup>61</sup> See McCargo (02.03.09: <http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=1021>).

imagining of religion in modern Western societies and Thai society.



## Chapter four: Buddhism

According to Richard King, the Enlightenment began a secularization process that has led to the erosion of the authority of institutional religions in modern Western societies. King maintains that while religion is not 'dying out', it has been increasingly marginalised and excluded from the realm of politics and power. King writes:

One consequence of the modern distinction between the spheres of religion and politics has been to foster a suspicion among Westerners that any linkage of the two realms is an example of a 'merely rhetorical' use of religious discourse to mask some underlying political, ideological or 'worldly' intention. (13)

Such a suspicion and tendency to separate religion from the public sphere and the socio-political power associated with it is not the case in many non-Western societies. In Southeast Asia, for example, religion is, in fact, part of a person's public identity and it is integral to the issues of social and political authority. This is particularly true with Thailand where Buddhism is seen as an integral part of the Thai identity and has long been employed as a legitimizing political tool by the State and, more recently, by the rising middle class. This chapter will examine the depiction of Thai Buddhism in three Australian novels and compare this with the representation of Buddhism in two Thai novels and four short stories. I argue that the aforementioned difference between the Western and non-Western construction of religion plays a crucial part in determining the Thai and Australian religious imaginings. The Australian impressions of Buddhism are quite varied, but they all echo the modern privatization of religion as a phenomenon associated with the personal realm and largely deprived of social and political authority. When religion is brought into the social or political sphere, it tends to be met with resistance, at least from a section of the populace who see the role of

religion in the public sphere as a political tool for certain conservative groups. On the contrary, in the Thai religious imagining Buddhism usually functions as a way to maintain social peace and order although this does not preclude the spiritual and psychological role of religion. Thai authors, particularly those from the middle-class, tend to depict Buddhism in a way that shows that it is indispensable to the social order. However, the secularization and so-called degradation of establishment Buddhism in contemporary Thailand has caused an anxiety that Buddhism will not be able to provide the much-needed moral and political foundation. This anxiety is reflected in Thai authors' predominant critique of establishment Buddhism as being corrupted and overwhelmed by materialism and consumerism. As Jackson maintains, the emergence of the Buddhist movement known as Reformist Buddhism which seeks to redefine the spiritual, social and political role of Buddhism is also partly the result of Duncan McCargo anxiety towards the growing secularism of contemporary Thai society (53-57).

***Noble Sindhu Horses (2005)***

Set in the 1990s, Lynette Chataway's *Noble Sindhu Horses* tells the story of an Australian couple, Ava and Francis, whose lives take a dramatic turn after they have spent a few years in rural Thailand doing volunteer work. Having witnessed poverty and restrictions imposed on the Thai villagers, the couple becomes keenly aware of the inequalities and material imbalance between the West and poorer countries. The author juxtaposes Ava and Francis' lives with that of Nikkon, the young Thai villager, whose life is a long and endless struggle against material lack and oppressive cultural and religious values. The novel can be read both as a critique of the West's materialism and the East's fatalistic, deterministic and oppressive religious and social

norms.

My discussion of *Noble Sindhu Horses* will concentrate on how the novel's representation of institutional Buddhism reflects the attitude that religion should be separated from the public sphere and that religion which is part of the public sphere is merely a socio-political tool used for maintaining the status quo. Apart from emphasising Buddhism's oppressive role, the novel also shows that it is a religious creed that prescribes a fatalistic world view and encourages an obsession with self and personal salvation. Although rejecting institutional religions such as Buddhism and Christianity, the novel foregrounds the human need for spirituality and recognises its crucial role in helping people to make sense of, and appreciate, life as well as deal with emotional crisis. The form of spirituality celebrated in the novel is an antidote to public religions such as Buddhism in its privileging of life and freedom and its emphasis on the interconnectedness of all forms of lives.

The adverse impact of institutional or public religion on an individual is dramatised through the life of Nikkon. Born into a poor family, Nikkon lacks access to proper education and has little chance to better his life. At the age of 11, Nikkon becomes a novice and leaves home to stay at a village temple for three weeks. An old monk comes to Nikkon's house at dawn to take him to the temple and the two walk a long distance to the temple. Nikkon's journey to the temple is endowed with a surrealistic quality as if to convey the young boy's anxious expectation and trepidation as he is about to be initiated into the realm of spirituality for the first time:

The boy and the old monk walk silently in single file, and watch as the sun rises and its rays mix with old forest fire smoke and ash that cannot escape beyond the mountain ranges. The sky is burnt orange and, with each passing step, Nikkon is drawn closer and closer to a place that does not exist in real time. His bare feet absorb the road until there is no road behind anymore, no past, only a split-second present, and a long winding future. (26)

However, the seemingly insignificant events that take place during the trip imply the inadequacy of Buddhism, its fatalistic world view and its inability to fulfill people spiritually. The monk's indifference towards a dying dog they meet along the way and Nikkon's confusion and probably even guilt create the impression of Buddhism as a religion which does not seek to intervene or stop suffering, but encourages people to see it as part of life and accept it as such:

Nikkon's attention is drawn away to an injured dog that is struggling to drink from a dirty puddle. The dog does not have the energy to move closer to the water, and tries to stretch its tongue to reach it. Why does no one help? Nikkon wonders. Why do I not help? The dog dies mid-battle, with its eyes on Nikkon. (26)

The old monk's advice to a little boy whom they meet a little later implies a similar construction of Buddhism as a pessimistic creed which ordains that life is full of pain and suffering. Nikkon's doubt of the monk's knowledge is the hint of the older Nikkon's lack of faith in the Buddhism practiced by people around him:

And the old Monk keeps walking. The only time he shows any other sign of life is when they pass a small boy, who is naked except for pieces of string tied around his wrists and ankles. The boy rubs his dirty fists into his eyes and cries for his father. The Monk says, without turning his head, "Your father is dead, son," just as a man arrives to take the little boy home. "Don't cry. Paw is here," the man says, and Nikkon wonders how the Monk could get it so wrong. (27)

Nikkon finds life as a novice little different from life at school. The moral education provided at the temple is similar to the secular education he receives at a local school, especially in the endeavour to make him uncritical, obedient and subservient. Nikkon has to mechanically follow the temple's strict discipline and subject himself to hard work and monastic training. Fearful forms of reincarnation are used to scare the boys away from breaking moral principles. Fear is, therefore, employed as a crucial

disciplinary tool:

He sleeps on the hard floor and rises at three for prayers, meditation, study and work. He learns things he does not fully understand: kill no living thing; if one is hateful or violent, rebirth is in hell; if greedy, it is as a ghost, if guilty of acts of delusions or confusion, the torment of life as an animal lies ahead. To reach Nirvana Nikkon must see things as they are. He must attain a deep insight into reality.

Nikkon shakes his head, bewildered, and mulls over such concepts as he sweeps, and dusts... (28)

As he grows up, Nikkon is repeatedly told that a good person must be obedient and submissive. His father frequently cites a few favourite religious parables to educate his son about the ways of the world. Nikkon is taught that he must follow the example of the Sindhu horses, the well-bred horses well-known for their endurance, docility and good behaviour.<sup>62</sup> This religious teaching thus dissuades people from the pursuit of freedom and autonomy:

Remember, mules are good, if tamed, as are noble Sindhu horses, but he who tames himself is better,' Pornchai warns. This is his favourite parable and he quotes it tirelessly... (62)

The novel also stresses the role of Buddhism in prohibiting a person from climbing a social ladder. Nikkon's father always warns him against an attempt to improve his social and economic status. He is told to look at his life as something that has already been predestined by his 'past *karma*' or the actions he did in his previous lives, and therefore, nothing can be done to make this life better. The only consolation lies in the next life and this can be achieved through making merit:

"It is not good for a man to know more than is necessary for his daily living," Pornchai says....

---

<sup>62</sup>For a definition of the Sindhu breed of horses, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sindhu\\_Kingdom#Sindhu\\_breed\\_of\\_horses](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sindhu_Kingdom#Sindhu_breed_of_horses).

Nikkon has heard such talk before; has heard it from birth. He must be patient. It is not possible to change past karma, or to change his life. Look to the future. He tells Nikkon this when they go to the temple with their incense sticks and lotus flowers, when they press gold leaf onto the Buddha there, or drop copper coins into a beggar's cup. (61-62)

The other villagers are similar to Nikkon's father in their unquestioning acceptance of the religious doctrine. Their merit-making practice is more an investment for a happier next life than something with intrinsically spiritual value. Monks and novices are merely a vessel through which people can make merit in the hope of securing a better reincarnation for themselves. While living at the temple as a novice, Nikkon dutifully joins other monks and novices every morning to receive alms from people who do not want their next life to be full of suffering:

Nikkon takes to the streets with a begging bowl. Pieces of fish, glutinous rice, black beans in coconut milk are thrown together into the bowl by others also trying to work out a precarious future. (28)

In addition to giving food to monks and performing Buddhist rituals, the Thais' act of giving money to beggars is also part of their attempt to seek redemption through merit-making. In the following passage a disabled hill tribe beggar is a means through which people hope to attain redemption. What is implied here is that it is more the wish to gain merit than compassion or sympathy for fellow human beings that motivates the Thais to give. Also suggested here is that the practice of merit-making has become little more than a business enterprise which can be quite profitable:

Prasert, the crippled Hmong, drags himself by. His legs bend forward at the knees and have the disturbing look of an umbrella that has turned itself inside out. Prasert is unable to walk, because his legs won't straighten. The soles of his feet are as soft as sponges, and he has sores on his limbs that are left uncovered. Flicking flies, he nods at those who drop coins into his tin cup, clink, clink. This is Prasert's full-time occupation. He makes more money from people hoping to gain merit than Jirapun does from those needing to eat. (12)

The Buddhist merit-making practice is also depicted as a ritual that prescribes threats of punishment for those who do not adhere to it. Buddhism as represented here, therefore, is little more than a doctrine that uses reward and punishment to lure and threaten people:

“Remember, you don’t want to end up grovelling in the dirt with the buffalo shit, or come back as a dirty, pockmarked Hmong,” his father warns....” (62)

Although a Thai, Nikkon is largely made to think and speak Western thoughts. He is also portrayed as a clever, sensitive and ambitious young man who is often frustrated by social restrictions and religious values imposed on him since childhood. Ultimately, Nikkon comes to a realisation that it is impossible for him to break free from the limitations imposed on his life and he decides to take his own life. Nikkon's attitude towards death as the best choice for him is more Western than Thai in its privileging of an individual's freedom to choose what he wants for his life over other people's opinions or oppositions. The traditional Thai attitude towards suicide is very negative because taking one's own life is considered a very serious sin and those who commit suicide are seen as escaping from responsibilities they owe to their family and society. Nikkon, however, does not see his suicide in this light. Although he is certain that his parents will be upset, he does not think of his suicide as something that breaks a moral code or evades responsibility towards his family:

He wishes it did not have to be this way, but like his father says, having choices is good fortune. He is aware that his father will view what he is about to do as destruction, as waste. He will be angry. But for Nikkon there is no doubt. His own conviction, that not doing it would be to live a lie is enough. (150)

Nikkon's preparation for death is very much like a religious ritual. He chooses a funeral pyre located in a lonely vacant land as the place where he will take his own life. The night is quiet, but he is not scared or depressed. Nikkon uses an especially beautiful piece of cloth that he has bought a long time ago from a mysterious old man and he is convinced that the cloth is meant for a very special occasion:

He spreads out the beautiful piece of purple material that he always felt from the moment he bought it from an old man by the river, was destined for greatness. Rows of stars woven in gold thread glisten around the edges, and Nikkon takes time to smooth out the creases. He stands and looks at the cloth, at the contrast between it and the stubby grass, the bleached earth.

Nikkon crawls onto it carefully so that his feet initially do not make contact with it. He arranges himself cross-legged in the middle and looks at the pyre before he turns his eyes away. He feels the warmth of the ground as it penetrates the material and he wills it to fill him with peace. (149)

The ritual-like actions that Nikkon engages in before he takes his own life can be read as an attempt to invent a faith or a personal form of spirituality in time of emotional crisis. This kind of spirituality is meant to provide Nikkon with comfort and peace, replacing the major religious tradition which he finds less than fulfilling and even suffocating. What is also interesting in the above passage is the emphasis on the cloth's beauty as contrasted to the dry and bleached grass underneath. The dying grass seems to suggest Nikkon's life which has been oppressed and stamped by the life-inhibiting religion and social values while the beautiful cloth represents the hope for freedom and autonomy. As the novel unfolds, Nikkon's death is not shown as the end of life, but as the beginning of a new life, one that will be closely intertwined with the Australian couple who spend two years in Nikkon's village. Nikkon's suicide does not convey an attitude that life is worthless, but is a protest against social and religious norms that deny humans' natural rights and freedom.

Similar to Nikkon, Francis and Ava also undergo a period of emotional crisis



although theirs resolves differently. After two years in a rural Thai village, the Australian couple find it hard to adjust to their former lifestyle. They are unable to find any meaning in the pursuit of more and more material comforts which people around them actively engage in. They are also upset with their friends' complacency and indifference towards the plight of people who are less fortunate. Both of them seek help from psychologists, but find it useless. Francis is the first one who succumbs to psychological breakdown. Lying in bed in a psychiatric ward, he recalls past events and regrets mistakes he has made that brought him to this helpless state. Seeing the ray of the rising sun, Francis remembers the day his daughter was born and he is suddenly overwhelmed by emotions:

Francis sees the sun come up through an East window. He has an almost mystical experience watching the watery light seep into the room. Not far from here, he held Elizabeth, unwashed and unnamed, a little purple bundle just born. The same sun rose through a similar hospital window back then, bars and all. Tears trickled down each side of his face into his ears. Francis believed that the three of them—he, Ava and Elizabeth—were taking part in a miracle that night. He still believes it, though he is not religious. (139)

Francis's recollection of the moments after his daughter was born reminds him of the importance of life and this eventually helps him to come to terms with his problem. The novel's privileging of life and its association of birth with spirituality is articulated more profoundly in a later episode which focuses on Ava's childbirth. Births are portrayed here as beautiful, joyous and exhilarating experiences and nature is celebrated as a source of new lives and fresh beginnings. Within the embrace of nature, all creatures are shown as aspiring for freedom and autonomy from the very beginning of their lives:

Elsewhere bird-wing butterflies are breaking free from the confines of their too-tight chrysalises and tentatively unfolding rice-paper wings for a test flight. Baby hermit crabs try on abandoned welk-snail shells for size and security. Mottled and pearly eggs in nests of hair, grass and baling twine hatch: the finch,

the starling, the frogmouth and the falcon. And the fruiting bodies on a myriad fungi release spores into the forest, while Ava rubs a hand over her bare stomach so like the laughing Buddha's in its roundness. She wonders whether it is her body or her baby's that is in control. Swamped by both pain and elation, she wishes she could lie back again on her own pillow in her own bed and give birth right now, with Francis and Elizabeth as the only witnesses. She has heard of women who orgasm during labour and, although she knows this is not likely to happen, she nevertheless can see the possibility... (230-231)

Birth as a means to freedom and through which nature creates the connectedness of all lives is emphasised through Nikkon's rebirth as Ava's second child. Nikkon's suicide does not extinguish life but is a passage through which a new struggle for freedom can be resumed:

Upside down, cocooned in a no-man's- land of suspended animation, Nikkon begins again. Sleek and seal-like, his blind head butts at the dark. Bones mould to muscle. There is a light at the end of the tunnel ...Nikkon works his way towards it and screams himself into existence... (231-232)

The novel's invocation of nature's spirituality can be perceived as an attempt to replace established or major religious traditions with a personal form of belief. In other words, private faith or a religion of personal fulfilment is privileged over public or institutional religion which is seen as standing in opposition to life's natural desire for freedom. In *White Light*, the other Australian novel under consideration, we also witness a quest for a religion of personal fulfilment that can better answer an individual's need for spiritual and psychological support. However, before moving on to this novel, I want to provide a critique of *Noble Sindhu Horses*, particularly its depiction of institutional Thai Buddhism in comparison with contemporary attitudes towards this form of Buddhism in Thai society.

As discussed earlier, the most important Buddhist concept under attack in *Noble Sindhu Horses* is the law of *karma* which is essentially seen as a form of fatalism and determinism. The novel shows that the Thai Buddhists are taught to believe that the

quality of their present life is already determined by *karma* or what they have done in their previous lives. There is nothing they can do to change this so they had better accept the condition of their present life and engage in merit-making which is the only way that can make their next life a better one.

Although traditional Thai Buddhism regards one's condition at birth as the result of past *karma*, in Thailand *karma* does not function as a form of determinism that validates class division. As Hanks maintains, the Thai social system does not ordain that an individual's status is permanently fixed by birth, but may be changed through that person's actions during his lifetime (1248). Nevertheless, it can be argued that the mainstream concept of karma contributes to the acceptance of a number of social and political wrongs and allows various forms of corruption to go unchallenged. By attributing unpleasant circumstances or incidents to bad *karma* or horrific deeds committed in previous lives, people can avoid taking responsibility for their actions or fail to search for the real causes of the problems which may stem from serious social, cultural or political issues that should be addressed. Still the concept of karma is not totally without psychological benefit because it can be interpreted in a way that helps an individual to feel better by lessening pressure or stress when something absolutely beyond control happens (Suntaree 214-218).

While *Noble Sindhu Horses* constructs the laws of reincarnation as a religious tool that effectively disciplines Thai people and impedes their freedom, in contemporary Thailand the traditional concept of reincarnation is questioned and even rejected by a significant number of people (Basham 7).<sup>63</sup> For many Thais who do not reject it, this concept may largely act as a reminder that a person should not do

---

<sup>63</sup> See also Spiro (1970).

something bad or else that bad thing will catch up with him or her by causing emotional or physical suffering either in this life or in later lives (Suntaree 214-218).

*Noble Sindhu Horses's* perception of the Buddhist ritual of merit-making also differs from what many Thais see. While the novel represents merit-making as a self-serving practice conducted to ensure that one will have a better rebirth, in Thailand merit-making is traditionally endowed with rich spiritual, psychological and communal meanings. Ideally, merit-making is a way through which one extends sympathy and compassion to other people; this helps purify one's mind and lessen selfishness. Merit-making also allows the Buddhists to participate in communal activities, especially when the ritual is performed at a temple or on a communal compound. However, in contemporary Thailand institutional Buddhism is now strongly criticised for exploiting merit-making for secular purposes. Many Thais express their dissatisfaction with the secularization and degradation of mainstream Buddhism. There is also an anxiety that Buddhism will no longer have a place in increasingly secularized contemporary Thai society. The following two short stories echo such an anxiety. The first story in particular reflects the Thai construction of religion as inseparable from the public realm. A society where religion no longer performs its spiritual role is shown as governed by greed, selfishness and shameful exploitation. This story can be seen as a plea for the reformation and purification of establishment Buddhism, but not as a rejection of the social or public role of religion. The critique of institutional Buddhism in these two short stories clearly stems from a different basis from the one in *Noble Sindhu Horses* which primarily regards public or institutional religion as in opposition to an individual's right to personal freedom and autonomy.

**“Mother of Waters, Thaokae Bak, and a Dog” (1979)**

Sri Dao Ruang’s “Mother of Waters, Thaokae Bak, and a Dog” focuses on the changes in an annual temple festival traditionally held as an occasion for people to pay respect and show gratitude to the Goddess of the Waters. To do this they float small decorative baskets along the river. It is believed that if they want something, they can make a prayer while they float the basket and the Goddess of Waters will grant them their wish. In the past this festival was also an occasion for people, both young and old, to have some fun together as well as to participate in merit-making and other religious rituals. However, this year sees drastic changes in the festival. Through the depiction of the festival as a profit-making business, the story attacks institutional Buddhism and those who exploit it for financial gain. Instead of being a communal ground where villagers can gather together for spiritual and recreational purposes as before, the temple is now a place that lures people to spend money in exchange for merit. Unlike before, the villagers now have to pay to enter the temple, to float the baskets and to enjoy entertainments. The changes in the festival are a great surprise to Thong Muan, the little girl whose point of view is at the centre of the story:

That evening, when Thong Muan arrived at the front of the temple, she couldn't help being surprised to find she had to pay to enter: three baht each for adults, and one baht for children of her age. But now that she was there, Thong Muan was ready to pay. She handed over the single baht her mother had given her and went in through the gate. She said to herself that anyway the money would go to the temple in the end, and that would be merit-making itself. As she went further in, she noticed that on the right-hand side a stage had been fixed up for the singing contest. The voice of the temple spokesman, whom she'd known since she was a little girl, was now announcing that competitors in the singing contest would have to pay a five-baht entrance fee. (171)

Because of their naivety, many villagers, especially the old, believe what the temple committee tell them—that by giving money to temple, they can gain a lot of merit and

their next life will be blissful. By telling the story from the point of view of the little girl who, although astonished to see the changes in the temple festival, is willing to believe whatever she is told, the author succeeds in satirising the villagers who are gullible enough to be deceived. Nonetheless, the author's much more vehement attack is directed at those who use religion to exploit the villagers for their personal benefit:

As soon as a sufficient crowd had assembled in front of the hall, one committeeman in a bright blue rosette shouted out: "Hey! Hurry up and come on in! The Prologue's already started! If you find all the seats taken, don't blame me! Only three baht per seat! And the money that comes in doesn't fly off... It goes straight to the temple, every penny! ... Believe me, by watching the like you are making merit together...In the next life, you'll get...!"

...a number of old women immediately dug out some money. They raised it with both hands to their foreheads in supplication and moved their lips silently before handing it over in payment for their seats... "it's no loss...One way or another, I'm putting money into the temple. If I make merit in this life, in the next I'll get...!" (173-174)

Monks are shown as complicit with laymen who use religion for commercial ends. The story shows that monks are no longer interested in their traditional role as spiritual guides but are totally concerned with material comforts and money. This critique of mainstream monks as people who use religion for personal gain is quite common in contemporary Thailand. Newspaper columnists often refer to self-serving and money-oriented monks as '*Seua Leuang* [Yellow Tigers]', too indolent to earn their living through decent hard work and using religion to provide themselves with material luxuries:

...by now the abbot of the temple would surely be fast asleep, since he couldn't stand the cold, and had left the committeemen to take care of everything. Not till the next morning would His Reverence learn whether they'd turned a profit or taken a loss. But even if they'd taken a loss, the temple wouldn't be out of pocket. For most of the capital outlay had come from Thaokae Bak, one of the members of the temple committee along with some high-ranking District officials. Of course...if they'd turned a profit, Thaokae Bak would naturally have to hand some of it over to the temple. The abbot fell asleep just before daybreak... (175-176)

After they enter the temple ground, the villagers are repeatedly urged to donate money for the renovation of the temple. This exploitation of the villagers and the monks' desire to increase the material grandeur of the temple is all the more repugnant in the light of the villagers' poverty. The villagers hardly earn enough to provide a decent meal for themselves and most of them are deeply in debt. The festival apparently helps make the poor even poorer while increasing the wealth of those who are already rich like ThaoKae Bak, the Chinese shop owner who is the primary sponsor of the money-making festival:

As for the old folks, they were breathing signs of relief that the day for asking forgiveness of the Mother of Waters had now passed, and that they'd had the chance to make their wish in silent prayer. If these prayers were granted, the rice-stalks in the fields would grow up tall and strong. The Mother of Waters would not make the waters overflow their banks and flood the fields as in previous years. Furthermore, in the coming hot season they'd be able to measure out enough rice to pay off their debts to Thaokae Bak, and so relieve their poverty for another year. Until the next Floating Basket Day came round. (176)

The anxiety that the erosion of religion will result in immoral and selfish social relations parallels a concern that traditional Buddhism is not able to keep up with drastic socio-economic changes and is, therefore, losing its relevance to modern people's lives. The next story expresses this latter worry succinctly. The fact that the following story is not as contemporary as others reveals that this concern about the inability of religion to meet modern society's demands is not merely a recent phenomenon.

### **“Lord Buddha, Help me?”(1969)**

In Suchit Wongthed's “Lord Buddha, Help me?” institutional Buddhism is shown as

losing a prestige it formerly enjoyed, becoming irrelevant to modern life. The story focuses on Bunman, an ex-monk who is deeply disappointed to find that he cannot get any job after he leaves the monastery. Bunman was ordained as a monk for ten years and was awarded a *Parien III*, a certificate which proves his success in monastic training. In the past, a person of Bunman's qualifications would be warmly welcomed by any employers. Now, however, things are very different. His *Parien III* is worthless because employers only want to hire college graduates and they have no interest in Bunman's moral training and achievement.

The story does not so much put the blame on society for belittling or neglecting religion as on religion itself for being unable to keep up with the world and maintain its relevance to contemporary life. This criticism is conveyed through the characterization of Bunman as a person who has little knowledge of the world outside the monastery and is totally unable to find his place once he leaves the temple. Bunman's initial pride and overestimation of his qualification and virtues can also be read as the criticism of mainstream Buddhism's sense of complacency and misjudgment of its own importance. The depiction of Bunman as a weak and whining type can also be seen as an attack on religion for lacking resilience and strength to face changes and adversity:

He never thought that the life of a layman would be so difficult and miserable. The world is so confusing. It is all turmoil, indecency, and without justice.

“How can I, who studied for my *Parien III* until my head almost fell apart, still be without a job?”

“While in the monkhood, I never transgressed even a minor precept. Why have not good deeds led to good results? Or are the words of the Lord Buddha already out of date? ....”

The more he thinks, the more uncomfortable he becomes. He starts feeling sick to his stomach. He smells the stinking car exhaust. He can't stand the dust rising from the street. Maybe it would be good to pass out so that he would be taken to a hospital, where he would be fed. (249)



Unable to stand hunger, Bunman decides to pawn the Buddha amulets he recently bought. The pawnshop rejects the amulets on the ground that they are fake. This is the last straw for Bunman. He gets rid of the amulets and is convinced that religion and its encompassing moral power are now useless in the modern world. Bunman's decision to throw away the amulets emphasises once more the irrelevance of traditional forms of spirituality in modern life. Through Bunman's defeat and his decision to return to the temple, the story implies that Buddhism's place in modern society is seriously threatened and any chance that traditional Buddhism will be able to maintain its spiritual viability is slim:

There is no use having the strongest and most consistent faith. Bunman will return to the temple again. Perhaps luck will later take his side, if not much, a little. He has always thought it is impossible for a person to be unlucky all the time.

Bunman looks around. He slowly bends down over the slightly open cover of the sewer system near the side of the road. He quickly drops what he holds in his left hand into the sewer and recovers quickly to leave the spot where he had been standing.

Bunman murmurs to himself: "I had to do this Luang Phauau. Even four of you together couldn't help me get what I wanted...even the little things. Go your own way. I'll go mine. You are not even any good for the pawnshop."(250)

The inability of institutional Buddhism to maintain its viability in the face of rapid socio-political development results in urban, middle-class based Buddhist movements which purportedly seek to restore Buddhism to its pivotal position as society's moral and socio-political foundation. Jackson refers to the form of Buddhism advocated by the middle-class Thais critical of establishment Buddhism as Reformist Buddhism. The Reformist Buddhists have reinterpreted a number of Buddhist beliefs and teachings based on logic, science and rationality. For example, they offer a demythologised interpretation of religious doctrines, shifting the emphasis from next

or previous lives to human life in this world and socio-economic development. Unlike mainstream Buddhism, Reformist Buddhism de-emphasizes the importance of merit-making and encourages a person to seek nirvana, redefined as a universally accessible goal for everyone, through his or her own efforts (Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict* 48-49).

Although functioning as an alternative form of spirituality, Reformist Buddhism is also used by the middle-class to justify their social and political views. Buddhadasa, the well-known reformist monk, enthusiastically advocated the use of *Dhamma* for social ends and emphasized the symbiotic relationship between the social and the spiritual. According to Jackson, Reformist Buddhism is the Buddhism of dissent because of the challenge it poses to institutional Buddhism and ultimately the establishment itself (Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict* 117-12).<sup>64</sup> Before proceeding further, I want to outline the relationship between the Thai state and institutional Buddhism. The Thai State has long employed Buddhism as a tool for political legitimacy. Since the ancient Thai Kingdom of Sukhothai (mid-thirteenth to mid-fifteenth centuries), the king has claimed to be a supporter of Buddhism and a devout follower of the Buddha. His claim to moral virtues was used to justify his position as the highest leader who held absolute power. The traditional Buddhist notion of *karma* was also used to justify kingship. The king was regarded as the one who had accumulated the greatest merit during his past lives and this legitimized his high position and absolute authority over others. After the fall of Sukhothai, Ayutthaya (1351-1767) was established and the palace was increasingly influenced by the Khmer political culture which perceived the king not merely as the most

---

<sup>64</sup>See also Jackson (2003) for a study of Buddhadasa and modernist reform in Thailand.

meritorious in the kingdom, but also as a god born into this world to help people by being their leader. Such notions of kingship and the use of Buddhism to legitimize political authority have persisted into contemporary Thailand although with some adaptations (Jackson *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict* 40-42). In Thailand today, the State control of Buddhism is evident in the *Sangha* administration, and institutional Buddhism is often employed to support the State's political and social agenda (Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict* 63-64).<sup>65</sup> A highly disturbing relationship between the State and institutional Buddhism is probably best articulated in the involvement of the conservative monk, Kittiwuttho, with right-wing demonstrations and violent suppression of unarmed protestors in the mid-1970s (Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict* 151-52).<sup>66</sup>

In the light of the secularization of institutional Buddhism and its alignment with the state, the rising middle-class turns to reformist Buddhism as the moral basis for their political and social visions. Such a trend is evident in middle-class writers' literary expression. Institutional Buddhism is often depicted as outdated, degraded or, at best, becoming less and less relevant to modern life. Reformist Buddhism, on the contrary, is often represented as a new hope and the answer to the current social and political ills. The downside of this is that Reformist Buddhism largely responds to the socio-political and spiritual needs of the well-educated urban middle-class rather than those of the rural populace whose religious practice is inseparable from superstitious and animist beliefs. The Reformist Buddhists, however, tend to ignore the class and regional-specific aspect of their version of Buddhism.

---

<sup>65</sup> See also Swearer (1999) for a discussion of Buddhism as an important factor in the politics of Thailand from the thirteenth centuries until today.

<sup>66</sup> See also Keyes (1978) for more about Kittuwuttho.

I will now examine the depiction of reformist Buddhism in two Thai novels and one Australian novel: Wimon Sainimnuan's *The Poor* (1987), Lin Leawarin's *Democracies on Parallel Lines* (1994) and James McQueen's *White Light* (1990). While the Thai representation of reformist Buddhism reflects a middle-class attitude that religion is integral to, and has a major role to play in, the socio-political sphere, the Australian author, James McQueen, constructs Reformist Buddhism as a religion of personal fulfilment which offers a way out from the trap of Western moralism.

### ***The Poor* (1987)**

Wimon Sainimnuan's *The Poor* launches a vehement critique of contemporary Thai society, seen as under the influence of capitalism and materialism which causes great suffering to weaker members of society, particularly the rural poor. The author denounces this kind of society as one of selfishness and immorality and proposes that in order to create a new and better society, people must resist capitalism and revive traditional social and religious values which are perceived as the foundation for unselfish social relationships. Reformist Buddhism functions as the guiding principle for this kind of social reformation.

*The Poor* centres on the lives of the urban poor, essentially those who are forced by poverty to leave their rural villages for Bangkok in search of a means to earn their living. These people are victims of the overwhelming capitalist force that deprives them of their land and livelihood. Their traditional way of farming is destroyed by the profit-oriented state and capitalists who persuade them to embrace new but harmful technologies and in the process destroy the fertility of their lands and plunge them into enormous debt. Talking about his childhood and home village, the

protagonist recalls his family's painful experience when they were forced to sell their home and rice fields to pay off the debts and migrate to Bangkok in search of a job:

There are many unseen hands which unsettle and destroy the balance of our traditional way of life. These hands drive my family and many others to homelessness and destitution. I think I can identify a number of these destructive hands. The first among them are the hands of the merchants who seek profits. The second are the hands of the government who demand taxes from us. The third are the hands of modernization and progress. We are told to use fertilizers, insecticides and grow new strains of rice so as to increase the produce for the benefit of the merchants and the government but these new technologies destroy our fields and make them so barren and unproductive. Money comes to play a central role in our lives and soon we are deeply in debt. My father is forced to sell his fields and his home to pay for the debts and then we have to go to Bangkok to try our luck there. (251-252)<sup>67</sup>

The city, however, can provide no assistance for the poor. Worse, it condemns them to life of utmost degradation. The city in this novel figures as a world in which individualism and materialism manifest themselves at their worst. The novel opens with a gloomy evening in which people are rushing home and they all look cold and worn-out. All of them are caught up in the fierce struggle to make money and each is shut up in their own small world in which no one matters but themselves:

The gloomy evening arrived sooner than before, but the crowd appeared to be in a greater hurry. They strode into the small alley and paid attention to nothing. They were covered with sweat and their outfits were all crumpled as if they had just fought a weary battle. They looked cold, lifeless and purposeless. One by one they disappeared into their houses, but the great human wave continued to flow unceasingly. (19)

Selfishness and exploitation are also the norms of city life and the poor are depicted as extremely ill-equipped to deal with them. Through the life and sufferings of the protagonist and his family, the novel underlines the helplessness of the poor against inhuman capitalist forces. The protagonist and his family members are all unnamed.

---

<sup>67</sup> All translations from *The Poor* are my own.

They are simply referred to as 'the Young Man', 'Father', 'Mother' and 'Grandchildren'. By refusing to name them, the novel implies that they are meant to represent many others who share the same plight. The family live in a poorly built shack and the money they earn is barely enough to sustain their lives. Because of his deformed leg, the protagonist is often bullied and beaten by local gangsters who prey on women and the weak. Hard work and poor living conditions gradually destroy the family mentally and physically. Things become worse when the father falls ill and can no longer work. The family is plunged into greater misery and hardship which tragically lead to homicide. In order to point out the cause of the family's suffering, the author evokes the image of a monstrous beast to represent selfish capitalists who deprive the poor of basic necessities in life:

He saw a gigantic head emerge from the swamp...then its long tail and repulsive body. The beast shook its tail and sent the water flying....but he heard nothing and people near him acted as if nothing unusual had happened....

...Then he recalled what the old man had told him. These beasts feasted on humans but the victims were completely unaware of their existence....

The gigantic beast moved closer until he saw its eyes. He couldn't believe that they were the eyes of a beast because those eyes seemed to reflect only mercy and kindness....

...As he peered deeply into the beast's eyes, however, he glimpsed cruelty and ruthlessness. He had no doubt about its true nature anymore. The beast lifted its head up as if it was laughing at his stupidity. (175)

The novel suggests that the only way for the urban poor to have a better life is to go back home and restore the traditional way of life. This traditional way of life is equated with a moral society founded according to the principles of 'Dhammic Socialism' which promotes a strong sense of community and a harmonious existence with nature. According to Buddhadasa, the renowned Reformist monk, 'Socialism' means "the point of view and attitude that the common good comes first, that society

is more fundamental than the individual, that the interests and needs of society as a whole comes before those of the individual” (Santikaro Bhikkhu 166). Society here is “the collective of all the individuals grouped together for mutual benefit and support” (166-67). 'Dhammic' means “to be composed of, based in, governed by, and in line with Nature and the Law of Nature” (167). Nature here is that which is originated from the natural order and it is the sum total of reality. Nature and humanity are intrinsically linked and human beings are not above nature but are only part of it and thus they must find their ‘Dhamma’ or natural role (159-160).<sup>68</sup> The Reformist Buddhists regard these insights as crucial in overcoming the selfishness and materialism of current Thai society. Such a belief is articulated in *The Poor* when the protagonist eventually decides to go back to his home village and actively engage in rebuilding the remains of the past:

Three months later the young man travelled back to his home village. He told people there what had happened to his family and also recounted the miserable lives of people he had met in Bangkok. He tried to bring back people's memories of their past, the good things and way of life that had been forgotten.....

The villagers began to revive the communal labour system which had been replaced by waged labour. Several festivals, communal activities and rituals were brought back to life again. Good things in the past were gradually restored. The neighboring villages were also actively reviving past traditions and communal activities....the villages which were once invaded and nearly destroyed by the cruel waves of modernization were now building up the strength to resist and fight back... (255-256)<sup>69</sup>

*The Poor* is a good example of how Thai writers employ Reformist Buddhism for the

---

<sup>68</sup> See more about Dhammic Socialism from Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1986).

<sup>69</sup> The renewal of traditional farming and sustainable economy is also advocated by the present King of Thailand by his proposals that Thailand should turn to sufficiency economy as a way to counter the influx of capitalism. There are, however, critiques of the promotion of sufficiency economy, especially when it is used for political purposes. See for example Andrew Walker (28.10.08) for a criticism of this concept in the context of contemporary Thai political life.

purpose of social renewal: social ills can be healed through the application of religious insights and the resurrection of traditional social values. In the next novel under consideration Reformist Buddhism also plays an important role in the public sphere, particularly the political arena.

### ***Democracies on Parallel Lines (1994)***

Lin Leawarin's *Democracies on Parallel Lines* concentrates on political struggle in Thailand from the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932 until the early 1990s. All through these years Thai political life is depicted as strewn with conflicts and wars among those who hold different political ideologies and goals. The attempt to use Reformist Buddhism to identify and explain the Thai political dilemma is mostly done through incorporation of the major Buddhist beliefs, namely the teachings about no-self, non-attachment and the law of impermanence, in the epigraphs. These epigraphs therefore function to deliver the moral messages that the author wishes to convey.

Lin attributes one of the major causes of Thai political problems to human selfishness, especially men's desire to acquire power for themselves for vested interests. The novel depicts how such a selfish desire for power leads to wars and results in bloodshed and suffering for many people. Political enemies are unfairly imprisoned, forced to flee the country and murdered. Government officials who are suspected of colluding with the opposing side are unjustly penalized. Innocent citizens are killed. The adverse impacts of human selfishness on society are summed up in the words of Buddhadasa, which serve as the epigraph of the novel's first chapter:

Selfishness is the cause of the world's problems and sufferings. Numerous



wars have been fought because of selfishness or because of an attempt to get rid of selfish people. (26)<sup>70</sup>

The author ridicules the follies which lead some people to believe that they can resist the law of impermanence. By chronologically tracing Thai political development, the novel creates a picture of Thai politics dominated by changes and impermanence. No dictators are shown as able to maintain their power forever. They may rise to the heights of power, but the law of impermanence will see that power will ultimately be snatched from their hands. The words of a Chinese philosopher are cited to convey this moral message:

No matter how prosperous or fortunate you are, do not see this as a permanent state.

If you are not careful, your fortunes may fall

Whenever you feel that life is so smooth and blissful, do not jump to the conclusion that nothing can change it.

If you do not follow the path of morals, you may encounter problems and difficulties some day.

You have to remind yourself that one day your honour, wealth and happiness may abruptly disappear if you do not always do good deeds. (198)

Throughout the novel, the imagery of death recurs as a warning against men's delusion that their power is invincible. Power and worldly possessions are seen as meaningless due to the fact that nothing can escape the law of impermanence which ordains that all things will ultimately dissolve into nothingness:

....since everything consists of small elements and these small elements are all subject to birth, change and death or destruction according to the law of permanence, nothing can escape the law of impermanence. They will sooner or later break up, die or disappear. (162)

Those who fight against tyranny and authoritarianism are also cautioned that victory

---

<sup>70</sup> All translations from *Democracies on Parallel Lines* are my own.

and defeat are not permanent states. Democracy can sometimes be severely challenged although it will never be completely eradicated. To underline this, a flower metaphor is used to represent Thai democracy: “The flower of democracy blooms and then fades. It always goes on like this. This is an undeniable truth” (13). Thai democracy is also compared to a tree which can still remain firmly rooted although it has suffered countless storms:

“Do you agree with me that Thai democracy is like a big tree over there? Dictatorship is like a storm. When there is a storm, the tree is shaking as if it is going to collapse; still the tree can stay rooted to the ground no matter how many storms it has endured.” (12)

Both the flower and tree images are employed to add some hope in Thai politics yet there is emphasis that this hope must be grounded in acceptance of the law of impermanence. In light of the truth that nothing can maintain its permanent state forever, the Buddhist concept of non-attachment is seen as the best way for people to alleviate their suffering and reduce human conflicts and violence against one another:

The concept of non-attachment is very useful in people's everyday life. Once people realise that there is nothing that they should attach themselves to, ambitions, gain or loss cannot get the better of them. People will not be so obsessed with sensual pleasure until it causes them trouble. They will be able to perform their personal and public duties with mindfulness and will not be too anxious or worried. Once they learn to practise non-attachment, they will not cry or laugh too much, unlike people who have yet to learn it. (94)

The employment of Reformist Buddhism in *The Poor* and *Democracies on Parallel Lines* exemplifies the prevalent Thai attitude that religion has an integral role to play in the socio-political sphere and is not simply a matter of personal belief or faith. The two novels clearly advocate the application of a religious world view and teachings in public spheres. The danger of doing this, however, is that it runs the risk of promoting an oppressive form of moralism and, when politics is concerned, too much emphasis

may be given to the role of moral leaders rather than civil society and the system of checks and balances which should form more crucial parts in making democracy strong. The stress on moral or virtuous public figures can also be used to promote a political system that verges on dictatorship in which only a few people who are deemed ‘moral’ and ‘incorruptible’ are allowed to wield power without taking into account the voice of the majority who are seen as morally and intellectually inferior.<sup>71</sup> In the following section I examine James McQueen’s *White Light* which reveals the attempt to break from the entrapment of moralism in search of a religion of personal fulfilment. Paradoxically, Reformist Buddhism in this novel is depicted as the answer to such a quest and it is firmly located in the private sphere.

### ***White Light* (1990)**

James McQueen’s *White Light* dramatises the quest for an alternative form of morality that can provide answers to the questions of good, evil, crime and justice revolving around the Holocaust. The novel centres on Erich Ritter, a former Auschwitz guard whose contact with Buddhism helps him to come to terms with his long suffering and guilt.

Buddhism in this novel functions as a religion of personal fulfilment which is privileged over a Western form of moralism based on the Judaeo-Christian tradition with its emphasis on the clear distinction between good and evil and the philosophical

---

<sup>71</sup> Of note is that the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) legitimises their street demonstrations and siege of public places precisely from the moral highground. They claimed that their political intervention is meant to ‘clean up’ Thai politics and get rid of corrupt politicians. The ousted prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, is seen by the PAD as the most corrupt leader of all and the PAD also accused those who had voted for Thaksin and his party as lacking moral integrity and conscience. See more about the PAD in chapter three.

concepts of guilt and forgiveness. *White Light* thus resembles *Noble Sindhu Horses* in the belief that public or institutional religion has little role to play in assisting a person spiritually while a religion of one's own choice or of one's personal faith is more spiritually fulfilling.

At the age of 19, *White Light*'s protagonist, Erich Ritter, works as a guard at Auschwitz. There he saves the life of the young Polish prisoner, Tony Caramia, who is about to be killed. After the end of the war, Ritter and Caramia change their identities and separately migrate to Australia. Forty-three years later, Caramia accidentally catches a glimpse of Ritter and recognises him as the guard who once saved his life. Shortly afterwards, Ritter takes a trip to Thailand and Caramia secretly follows him. In Thailand Caramia tries to threaten Ritter with the exposure of his past, but in the process is forced to acknowledge the sins that he has kept hidden for so long.

It is through Ritter and Caramia's lives that the author problematises the traditional Christian notions of good and evil as two distinct and fixed entities. The novel illustrates that in an horrific time, such as the Holocaust, the boundary between good and evil can be extremely obscure. Those who are seen as the perpetrators of crime and the embodiment of evil can in fact be victims at the same time. On the other hand, the ones who see themselves, or are perceived by others, as victims might also partake in acts of crime against others. In the light of the difficulty of identifying and marking a clear boundary between good and evil, it is highly problematic to label someone as totally evil or to claim that one is on the side of good and plays no part in perpetrating evil.

The novel shows that in spite of Ritter's involvement in the persecution of the prisoners at Auschwitz, he is also a victim. Ritter remembers how he grew up in a

family completely dominated by his authoritarian father and how as a young man he had to choose between being sent to the border to fight the Russians or work in Auschwitz. His elder brother's gruesome death at the hands of Russian soldiers scares him into making a decision to work at Auschwitz. Like many other guards, Ritter has to stay drunk to keep his mind off the atrocious actions he commits. There are moments when he catches himself enjoying his acts of brutality against others and afterwards suffers intense feelings of self-disgust. Ritter is not simply victimized by circumstances but is also tortured by self-hatred:

I beat them, he thought, I beat those wretched prisoners, beat them, kicked them, harassed them, because if I had shown them any leniency I myself would have been beaten, kicked, harassed, sent back to that frozen purgatory in the East...Fear...And yet-- and he admitted it now—he had found at times, deep in a haze of alcohol and slogans, a kind of sick joy, a pleasure almost sexual, in the torture he had performed. Had in fact several times vomited later, when the nature of his pleasure threatened to gain his attention. (148)

Reflecting on his youth, Ritter blames himself for being a coward and morally weak. Although he survives the Holocaust, he knows that an essential part of him is destroyed there. He is deprived of hope and resignedly accepts the impossibility of being forgiven both by himself and by others. Moreover, he does not feel that forgiveness can do him any good. Ritter literally lives in despair and imprisonment:

Caramia can never forgive, of course, he thought. None of them can forgive me, and that is not important. He had thought a great deal about forgiveness after the night at the boxing match when they had talked, and knew that he could never forgive himself. That too had become irrelevant. The real problem, as he saw it now, was that time had stopped for him in Auschwitz, and the years that followed were nothing but dust and emptiness. He thought it quite possible that he, or all that was worthwhile in him, had actually died there... (147)

The Holocaust is also an horrific past that Caramia painfully suppresses. At the age of 14, Caramia is taken to Auschwitz as a prisoner and forced to work there for almost

three years. The unexpected encounter with Ritter more than forty years later stirs the ageing Caramia's memories of the concentration camp. A nightmare he has suffered so often in his younger years comes back and he decides that the only way to free himself from it is to confront Ritter. As a victim, it seems that Caramia has every right to demand justice from people who have inflicted violence and torture on him. The use of flashbacks, however, reveals to the reader that Caramia is not that innocent. As a prisoner, he does everything to ensure his survival and he spares no sympathy or pity for his fellow prisoners. On a train to Auschwitz, Caramia manages to stay alive by stealing food and water from the dead or those too weak to defend themselves:

...in the hour before dawn, as the train rocks through the darkness, the boy edges his way through the crush and steals a bottle containing a little water and wine from a sleeping woman....( 17)

As the food and water become more scarce and the conditions on the train worsen, Caramia's ruthlessness increases. Although very young, he learns quickly that only the fittest can survive and he does not feel sorry to see other people die so that he can stay alive. More deaths mean more chances for him to survive and Caramia's fight for life takes no heed of rules or morals:

In the night five more die, and by dawn the boy has found a corpse to sit on. From now on he will change corpses regularly, exchanging the old for the new as opportunity arises....he is always ready when a little water is brought, or when another companion dies who might have food about him. He will fight now, and push and scabble amid the ordure, and feels neither kinship nor compassion for his fellow travellers. (17)

At the concentration camp, Caramia becomes more cunning and brutal day by day. Many times he bribes guards so that they will give him a job that needs the least labour and is relatively free from beating or abuse. In order to obtain food or other objects to bribe guards, he either has to steal from weak or dying prisoners or take

them by force. He even resorts to murder as he later tells Ritter:

“I went to him in the night;” said Caramia, grinning a little now.

“Just like all the other *pipuls*.”

“Yes?” said Ritter, a little distantly, his gaze still on the far bank.

“I strangled him,” said Caramia. “I was a strong boy for my age. I strangled the dirty bugger and took his sausage and his margarine and bread and traded them for the boots.” (116)

By juxtaposing the lives of Ritter and Caramia, McQueen succeeds in complicating the issue of crime and justice. Both Ritter and Caramia have suffered and both assume the role of evildoer and victim. Of equal importance is the novel's suggestion that guilt and the attempt to seek redemption from past crimes can do little to alleviate suffering. Ritter in particular is haunted and tortured by guilt and fear. When Caramia first confronts him in Thailand, Ritter panics and runs away. While he is trying to escape, Ritter comes across a legless Thai beggar. In spite of his patient expression, the man is the image of suffering and Ritter is suddenly overcome by emotion and gives the beggar all the money that he has with him. Ritter's impulsive act can be perceived as an attempt to redeem himself from his past sins, but as he painfully realizes a moment later, such redemption is impossible and a struggle towards it can only cause him great misery:

He had not gone far, a dozen steps, when he felt his body begin to shiver, his legs to tremble. He slowed down his pace, a sudden wave of anguish rising inside him. His throat seemed to close and an enormous ache grew in his chest, rose and grew stronger, until it seemed to encompass his whole body. He had not wept in more than forty years, but now tears blinded him, and he began to pant like some panicked animal. And the ache grew greater until it was insupportable, and his body was invaded by a misery so great that he could hardly breathe. And it seemed to him that the sun struck him down; the strength left his limbs, and he slumped onto the worn concrete steps of the City Centre, sobbing and wrecked. (68)

Ritter's life takes a dramatic turn when he comes across a Thai monk who ultimately

helps him come to terms with his long suffering. Contrary to Ritter's conviction that the evil he committed in the past will condemn him to misery forever, the monk introduces him to the Buddhist belief in the law of impermanence. According to this law, good and evil, like other things, are subject to change. This way of looking at good and evil is thus different from the Christian view which traditionally sees good and evil as fixed, and largely unchangeable entities:

“You believe that?” said Ritter. “That impermanence is a natural law?”

Sumano shrugged. “Of course. All things are unstable, they have no essence that is unchanging.”

“Including men?”

“Of course.”

They sat in silence for a while, Ritter frowning at his feet. “Men can change, then?” he said at last.

“Men most of all,” said Sumano, smiling.

“A bad man may become good?”

“And a good man bad.” (180)

Buddhism also has a different way of perceiving crime, punishment and redemption. Unlike traditional Christianity which looks to God for ultimate forgiveness or redemption, Buddhism maintains that only through one's own actions can a person create a new life for her/himself. S/He cannot seek forgiveness or redemption from an external source and at the same time those who suffered from his/her actions in the past are not entitled to free her/him. A person is therefore fully responsible for the course of his/her future:

“And sin?”

“There is no sin, there is only cause and effect.”

Ritter frowned. “Evil then?”

“Evil? Remember, Mr Ritter, cause and effect. Evil arises from ignorance, from a cleaving to the desire for power, for riches, for pleasure.”

“But if a man does evil action...”



“Yes?”

“Can he be absolved?”

Sumano shook his head slowly. “Who is to absolve? Those who have suffered by the evil actions? They cannot change the evil-doer's *Karma*. And an honest man can never absolve himself, I think.” (181-182)

The monk explains to Ritter the meaning of *karma* and the essence of Buddhist beliefs. According to him *karma* is not predestination imposed on people but rather the law of causality. It is what the Lord Buddha described as: “When this is, that is; this arising, that arises; when this is not, that is not; his ceasing, that ceases...” (180). He describes Buddhism as a religion that promotes the use of reason and logic, but discourages blind faith, miracles and magic. The Buddhism introduced to Ritter here is, therefore, Reformist Buddhism as evident from its rationalised and demythologised set of beliefs. The monk then encourages Ritter to take control of his life and leave his past behind. A Buddhist belief that all living beings share suffering and the struggle to be freed from it eventually leads to Ritter's realisation that he is not different from people he hurt in his youth and the legless beggar he met on the Bangkok street:

“... if I'm evil in this life,” said Ritter slowly, “then in my next incarnation will I suffer?”

“Not necessarily.” Sumano paused. “This is a little difficult for a Westerner to understand all at once. When a man dies, we believe that his body and his person, all that is related to his worldly life, die and decay. His soul is reborn into another body and he renews his struggle to free himself from desire. When he finally succeeds--as every living thing may eventually succeed if diligent-- then his soul ceases to exist. And then, the part that remains, the spirit, if you like, is joined to the universe in a final unity. That is *Nibbana*, the final freedom of the individual spirit from suffering and desire, the final union with the universal spirit.”

“Then you mean,” said Ritter, raising his head slowly, looking into the steady brown eyes of the monk, “that there is another chance for everyone?”

Sumano smiled. “Of course, if you like to think of it that way. Because there is cause and effect. Buddhism is all mind, you see...”

“And remember,” said Sumano, “that the beggar you see on the road may be wiser than you, farther along the path of enlightenment...”

And Ritter thought again of the beggar in Petchburi Road. (181-182)

The breakdown of the boundary between perpetrator and victim frees Ritter from his past. Buddhism is the 'white light' of the title which functions to liberate him from guilt and allows him to lead a more meaningful life free from fear, self-pity and self-hatred:

...Ritter knew at last the truth which had evaded him since that day, that he himself was the beggar in Petchburi Road, just as he himself was one with all the victims of his youth; and that what he had done to them, he has in truth done to himself...

With the pain of truth came a great relief that filled him like a comforting wine. Tears came, and they were no longer tears of self-pity or guilt, but rather of joy and acceptance....He raised his eyes and there was nothing but the blue distant hills and the great weight of light that lay like a blessing on the land...(185)

The role of Reformist Buddhism in this novel is exclusively private since it largely concerns an individual who seeks out a religion of personal fulfillment in response to his own spiritual need. This is quite different from the Thai literary construction of reformist Buddhism as integral to social and political life, as evident in the two Thai novels discussed earlier. The Western construction of religion as belonging to the personal or private realm is also reflected in *The Edge*, the next Australian novel under consideration. Unlike *White Light*, however, religion in *The Edge* fundamentally functions to enhance an individual's power rather than to answer his spiritual need.

### ***The Edge* (2005)**

Bryan Clark's *The Edge* tells the story of Alex Walker who, after his attempted suicide fails, gets involved in a series of life-threatening dangers which eventually lead him to flee Australia for Thailand. There his life is drastically changed by what

he initially sees as the Thais' strange superstitious and religious beliefs. Through his wit and courage, Alex successfully helps free a group of young Thai women from the sex trade and makes it possible for them and their families to start new and happier lives. He finally returns to Australia with a conviction that he has discovered his destiny and the true meaning of life.

At first glance, *The Edge's* depiction of Thailand as dominated by supernaturalism and mysticism corresponds with the modern West's tendency to characterize non-Western cultures as the opposite of the secular, rational, and scientific-minded West (King 3-4).<sup>72</sup> However, on close reading *The Edge* does not prescribe to the modern West's predominant division of science/religion and rationality/mysticism. In fact, it attempts to invert the dominant paradigm that perceives religion and mysticism as the antithesis of science and rationality. Clark tries to demonstrate in *The Edge* that Thai supernaturalism and Buddhism are not the opposite of science, but correspond to scientific and rational rules, although science is too limited and inadequate to give a sufficient explanation to what Buddhism holds as truth.

It is interesting to compare this construction of Buddhism and supernaturalism with the way the Thai Buddhists see them. In Thailand the Reformist Buddhists also resort to science and rationality in an attempt to empower Buddhism. As mentioned earlier, the Reformist monks and laymen reinterpret and rewrite Buddhist beliefs and teachings in a way that parallels rational and scientific principles. However, there are significant differences in the ways *The Edge* and the Reformist Buddhists interpret

---

<sup>72</sup> See also Steadman (1970) for detailed discussion of Western tendency to depict the Orient as the West's antithesis.

and apply a number of major Buddhist concepts. The Thai Reformists' attitude towards supernaturalism is also markedly different from the one conveyed in *The Edge*. While *The Edge* portrays supernaturalism as not distinct from Thai Buddhism, seeing their relationship as symbiotic or supportive of each other, the Reformists mark a clear boundary between Thai supernaturalism and Buddhism. Supernaturalism is perceived as something that tarnishes and obscures 'real' Buddhist values and teachings, and more covertly, undermines the power of Buddhism as a national religion. According to Jackson, the Reformist Buddhists see Thai supernaturalism or local beliefs in spirits, mediumship and magic, as having a high potential to undermine social peace and order. While maintaining a rather negative attitude towards superstitious practice, establishment Buddhism is more prepared to make concession for supernaturalism, especially when it involves the institution of the monarchy (*Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict* 57-61). It is also common among Thai politicians to participate in or initiate supernatural rituals as a way to boost their morale or intimidate political enemies (Suntaree 221-22). Regardless of Reformist Buddhism' disdain of supernaturalism, the extent to which many Thais put their faith in supernaturalism could reach the point of fanaticism and this could turn into extreme violence against those perceived as insulting a supernatural being who is the object of one's worship. On 21 March 2006, a Thai man suffering from mental illness was beaten to death by angry bystanders after he had smashed the Brahmin statue in Bangkok's Erawan Shrine.<sup>73</sup>

In *The Edge* superstitious beliefs are depicted as part of ordinary Thais' life and both Buddhism and supernaturalism are employed and privatized as the

---

<sup>73</sup> See more details from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erawan\\_Shrine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erawan_Shrine).

protagonist's tool to gain access to power and to enhance his heroic and saint-like status. Clark's demonstration that Buddhism and supernaturalism are not against science and rationality can be seen as an attempt to validate his protagonist's claim to access the spiritual and otherworldly. Moreover, as will be illustrated shortly, the author's interpretation of a number of Buddhist concepts crucially serves to make religion an instrument that enables one to exert control over his/her life and destiny.

Alex, *The Edge*'s protagonist, is portrayed as a figure of respect and reverence in the eyes of the Thais he has met. These Thais' lives are shown as profoundly determined by their beliefs in supernaturalism. They seek help and advice from spirits in times of trouble and this practice is shown as an effective way to resolve their anxieties and problems. When Alex first arrives in the South of Thailand, he witnesses the locals' strong faith in and reliance on the power of spirits and he gains immediate respect from the locals when a Thai medium pronounces that he is sent by the benevolent and powerful spirit of Thailand's late king to help his people. In another small village in the North of Thailand, Alex is also warmly welcomed by a Thai family who believes that a spirit has brought him to them so that he can help them find their lost daughter. Alex is not merely a stranger who happens to stop by, but a saviour the spirit has earlier promised them:

Several women of various age groups emerged, led by an older woman who was clearly the matriarch of the household. When she saw Alex, she raised both hands to her face in an expression of disbelief, then dropped her arms and smiled. Alex did not understand the reason; but it seemed to him that his arrival was not only welcome, it bore some special significance to the household. (376)

Alex's heroic status is not only enhanced by people's belief in supernaturalism, but also by his religious experience. He is shown as coming close to experiencing enlightenment which is the highest spiritual goal of Buddhists. Enlightenment as

constructed in this novel is not only the achievement of a state of mind that is free from suffering, but also the ability to see and know the world which is beyond access of the five senses. During Alex's conversation with a Thai monk, this state of mind is referred to as the luminous mind. Later on it is revealed that the spirit world the Thais believe in is actually 'the higher-dimensional universe' or 'the universe without form' (632) that can be accessed only through the luminous or enlightened mind. The Thais' belief in spirits is, therefore, seen as a religious and scientific truth rather than something irrational:

“The third truth is to understand what 'no suffering' is. It is not actually the elimination of suffering; it is a state-of mind opposite to suffering. It is like having a luminous mind.”

“What do you mean by a luminous mind?” Alex asked.

“It is like a sixth sense: a mind with understanding of all things both in and beyond the world that you are familiar with,” the monk explained. (358)

Clark consciously equates his protagonist with holy figures such as the Buddha and Jesus. Alex is not so much someone who has helped people in Thailand out of his compassion and sympathy for fellow human beings, as a person of exceptional moral and spiritual greatness who is destined to rescue those who are inferior to him. A monk whom Alex has met in Thailand treats him with special care and bestows a blessing appropriate to one who is about to undertake a privileged and sacred mission:

The monk took his hand from Alex's shoulder and bent to scoop another bowl of water from the urn. “Please be still,” he said. He slowly poured some of the water from his bowl onto Alex's head and spoke some words in a strange language.

Alex closed his eyes and the world disappeared. He thought of Jesus when he had asked John the Baptist to baptise him in the river. He washed my feet and now he's making a blessing with water. How strange to have things happen to me like happened to Jesus, but with a Buddhist monk.

The low murmuring of the unfamiliar words first reassured him then seemed to flow into his very being and touch his soul. The water trickled down his face and behind his ear, caressing him to an inner peace. It finished, and the sensation of the water was replaced by a feeling, a bond, so strong that

for an instant it was almost something tangible between himself and the old man in the orange robe giving the blessing. (370)

Alex is also treated by the Thai women whom he has rescued from the sex industry with great reverence. Again, he is not merely treated as a kind-hearted man, but as a person of exceptional moral goodness comparable to that of the Buddha. One of the women praises him for having “goodness wide like the ocean” (518).

In an attempt to validate his protagonist's spiritual and religious experience, Clark resorts to the language and rhetoric of science. Science is employed to lend power to religion or mysticism which, as argued earlier, is largely deprived of power and relegated to the private or personal realm. This is evident when Alex tries to convince his Australian friend that he has achieved enlightenment. Alex's definition of enlightenment is less a spiritual experience than a physical one, and enlightenment appears to be nothing more than sensitivity to an energy that nature can generate and the ability to utilize that energy:

....the rain forest abounds with life energy. If you can connect with that energy, I mean really sense it, feel it coursing through you, then you can use that energy field to temporarily separate your life-force from its body association and surf the wave of that energy to the dimensional transition point to experience enlightenment. (640)

Alex's definition of enlightenment can also be perceived as the affirmation of an individual's authority to directly access the otherworldly realm and gain the knowledge of the universe without the need to rely on God. Enlightenment makes it possible for one to refuse the power of God and assert that s/he can be all-knowing:

It's an ability to segregate the life-force from the body to achieve a deep understanding of all that I've spoken about. Enlightenment takes you beyond blind faith. My old mate Paddy had a blind faith in God, similar to a child trusting and believing in parental omniscience. Enlightenment enables you to understand the mind of God. Deeply religious people gain this understanding through their faith, but it's also possible to take another path directly through

enlightenment. (640)

The deep understanding referred to in the above passage is seen as a source of great power. A person who achieves enlightenment can receive energy from the unseen universe which enables him/her to foresee and change the future. Through achieving enlightenment, a modern woman/man's dream to be omniscient is therefore fulfilled:

You gain an understanding of the wisdom of your species, and you can clearly see and feel what potential events could and should unfold in the future. This information, this understanding, is carried down with the life-force energy, in a way similar to the frequency modulation of a radio carrier wave....Once you're in tune with this energy, once you have this enlightenment, you can develop an ability to filter out the events that you don't want to happen, and then control the future by imagining it into the present. (641)

Clark later attempts to explain the meaning of life in the language of Buddhism, Christianity and science. The way the Buddhist concepts of *karma* and enlightenment are interpreted renders life something that men are capable of controlling. According to Alex, all living beings consist of the body part and the life-force which is like: "...an energy string flowing out of the higher dimensional universe, into our universe, through the body form and back again to the higher dimensional universe. It continues this way until the body form passes away...." (632). The life-force needs to be purified in order to generate good *karma* so that it can evolve to a higher state and not degrade itself and be forced to revert to a lower life form. The highest goal is to make the life-force reach a perfect level of purification, free from its body form and moving up to 'the universe without form' or 'the higher-dimensional universe'. Once secured in the higher universe, the life-force can choose whether to retain its contact with the lower universe or not. In order to generate good *karma* so as to purify the life-force, a person needs to recognize that each life has a determined destiny that gives it the opportunities to purify or develop itself. Life also has free will, given as part of its



test. A person must act rightly when deterministic acts occur or else s/he will not be able to develop his/her character and will fail to generate good *karma*. Enlightenment, however, enables a person to see the future and thus s/he will be able to foresee what events will take place and act rightly, hence, succeed in generating good *karma* and ensure a good reincarnation for him/herself (610-645). A person is thus able to assert control over his/her life and destiny, freed from the anxiety about how this life or the next lives will unfold.

The way *The Edge* constructs the Buddhist concepts of *karma* and enlightenment differs significantly from the way they are perceived by both institutional Thai Buddhism and Reformist Buddhism. Institutional Buddhism regards nirvana or the freedom from this world and its suffering as largely the religious goal of monks or the truly devout. Ordinary people are primarily taught to follow the religious precepts and make merit for their present and future happiness. By doing this, they act according to the law of *karma* which relates a person's present state of well-being or suffering to the morality or immorality of his or her past actions. Reformist Buddhism differs from institutional Buddhism in its assertion that all individuals are capable of reaching nirvana, which is also redefined as the state of freedom from suffering that belongs to the here and now rather than beyond or after this life, and an individual can achieve it through right actions and wisdom (Jackson *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict* 48-49). In spite of these differences, both forms of Buddhism perceive nirvana as primarily achieved through the negation of the self. Buddhists are encouraged to perform their duties at their best and live harmoniously with nature and the world rather than to attain the omniscient knowledge or power to direct life the way they want to. Nirvana and *karma* are, therefore, not a means to gain power over life as they are constructed in *The Edge*. A layperson who tries to access

personal power through religious or superstitious means tends to be viewed suspiciously by the Thai State which, as noted earlier, significantly relies on Buddhism as a political tool to maintain a unified society and suppress regional dissent and difference. However, it should be noted here the Thai state has never been completely successful in its attempt to suppress regional sensibility. In *In the Place of Origins: Modernity and Its Medium in Northern Thailand*, Rosalind Morris explores the practice of spirit mediumship in Chiang Mai and sheds light on some of the ways local mediums gain power, respect and income through acting as a vessel for the spirits of personages and lords who used to rule the cities. She traces the history of Northerners' belief in spirits to the time when the region was not yet an official part of Siam and the act of paying homage to the spirits was an intrinsic part of local belief and practice. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, however, the North was incorporated as part of the new nation centred in Bangkok and from the late nineteenth century, the Thai State began to deploy a number of strategies to weaken local difference.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, while Northerners today identify as Buddhist and Thai and are no less nationalistic than people in other regions, an increasing number of people in the North have begun to enthusiastically embrace and promote regionalism. Chiang Mai, in particular, has seen regular events which highlight and idealise local history and culture (5-6). Spirit mediumship also figures significantly as “a mode of presencing the past and of bringing forth the figures of originary power” although “contemporary mediumship is inextricably bound up with the wounded translation of absence and partiality” (3). Morris remarks:

...mediumship is supported by the recourse to origins that also characterizes

---

<sup>74</sup> See also Thongchai (1994: 164-74) for the discussion of the issue of Thai nationalism as an exercise in demarcation that involves affiliation as well as exclusion.

the speech of public intellectuals, culture brokers, and middle-class consumers who flock to photographic studios for portraits of themselves in the period costumes of bygone days. However, the narratives of origin that circulate during periods of felt loss, such as the one in which so many northern middle-class Thai individuals now find themselves, are not so unequivocal....for every tale of origin, there is an encounter with the absence of origins. For every image of first appearances, there is a vacancy. Invariably encrypted within the tales of commencement is the realisation that the origin is not one, that there are only substitutions, displacements, and translations in their stead. (3-4)

Remarkably, belief in spirits and pagan rituals may also effectively serve environmental, conservationist and political purposes for people in Northern Thailand (Morris 270-286). However, belief in spirits and superstition is not limited to the North but is also prevalent in other Thai regions and Bangkok. Still, Thai people are divided in their attitude towards supernaturalism. While many Thais, both from rural and urban backgrounds, regard supernaturalism as a source of emotional and psychological support, even to the point of blind and fanatical belief, some Thais are totally dismissive of it. There are yet other Thais who are prepared to make concessions for superstitious practice, but still see it as inferior to 'true' Buddhist teachings and practice. The following short stories, "Greenie" (1984) and "Venerable Sem" (1954) articulate these differing attitudes towards supernaturalism in Thailand. "Greenie" in particular denounces supernaturalism and equates it with ignorance and irrationality.

#### **"Greenie" (1984)**

Manop Thanomsri's "Greenie" depicts the sad life of an orphaned village girl who is virtually neglected and treated as a social outcast. Greenie, the girl of the title, is left under the care of her unloving aunt who sees her as a burden. Although very young, Greenie is used to loneliness, abuse and discrimination. The villagers' belief in

superstition is essentially the cause of Greenie's suffering.

As opposed to *The Edge*, which sees Thai supernaturalism as having a strong basis in Buddhism and not the antithesis of science and rationality, in “Greenie” Thai superstition is seen as distinct from Buddhism and opposed to science and rationality. The story also underlines the role of superstition in marginalising certain groups of people and providing a basis for prejudice and cruelty against them. Superstition is therefore seen here as very destructive to an ideal moral world governed by compassion and sympathy.

The rural village which is the setting of the story is shown as a world dominated by ignorance and irrationality. The belief in spirits is fundamental to the village's life and when something strange or unusual happens the villagers mainly attribute it to the work of ghosts or evil spirits. When Greenie's mother falls ill and acts strangely, the villagers believe that she is possessed by an evil spirit. Instead of taking his wife to a hospital, Greenie's father asks for help from a local monk who is a renowned exorcist. Upon seeing Greenie's mother, the monk confirms the villagers' belief that she is under the control of a vicious spirit and proceeds to expel it from her. Out of ignorance and misguided belief, the monk and the villagers pour water on the raving woman:

The monk came. He was very old. Slowly, he climbed the stairs into their house. Greenie lay curled up in a corner. No one paid any attention to her. Her mother lay on the floor in the center of the room. When the monk looked into her face, he startled the curious villagers who had shuffled into the house behind him by pointing his finger at her and laughing loudly. “Where did you come from, you evil thing?”

The delirious woman tried to get up. She began screaming at the monk, but her words were meaningless. He turned to Greenie's father and said, “Yes, it is true. A strong spirit has possessed your wife. I think that you have waited too long. But I will try to defeat it.”

He directed Greenie's father, and the others too, to bring buckets of water. Everyone rushed off, returning with a full bucket in hand....When he

dashed the first dipperful of water into Greenie's mother's face, she shrieked and writhed on the floor and screamed curses at him.

“Ha! It is a very strong spirit,” the old monk said. When he splashed another dipperful of water into her face, she only groaned and trembled and then lay still. (272)

The story shows that the tragic death of Greenie's mother is the result of the villagers' superstition. Instead of providing her with proper medical care, they subject her to brutal treatment which shortly afterwards brings about her death. The monk who engineers the death of Greenie's mother is portrayed as the follower of superstitious rituals and practices rather than Buddhism. The story makes this clear by having the monk brag about his encompassing supernatural skills while denigrating the Buddha and his teachings. Here we can see the Manop's attempt to draw a clear boundary between Buddhism and superstition, the latter depicted as stemming from ignorance and stupidity:

“It was a very terrible spirit from the Pone Tong Forest. But my words also were strong and prevailed over that spirit.” He handed the dipper to the man. “Prayer and holy water have done this deed. The Buddha and the Scriptures are all very well, but in such a matter, it is the monk upon whom you must depend.” (273)

The unnatural and violent death of Greenie's mother makes the child the object of fear, ridicule and repugnance in the village. The villagers believe that Greenie has inherited an evil and fearful taint from her mother. The village children bully and make fun of Greenie and the adults make no effort to shield her from abuse. In fact, the adults are as cruel towards Greenie as the children. Greenie's aunt shows no affection for her and gives her inadequate food and clothing. Other adults spread rumours about the mother's fearful death and treat the child as if she is the daughter of a ghost. They obviously gain pleasure from marginalising her. What is emphasised here is the role of superstition in feeding cruelty and maltreatment against others as

well as providing an excuse for people to be morally irresponsible towards an expendable member of society:

Some said that Greenie was quite mad, exactly like her mother. Some said that the girl herself was not mad but possessed by a demon that had put madness into her. A few dared to say that it was this girl herself, this Greenie, who had caused the terrible death of her own mother.

Greenie knew about the rumours and thought about them. The older she grew, the more thoughtful and quiet she became. She shrank from people and was unwilling to speak to anyone. Not the village children nor their parents nor even her own aunt. When anyone spoke to her, her face would take on a look of queer stillness that no one could fathom, and she would slip away without saying a word. Like a ghost. (268-269)

“Greenie” gives a very negative picture of Thai supernaturalism. It is depicted not only as a stupid and pagan practice, but also as being detrimental to a moral, compassionate and caring society. Supernaturalism is viewed in a more sympathetic light in the next story, yet it is not regarded as an essential component of Buddhism as in *The Edge*.

#### **“Venerable Sem” (1954)**

Set in the early 1950s, the story is an idealised portrayal of a monk and his role in Thailand of a bygone era. Venerable Sem, the monk of the title, is respected and worshipped by the villagers. They seek his blessing and look to him for counsel and advice in times of trouble. Superstition is shown as inseparable from the villagers' life and the monk is regarded as the one who is able to fend off wandering or mischievous spirits. The story does not equate superstition with ignorance and irrationality nor does it draw a clear line between Buddhism and supernaturalism. Yet supernaturalism is not seen as the core or essence of the Buddha's teachings and the obsession with supernatural powers is shown as detrimental to a person who aspires to spiritual

purification and enlightenment. This is illustrated through Sem's preoccupation with supernaturalism during the early period of his monkhood. The monk's attempt to endow himself with supernatural powers is shown as a wrong and misguided practice and its adverse impacts on his body and mind are stressed:

If he heard of a temple which had amulets or talismans, he tried to get to know people there to get hold of these. From day to day, Sem spent his spare time in his cell sanctifying these objects, and himself, with magical powers. He sincerely believed that these methods would eventually lead him to the final goal. Sometimes he became so engrossed he sat reciting spells until late at night, and after a while became emaciated from lack of food and sleep, and from anxiety over his spells. He began to look like someone with chronic fever, with wandering eyes which avoided one's gaze, like a madman. At times he stuttered and stumbled in his speech. (35-36)

Sem eventually realizes that supernaturalism is not the right way to the kind of spirituality and enlightenment he is seeking. Moreover, supernatural power is worthless and irrelevant to a monk's life. Also implied in the following passage is the attitude that supernaturalism is inferior to 'real' Buddhist teachings and practice which are capable of providing a devout follower with an encompassing moral power unavailable to exorcists or others who claim supernatural skills. Supernaturalism is also seen as 'a temptation', something that lures one away from the true path to enlightenment:

From then on, the spells lost their meaning. Sem had learnt from Old Chom that even if they worked, they were useless. A monk like himself had no need to take up the cudgels with anyone. His yellow robe was adequate protection. Everyone who saw it paid obeisance to it, and entertained no thought of harming him. He had no reason to fear anyone enough to need invisibility, because everyone welcomed him gladly-- a disciple of the Buddha. As for walking on air, that was hardly necessary for one who lived simply in any surroundings, and had surrendered all need to rush and hurry. He began to eat and sleep at the usual times again, like the other monks. His skin shone with an extra radiance through the denial of yet another temptation. (37)

Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the story does not deny the existence of the

supernatural world, but rather affirms the traditional Thai belief in spirits and their capacity to disrupt and cause havoc or illness to people. This is illustrated through an incident in which a village child is possessed by a spirit and becomes seriously ill. Sem visits the child and is able to save his life and free the spirit that causes the illness. Unlike ‘Greenie’ where the monk claims that he has supernatural skills necessary to exorcise the spirit, Sem uses compassion and the Buddha's words to help both the spirit and the possessed boy:

“You've paid for all your previous sins and *karma*. Go, and be born again in your chosen place. Now repeat what I say”, Sem declared into the void. Clouds had drifted over to hide the moon, plunging the area into darkness.

“I take refuge in the Buddha.”

Sem had begun the Pali chant of the triple gems. A few seconds later the voice repeated,

“I take refuge in the Buddha.”

“I take refuge in the *dharma*”, Sem continued, followed by the voice.

Sem recited the triple gems three times, and each time the voice echoed him. A cool breeze wafted by, carrying the sound of gentle laughter mingled with relief. A cloud formation had passed over the moon. Brightness reigned once again. (44)

“Venerable Sem” also shows that a belief in supernatural power is not altogether destructive as long as those who believe in it strictly adhere to the Buddha's teachings. This is evident through Sem's ability to turn his followers' belief in consecrated objects to a useful end. Unable to dissuade his followers from their pursuit of these objects, he allows them to believe that his old robes and dry tea leaves are sacred objects but insists that they follow the Buddha's teachings once they are in possession of them:

“Show compassion for all living beings, oppress no-one, and live in harmony with others.”

The shreds of robe and tea leaves became sacred objects. Everyday more people offered to be his disciples. Each asked for a piece of cloth or a



handful of tea leaves as a talisman, renowned for effectiveness in compassion. Those who had got hold of them were reputed to have fulfilled their wishes and dissipated all enemies and ill feeling towards them. (45)

Sem finally achieves enlightenment. The story's depiction of an enlightened state of mind differs markedly from the state of enlightenment constructed in *The Edge*, which employs religious experiences as an individual's mean to power over life. *The Edge* defines enlightenment as an individual's ability to separate the body from the life-force or the soul so that the soul can access power from the universe and utilise it for the purpose of gaining control over one's destiny. An individual's will is therefore, of central importance and enlightenment is in fact secondary to this will to be in control of life. In "Venerable Sem", however, enlightenment is not regarded as man's access to power, but rather as a state when one achieves the complete negation of the self and its will and desire. Sem's enlightenment is achieved through abandoning personal goals and purposes and having deep faith in the Buddha's virtues and goodness:

One night after bathing Sem was preparing for bed. He lit candles and incense to make obeisance to the Buddha and recite his daily prayers. The candlelight fell on the face of the little Buddha image, illuminating it. Sem glanced at it, and struck by the beauty of the radiant image, meditated on the characteristics of the Buddha. His satisfaction deepened as he reflected. He recited the common prayer, 'I take refuge in the Buddha' over and over again, with no particular objective. Through his concentration on the Buddha's qualities all desires and temptations fell away. Sem was fully aware that he had not soared into another realm but was sitting in front of an image in his cell. But he was in a state of perfect concentration. A radiance illuminated his cell, a cool quiet light that came not from sun or fire, a self-luminous light unlike the reflected light of the moon. He felt overwhelmingly happy, with an enlightened happiness resulting from surrender. It was not the surrender of the senses, though, but the bliss of the complete extinction of desire. (40)

To conclude, both "Venerable Sem" and "Greenie" differ significantly from *The Edge* in their depiction of Thai supernaturalism and Buddhism. In these two Thai stories, supernaturalism is accorded a lower status than Buddhism precisely because it is

unable to serve as a moral and cultural symbol that unites the community. Even when supernaturalism is not shown as altogether backward and useless, its benefits are perceived as conditional, limited and largely involving an individual rather than society as a whole. Buddhism, on the other hand, is regarded as capable of providing spiritual and emotional guidance and at the same time maintaining social peace and order. This attitude is articulated in “Venerable Sem” through the depiction of an ideal Buddhist monk as the one who devotes himself to spiritual purification and the well-being of his community. The search for enlightenment is not a quest for a power to control life, but the negation of the self in order to free oneself and society as a whole from suffering. These two Thai short stories, however, do not reflect the belief of those Thais who embrace supernaturalism, and there appears to be a steady increase in the popularity of supernaturalism in Bangkok and other cities, partly due to people’s quest for psychological support in time of economic hardship and political uncertainty.<sup>75</sup> Jackson observes that the rise in the popularity of supernaturalism in Bangkok could stem from the need to find meaningful and highly accessible means to deal with anxieties among the rural immigrants in Bangkok. Cut off from their rural ties and sense of community, rural workers in Bangkok may turn to supernaturalism as a way to help them adjust to life in a competitive and unfamiliar environment. For these Thais, supernaturalism’s emphasis on personal protective power and personal success could be more appealing than the more collective religious forms and rituals of Buddhism (58-61).

The foregoing discussion has illustrated that when Australian authors depict

---

<sup>75</sup> See for example Head (03.09.07), Crowell (28.06.07) for the recent craze in Thailand for amulets believed to possess magical powers. For articles about superstitious rituals in the contemporary Thai political scene, see Harrison George (14.11.08) and *The Nation* (09.06.08).

Thai Buddhism, many of them tend to bring their Western imagining of religion to bear on their representation. Nevertheless, Australian author James McQueen is able to employ certain Buddhist teachings and beliefs to aid his protagonist's quest for the meaning of life and help break through the trap of Western moralism. This corresponds with the main argument in J.J. Clarke's *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* (1997), that East-West contact has the potential to bring about constructive dialogue and new ways of looking at things.

Contact with Eastern religion has the potential to help Australians, and it is the opinion of this author that a look at Western imagining of religion can also be helpful for Thailand. As mentioned earlier, the Thai literary imagining of Buddhism reflects a construction of religion which is different from the Australian one. The Australian authors largely locate religion away from social and political issues and principally associate it with the personal realm whereas Thai authors do not advocate such a separation, but rather promote the public role of religion. This difference in religious imagining not only has an impact on an individual's approach to religion but also on the role that religion should play in the public sphere. In Australia religion is not part of a person's public identity and any conservative move towards the increase of the role of religion in public life has often met with resistance. In Thailand, however, the predominant view is that religion, that is Buddhism, should assume both a spiritual and a socio-political role. Religion is seen as inseparable from public morality, and the official Thai identity revolves around the notion of the three pillars of the State: Nation, Religion and the Monarchy.<sup>76</sup> Recently, with the rise of conservative political factions in contemporary Thailand, 'morality in politics' has been consistently

---

<sup>76</sup> The three colours of the Thai nation are red, white and blue where red represents the nation, white represents religion and blue represents the monarchy. See <http://www.mfa.go.th/web/2634.php>

promoted. Conservative calls for ‘moral leaders’ who can help save Thailand from self-serving and greedy politicians can be heard on a daily basis. Politicians are derided for their self-serving motives and corruption, and voters are seen as casting their ballot for candidates who have given them a bribe. Thus the whole political system in Thailand is depicted as a failure. Significantly, the design of Thailand’s new parliament building also aims to convey the notion that Buddhist morality, rather than the principle of democracy or people’s rights to govern, should occupy a central place in the Thai political life.<sup>77</sup> This overemphasis on the role of religion and morality in politics in Thailand is detrimental to the development of democracy if it consistently undermines the ideology of democracy, the power of the people, rights and freedoms, and equality.

Buddhism and supernaturalism are not the only aspect of Thailand that appeals to Western interest and imagination. As Rachel Harrison maintains, few countries have been so thoroughly subjected to Western erotic fantasy as Thailand, which, since the days of the Vietnam War, has often figured in popular western discourses as ‘home to a widespread and unrestrained sex industry’ (“Prostitution, Politics and Power” 138). This image of Thailand has always outraged Thai people and this is perhaps best testified by the vehement boycott of the *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* which defines Bangkok as ‘a place where there are a lot of PROSTITUTES’ (1992:79, emphasis in original).<sup>78</sup> While the anger against such a characterisation of one’s capital city is understandable, denying the existence of the widespread sex industry in Thailand does little to help alleviate the problem. This state of denial and excessive concern for a ‘respectable image’ of the country only

---

<sup>77</sup> See Prachatai (15.12.09)

<sup>78</sup> See Barmé (2002: 5) and Rachel Harrison (2001: 154-55).

perpetuate the problem of prostitution within Thailand and worsen the plight of Thai sex workers. Western males' fantasy and desire further complicate the problem and contribute to the drowning of the voices of the Thai women who participate in the sex trade. In the following chapter I examine the depiction of Thai women in Australian male authors' works and illustrate how their representations of Thai women reveal the utilisation of women as the fetishised others who largely function to address male adequacy and fulfill their emotional demands. The chapter also addresses some of the issues related to the Thai sex industry and the relationships between Western men and Thai women, starting with a discussion of Dennis O'Rourke's *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991), a highly controversial film about a filmmaker and a Thai sex worker.

## Chapter five: Women

The year 1992 saw the cinema release of a highly controversial film about an Australian film-maker who travelled to Bangkok in the hope of finding 'love' from the city's commercial sex venues. The film, *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, was produced and directed by Dennis O'Rourke. He called this film a 'documentary fiction film' and proclaimed that the break-up of his 15-year marriage led him to Bangkok to find a prostitute, initiate the affair with her and make a film about it. According to him, this film would be a break from normal documentary films and he also claimed that he was trying to demonstrate in his film that prostitution was a metaphor for both male-female relationships and capitalism.<sup>79</sup> The film provoked both positive and negative responses. Those who praised the film identified with the filmmaker as artist and commended the innovative form of the film. These positive responses, however, come at the cost of side-stepping the role of O'Rourke as a first world sex tourist who deliberately engaged in commercial sex and performed in his film. Positive resolution also fails to take into account the highly unequal power relation between O'Rourke and Oi, the Thai prostitute whose life story he chose to film, and how this allowed O'Rourke to use and exploit Oi as his material. Not surprisingly, most positive reviews tend to evade in-depth discussion of the way O'Rourke used his economic power to pay for Oi's sexual service and performance in his film, not to mention the way he willfully ignored her protests against being filmed when she wanted some private moments of her own. Negative reviews of the film, on the other hand, concentrate on O'Rourke's participation in the sex trade as a first world exploiter of a third world woman and disregards his role as the one who

---

<sup>79</sup> See O'Rourke 212-215 and Powers 106-108.

directed and edited the film and allowed himself to be 'excoriated'. Negative resolution is also frequently achieved through denying Oi any agency and reducing her to a passive victim (Berry, "Dennis O'Rourke's Original Sin" 36-41).

Chris Berry's analysis of the film in "Dennis O'Rourke's Original Sin: *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, or 'Is this what they mean by 'Australia in Asia'?" stands out as the most interesting one between these two poles of responses. Unlike other critics and reviewers, Berry's critique does not try to reach either a positive or negative resolution. Rather, it seeks to show that both positive and negative responses are unable to capture the ambivalence of the film and something positive is lost when ambivalence is not acknowledged. Berry regards the refusal to acknowledge ambivalence and the attempt to disavow one side or the other of ambivalence as something that mimics the structure of fetishism, defined as a defensive response to the discovery that one does not have total power. To maintain one's power, one resorts to the repudiation or disavowal of what one perceives as undermining or challenging one's power and substitutes something else for it (38-41).

Berry also observes that the other thing that is effaced in those reviews is the metaphor of collective identity. He regards the film as not simply the depiction of male-female relationships, but also the representation of Australian-Asian relations. He discusses in detail how the film-maker's encounter with Oi can be read as Australia's encounter with Asia with the latter initially functioning as the former's fetishised other and later as something much more complicated. Berry relates his argument to Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined community'<sup>80</sup>, drawing an analogy between the nation-state and the humanist subject:

---

<sup>80</sup> See Anderson (1983).

The nation-state is collective and the humanist subject individual, but both are comprehended as coherent and unified identities produced and maintained through an ongoing process of, on the one hand, identification with and internalisation of ideal images and, on the other, repression and projection onto others of that which does not fit and disturbs unification and coherence. This process of othering is the process of disavowal and fetishisation...and has long enabled nation-states' blindness to their own lack of essential coherence and unity, even in the case of the classic European nation-state. (42)

Berry further elaborates that Australia as a nation-state originally formed a powerful identification with Britain and this led to the first Australian self-conception as a Western outpost with little to do with surrounding Asian neighbours. The experiences of WWII destabilized this first self-conception and resulted in the emergence of the second self-conception—the creation of national identity based on the ANZAC legend and local Anglo-Celtic tradition. The two self-conceptions, however, share something in common. Berry remarks:

...whether based on identification with or differentiation from Britain, the concept of the nation as an essential, coherent and unified entity seems to have informed white Australia's construction of its identity as an imagined community, and in both cases the rest of the Asia-Pacific region has functioned as a fetishised other against which Australia constructs that identity. (43)

Contemporary Australia sees another emerging self-conception which is characterized by the attempt to engage and participate more fully in the Asia-Pacific region, now recognised as vital to Australia's economy and 'multiculturalism'. Berry contends that if this third self-conception is also modeled on the concept of the nation as unified and coherent entity, it is necessary to forget Australia's past colonialist relationship with the rest of the Asia-Pacific region. To both remember Australia's colonialist past and formulate a new but as yet vaguely defined non-exploitative relationship with Asia would create an internal splitting unacceptable to the logic of coherence and internal unity. The film is therefore highly disturbing for some Australians who support the



reorientation of Australia-Asian relationship since it will not let them forget Australian's colonialist past and thus undermines the claim to a new Australian national identity (45). Berry then proceeds to discuss the film's suggestion that if Australia is to share a common space with Asia, it must acknowledge its colonialist past and recognise the impossibility of utilising Asia as the other by which Australia constitutes itself. In other words, the other must be recognised as something more than just the projection of the subject. Berry later demonstrates that *The Good Woman of Bangkok* is able to take a further step into a post-colonial space in which Australia is part of Asia and move beyond the othering of Asia as the basis for the construction of new self-identity (49-54).

While *The Good Woman of Bangkok* is a highly disturbing film and the relationship between the film-maker and the Thai woman he filmed is much more ambiguous than an ordinary love affair, the film is worth discussing as it brings to the fore questions of representing the other, both at the individual and collective level and at the same time challenges the old way of imagining the other. Crucially, representation of Thai women in *The Good Woman of Bangkok* sparked my interest in Australian men's representation of Thai women and Chris Berry's analysis of the film provides me with an excellent tool. I began my examination of Australian fiction with the following questions in mind. Do Thai women in Australian male authors' works figure simply as the fetishised other against which Australian males reconstitute themselves, or as something more than that? Through the depiction of Thai women, do we see Thailand sharing common space with Australia as a separate and different entity of its own, or merely as the projection of Australian subjectivity? Do some of these works reveal to us the possibility of Australia gaining access to Asia through the metaphor of identification and empathy? Fictional representation of the encounter

between a Thai woman and an Australian man may not simply reveal something about male-female relationships, but also Australia's relation to Thailand. As Berry argues:

If there is an homology between the male subject and the nation-state, it suggests that the masochistic implications of the film extend beyond the specific interaction between Oi and O'Rourke and the gender metaphor of male-female relationships to encompass Australia's relation to the Asia-Pacific region. (52)

In this chapter I examine three Australian novels and two short stories wholly or partially set in Thailand in order to find out whether the depiction of Thai women and/or their relationships with Western men resembles the one in the film, and whether, at a symbolic level, these works reveal something about Australian-Thai relations that is comparable with what is conveyed through *The Good Woman of Bangkok*. The texts examined are James McQueen's "A Million Swallows" (1989) and "The Night Market" (1989), Don Townsend's *The Thai Swing* (1994), Donald Lee's *The Silvered Shovel* (1989) and Morris West's *The Ringmaster* (1991).

My finding is that these stories are quite different from *The Good Woman of Bangkok*. While their depictions of Thai women appear to mark a significant departure from the explicitly racist imaging of Asia of the earlier era, these works hardly provide a critique of the use of Thai or other Asian women as the other against which the Australian male can reconstitute himself. Thai women in these works are imagined as the projection of the desire and demands of the Australian male protagonist. The crucial role Thai women are made to assume is the idealised female who heals male emotional inadequacies and redeems men to the position of power. As Annette Hamilton remarks, the rise of feminism in the West has led to increasing imagining of Asian women as a means through which another form of power can be

discovered (26). The texts examined in this chapter testify this employment of women as a way to confirm male power.

Significantly, while Thai and sometimes other Asian women are idealised, their male counterparts receive little attention or much less positive depiction. In the four Australian novels under consideration, Thai and Japanese men are not only portrayed as morally inferior to their women, but also to the Australian protagonists. Japanese men, in particular, are made to assume the role of ruthless colonialist and neo-colonialist exploiters who inflict pain and damage on both the Thais and Australians. The construction of Japanese men can be seen as the projection of what the self represses or wants to reject. If we read this as a collective metaphor, it can be argued that the attempt to recast Australia's relation to the Asia-Pacific region involves the process of othering in which Japan becomes the projection of things that do not fit or undermine Australia's new status in Asia namely, Australia's own colonialist past. In other words, the demonisation of Japan and the emphasis on Australia's innocence and victimization make it possible for Australia to identify itself with the rest of the Asia-Pacific region which is perceived as falling victim to either Japanese imperialist ambition or economic colonialism.

The choice of woman as the other against which the male reconstitutes himself is not restricted to Australian male authors. The second part of this chapter looks at two Thai novels authored by Thai men who also utilise women as their male subject's fetishised other. The novels are Akard Damkerng's *Life is a Play* (1929) and Pira Sudham's *The Force of Karma* (2002). More interesting, however, are stories by the young Thai author Rattawut Lapcharoensap, whose depiction of Thai women reveals an attempt to destabilise Western fantasy about Thailand and Thai femininity, and serves as an effective antidote to Australian male authors' tendency to employ the

Thai female as the self-confirming other. Rattawut's two short stories, "Farangs" and "Don't Let Me Die in This Place", both published in 2005, will be examined in detail in the latter part of this chapter. Both stories can be read as an endeavour to rewrite the images of Thailand that differ from persisting Orientalist images and a struggle to address the unequal power relations between Thailand and the West.

### **Australian writing**

#### **"A Million Swallows"**

James McQueen's "A Million Swallows" (1989) tells the story of Luke, the lonely and vulnerable Australian tourist in Bangkok, and how he comes to find the woman of his dreams who can fulfill his emotional needs. As with the filmmaker in *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, Bangkok comes to represent a city that holds the promises of 'love without pain' for Western males. Luke is one among 'a million swallows' who visit this city in the hope of finding something they feel is not available to them at home. Yet the similarity seems to stop here. Unlike O'Rourke's conscious attempt to construct the filmmaker as little different from Western males who participate in the Thai sex industry, McQueen's protagonist maintains a safe distance from those sex tourists. Luke is not the one who enjoys paying for girls in Patpong, Bangkok's notorious red light district. He shudders at the slave-like treatment the girls there receive and does not enjoy exerting the economic power he has over the Thais, particularly when it involves exploitation in its explicit form. Crucially, Luke perceives Thai prostitutes as defenceless victims without any agency. This disempowerment of Thai sex workers is maintained throughout the story and is an interesting contrast with O'Rourke's attempt to show that Oi, the Thai prostitute in his

film, tries to assert her power whenever she can and frequently eludes the victim status the film-maker assigns her. McQueen writes:

He had visited one of the brothels, but had left quickly at the sight of the girls, more than thirty of them in swimsuits or underwear behind the plate glass window, each with a number pinned to her. It seemed altogether too gross, too brutal...He had been with prostitutes at home, of course, but they had been girls who had picked him up on the streets, freelancers who had serviced him rapidly and efficiently, taken his money and moved on. But the place in Patpong Road had seemed to him to carry the aura of the slave market, of captivity and oppression, and he had been revolted by it. (174-175)

The story not only creates a distance between Luke and other sex tourists, but also seeks to form the identification between Luke and the disadvantaged Thais. Luke's relationship with his Thai friends, Yee and her brother, Kampon, begins when he helps Kampon pay for the repair of his *tuk-tuk*. In return for Luke's generosity, Kampon and Yee, invite Luke to have dinner with them at their place. The brother and sister are from rural Northeastern Thailand and, like many other rural poor, they have left their village for Bangkok in the hope of earning money to support their family back home. In Bangkok the brother and sister live in poverty and the sister works in Patpong, presumably as a bargirl. Nevertheless, Luke finds that Yee and Kampon are quite content with their life and they are very kind-hearted people. He is drawn to them and is reluctant to leave Bangkok without seeing them again:

Luke went early to bed, in no mood for another idle evening on Silom Road. He lay on his back in the darkness for a long time thinking of the two Thais. Neither of them had suggested that they meet again, nor had he; but he felt a vague uneasiness at the thought of never seeing them again. There was a certain simplicity about them, a quality of directness and ease, that he had never known before in anyone. (174)

Luke's character contributes to his attitude towards the two Thais. He is deformed in one leg and he usually feels inadequate because of it. He is also without family and does not feel that he belongs in his society. Luke is tormented by the sense of

alienation and vulnerability. He is self-conscious and uncomfortable whenever he feels that people are looking at him:

He disliked the dining room less for its exorbitant prices than for the public isolation to which it exposed him. No one, it seemed to him, ever sat there alone; except him. All the others were in groups, families, pairs. And it seemed to him that everyone turned to watch his limping progress up the wide stairs, across the carpet to the table. On the streets, in the crowds, it was different, but here he felt exposed and raw. (168-169)

In Luke's eyes, Yee and Kampon are different from other people he has met. They are eager to please him and they make him feel accepted and less lonely. In a way, both Luke and the two Thais are similar in that they do not belong to mainstream society. While Yee and Luke are marginalised because of their social and economic status, Luke feels that he is more or less a social outcast in Australia because of his introverted personality and his sense of inferiority. The friendship between Luke and Yee and her brother develops very quickly and Luke soon becomes Yee's lover and moves in with her. To differentiate the relationship between Yee and Luke from that between a prostitute and her client, Yee is made to be the one who initiates the love affair out of the desire to alleviate Luke's unhappiness and loneliness. She demands nothing from him and through her love, Luke's shame of his lame leg subsides. The deformed leg can be read as a sexual metaphor and the relationship seems to heal male impotency and make it possible for him to feel more empowered:

She raised herself, leaned on one arm, ran a small hand down his flank, onto the thigh of his withered leg. 'Why this leg smaller than other one?'

He flinched a little at her touch, turned his head away.

'It got broken when I was a kid,' he said. 'It never mended properly.'

'Don't matter,' she said. 'You got good heart. Leg only small thing.'

'Maybe,' he said.

'You don't like I touch him?'

'It doesn't matter.' He closed his eyes again, shame enveloping him.

Yee knelt up on the mattress, ran her hands gently over the shrunken muscles on the leg.

“Just leg,” she said. “Nothing too much bad. Maybe you think too much about this leg.”

He reached out, his eyes still closed, drew her down so that she lay along side his body, her hair in a dark cascade across his throat. With his eyes closed he could imagine all kinds of possibilities. (178-179)

It is not merely Luke’s love affair with Yee that restores him to the position of power. Indeed, Luke’s power over the Thais is sustained throughout the story in spite of the sense of identification and empathy he has for them. From the beginning, the story emphasises Yee’s humility, simplicity and child-like figure and looks. Her use of broken English and very simple words also deprives her of linguistic power. When Yee first comes to see Luke to thank him for helping her brother to repair his motorbike, she treats him with great respect and pleads for him to come to her house as a guest. Luke appears as the one in control of both the language and situation:

The girl came forward, made a *wai*. She was tiny, came only to Luke’s shoulder; and she was almost pretty, he thought. Then she smiled again, and he thought that she might be beautiful.

“We come to wait for you,” she said. Her voice was high and childlike. “You very kind to Kampon last night. We think you have very good heart, we like to make you friendship.”

Luke nodded cautiously, watching her with something like wonder.

“We poor people,” she said. “Not got much nice place. But we like make meal for you, make very friendly. Maybe you come our house today, eat with us?”

“Thanks,” he said. “But you don’t have to do that. You don’t owe me anything, you know. It was just a ...just a gift.”

“Yes,” she said, Kampon beaming over her shoulder, “yes, you got good heart, we make friendly, you eat with us today, OK?”....

“Well, alright,” he said. “I suppose so.” (169-170)

Luke’s power over Yee is also affirmed through his better economic status. Although Yee never asks Luke for money, she feels a deep gratitude when Luke offers her the

money for household use, and later as a ‘gift’. Unlike *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, which seeks to expose the impossibility of the saviour myth, “A Million Swallows” embraces it and uses it as a means to alleviate Western guilt. Although Luke is not one among Western tourists who use their economic power to buy third-world women, the fact that he is Western and more well-off than ordinary Thais seems to attach to him the sense of guilt which is more or less effaced through his role as saviour for Yee and her family:

At the end of the week, he gave Yee another five hundred *baht*.

“I’m going to stay a bit longer,” he said. “Another week, anyway. That all right?”

She laughed happily. “I think you more happy now, you not lonely no more.”

He smiled at her, gave her another two hundred *baht*.

She was puzzled. “What this?”

She threw her arms around him, buried her head on his chest. When she spoke her voice was muffled, and he thought she might be crying a little.

“You very good man,” she said.

“I know,” he said, and laughed. “I’ve got a good heart.”

At the end of that week he gave her another five hundred *baht* without comment. She smiled happily and kissed him. (182)

Luke’s guilt is further resolved through the approving and enthusiastic way Kampon treats his relationship with Yee. Kampon’s respect for Luke is by no means lessened after he knows that Luke sleeps with his sister. He is still friendly, polite and eager to please Luke. The story also shows how Yee’s relationship with Luke allows both Kampon and Yee to enjoy the luxury that they could not afford before:

In the late afternoon they went back to the room, and were lying there together when Kampon returned. Luke, embarrassed, dressed quickly and started to leave; but Kampon smiled and made a *wai*, and Yee hung on his arm, and he stayed. He took them both to eat in the terrace restaurant at the Panthip Plaza on Petchburi Road, where they sat with the rich Chinese tourists from Hong Kong and the waiters smiled while they cooked the food on a small gas stove



at their table. (179)

While the story seems to have a happy ending—a lonely Western man eventually finds a woman of his dreams who warmly accepts him into her home—Luke’s emotional fulfilment is by no means permanent, as he himself is aware. Luke knows that one day he will have to leave Bangkok just like those ‘million swallows’ who come to Bangkok in the hope of having their fantasies or dreams temporarily fulfilled. Besides, as Luke knows, this fantasy can only be sustained as long as his money lasts. Crucially, it is the economic power of people from the first world that makes it possible for them to indulge in fantasy:

He sat drinking quietly, staring out at the night. After a few minutes he took a scrap of paper and a pencil from his pocket, began to make some small calculations. He still had ten thousand *baht*, enough to last him for at least two months if he were careful. In the bank at home he had another two thousand dollars, perhaps forty thousand *baht*, enough for another forty weeks. He could write to the bank, ask them to send it to him. All told, enough for a year. And there was his airline ticket, too: he could cash it in, and when the time came, well, let the consulate repatriate him. Of course, they might catch him before then, deport him. But they would have to find him first, and he didn’t think that would be easy in the warren of Ratcha Prarop Road. And even if they did, he might still have enough money for a small bribe.

One day he would have to leave, like the swallows; but he saw no profit in thinking about it now. (184)

If we read the story of Luke and Yee as extending beyond male- female relationships to symbolically encompass the relationship between Australia and Thailand, Yee/Thailand appears to be a mere projection of Luke/Australia’s desire and fantasy, a function which, as Luke admits, is short-lived in nature. As illustrated earlier, this self-confirming Thailand is little more than a passive and disempowered entity which eagerly responds to the demands of Australia. Its only significance lies in the promise it holds for Australia to reconstitute itself and to legitimize its involvement with Asia. Viewed in this light, this short story creates a different effect from that of O’Rourke’s

film since it affirms rather than challenges the attempt to form a new Australian self-conception based on the employment of the Asia-Pacific region as its fetishised other. Also, as suggested through the relationship between Luke and Yee, the story evades Australia's colonialist relationship with Asia by constructing a metaphor of identification and empathy to conceal the unequal power relations between Australia and the Asia-Pacific region.

In "The Night Market", also by James McQueen, things appear to be more complicated. Instead of allowing the Australian protagonist the satisfaction of having his fantasy fulfilled, the story shows how his trip to Thailand is a source of great disappointment. If we see the protagonist's encounter with Thailand as a metaphor for collective identity, the story is a powerful dramatisation of the difficulty involved in the reorientation of the Australian-Asian relationship.

### **"The Night Market"**

"The Night Market" (1989) tells the story of Thomas, an aging Australian tourist, and the days he spends in Chiang Mai. Like Luke, the protagonist in "A Million Swallows", Thomas is one among many Western tourists who temporarily escape from home and long to find some sort of emotional fulfilment and fresh beginning in the East. From the beginning of the story, we are told that Thomas has been nagged by what he refers to as 'ennui' and he looks forwards to something that can relieve it. The hope and expectation Thomas places on Thailand appears to be of a spiritual nature as suggested through his first impression of Chiang Mai. The temple on the top of the mountain evokes in him a sense of purity and spiritual enlightenment:

When at the beginning of the week he had stepped from the sterile coolness of the plane into the heat and light of the day and seen the Wat of Doi Suthep

hanging suspended high on the mountainside, separated from the earth by a pearly band of haze and smoke, he had found himself suddenly breathless; had felt the shock of something like recognition for this place he had never seen before. And some weight within him had seemed to shift, to lighten, as if a journey were unexpectedly nearing its end. (44)

Thomas spends his days in Chiang Mai with the anticipation and conviction that the place will soon reveal what it has promised. However, the initial expectation he has of the city seems to give way to something else which he himself does not seem to be conscious of. Thomas has found a favourite spot in Chiang Mai: a bustling night market where various items are sold by the locals. Each day he looks forward to visiting the place as night approaches. The description of the market associates the place with energy, liveliness and the promise of new discoveries, excitement and the renewal of the physical rather than the spiritual or mythical. This leads us to suspect whether the ‘ennui’ that Thomas feels has been nagging him is partly to do with aging and that he does not simply long for spiritual renewal, but also physical rejuvenation:

He had found it on his first night, returned each night since. It had become the final ceremony of the day for him, a ceremony that differed in pitch and mood each time he came. On some nights it was quieter than on others, but always cheerful, noisy, vital. The Night Bazaar and the Viang Ping stood side by side, deep labyrinths of stalls and shops. For several blocks the footpaths were crowded with patient round-faced Akha women, their bags and jackets spread around them. The market bled over into the side-streets, sprawled off into the darkness in a maze of eating houses and food stalls. There was colour, bustle, life everywhere, and he would roam happily until his feet grew tired, then retreat to the bar at the entrance of the Viang Ping...( 46)

As its name implies, the night market, Thomas’s favourite place, has something else other than local products and souvenirs to offer to tourists. Chiang Mai as depicted in this story is not merely a place that holds the promise of uplifting discovery, but also a place that lures and tempts one to indulge in his/her own secret desire. Thomas is no less sensitive to this dark side of the city than to its tranquil and spiritual side. Watching people strolling past him, among them Western tourists and their Thai

girlfriends, Thomas wonders how the men get to know their women. A hidden longing for a love affair with a Thai woman surfaces, but Thomas fights to suppress it by reminding himself that a middle-aged man like him must not compromise his moral and sexual codes by indulging in such a rendezvous. Moreover, there is a greater and more palpable fear that sexual contact with local women can cause disease and contamination:

He just envied the boys their companions. And he wondered sometimes how it was arranged. Was there some sort of agency? Or did they just drift together?

It didn't matter, he thought; it wasn't for him. At forty he was beyond that sort of thing, he knew. And besides, there were VD clinics on every second corner, and their blatant presence made him a little uneasy. (47)

Yet Thomas's adherence to his moral and sexual codes is severely tested shortly afterwards when he is approached by a local man who offers to procure a Thai girl for him. Thomas wants to escape but is eventually tempted to stay and wait for the man to bring him the girl. It is at this point that Thomas becomes conscious of his secret desire and this fills him with trepidation. For a moment at least, he is unable to resist it and he succumbs to the desire to meet the girl the Thai man promises to fetch for him:

Thomas was tempted to get up, excuse himself, walk away. It wasn't fear of robbery, now, or any kind of violence, but an apprehension of an altogether deeper kind. But he did not move, sat sipping his beer, the sweat breaking slowly on his forehead. Something almost like hope was beginning to germinate down beneath the fear. (50)

In the end, however, Thomas's fear overwhelms his desire. The intensity of Thomas's apprehension makes him imagine that he is being pursued and trapped. Even after he manages to run away from the girl after a few minutes' talk and locks himself in his hotel room, he still feels anxious that the girl and the Thai man might come to look for

him. While Thomas's fear partly stems from his association of local prostitutes with contamination and disease, at this moment it seems to have more to do with the fear of surrendering himself to temptation—that he will be eventually persuaded by the Thais to give in to his secret desire:

They sat for a few moments without speaking. Thomas found that he was having difficulty swallowing. It seemed to him that the world was closing in about him, the night growing brighter, noisier, more threatening.

He stood up quickly. "Excuse me," he said. "I have to go...find a bathroom... you understand?"

"You know where is?"

"Yes," he said, committed now. "Yes, just a couple of minutes, if you don't mind waiting..."

And then he was gone, hurrying out on to the footpath, pushing himself through the crowds, across the road, into the mouth of the alley....He hurried, almost running, along the lane to the guesthouse....

He did not switch on the light, but threw himself on the bed, lay panting there in the darkness. For a long time he did not stir. Then at last he sighed deeply, got up and went to the bathroom, cleaned his teeth; undressed, crawled under the light blanket. A great weariness descended on him. The fan made a soothing hum in the night, and the light from the street threw shadows on the ceiling.

He was almost asleep when the thought occurred to him: had he told them...Keree... or Chawee...where he was staying? Would they come looking for him?

But the door was locked, the light was off, and at least for the moment he was safe. He slept. (51-52)

It is not only fear that torments Thomas. There is also the shame of realising that he has almost succumbed to temptation, becoming just like those Western tourists who come to Thailand to buy sexual partners. While rushing back to his hotel, Thomas is reminded of what he might become when he sees an American woman staying in the same place as him kissing a Thai girl:

In front of him he recognised the American lady hand in hand with a Thai girl. As he reached them, she kissed the girl on the cheek; then seeing him, bridled, startled.

He ran past them, in through the gate, up the stairs to his room. (52)

Thomas's experience in Chiang Mai seems to open his eyes to his own susceptibility and moral weakness. The physical pain, either real or imagined, that he feels while leaving the city appears to be an indication of his moral vulnerability and the trauma of having to confront and acknowledge it. The fact that Thomas averts his eyes from the mountain temple which so fascinated him when he first arrived also foregrounds his shame on discovering that he easily falls to temptation and fails to pursue the spiritual journey the place initially offers him:

As he walked out of the terminal building towards the plane, through the heat and the white morning light, he did not look towards the mountains where the Wat of Doi Suthep hung above the haze. Instead he kept his eyes on the tarmac at his feet. He could not understand it, but his flesh felt slightly bruised, and his eyes seemed strangely tender to the brightness of the day. (52-53)

Thomas's disappointment and hurried departure from Thailand can be read as an indicator of the challenges involved in reorienting the Australian-Asian relationship. Thomas's initial sensitivity and eagerness to open himself up to Thailand can be seen as representing the attempt by some sections of Australian society to form a non-exploitative relationship with Asia, part of what Chris Berry refers to as the third Australian self-conception ("Dennis O' Rourke's Original Sin" 45). Nonetheless, Thomas's weakness prevents him from pursuing his initial goal and he hurriedly leaves Thailand with a deep sense of disappointment. What is suggested here is that in spite of Australia's enthusiasm to be part of Asia and its desire to distance itself from exploitative encounters with the locals, there is still a great difficulty in exorcising the colonialist legacy. Still, in spite of Thomas's shortcoming, his struggle to resist temptation and his refusal to participate in the sex industry seem to suggest that for the new Australia a colonialist relationship with Asia is unacceptable and must be

disavowed no matter how difficult it is. Symbolically, Thomas may be seen as representing this new Australia, which, in spite of its weakness, shame and guilt, persists in the struggle to distance itself from an exploitative relationship with Asia. Also worth noting is the nationality of the Western woman whom Thomas saw kissing a Thai girl. She is not Australian, but is ‘an American woman who was something to do with the university’ (44). Implicit here is that while the rest of the Western world may still be using their superior economic power to buy sexual and emotional gratification from Asia, the new Australia, represented by Thomas, is trying to disengage itself from this kind of exploitation.

Nevertheless, while James McQueen’s “The Night Market” brings to the fore the challenges involved in the recasting of Asia-Australia relation and seeks to establish the emerging third Australian self-conception based on a non-exploitative relation with Asia, its depiction of Thailand does not deviate much from persisting Orientalist images. The story still endorses and reaffirms the contradictory Orientalist construction of the East as a locale that both promises spiritual enlightenment and lures one to indulge in immorality. This is evidenced from the contrast between the uplifting atmosphere surrounding the temple on top of the mountain and the alluring and seductive night market with its dark and seedy side. More importantly, the story does little to criticise Australia’s utilization of Thailand as its other. This is the other evoked through Thomas’s first impression of Chiang Mai—the serene, tranquil and spiritually uplifting Asia whose access may be open to someone who is strong enough to resist temptation. Indeed, *White Light*, one of McQueen’s novels, also features a quest for such an idealised other. In this novel Erich Ritter, a troubled Australian, travels to Northern Thailand and finds that the place can offer him a much needed

emotional and spiritual answer, peace and consolation.<sup>81</sup>

In Don Townsend's *The Thai Swing* (1994), the depiction of Thailand is similar to that offered in *White Light*. Thailand is constructed as the other which promises an alleviation of emotional and spiritual trauma for the Australian protagonist. However, while *White Light* concentrates on Thai Buddhism and its spiritual promise, *The Thai Swing* addresses the issue of Western grief and longing for lost spiritual, communal and other traditional values through the idealisation of Thai social and communal values. Unlike in "The Night Market", Thai women in Don Townsend's novel are not made to assume the role of temptress or seducer who lure men from the pursuit of a spiritual journey, but are elevated to the role of the guardian of tradition and moral values. Nevertheless, whether represented as Madonna or siren, Thai women in Australian stories examined here similarly function as the projection of Australian subjectivity and/or help to address male anxieties.

### ***The Thai Swing***

Don Townsend's *The Thai Swing* (1994) tells the story of James Sherwood, a Sydney businessman, and his search for the truth about his lost father in Thailand. James' father was sent to fight the Japanese during WWII and was never heard of again. The novel begins with James's arrival in Thailand and his trip to the cemetery of prisoners who died working for the Japanese on the construction of the Thailand-Burma Railway. Chapters two through four go back to the WWII years and recount the ordeal suffered by James's father, Peter Sherwood, and other Australian soldiers. As Prisoners of War, they were brutally treated by the Japanese and many of them were

---

<sup>81</sup> *White Light* is discussed in detail in chapter four.



murdered or left to die when they were too ill to work. Peter Sherwood and two other prisoners tried to escape from the Japanese but only Peter made it. He was severely injured after the escape and was helped by a young village woman who became his lover. From chapter five on, the narrative largely concentrates on James and two Thai sisters who play a crucial role in James' understanding of and fascination with Thai culture. Significantly, the major Thai characters in this novel are exclusively women: Pranee, the village woman who saves Peter Sherwood's life and her two daughters Acharaa and Amporn. The three women figure as guardians of moral and cultural values. They are not only kind and gentle, but also highly intelligent and resilient. However, while these women are depicted as superior to the Thai men, they are never shown as attempting to challenge or subvert male authority. Pranee's characterisation best exemplifies this.

Pranee as a young woman is highly virtuous and devout. She is also a practical and strong woman who does not allow her own grief and suffering to prevent her from being responsive and sensitive to other people's misfortunes. Shortly after the loss of her husband and young son, Pranee finds the severely damaged and unconscious body of Peter Sherwood near a river and he becomes the object of her care and attention. Because she is fearful of dejection from village men, she discreetly hides him in a small shelter and seeks help from other village women while she cares for him. Pranee's genuine concern for, and self-less devotion to, her patient evokes an image of a mother figure whose love and compassion envelop not only her children, but also other fellow human beings:

She washed him frequently with very hot water speckled with red pepper seeds. She squeezed the juice of frangipani into the narrower cuts and gashes; and poultices of papaya, bananas and pumpkins to the badly ulcerated skin. She poured coconut oil and coconut water into his throat and propped him up so as to force into his stomach small lumps of chicken meats in crushed

banana.... For the most foul of the ulcers, she applied a mulch of fish oil, tamarind seeds, moringa leaves and root ginger. Whether against insects or for hope, she always hung a garland of hibiscus, dripping nectar, inside the shelter. (77)

Pranee's village is a small and close community. While the men are the ones who play leading roles in public affairs and make important decisions, the women are respected for their kindness, generosity and virtuousness. Village men openly recognize their women's superior moral character and their ability to change their men's character. Addressing villagers who gather together after their cargo ship has been attacked by pirates, a village headman accepts responsibility for the loss and admits that it is now too difficult for village men to defeat pirates as they are no longer shrewd or savage as before:

I set the protection for our operations, but it was not enough. That was my mistake, lost as I was in the old ways of fair cheating. You young men can find and fight those pirates in Prachuap, or their bosses, but they are tough and ruthless. We are not, perhaps the land by the river, or the kind ways of our women, has made us soft. We are of the village, not wild people now. (123)

The real power, however, is still in the hands of men. Village women, no matter how respectful they are, allow men absolute authority to make important decisions. While village women like Pranee might seek other women's support when they are unsure of men's approval, in the end, it is the men who have the final say. Village life as depicted in the novel cherishes harmony and collectivism much more than difference and individualism, and the women will not assert themselves in a way that can cause conflicts and communal disintegration. Having spent nearly a year in the village, Peter Sherwood, now fully recovered, also comes to accept this world view. Peter has made a mistake which causes the death of one villager and an injury to another. This leads to the male villagers' decision to banish him from their community. Peter does not resent Pranee, now his lover and the mother of his child, for accepting the majority's

verdict without protest. He knows that she cannot contradict the majority's opinion for his or her own sake:

I could say nothing without being indecent or impolite or ungrateful. I could not put up arguments and explanations against a collective feeling about what is, or was, or should be. Reason might appear to win by knocking down the bushes of ignorance; but afterwards, the thorns of bitter revelations would cover the grounds of the village. You know it, too, this truth of Thai life: it does not matter to be right unless the majority of your people want it to be so. Truth is a social matter. (126)

Pranee's submission to village men's power makes her a traditional woman who, although highly regarded by all for her virtues, is satisfied to stay in the background and allow men full power in the public sphere. She is also willing to sacrifice her personal love and attachment for her lover's dream and aspiration. Pranee's attitude towards her relationship with Peter reflects this. Although she saves Peter's life and later becomes his lover, she does not demand that he stays in the village with her, knowing that he cannot fit into the village's small world and will eventually want to leave. She is satisfied with her role as someone who helps make him strong so that he can proceed on his way. Of note here is Pranee's fluency of language which marks her as an intelligent and sophisticated woman, the qualities that enable her to understand men's emotional and psychological needs and assist them in a way that they themselves may not be able to comprehend:

"I watched your face coming back from Kanburi, when uncle made the new plan. I saw you during the meeting, looking beyond the serious problem, admiring clouds. Clouds! Clouds! You were not with us. Another thing had moved into your strengthening mind, like a crab claiming and fitting an empty shell."

Peter sat behind her, her right hand resting on his wounded arm, and they scanned the sky for familiar stars between the clumps of accumulating cloud.

"Flood will come soon. You will go. Our lives mix only here. You do not need us or the backwater village, when you are strong. *Farang* lost their village long ago." (127)

Pranee and other Thai women in *The Thai Swing* not only function as fetishised others who restore male power and emotional security, they also accommodate a Western nostalgia for lost tradition and values. Throughout the novel we can detect the grief for the loss of community in modern Western society. To heal such a grief, traditional Thai society is constructed as a locale where communal values are powerfully endorsed and highly cherished. Village life as discussed above is a good example of such a social unit in which collectivism is privileged over individualism. Moreover, the novel seeks to show that in modern Thailand collectivism and communality are still maintained and that women play a crucial role in strengthening them. Pranee's two daughters, Acharaa and Amporn, embody the qualities that make modern Thai women able to be the guardians of traditional values. Acharaa gets married and sets up a household in Bangkok where Amporn and other relatives shortly join her. Acharaa makes her home a comforting and loving refuge for her family and friends and they know that this home is a continuation of a village tradition in which a communal spirit is nurtured. Acharaa's rescue of a young Thai prostitute and her decision to bring the girl into the household shows that her kindness and generosity extends beyond family members and friends. As a young and successful career woman who sometimes finds the competitiveness of the business world overwhelming, Amporn is very grateful for the warm and loving home her elder sister has created for her:

She drove out to battle the traffic. She hurried for the comfortable embrace of familiarity which would always be just inside the door of the jumbled apartment which she shared with Acharaa, Preeda and usually a couple of others. It was a place where she could escape a burden of distinctive personality. She belonged there, not in a specific role, function or relationship, but as part of the spiritual fellowship of a village family staking out its value and sanity in a pressured city environment.

“I want to be there,” she whispered. “I want to flop down, eat mandarin

bits, ping pips into the brass bowl and gossip with Raa above the din of the boxing match.” (193-194)

The difference between Thailand and the modern West’s familial values is suggested through James Sherwood’s great surprise when he is introduced to an extended family of one of his Thai friends. Deeply impressed, James feels as if he is entering the world of bygone time which no longer exists in the modern West:

She pointed to the rear of the house. James looked in on a scene which struck in the modern wanderer a fine chord from an antique sedentary culture. In the yellow light of the dining room, six people were seated at a table burdened with bowls of fruit, meat, soup, sweets, vegetables, flowers and rice. There was a focus, a hearth, a center, a core of sociability, a comfort, a reason for being people, an affirmation of collectivism over individualism. (142)

Modern Thailand also sees the survival of many ancient rituals and festivals which help to bind the community together. As with her sister, Amporn deeply cherishes tradition and inherited social values. Taking her Japanese boss to a Royal Ploughing Ceremony, Amporn tries to explain to him how important the ceremony is to Thai people. Offended by the Japanese’s dismissive attitude towards Thai ceremonies, Amporn puts up a defence for the ceremony that she holds dear. As with Pranee, Amporn’s fluent and impeccable language functions to underline her intelligence and ability to articulate herself well:

Esse, it is more than that. A life without hope is a life of pain, with anti-social outbursts, most likely. The Royal Ceremony provides a sense of community, of pride and of optimism. Optimism releases energy, you would know that. (269)

Amporn and other Thais’ deep emotional involvement while participating in festivals is frequently stressed throughout the novel. While the festive aspect of ceremonies draws people to join them, what is more important is the role of festivals in strengthening the bonding and the sense of belonging among Thai people:

“These festivals belong to us. It is a time to feel, a time to celebrate what holds us together. Not distracted, no. Made strong again as a group, the better to resist the excesses of the economists and politicians and militarists.”

“Well said, Amporn. May I add that such a hope enables us to pursue a dream or two. Life is richer for that, even if it raises no taxes for your governors and bureaucrats. Look at all these *krathongs*, these boats! A cosmic soup of hopes and ideologues. Ours.” (345)

Apart from rituals, festivals and ceremonies, there is a suggestion that the Thai monarchy is an irreplaceable institution that unites Thais from all walks of life and sustains national harmony in times of crises. In spite of the acknowledgement that the institution is maintained through the hardship and labours of common people, its symbolic role as the nation’s pillar lends it legitimacy:

Royal privileges. Royal wealth. Passed down through the ages, and extracted from peasants and workers, ultimately. But that is acceptable if people feel the resulting symbol of communal spirit belongs to, is part of them. That’s where our monarchy has been successful. That’s how we avoided being the next domino or a ruin like Burma: enough people believed in sharing and in spiritual values....A beloved king can reflect love, and self-esteem, to all his people. (343)

*The Thai Swing*’s fascination and idealisation of Thai collectivism, communal values and indigenous political institutions can be partly attributed to Western yearning for the restoration of lost values and tradition. Thailand is constructed in a way that fulfills such a yearning—it becomes the other on which the nostalgia for ‘the good old days’ is projected. Interestingly, this idealisation of Thai traditional culture and indigenous political system matches with the Thai establishment’s attempt to represent Thai social values and culture. In the State-sanctioned discourse, social harmony is privileged above individualism and the Thai monarchy is regarded as indispensable to social unity. Frequently, however, this kind of discourse is used for political purpose, particularly to suppress those regarded by the State as a threat to its power. By accusing political enemies of trying to disrupt social order and create social

conflicts, the Thai State justifies its suppression of difference.<sup>82</sup>

Interestingly, while *The Thai Swing* emphasizes the difference between Thailand and the modern West's social and familial values, it seeks to show that there is strong affinity between Thai communal sense and Australian traditional values such as mateship. Many of the Australian war veterans find that they cannot fit in with the lifestyle of contemporary Australia which has become very competitive and much less caring. They, however, are able to find what is lost from modern Australia in Thailand. These old soldiers come back to Thailand every year to relive their war memories and to help local people. One of the veterans, Wilfred, marries a Thai woman and spends his life in Thailand trying to help Thai villagers maintain their traditional way of life amidst the threat of materialism and modern Japan's economic imperialism. Wilfred's identification with the Thais is clear and this identification is also intensified through what he perceives as the shared experience of oppression and exploitation from Japan:

“...My friends were stripped of humanity here. Many died here, in stupidity and brutality at its worst. History you might say, but it still lives in some people, and it must be remembered. And this too. Under Japanese bayonets and clubs, we violated this land. It is time to prevent the ruining of land by them who happen to have power at a particular time. This small piece can rest now, and all the lives around and under it....Siam was forced, once, to submit. We were forced to submit to the same power. Thailand should not be suppressed by the new economic power. Freedom and innocence, prayer and play—these things are precious—culture, friends, family....”

He ignored Sahlee's surprise at the longest speech he had made in thirty years, to let out the ideas which had been spawned in bitterness and matured in years of contemplation.

“...What Australians called ‘mates.’ The caring about your own kind and your own community. It matters most.”

Amporn now saw in the tall *farang* the familiarity which Preeda had mentioned. (359-360)

---

<sup>82</sup> See more discussion of the Thai State in chapter three.

Of note is the very negative representation of Japanese men in *The Thai Swing*. During wartime, Japanese soldiers figured as ruthless invaders, exploiters and oppressors who killed and tortured British and Australian captives. Modern Japan is not depicted in a much better light. Japanese businessmen are portrayed as ambitious and intent on using their economic power to exploit and take advantage of others. Both Australia and Thailand are shown as being threatened by Japanese economic invasion and domination. Reprimanding his teenage son for leading a carefree and irresponsible life, James Sherwood reminds him that it will not be long before rich Japanese and Chinese make a complete purchase of Australian land:

So you are enjoying yourself. But while you're playing around up here, the Chinese and Japanese are buying up your beaches back there, your North Sydney offices and a whole row of million dollar houses in Mosman Bay. You won't be able to buy yourself a house in Sydney. You'll have to go to Bali just to get a swim. For a job?—you will be pulling tourists in imported rickshaws around King's Cross Lanes. (211)

The novel also dramatises how Japan exploits Thailand economically and has no regard for Thai tradition and culture. Japanese investment in Thailand hardly benefits Thailand, and worse, is shown as causing damage to Thai cultural heritage. The relationship between Amporn and Tokita, her Japanese employer who later becomes her lover, is a metaphor for the relationship between the two countries. Tokita is aggressive, competitive and self-serving while Amporn is warm, loving and caring. Amporn's attempt to reform Tokita ends in failure. She tries to invite him to her family but he is too different to feel comfortable there. Besides, his competitiveness and desire to show off make her very uneasy. Eventually, she realizes that it is not possible for them to be happy together:

Amporn cared much for the private Esse, but shuddered with revulsion at the



groupie performer Tokita-san. Tonight she had pleased him, she could see, with a victory of imagination and discipline over many uncertainties in the Chiang Mai proposal. She resisted the invitation by which she would become a beautiful drape on which to display his colours, a reluctant sister of the prostitutes who swooned at the persistent hard currency of the new force in Thailand, and eventually, the trembling instrument on which he could play out his complex game of assailant, enforcer, lover, child, brother and exhausted, grateful confidant. (192-193)

Tokita's competitiveness is depicted as closely tied to Japan's past. He grew up during Japan's darkest years, immediately after the end of WWII. His father, an ex-soldier deeply embittered by his country's defeat, raised to win back Japan's dignity. Tokita does not seem to question his father's dream and he tries to make his father's wish come true. His sole obsession is success and it does not matter how he achieves it:

“Go there, as a proud son of Japan. Raid them and bring back the knowledge which enables them to generate such wealth and power from a crude, empty culture. Keep your cool determination behind good manners. But raid, for us, steal and prosper.”

So he had, and made an efficient progress through university, and performed well in swimming, golf and squash. Rising with the miracle of Japanese recovery and expansion, he had built a solid position with a major trading company, had worked in most of the capitals of East and Southeast Asia, and had established a family of two girls during the 1970s. His wife had continued a career job in Tokyo, maintained their simple, elegant flat there, and made bi-annual visits to wherever he was assigned. Success was his shield against isolation and alienation. (195-196)

The negative depiction of Japan and Japanese men in the novel can be attributed to Australia's WWII experience and Japan's power and influence in the contemporary Australian economy. During WWII Japan's military power and imperialist agenda were seen as a threat to Australia (Hamilton, "Fear and Desire" 24-25). In spite of the defeat during the war, Japan soon recovered and assumed a central position in the

world economy. Although Japanese economic power is somewhat diminished now, its image is quite different from that of the rest of Asia. Arguably, the demonisation of Japan could sometimes facilitate the formation of the 'third Australian self-conception' by making possible the externalisation onto the other of what the self represses or wants to reject, namely Australia's past as a coloniser. As *The Thai Swing* tries to demonstrate, it is Japan who is the colonialist and the exploiter while Australia is a victim of Japan, just like Thailand and the rest of Asia. This message is conveyed through James's referring to his father and other Australian soldiers who suffered from Japanese military aggression as those who initiate the reorientation of Australian attitudes towards Asia:

...his death was not as straightforward as the marker in the cemetery would imply, that's the story I heard. Worth a little scratching around for my own curiosity. Also, there may have been some historical destiny in it after all: in a strange way, those prisoners started the rest of us on a change from Euro-Aussies to Austral-Asians. (209)

This attempt to formulate a new Australian self-perception through the process of disavowal and projecting onto Japan what does not fit in with the ideal image of self or the nation state is also evident in Lee McDonald's *The Silvered Shovel* and Morris West's *The Ringmaster*. It is important, however, to note that the depiction of Japanese women can be significantly more positive than that of their male counterparts, as women seem to be largely constructed as the projection of male desire rather than as the externalisation of the rejected side of self. In *The Silvered Shovel*, the next Australian novel under consideration, Japanese men are shown as cruel, sadistic and beyond redemption whereas the Japanese heroine is portrayed as pure, virtuous and blameless.

***The Silvered Shovel (1989)***

Lee McDonald's *The Silvered Shovel* (1989) is a heroic portrayal of David Willoughby, a young Australian soldier, and his life during and after WWII. The first half of the novel dramatises the suffering of the Australian and British soldiers working on the construction of the railway line in Thailand under ruthless Japanese supervision. The Japanese and their Korean guards are depicted with great horror and hatred. They abuse, beat and murder the prisoners at their own whims. The Japanese and Korean intoxication with power deprives them of all human qualities and sympathy and they are reduced to evil personified:

...all the time a handful of demons leapt among them, striking them down, screaming unintelligible oaths in fury. And over all stood Satan with a hurricane lantern. What had he been in the Land of the Rising Sun? A garage-worker? A labourer? The white men never knew; but here at Kanu the nameless yellow N.C.O. ruled supreme. He gazed down sardonically at the little Hell. From his high position he saw the sheer walls lose themselves in the blackness under which his victims toiled by smoky torches, and he saw the shelf over which they dragged the rubble. And here his illiterate and sadistic minions courted his favour by the demands they made. Should a man stumble from the sinking weight on his numbing fingertips of the rough granite, a demon would leap at him with flailing fists and kick him as he writhed upon the stones. Then he would retire as from a job well done, not looking up to see whether Satan had noted his keenness but hoping nevertheless that he had done so. (33-34)

In spite of their fear and agony, the prisoners are able to retain their courage and dignity. The difference between the suffering but brave and heroic Australians and the maniacal, depraved Japanese is emphasized throughout the first half of the novel. This contrast can be read as the process of othering in which only idealized attributes are appropriated as part of the humanist subject/nation-state while depravity and barbarism are externalized onto the other. The most outstanding contrast to the evil Japanese is the Australian Sergeant, David Willoughby, who is courageous, kind and compassionate. David always endures pain in silence and is forever ready to help and

protect those weaker than him:

During the heat of the day David saw the men following the scanty shade around the few bushes the compound contained—just as the sheep did back home. He thought of the dream and his heartache as he felt terribly homesick. Then he saw young ‘Whipper’ Watkins, a lad of twenty, if that, spewing his heart out. He was one of his men. David was up in a moment, his own pain forgotten. The poor lad was sunstruck. They took him to the medical officer. On the way back, David realised that more than ever he had to look for the sick ones here too, and help them when sickness, misery, and failing strength had robbed them of their fighting powers. (18)

David is later mercilessly beaten by a Japanese soldier as a punishment for his attempt to save the life of his sick friend. The last thing that David remembers before he loses his consciousness is the image of the ‘silvered shovel’ wielded by the Japanese and about to strike him a fatal blow. The ‘silvered shovel’ of the title appears to be a symbol of Japanese brutality which leaves painful and horrific emotional and physical wounds on Australian prisoners of war.

Although severely injured, David survives. Sang, the Thai man, saves his life and takes care of him until he regains his strength. Like David, Sang is a victim of Japanese cruelty and military ambition. Sang is a bargeman who used to lead a free and contented life before the invasion of the Japanese. A Japanese soldier’s brutal rape of his only daughter, Ola, makes Sang despise the Japanese even more. As with *The Thai Swing* *The Silvered Shovel* attempts to form a sense of identification between the Thais and the Australians through their experience of Japanese oppression and exploitation.

While Sang is depicted in a much more positive light than the Japanese, his characterisation distances him from the genuinely kind-hearted and compassionate David. The latter’s gentleness, purity and good nature are conveyed not only through his concern for friends and subordinates, but also through his love for animals. Born

and raised on a farm, David develops great attachment for country life and creatures around him, especially those who are weak and in need of help. David sees himself as the saviour of sick animals and people whom he perceives as weaker than him:

David's mind was carried on a magic carpet to his beloved 'Seeping Waters' and he smelt the clean good grasslands and saw the tall gum trees and the flowering wattle. And sheep (he loved sheep); they were not the stupid creatures people made them out to be but then, there was something about them, in the way they looked at you with their soft, trusting eyes. He always looked for the sick ones, and helped them because of their helplessness. He felt when he helped them that his spirit seemed to enter them, and they fought for the life that, but for his help, would have run from them like water. He dreamed on, of his horses and his dog...(17)

Sang, on the other hand, possesses a different nature from David. Although he leads a decent life and appears to be kind, his kindness and compassion for other human beings are not spontaneous but a result of years of practice and self-control. When something deeply upsets or traumatizes him, he can lose control of himself and become a completely different man. The revenge Sang exacts on a Japanese soldier who rapes his daughter shows how cruel Sang can become once he allows his savage instinct to get the better of him. Unlike David who figures as someone who protects and rescues others from pain and suffering, Sang assumes the role of ruthless and barbaric executer who spares no sympathy for those who have wronged him. Sang, like the Japanese soldiers, functions as the other who is given the attributes that could not possibly be assigned to David without undermining his heroism and virtue:

The savagery that his ancestors had bequeathed him had lain dormant a long time and when the gates had opened, it had poured out like a flood, and Sang had lost all control of his feelings so that lust and thirst for blood and the writhing of his victim built up an appetite that could not be appeased.

Sang looked around him and shuddered. He wanted to get away, and, without even retrieving his knives, he turned and set out for the barge. His mind was chaotic, but uppermost was the incredulity that he could have done what he had done. Surely some evil spirit must have entered into his soul. He looked at his hands and the sight of them revolted him. (62-63)

Sang's daughter, Ola, who later becomes David's wife, is much more positively portrayed than her father. Initially, their physical appearances separate them markedly. Unlike her father who is "gnarled and weathered and twisted like a tree on the wind-smacked slope of a mountain" (52) Ola is "tall and straight, and beautiful, with skin of satin smoothness, light brown in colour and aglow with health" (68). More importantly, she is pure, virtuous and blameless in nature. Like the Thai heroines in *The Thai Swing*, Ola is constructed out of male fantasy for 'perfect femininity', as an idealised female who willingly performs a traditional role of woman and hardly questions male authority. There is also the emphasis on Ola's cleanliness which seems to distance her from the dark side of her race which her father has inherited:

Living with Sang, and Jon, and Ola, David learned to know them well, and they in turn took him completely into their family. Time went by and David found himself seeking the company of Ola whenever he could. She kept house for them and never had David seen anyone so scrupulously clean. Each day she bathed in the river and always she seemed to be washing clothes or mending them. Sometimes he felt ashamed when he awoke to find spotlessly clean garments at the foot of his sleeping mat and the clothes he had been wearing spirited away. She loved flowers and would often wear one in her glossy black hair. (68)

Ola is not merely depicted as very 'feminine', docile and undemanding, but also as a woman who is true and loyal to her husband and willing to die for him. Only a year after her marriage to David, Ola, in her attempt to save David's life, is brutally killed by a Japanese soldier. Of great interest is the way her death is explained. Seeing the grief-stricken David who has just lost his beloved wife, Sang tells him that Ola's death is not David's fault but an inevitable punishment for Sang's own sins. Ola, therefore, is made a sacrifice for the crime and atrocities committed by men—both her own father's crime, as Sang himself believes, and perhaps those crimes committed by

Japanese soldiers:

...I know the questions that torment you, and I know the answer. You demand as in a prayer to know why your wife who has always been so good and so pure should be made to suffer at the hands of men-beasts and then when she had found her greatest happiness, should be struck amongst us all, swiftly and terribly from the skies. You reason that she had done nothing to deserve such punishment, and you wrestle with your mind, wondering and wondering what crime she has committed to bring such a wrath upon her. Yes, David, a crime has indeed been committed, and my beloved daughter has paid a price for it....

...twice in my life have I killed a man, and each time it was because of a woman. The mother of Ola was also very beautiful and after she became my wife one of my own brothers and I fought and he died at my hands. Before many years passed a great storm arose and swept my wife into the sea and I suffered as you now suffer....You see, my son, I alone am to blame for that which has befallen.... (76-77)

As the novel progresses, the use of woman as a sacrifice for the sins committed by men is repeated once more. This time through the characterization of another Asian heroine, Keiko, a young and beautiful Japanese woman who marries Ralph, David's brother. After the war ends, David goes back to his family in Australia. He tries to bury the horrific past and hopes to lead a quiet and peaceful life with his parents on their farm. Things seem to go well for him until his brother, also sent to fight in Asia, returns home with Keiko, his Japanese wife. On learning that his sister-in-law is Japanese, David is upset and angry because she brings back the memory of the wartime that he wants to forget. As time passes, however, his resentment gradually disappears and he becomes very fond of Keiko, who is beautiful, kind, loving and very 'feminine'. More importantly, Keiko's suffering is the crucial factor that melts away David's hatred for the Japanese. Ralph, Keiko's husband, begins to treat his wife very badly shortly after they are back in Australia. He feels ashamed that she is Japanese and when he is in a bad mood, he abuses her both verbally and physically. Seeing her as a representative of a race which has inflicted great pain and damage on

Australia, Ralph takes upon himself the role of avenger for his people and spares no pity for Keiko or her beloved pet:

The pup landed with an awful jar against the corner of the wood box; for a moment it seemed stunned, then it made off on three legs, yelping pitifully.

Keiko was aghast. As she saw her little pet hurtle through the air then heard the sickening thump as it hit the box, she sprang at Ralph like a tigress.

“Oh! You beast! You beast!” she screamed at him. “You’ve broken his leg!”

Ralph pushed her away and as he did so his eye fell on the leash Keiko had thrown on the table.

“I’ll teach you not to hit me. You Japs are too fond of using y’bloody hands.”

As he spoke, Ralph seized the leathery leash and brought it down with stinging force across Keiko’s shoulders. Again and again he hit her until the sight of blood on her arm caused him to desist. In his fit of temper Ralph had forgotten the metal clip on the end of the strap. (149)

Despite Ralph’s horrific treatment of her, Keiko endures the suffering without telling anyone. Ralph soon has an affair with another woman and he eventually decides to bring the woman home and tells Keiko that he no longer wants her. The following episode underlines Ralph’s cruelty and his inferiority to the virtuous and blameless Keiko who is forever forgiving and willing to give up her own happiness for the sake of her husband:

As he looked at Keiko, a sudden wave of anger passed through him, because he saw in her qualities that he had discarded. Despite all that he had done to her, and the great crisis that he was about to spring on her, she confronted him, more beautiful than ever, apprehensive perhaps, but feminine, true to him, ready to be kind, ready even to be loving to him.

The gulf between them had widened and widened until what he now proposed showed clearly that he had let himself go a long way. Keiko was too good for him. In his heart he knew it, and the thought goaded him into hurting her, because it made him furious to think that she had descended not one step with him in self-indulgence. (168)

Ralph’s final act of cruelty hurts Keiko deeply. He not only tells her that he is



deserting her for another woman, but also reveals to her an ugly lie he has hidden from her for so time—that their marriage is in fact a fake ritual performed by one of Ralph’s pals to cheat Keiko. The painful news traumatizes Keiko and she decides to commit suicide. However, David comes to her rescue, consoling her and taking her home with him. David’s hatred for the Japanese eventually disappears after he knows how Keiko suffers. Talking with his sister about Keiko, David feels that she, or more precisely her suffering, has changed his attitude towards the Japanese. David’s emotional pain from Japanese brutality or the ‘silvered shovel’ of the title is healed through his witnessing of Keiko’s pitiful and selfless devotion. Female sacrifice therefore plays a crucial role in lessening racial antagonism and hatred:

I’m very sorry for her, Madge. I’ve been thinking a lot lately and if I hated the Japs, then I realize that I was wrong. There are millions of people in Japan, and I’ll bet that not one single Jap is aware that such a person as David Willoughby exists. If I’d gone on hating I would have been the only loser, making myself more bigoted, more sour, and more unhappy than there’s any need for me to be. There were a lot of brutal Japs, admittedly, but if you’d studied their history of oppression, much more recent than that of England, France and even Russia, there are extenuating circumstances. (151)

If we read David’s encounter with Asia and his relationship with Keiko and Ola as a collective metaphor, David and people like him seem to represent the ‘new Australians’, those who no longer treat Asia as an enemy or a threat, but are willing to form a more cordial relationship with Asia. As Madge, David’s sister, argues, she and other ‘new Australians’ advocate the move towards the future and prefer to leave past racial hostility behind. These ‘new Australians’ are contrasted with the ‘old Australians’ like Ralph who pride themselves as racially superior and unable to see Asians in other terms than as villain or enemy whom they must exterminate or exact revenge on:

....there are bad elements in every race and country. They are there all the

time and only await an opportunity to express themselves. Patriotism! They'll use a grand word to cover up a filthy deed. A bomb in a room and all the mangled bodies are supposed to be a glorious achievement for some cause or other. I think you're right, David. It's no good hating. It's better to forget so that what happened years ago doesn't make you unhappy today. I would say, write it off, forget it, get on with today and tomorrow, and maybe if we're friendly enough to the children of yesterday's brutes, they'll grow up with views like our own, and they'll not want to destroy them. (152)

Nevertheless, as with the Australian stories examined earlier, while advocating the 'new' Australian-Asian relation, *The Silvered Shovel* still bases this formulation of this 'new' Australian identity through the utilisation of Asia as the other and the disavowal of Australia's colonialist past. Indeed, Madge's desire to 'write off' and 'forget' the past appears to indicate not only the will to forget Japanese colonialism, but also Australian colonialism. Besides, the characterisation of Ola and Keiko as helpless victims who are saved by David suggests the need for the 'new' Australia to rely on the self-confirming other so as to make possible its legitimate status in Asia, especially as saviour and benefactor. In *The Ringmaster*, the next novel under consideration, we can detect a number of parallels with *The Silvered Shovel*. Both novels attempt to move away from WWII fear and hatred of Japan and advocate a more open and friendly approach to Asia while still maintaining Asia as the Australian subject's fetishised other.

### ***The Ringmaster* (1991)**

Morris West's *The Ringmaster* (1991) is a good demonstration of an age when multiculturalism is officially embraced. Access to and familiarity with other cultures are considered an advantage and those who shut themselves up in their own insular world are seen as lagging behind. *The Ringmaster's* protagonist-narrator, Gil Langton, embodies the privileges and freedom of entry to many different cultures. Gil, a

polyglot, has intimate knowledge of various cultures and is always needed by big transnational corporations worldwide to help them handle business negotiations. Describing his job, Gil sees himself as different from ordinary interpreters because he not only utilizes language skills, but also knows about culture. He is, in fact, 'the ringmaster' of the title, the one whose role is crucial in the success of cross-border business deals:

...those who understood what I could offer were able to save a mint of money in lawyers' fees and executive time. More than half the cost of international business is used up in dialogues of the deaf, between people who are totally ignorant of each other's laws, customs and business dialect.

...I'm not a professional interpreter. They are highly skilled people with a precise function. They must translate and not comment. They must present a proposition bald and unglossed, otherwise they betray their trust. I can do that, but I have no taste for it. In fact, my function as mediator is exactly the opposite. I supply the tonalities of the dialogue. I explain the concepts which underlie the language. I say what is left unsaid, perhaps the unsayable. (9)

Gil is also a highly successful publisher whose company has branches worldwide. Wherever he goes, people are amazed by his gift with language and they treat him with admiration. Gil attributes his success in language acquisition to the education and training he received from his father, a professor in linguistics. In addition to this, growing up in an Australian city where the population speaks a number of different languages allows him an ideal opportunity to practise with native speakers. Here the multicultural environment is seen as something very positive and enriching to one's life and future success:

...he had given me the gift of tongues. My mother died very early in my life and my father devoted every moment of his leisure life to making me, as he put it, 'apt for a gypsy life on a shrinking planet'. He buried his grief so deep that I glimpsed it only at rare moments. All he allowed me to see was the joys of things, the challenge of new places, new people, old history relived, new history in the making. A polyglot himself, he gave me the key to the Tower of Babel where the world's languages echo in hopeless confusion. He taught me how to decipher them, remember them, turn them into the currency

of daily commerce....

...he showed me the trick to it: a good visual and oral memory, an understanding of tribal and lingual families, a daily drilling with the native-born. In my own time Australia had become a haven for migrants from all over the globe—Greeks, Turks, Vietnamese, Chinese, Ethiopians, the whole gamut of races—so practice partners were not hard to find. (8)

*The Ringmaster* revolves around Gil's latest job as a mediator for Kenji Tanaka, an influential and wealthy Japanese businessman who has embarked on an ambitious transnational project purporting to create a food transportation system across the then Soviet Union. The project is also joined by a German company led by Carl Leibig and a meeting in Bangkok is planned. Thinking about his job with the Japanese and German employers, Gil realizes that he is now working for the enemies of the Western allies during WWII:

...the Japanese were the occupying power. Their invasions of Malaya and Singapore were launched from Thai territory and the nightmare horrors of the Burma railway were enacted under the placid eyes of the Thai people. Now I, the son of a man who had interpreted at the trials of Japanese war criminals, was here in Bangkok, mediating the interests of a large Japanese corporation and a German one which has survived two world wars.

How to explain it? How to justify the shifting allegiances, the chameleon changes in the colour of human acts? (206-207)

Despite Gil's perplexity, he does not feel that his work is something he should be ashamed of. In fact, Gil's ability to work with people across cultures appears to make him superior to insular-looking Australians who refuse to open themselves up to others, even at the expense of their own economy. Here we see the attempt by the 'new Australians' like Gil to distance themselves from the 'old Australians' who persistently ally themselves with the Western world and ignore the rest. These 'new Australians' are also aware that they tend to be regarded with suspicion and mistrust by their own compatriots:

"...We're committed to a pro-American line in foreign relations, but

Washington is cutting our throats with subsidized foreign trade. They're compounding that by a not too subtle smear campaign of competitors. It's a short-sighted policy and our friend here seems to be aiding and abetting it. I leave you with a practical suggestion, Andy...."

"Your guess is right, Gil. We are collecting flak from the yanks and we're tossing cans over their fence, too. They've got themselves into a hell of a mess: the Gulf, a European trade bloc in 1992, and still no enlightened policy for the Pacific Rim. Your name is being bandied about in the present context, because you're painted as some kind of golden-tongued demagogue, leading the ungodly against the faithful....We're a very insular lot, suspicious of all foreigners...."

This was an experience for which all my father's love and counsel and companionship had not prepared me—the loneliness and hostility of the gypsy road....Here I was, rich, respected, with work to do around the world, a talisman of language to walk me across every frontier and into most tribal enclaves. Yet suddenly I was a threat, a maker of alien magic. (97-98)

*The Ringmaster's* criticism of insularity and embrace of multiculturalism, however, invite suspicion and are reminiscent of a number of critiques launched against mainstream promotion of cultural diversity and multiculturalism. One among such critiques is Foong Ling Kong's review of Alison Broinowski's *The Yellow Lady*. In "Postcard from the Yellow Lady", Foong Ling Kong observes that Broinowski allies herself with artists and novelists whom she praises as experts on Asia. Knowledge and appreciation of Asian culture become valuable attributes, and those who lack or refuse access to Asia are regarded as less sophisticated. Moreover, while knowledge and enthusiasm for Asian culture is applauded, the focus is on how Australia can make use of such knowledge and there is little mention of how Asia can benefit from Australia. In other words, Australian demands come first and Asia appears to be ascribed the role of static and passive entity awaiting to be discovered and utilized by Australia (91-94). The other critique of the use of multiculturalism as part of the self's valuable attributes without questioning the unequal power relations between self and other, or recognizing the diversity of the other, is that of Ghassan Hage. In *White Nation* Hage maintains that Australian multiculturalism and the enthusiasm for

cultural diversity largely function to enhance or enrich the self's image and sophistication while denying the other autonomous existence and difference (121-122).

Hage and Foong Ling Kong's arguments should not be accepted unconditionally, yet *The Ringmaster's* approach to the culturally other is precisely that which these critics identify. In *The Ringmaster* knowledge of culture and language is regarded as something that lends Gil the aura of sophistication and superiority. The novel can be read as portrayal of a heroic man whose exceptional skills in language allow him privileged entry into many foreign worlds so as to make the most of what they can offer for his own needs. Not surprisingly, 'the others' as represented in *The Ringmaster* is little different from the ones in the Australian stories discussed previously. They are largely constructed to correspond with an Australian male's demands and needs and to affirm his superiority.

*The Ringmaster* not only foregrounds the Australian protagonist's superiority by distancing him from the 'old Australians' but also by juxtaposing him with Asian men. Once again Japanese men are portrayed as the most striking contrast to the Australian protagonist. The most important Japanese character in *The Ringmaster* is Kenji Tanaka, Gil's employer. Although Tanaka is an immensely rich and successful man, he is in many ways inferior to Gil. Whereas Gil is shown as a progressive and open-minded person, Tanaka is depicted as narcissistic and trapped within his own world:

I could not come within a shout of his wealth, his power, even his mobility. His private jet could whisk him at any moment to the ends of the earth. But every Japanese, however widely travelled, lives always in his own history, his own culture, his own language. There is, in fact, a whole subspecies of modern literature called *nihon-jinron*—Japanese look at themselves. It is pulp magazine stuff for the most part, which emphasizes the racial uniqueness and superiority of the Japanese people. (17)

Tanaka's dreams and aspirations are little different from those of Tokita, the Japanese businessman in Don Townsend's *The Thai Swing*. Growing up during post-war years, Tanaka has been taught to strive for Japan's rise and glory. WW II is seen as Japan's great mistake and he is told that he must correct it and bring back prosperity and dignity to his nation. Such an emphasis on Japanese people's will and determination to win seems to betray an Australian fear and mistrust of modern Japan:

It was in this shrine that all three of them had sat to listen to the Emperor's speech of surrender. For the first and last time he had seen his father weep. Then he heard the words that drummed in his skull-case for half a century: 'We were fools and cowards, gulled by criminals. We wallowed in cruelty and called it the honour of warriors. We locked ourselves in a madhouse and threw away the key. So we became the first victims of the atomic plague which now threatens all mankind. At last we have been given a chance—a small one but, yes, a chance!—to build a new Japan, even perhaps a new world. But this time we dare not fail....

As his father had prophesied, so it had come to pass. Today, Kenji Tanaka was president of the Tanaka Group, a giant conglomeration of banks, insurance companies, trading corporations and manufacturing enterprises, with interests in every country on the planet. He was Chairman of the small elite consortium who controlled the economic policies of the nation....He was rich beyond his dreams. He had risen as high as any man might aspire. (4)

Tanaka's moral character is also shown as far less admirable than Gil's. Success is his goal and it does not matter how he gets there. For the benefit of his business empire, Tanaka has no hesitation working with criminals. Gil, however, insists on having nothing to do with the underworld and would rather lose money than compromise his conscience:

...on one of my visits, Kenji Tanaka tabled a proposition: a merger with a manufacturer of comic books and cartoon novels for which there is a huge market in Japan. The comic books are gaudy, gory and highly erotic, with emphasis on mutilation and debasement of women. Everyone reads them—commuters in trains, school children waiting for buses, typists munching sushi during their lunch breaks. It is a huge and profitable industry. I could not for the life of me see why they needed our small outfit. I could, however, see that they might want our international distribution, which was

functioning better every year. I knew something else for certain: these particular comic book publishers were part owned by a Godfather of *Yamaguchi-gumi*, one of the biggest crime syndicates in Japan. Its connection with Tanaka was no secret. Every great corporation in Japan has a symbiotic relationship with the underworld organizations who run the entertainment, the gambling business and the woman trade. It is as traditional as the feudal system in England. Kenji Tanaka had explained it to me many times. Now he was trying to persuade me to make the deal.

“It’s big money, Gil, safe money. They’ll pay a premium to come in. They’ll inject new capital whenever you need it. Why are you making such a problem?”

“It’s not a problem. It’s a simple decision. I don’t like the people. I don’t like the product. I won’t handle it.” (9-10)

Gil’s moral character is not only enhanced through his superiority over his Japanese friend, but also through the emphasis on the dark side of the Thai mentality. Travelling to Bangkok for a business meeting, Gil recalls the first time he visited the city with his late wife, and happy memories come back to him. Bangkok in those days was a fascinating and exquisite city and the couple had a wonderful time, yet Gil cautions against romanticizing and idealising the city:

But there was another and darker side of this generous land and its smiling, pliant people. They had their cruelties and the cruelties were doubled by indifference. They were capable of sudden murderous rages and swift, brutal forays against any hint of insurrection. There were bandits in the hill country who attacked tourist buses. There were thieves in the city who burnt oleander leaves outside the windows of sleeping householders and robbed them when they succumbed to the toxic vapour. There were peddlers of drugs and cartels of traders who bought country girls and sold them to the brothels and bars of Patpong and Pattaya. (189)

Gil has first hand experience of the unpredictability and incredible cruelty of the Thais. Attending a wedding of a Thai acquaintance, he discovers with shock that in Thailand a verbal insult from a drunken man can lead to a gruesome revenge that costs the life of the offender. Such a representation of Thai men, as unpredictable,



brutal and savage is not uncommon in Australian stories.<sup>84</sup> While Thai masculinity is associated with unbridled instinct and savagery, Thai femininity as represented in this novel is its opposite. This is suggested through the depiction of Sirinart, the Thai heroine in *The Ringmaster* as the embodiment of compassion, kindness and undemanding love. As argued earlier, the idealisation of women appears to reflect male unhappiness and use of fantasy to address it. Although very successful and well-off, Gil's life has an unhappy side. He sees his life as that of a 'gypsy'— a highly mobile life with great freedom but also a lonely life with few people whom he can trust. Moreover, Gil's beloved wife is dead, and he is still grieving for her. Working with Tanaka, Gil becomes involved with two beautiful women: Marta and Miko. Gil's relationships with them are very uneasy. Marta is a very attractive and distinguished professor who secretly works as a spy for the American government. Miko, Tanaka's mistress, is a woman of exquisite beauty and a very successful businesswoman. Marta and Gil have a brief affair which ends when Gil discovers that she has a lesbian relationship with Miko. Gil is also deeply hurt when he finds out about the deception in relation to the espionage job Marta keeps hidden from him. Both Marta and Miko seem to represent a threat to masculine power and heterosexual norms. They both possess attributes that make men feel intimidated. They are well-educated, independent and very capable working women. They are also very skilful at using their beauty and charm for their own advantage. More shocking and disturbing is their refusal to adhere to heterosexual norms. Miko, in particular, poses a greater challenge to Gil's sexual power since she is the one who seduces Marta. To Gil, Miko is 'the fox woman' who must be kept outside, but he soon realizes that he is unable to stop

---

<sup>84</sup> Chapter two discusses the Australian representation of Thai men in more detail.

her from intruding into his private domain and stealing his woman:

Marta was sound asleep, the covers half thrown back to reveal her naked breast and the curve of her thigh. Her hair made an aureole on the pillow and she was smiling as if at some pleasant dream. I undressed, went to the bathroom and made ready to slip onto bed.

It was then that I noticed the fragrance. Marta herself always used one with the faint, fresh smell of lemon blossom. This one was heavy and musky and it clung to the fabric of the pillow and the coverlet. I crawled carefully into bed, shivering at the cold touch of the covers. There was warmth only a hand's reach away, but I could not bring myself to seek it. Marta stirred and murmured in her sleep. I could not respond. I switched out the light and lay staring up into the darkness, lapped in the cloying fragrance of Miko's perfume.

I prayed that tomorrow would come and go quickly. I wanted no more arguments, no more discussions, no more protestations. I was too old and too cynical for the games they played in the world of flowers and willows. Besides, the fox-woman was inside the house now and I was full of fear. (160)

Both Miko and Marta are eventually punished. Miko is murdered and Marta's espionage is exposed and her career tarnished. Also, before her death, Miko tries to amend her friendship with Gil, and Marta regrets what she did to destroy Gil's love for her. As the novel moves towards conclusion, Gil's emotional pain is further healed by the Thai lady, Sirinart, whom he has known for many years. Sirinart has all the qualities of great professional woman, but unlike Miko and Marta, she is loyal, caring and undemanding. Staying with her Gil feels that he can have a carefree rest. She creates a home where he can find peace and consolation. It is a private sphere where he feels safe and secure and here there is a promise that his wounded masculinity may be healed:

This was the true gypsy's resting place, marked by secret signs, redolent of the magic of other happy sojourns. Here, the yellow moon shone kindly; the spirits who lived in the tiny gilded house in the garden were all friendly; the Buddha who smiled from the shrine above the bed told the same age-old message to an unheeding world: 'Nothing is permanent. Tomorrow the caravan moves on. The wheels turn. The flowers bloom and die. The good we do in bad times is a seed planted for others to harvest. Evil is a dark hole in creation, where good may once have flourished, where it may take root again

one starlit night, when the wounded world murmurs in a healing sleep. (309)

The construction of women in a way that helps heal male insecurity and unhappiness is not restricted to Australian male authors. Akard Damkerng's *Life is a Play* (1929) and Pira Sudham's *The Force of Karma* (2002) also construct women as responsive to male emotional demands. The following section briefly examines these two novels before proceeding to more innovative works which seek to destabilise male fantasy.

### **Thai writing**

#### ***Life is a Play* (1929) and *The Force of Karma* (2002)**

Akard Damkerng's *Life is a Play* (1929) portrays a romantic relationship between a young Thai aristocrat and a beautiful British woman. The novel is narrated in the first person and can be read as another good example of how male unhappiness results in the fantasy for a perfect woman who resurrects a male to the position of power.

*Life is a Play* begins with the childhood and early adulthood of Wisut Supaluck, a young man of aristocratic birth, in Bangkok of the early 1920s. As a child, Wisut suffers prejudice and discrimination from his affluent father who treats his children unfairly. After the death of his father, Wisut inherits very little and becomes nearly penniless. Some people who used to be kind to him, among them a girl he loves, begin to distance themselves from him. Sad and embittered, Wisut feels that the only way to make his life better and earn respect for himself is to get a degree from abroad. He struggles to procure a small amount of money and eventually leaves for England where he experiences a new and happier life. People he meets are very kind and supportive and he gets to know friends who encourage him to take up journalism. Among them is Maria Gray, a beautiful and gentle British woman who

works as a newspaper reporter. She is the opposite of Lamjuan, Wisut's former Thai lover, who has deserted him to marry a richer man. Maria knows that Wisut is poor but this does not diminish the admiration and love she has for him. She also recognises his talent as a writer and inspires him to take up a job that will give him an opportunity to utilise his gift, thus restoring Wisut's self-worth and self-respect:

I admire you because I know that you are a very good man, both for me and for the world. You must become a journalist. The job will give you a chance to travel widely and then you can write about all sorts of lives that you have seen. Please call your book 'Life is a Play'. (159)<sup>85</sup>

Apart from Maria, the other Westerners in *Life is a Play* are also the embodiment of kindness and generosity, unlike Wisut's father and other relatives who have treated him coldly and unjustly. The West as depicted in this novel appears to function as the fulfilment of the male subject's yearning for a place where he belongs and people who recognise his capacity.

In a more recent Thai novel, *The Force of Karma* (2002) by Pira Sudham, a Western woman is also constructed to fulfil male yearning for the affirmation of his self-worth and power. However, before discussing this novel, it is important to understand the author's background and his works. Pira has spent a great deal of his adult life abroad and all of his works are written in English. His novels and short stories are largely about the lives of poor people in Northeastern Thailand and some of them appear to be semi-autobiographical. Born to a poor family in a rural village, Pira's tertiary education, both in Thailand and abroad, was sponsored by a number of scholarships. His earlier works namely, *Monsoon Country* (1988), *Siamese Drama and Other Stories from Thailand* (1983) and *People of Esarn* (1991), are powerful in

---

<sup>85</sup> This translation from *Life is a Play* is my own.

their sympathetic rendering of the life of impoverished villagers. *Monsoon Country*, which was nominated for the 1990 Nobel Prize, reveals Pira's love and attachment for his birthplace and his people who, because of their inner strength and unyielding struggle against harsh living conditions, appear almost heroic. This novel also conveys the author's displacement—the sense of being torn between the love for his homeland and his inability to make himself at home and accept things the way they are in Thailand. Of note is that *Monsoon Country*, as with others of Pira's short stories, provides vehement criticism of the hierarchical social structure and Thai cultural and religious values.

Pira's latest work, *The Force of Karma* (2002), is a sequel to *Monsoon country* and it traces the life of the main protagonist after he left England. While Pira's language improves, his writing style changes dramatically and rather disappointingly. The novel appears to be unable to communicate deep thoughts and it depicts Esarn villagers in a condescending and patronizing light. Unlike *Monsoon Country* and other earlier stories which articulate Pira's strong tie with his people and ancestral land, *The Force of Karma* largely functions to fulfill the author's desire for self-assurance and self-celebration. Not surprisingly, such a desire impacts on Pira's construction of woman. In *The Force of Karma* the protagonist, Prem Surin, a young man born poor, is depicted as a talented writer, a poet and an idealist. Prem went to England on scholarship and there he met Elizabeth Durham, who becomes his loyal friend and lover. After he leaves England, Elizabeth quits her job and follows her Thai lover to Thailand, where she works tirelessly and selflessly by his side to help impoverished Thai villagers improve their life. The end of the novel sees Prem and Elizabeth back in England and inheriting a grand, prestigious estate, presumably a reward for the former's courageous deeds and devotion to his people.

Of interest in *The Force of Karma* is the construction of the West as the other against which Thai social and political structure is criticised. While recognising the West's history of racism and discrimination against people of colour, Pira depicts the West as a land of civilisation, opportunities, and freedom as contrasted to Thailand's military authoritarianism, corruption and social inequality. As observed earlier, for some Thai authors, the fetishisation of the West is not merely a means to fulfill personal or individual fantasy, but also constitutes a form of social and political liberation. In the case of Pira, his fetishisation of the West significantly reveals his dissatisfaction with and estrangement from Thai society. It is also important to note that for Thai people in general Australia is hardly distinguishable from the rest of the Western world. In the late 1940s, a well-known Thai writer and political activist, Kulap Saipradit, travelled to Australia and wrote essays which record his impressions of the place and its people.<sup>86</sup> Kulap's construction of Australia is similar to Pira's depiction of the West in that both authors imagine Australia/the West as the land of democracy, freedom and egalitarianism as opposed to Thai despotism and conservatism. However, this construction of the West is not without challenge in Thai discourses and popular Thai perceptions of the West could be contradictory. While at one end of the spectrum is the idealisation and the recognition of the superiority of the West, on the other is fear and anxiety about the negative impact of 'Westernisation' on Thai moral and cultural values.<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>86</sup> See Barmé (1995).

<sup>87</sup> See for example the poem "Fishiness in the Night" (1964) by Chitr Phoumisak (1930-1966) and "Concerning *Farang*" (1960) by Vasit Dejkunchorn. Chitr's poem depicts Bangkok as a city of sexual degradation and the influx of American soldiers was seen as worsening the city's immorality. Although in this poem Chitr's world view appears rather conservative, he was in fact a leftist intellectual and many of his works launch vehement attacks on traditional Thai polity. In 1957 the highly

In Rattawut Lapcharoensap's "Farangs" and "Don't Let Me Die in This Place", the construction of the West and its relation to Thailand is more complicated than the unquestioning acceptance of Western superiority or the denunciation of the West as the major cause of moral degradation in modern Thai society. Born in Chicago and educated in Thailand and the US, Rattawut is fluent in both Thai and English, and as with Pira, he writes in English. "Farangs" and "Don't Let Me Die in This Place" are from a collection of short stories titled *Sightseeing*, published in 2005 when Rattawut was only 25 years old. Rattawut's writing reveals the attempt to engage in a task to reorient East-West relations and through some of his stories, we also see the attempt to contest stereotypes of Thai women who have relationships with Western men.

### **"Farangs"**

Set on an island beach, Rattawut's "Farangs" (2005) is an amusing story about the love-hate relationship between local Thais and tourists who frequent their island. The narrator is a young man whose mother runs a small motel which mainly caters for Western tourists. Although her major income is from the motel business, the mother's bitter experience with her former American husband who deserted her makes her dislike Westerners. She is also very keen to ensure her son shares the same negative

---

repressive regime of Sarit Thanarat detained and prosecuted a wide range of opposition figures including writers, journalists and activists. Chitr was arrested on 21 October 1968. On 5 May 1966 he was shot and killed in the Northeastern province of Sakhon Nakhon, not long after he was released from prison. During the 1970s, Chitr's political writing was highly hailed by students who were involved in the demonstrations against military authoritarianism. In contemporary Thailand, Chitr remains an inspirational figure for many left-leaning Thais. For more details about Chitr, see Reynolds (1987). Vasi's "Concerning *Farang*" sheds light on popular Thai imagining of the West and his more recent works articulate more clearly both the fascination of the West and the fear that 'Westernisation' could lead to the degradation of traditional Thai values. Vasi's recent novels are examined in chapter two.

attitude towards ‘farangs’, the Thai word for Westerners in general, and forbids him from having relationships with young Western girls. To the mother, tourists who come to the island are purely pleasure-seekers who can spare no time for sophisticated things:

Ma says, “Pussy and elephants. That’s all these people want.” She always says this in August, at the season’s peak, when she’s tired of farangs running all over the Island, tired of finding used condoms in the motel’s rooms, tired of guests complaining to her in five languages. She turns to me and says, “You give them history, temples, pagodas, traditional dance, floating markets, seafood curry, tapioca desserts, silk-weaving cooperatives, but all they really want is to ride some hulking gray beast like a bunch of wildmen and to pant over girls and to lie there half-dead getting skin cancer on the beach during the time in between.” (2)

Other islanders’ attitudes towards tourists are similar to Ma’s. They know that their island is simply an exotic locale where wealthy tourists can indulge in their desire for excitement and pleasure, and where their superior economic power can be affirmed. The islanders also learn to form their own stereotypes of tourists and use them to distinguish one nationality from another. Yet in the end all tourists are merged into the same category that Ma sums up earlier—they are all unsophisticated fun-seekers. However, because they have big money, the islanders cannot ignore them and have to do their best to cater for their demands. Worth noting here is that Australian holiday-makers are distinguishable from other Western tourists only from the date they arrive on the island. This corresponds with Annette Hamilton’s remark that most public circuits of imagery in South-East Asia have no space within them for Australians as against any other affluent Westerners (27):

This is how we count the days. June: the Germans come to the Island—football cleats, big T-shirts, thick tongues—speaking like spitting. July: the Italians, the French, the British, the Americans. The Italians like pad thai, its affinity with spaghetti. They like light fabrics, sunglasses, leather sandals. The French like plump girls, rambutans, disco music, baring their breasts. The British are here to work on their pasty complexions, their penchant for



hashish. Americans are the fattest, the stingiest of the bunch. They may pretend to like pad thai or grilled prawns or the occasional curry, but twice a week they need their culinary comforts, their hamburgers and their pizzas. They're also the worst drunks. Never get too close to a drunk American. August brings the Japanese. Stay close to them. Never underestimate the power of the yen. Everything's cheap with imperial monies in hand and they're too polite to bargain. By the end of August, when the monsoon starts to blow, they're all consorting, slapping each other's backs, slipping each other drugs, sleeping with each other, sipping their liquor under the pink lights of the Island's bars. By September they've all deserted, leaving the Island to the Aussies and the Chinese, who are so omnipresent one need not mention them at all. (1-2)

Although the narrator is aware that Westerners who visit his island are largely those in search of fun and nothing else, he is still keen to be close to them. He does not share his mother's disdain for Westerners and usually falls for young Western girls. Being abandoned by his American father when he was a small child, the narrator seems to have a fixation on girls who look Western. Fantasizing and fetishising about Western girls seems to be his way of dealing with the absence of his father although he himself is not aware of this. Rattawut, however, lets the reader know that his narrator has a fetish through the way the boy perceives Elizabeth, one of the American girls he is attracted to:

She threw back her head and laughed. I admired the shine of her tiny, perfectly even rows of teeth, the gleam of that soft, rose-colored tongue quivering between them like the meat of some magnificent mussel....

She smiled a close-mouthed grin, admiring my pig at play, and I would've given anything in the world to see her tongue again, to reach out and sink my fingers into the hollows of her collarbone, to stare at that damp, beautiful navel all day long. (4-5)

Yet the narrator's fantasy can hardly be sustained. Although his father is American, he grows up as a Thai and is treated as a Thai by Western tourists. The narrator's love life is that of disappointment after disappointment. While Western girls enjoy his company and romantic attention during their brief holiday in Thailand, once back

home the girls all forget about him. The narrator's unhappy relationships with American girls can be read as symbolic of the unequal power relation between the West and Thailand. In the world of globalization and mass travelling, poor countries like Thailand serve as a temporary pleasure zone for Western holiday-makers who, because of their economic power, have the ability to determine what sort of holiday or companion they want and for how long. This reminds us of Luke in "A Million Swallows" who seems to be aware that his Western-ness and money are the crucial factors that allow him to indulge in fantasy. The narrator in "Farangs", on the other hand, has little power to determine his relationship with Western girls. Pondering over his heart-broken experiences, the narrator feels that all the girls use him and treat him little differently from toys:

Night is upon us now. In the distance, I can see squidding boats perched on the horizon, searchlights luring their catch to the surface. Clint Eastwood races ahead, foraging for food in the sand, and I'm thinking with what I suppose is grief about all the American girls I've ever loved. Girls with names like Pamela, Angela, Stephanie, Joy. And now Lizzie.

One of the girls sent me a postcard of Miami once. A row of palm trees and a pink condo. "Hi Sweetie," it said. "I just wanted to say hi and to thank you for showing me a good time when I was over there. I'm in South Beach now, it's Spring Break, and let me tell you it's not half as beautiful as it is where you are. If you ever make it out to the U S of A, look me up okay?" which was nice of her, but she never told me where to look her up and there was no return address on the postcard. I'd taken that girl to see phosphorescence in one of the Island's bays and when she told me it was the most miraculous thing she'd ever seen, I told her I loved her—but the girl just giggled and ran into the sea, that phosphorescent blue streaking like a comet's tail behind her. Every time they do that, I swear I'll never love another... (18-19)

The narrator's latest affair with the American girl, Elizabeth, is no better than his previous affairs. Although Elizabeth appears to be a nice, pleasant girl, and she enjoys the narrator's company when they are alone together, she does not like being seen by other Americans as a Thai's girlfriend. Like other Western girls, Elizabeth succumbs

to the attitude that a relationship with a Thai boy is simply part of a holiday fling, but never something permanent or serious. In the end, she leaves the narrator for her former American boyfriend, an arrogant and insensitive bully, whose company she finds less satisfying than that of the narrator and yet not the one to be easily discarded. The narrator's encounter with Hunter, Elizabeth's American boyfriend, brings him face to face with racial prejudice and discrimination. Hunter is rude and offensive, but Elizabeth lets him have his own way and does very little to help the narrator or defend her relationship with him. She chooses to endure the situation rather than be assertive:

He just stares at me with that stupid white nose jutting out between his eyes. For a second, I think Hunter might throw the squid at me. But then he just pops the rest into his mouth, turns to Lizzie, and says with his mouth full:

“You fucked this joker, didn't you?”

I looked over at Lizzie. She's staring at the table, tapping her fingers lightly against the wood. It seems she's about to cry. I stand up, throw a few hundred bahts on the table. Clint Eastwood follows my lead, rises clumsily to his feet.

“It was a pleasure meeting you, Miss Elizabeth,” I say, smiling. I want to take her hand and run back to the motel so we can curl up together on the beach, watch the constellations. But Lizzie just keeps on staring at the top of the table. (17)

Elizabeth's passivity can be read as her unquestioning acceptance of the West's neo-colonial relation to the East. The East is largely imagined and frozen as a pleasure zone for the former. The narrator's unfulfilling relationship with Western women reminds us of his mother's brief relationship with an American soldier who regards his marriage to a Thai woman as simply a relaxing break from his military duty. Yet while foregrounding the unequal power relations between the West and Thailand, the story also shows some Thai characters as actively seeking out Westerners' interest and affection. In her younger days, Ma's dream and desire for a good life abroad leads to her falling in love with an American soldier who married her and fathered her a

child before abandoning her. In a way the younger Ma's enthusiasm to form a relationship with an American man, acquire English and spend a new life in America with her American husband parallels her son's fetishisation of 'farang' girls.<sup>88</sup>

However, the story refuses to ascribe the role of passive discarded lovers to Thai characters. Although deserted by her American husband, the trauma does not ruin the life of the narrator's mother. Instead, she manages to regain dignity, autonomy and economic independence. She appears to us as a strong, resilient and practical woman who can take care of herself and her child without help from her absent American husband. However, as mentioned earlier, the mother herself also forms limiting stereotypes of Westerners who visit Thailand and regards them as inferior to Thai people. Her insistence that the son subscribes to a similar set of attitudes is clear when she reprimands him for going out with another Western girl. To her, the son's affair with a Western woman is an act of ingratitude and a betrayal of her. The son, however, ignores his mother's reproach:

She sniffed my head.

“And is that my nice mousse in your hair? And why,” she asks, “do you smell like an elephant?”

---

<sup>88</sup> Cook and Jackson (1999) comment on the issues of seduction and anxiety involved in Thai-Western relations and point out that “the Thai-Western relationship is complex, and is both constrained and enhanced by assumptions about gender and sexual attitudes on both sides” (18). They remark that both formal and popular discourses in Thailand seek to seduce and encourage a Western tourist to form a relationship with a Thai person and invest emotional commitment although most researchers tend to focus more on Western exploitation and little weight is given to the way the Thais in the sex trade and tourism section attempt to incite and elicit Western fantasies and desires. Cohen, however, breaks away from this trend by showing how Thai sex workers try to form a relationship with Western men through seduction and tactful manipulation of the men's guilt and fantasies. Reynolds also suggests how the seduction of the West has become crucial in Thai discourses about the West and Westerners, and that there is an endeavour to construct Thailand and Thai people as attractive in the eyes of Westerners (20-21). See also Cohen (1982) and Reynolds (1999).

I just stand there blinking at her questions.

“Don’t think I don’t know,” she says finally. “I saw you, luk. I saw you on your motorcycle with that farang slut in her bikini.”

I laughed and tell her I have hair mousse of my own. But Ma’s still yelling at me when I go to the pen to fetch Clint Eastwood.

“Remember whose son you are,” she says through the day’s last light, standing in the office doorway with her arms akimbo. “Remember who raised you all these years.”

“What are you talking about, Ma?”

“Why do you insist, luk, on chasing after those farangs?”

“You are being silly, Ma. It’s just love. It’s not a crime.”

“I don’t think,” Ma says, “that I’m the silly one here, luk. I’m not the one taking my pet pig out to dinner just because some farang thinks it’s cute.”  
(13-14)

The story attempts to go beyond stereotypes as it progresses. Disappointed and frustrated, the narrator loses temper when his beloved pet pig, Clint Eastwood, becomes a target of attack from Hunter and his friends. Hidden in a mango tree, the narrator and his friend throw mangoes at the Americans in the attempt to help the pig. While Hunter and his friends seem to represent the living manifestation of racism, the pig can be seen as representing those who are trapped and hurt by racial prejudice and discrimination. The narrator’s desperate attempt to help his pet and Clint’s eventual escape seems to suggest the possibility of escaping from the entrapment of racial prejudice and limiting stereotypes. At this moment the narrator also seems to stop fantasizing Elizabeth and realize that she is not able to see him for what he really is as she herself also internalizes similar sets of stereotypes as Hunter does. She also ceases to be his fetishised other and becomes much less important than the successful escape of his pig:

It’s Hunter and his friends, laughing, slapping each other’s backs, tackling each other to the sand. Lizzie’s walking with them silently, head down, trying to ignore their antics. When she sees Clint Eastwood racing up to meet her, she looks to see if I’m around. But she can’t see us from where she’s standing. She can’t see us at all.

“It’s that fucking pig again!” Hunter yells.

They all laugh, make rude little pig noises, job him with their feet. Clint Eastwood panics. He squeals. He starts to run. The American boy gives chase, trying to tackle him to the ground. Lizzie tells them to leave the pig alone, but the boys aren’t listening....

I follow Surachai’s lead, grab as many mangoes as I can. Our mangoes sail through the night air. Some of them hit their targets squarely in the face, on the head, in the abdomen. Some of the mangoes hit Lizzie by accident, but I don’t really care anymore, I’m not really aiming. I’m climbing through that tree like a gibbon, swinging gracefully between the branches, grabbing any piece of fruit - ripe or unripe - that I can get my hands on. Surachai starts to whoop like a monkey and I join him in the chorus. They all turn in our direction then, the four farangs, trying to dodge the mangoes as they come.

It’s then that I see Clint Eastwood scurry away unnoticed. I see my pig running into the ocean, his pink snout inching across the sea’s dark surface, phosphorescence glittering around his head like a crown of blue stars, and as I’m throwing each mango with all the strength I have, I’m thinking: Swim, Clint, Swim. (22)

Rattawut’s other story, “Don’t Let Me Die in This Place”, also tackles the issue of cross-cultural encounter and the ensuing conflicts and misunderstandings. This story, however, is more positive than “Farangs” since it shows that in spite of cultural difference, people are capable of reaching out to one another across the cultural divide and establishing understanding and affection.

### **“Don’t Let Me Die in This Place” (2005)**

“Don’t Let Me Die in This Place” (2005) is told from the point of view of an elderly wheelchair-bound American who comes to Thailand to stay with his son and Thai daughter-in-law. The narrator’s first few weeks in Thailand are difficult for both himself and his son’s young family. Bangkok’s heat and humidity coupled with his poor health and homesickness render the narrator’s cultural shock all the more intolerable. The son’s attempt to arrange a sight-seeing tour for him barely cheers him up. While outside, he feels that the Thais stare and gossip about him. He also

misunderstands his Thai daughter-in-law as being patronising and condescending. Moreover, he is hardly able to relate to his two grandchildren who speak little English and look very different from him:

As always, it's hot as hell. My stomach's sweating clean through my shirt. For a while I just sit there and stare at the kids spooning clumsily at their fried rice and egg, talking to each other in Thai, the wife nodding now and again at something they say.

Neither of the children looks much like me. I have to look real hard to find any resemblances. They have broad flat noses, long banana-shaped eyes, dark auburn hair, and clear toffee-colored skin....I have to remind myself sometimes that they're not adopted, that these children are my own flesh and blood...even if I have troubled pronouncing their names and they have trouble pronouncing mine. (My name's often times a verb on their tongues—*Parry*—sometimes even an adjective—*Purry*—like I'm a cat—so I've made them call me 'Grandfather' instead. I rarely say their names at all....the few times I tried calling them by their real names, 'Ruchira' and 'Sornram,' they'd both laughed insensitively at my attempts.) (131-132)

Gradually, however, the cultural barrier between the narrator and his Thai daughter-in-law and grandchildren begins to break down. The narrator also becomes closer to his son and realises the genuine love he has for his wife. He also learns that the couple's marriage is by no means easy because there are discrimination and prejudice against their relationship from people around them:

Jack leads Tida to the dance floor. They're the only people out there. It seems the whole place is watching them. Everybody looks up to watch my son—this tall, foreign man—dancing with his Thai wife. It's a slow Thai dance and another couple, both Thai, join them on the floor, the lights from the mirror ball sweeping back and forth. Jack's holding his wife close. They're smiling at each other like there's so much love between them they don't know what to do with it.... I look around and see some of the men under the tent snickering in Jack's direction. I notice, too, that the women are talking to one another sternly, peering at Jack and his wife. I can tell by the way they look at her that they think Tida's some kind of prostitute and suddenly I'm proud of them both for being out there dancing, proud of my boy Jack for holding his wife so close, because their love suddenly seems for the first time like something courageous and worthwhile, and I'm thinking: *There he is, Alice. There's our little man.* (144)

Of note here is that negative stereotypes attached to Western-Thai relationship are not

something new in Thai history. A number of Thai novels depict Western-Thai relationships in an unhappy light due to parental disapproval and social discrimination (Reynolds, “On the Gendering of Nationalist and Postnationalist Selves” 268-70). A classic example of this is Kukrit Pramoj’s *Four Reigns*, which was written in 1953. The novel revolves around the life of Ploy, a woman born in the reign of Rama VI who lives through to the reign of Rama VIII. One of Ploy’s sons marries a Western woman whom he met during his studies overseas. The marriage is vehemently opposed by his father and causes rift and pain between the father and son. Despite Ploy’s sympathy for her foreign daughter-in-law, the young couple eventually break up due to their inability to come to terms with social pressure and cultural difference.<sup>89</sup>

While Thai racism and discrimination against Westerners has a long history, it is not until the Vietnam War that Western-Thai relationships take a significantly more negative meaning. As Rachel Harrison remarks, during the war, Thailand served as a ‘R&R’ site (Rest and Recreation) for American soldiers on a break from war duty and this resulted in the mushrooming sex industry that catered and provided ‘rented’ wives for soldiers. While prostitution in Thailand could be traced to the time before the Vietnam War, Western and Thai discourses alike tend to see this war as crucial to the spread of the Thai sex industry (“Prostitution, Politics and Power” 142). Discrimination against Western-Thai relationships persists into contemporary Thailand although, ironically, Eurasian looks are fetishised as evident from the popularity of many Eurasian beauty queens, models, actors and actresses in the Thai entertainment world (Reynolds, “On the Gendering of Nationalist and Postnationalist

---

<sup>89</sup> See more discussion of *Four Reigns* from Kepner (1996:19-20) and Fishel (1999: 158-162).



Selves” 267, 268-72).

Interestingly, Rattawut’s “Don’t Let me Die in This Place” attempts to counter the stigma attached to Thai-Western relationships through the portrayal of Jack and Tida as two people who are not afraid to express their love for each other despite the prejudice directed at them.<sup>90</sup> The depiction of Tida as a woman who is kind and gentle but also assertive and strong also makes her a fully-realised character, not a passive object of love or a projection of male fantasy. Significantly, Rattawut makes Jack fluent in Thai and he uses Thai to communicate with this wife and children with ease. The story’s refusal to make Tida give up Thai for the sake of her husband can be read as the attempt to lend power to her through the ability to maintain the command of her mother tongue within the household. This makes an interesting comparison with James McQueen’s “A Million Swallows” in which the Thai woman is made to speak broken English so as to enhance the image of a childlike, pliant woman who fits in with the Western male’s fantasy. By speaking his wife’s language, Jack appears less as an American and becomes more Thai, thus closer and more or less equal to his Thai wife. Looking at Jack speaking to his wife in Thai, the narrator suddenly feels that his own son appears to him so foreign and unknown:

Tida’s sitting at the dining room table doing the bills. Jack walks over and bends down and kisses her on the head. They speak to each other in Thai for a little while. It’s strange and perplexing to hear Jack speak Thai. You grow old thinking you know your kid and then he starts speaking a foreign language and you never know him at all....

She and Jack start talking again. Jack’s telling her some story, maybe something funny about his day, because she laughs every so often at what he’s

---

<sup>90</sup> Among Thai works with English translations which attempt to contest negative stereotypes attached to people of mixed origins, foreigners or ethnic minorities are Si Fa Ladawan’s *Wild Rice* (1973), Samruam Sing’s “The Necklace”(1979), Prathip Chumphon’s “Water and Earth” (1979) and Botan’s *Letters from Thailand* (1969). These works, however, fail to question a number of predominant cultural assumptions and prejudices despite the challenge they pose to certain mainstream racist attitudes.

saying. They seem happy with their own company, so I wheel myself over to my room. (137-138)

While the use of Thai language within the household is crucial in maintaining Tida's autonomy and power as well as bringing her American husband closer to her and away from his American-ness, it seems to pose an obstacle to the narrator's access to the family, at least initially. Nevertheless, the story shows that with time, patience and effort from both sides, it is possible to reach mutual understanding. Language, however, is not the only means through which understanding and affection can be achieved. Expression of affection can also be conveyed through body language and gestures. In fact, it is the youngest grandchild who speaks the least English who is able to convince the narrator that he is seen as part of his son's family, not a stranger. By hugging the narrator tightly, the child unintentionally makes the old man feel that even though he is in a foreign country, he is, after all, with his own family although they speak a different language and do not look like him:

“Hey,” I say, turning the chair around. I wave him over. “Come here. Let me take a look at that nose.”

He eyes me curiously, takes slow, cautious steps into my room. I reach out and hold his small chin up to the light with my good left hand. He looks confused, a little frightened by the gesture.

“You'll be all right,” I say, inspecting his face. “Sorry about that.”

When I let go the kid reaches out and hugs me so hard I almost fall out of the chair. He squeezes me tight around the neck and I can barely breathe. When he's done, he waves at me with both hands, says “Bye-bye,” and then runs out of the room like he can't get away from me fast enough. I sit there listening to his footsteps pattering back to the dining room. A little later Jack pokes his head in the door and says, “Everything all right with the kid? Why are you sitting in the dark, Father?” and I say, “Yeah, Jack. The kid's all right. I think we have an understanding now.” (140)

The story further reveals that when understanding and empathy begin, other positive things follow. The narrator's realisation that his daughter-in-law and grandchildren see him as part of the family enables him to explore new ways to live in an unfamiliar

culture. His physical handicap does not worry him so much as before and he is prepared to enjoy life more fully. Going to a temple fair with his son's family, the narrator insists on joining his grandchildren in a bumper car race. The story ends with the whole family's excitement, exhilaration and relief after an exciting game in which they all eventually discover something in common to share:

I see Jack and his son nudging one of the teenagers from behind, the cars bouncing off each other like pool balls. I'm bearing down on them now. I'm gathering speed. I'm a stone flying out of a goddamn slingshot. And then I get them good. I hit Jack and the kid so hard from behind both their heads start bobbing like one of those stupid dolls Mac loved to put on his dashboard. The little boy starts giggling and I'm screaming through the laughter, saying, "Gotcha, gotcha, gotcha!"

...I'm trying to find the wife and her daughter now. I see that they've been cornered by two of the teenagers, so I move over to the side of the pit and wait for an opening.... I saw them all laughing now, facing one another in their cars, and I'm circling them, planning my next line of attack. I'm going for the knockout punch, I'm aiming my car directly at both their bumpers....

A few more manoeuvres and the mirror ball's off, the pit's dark again, there's no more music except our laughing in our bumper cars. (149-150)

The story can be seen as a work that reflects a productive form of East-West hybridization. The East-West interaction depicted in this story does not fit in with Said's domination-subordination model but reveals how contact between East and West results in negotiation, compromise and accommodation for both parties. The story also challenges the racist discourse and, unlike the Australian and other Thai works discussed in this chapter, it does not fall into the trap of the fetishizing discourse. Rattawut's story is an example of Ien Ang's argument that there is the need to start from ordinary personal and social relationships if one wants to bridge the gap of cultural divide.

The endeavour to go beyond cultural barriers and stereotypes in both of Rattawut's stories is worth comparing with similar attempts in fictional works by a

number of Australian authors. A good comparison is Peter A. Jackson's *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* (1994), which is the focus of the following chapter. As with Rattawut's stories, Peter A. Jackson's work seeks to show that cultural difference is not necessarily an impediment to genuine empathy and identification.

While there are Australian authors, such as those discussed in earlier chapters, who appear to subscribe to the old circuits of imageries about Asia and Asian women, gay authors such as Peter A. Jackson and a number of other male and female Australian authors, are engaging in contesting these old images and perceptions. There are questions which have yet to be answered: Are these authors able to represent the other in a less hegemonic way because they themselves also occupy marginalised space? Are there any other factors apart from shared experience of marginalisation that contribute to a less hegemonic representation? Does the experience of marginalisation necessarily lead to greater sensitivity towards difference? Are there any risks involved when one universalises his/her experience of marginalisation? The following chapter will address these questions in more detail.

## Chapter six: Gay Men

In the previous chapter I looked at five contemporary Australian novels and short stories written by Australian male authors and argued that the writing examined reveals a collective attempt to recast Australia's relations with Asia and to distance itself from the overtly racist imagining of Asia of the earlier era. These Australian stories, nonetheless, utilise Asia as Australia's other and as the projection of Australian subjectivity. At an individual level, the stories illustrate how male inadequacies and insecurities lead to the quest for alternative sources of emotional fulfilment and power. For Australian male characters in these works, Thai women largely serve as a means through which male power is restored.

In this chapter I concentrate on an Australian work which aims at something different as it attempts to contest the construction of the other as the fulfilment or projection of self. The writing under consideration is Peter A. Jackson's *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* (1994), a novel about an Australian gay man in Thailand who is in search of a more liberating form of masculinity and a community that offers him a sense of belonging and acceptance. The novel demonstrates how Thai men initially figure as the protagonist's fetishised other and how he tries to rid himself of his Western identity and disavow his sexual attraction for white men in order to formulate a new identity modeled on 'Thai identity'. The author then proceeds to show the protagonist's failure in the construction of his new identity and his gradual recognition of his fantasy and tendency to universalise culturally specific concepts of homosexual desire and needs. As the novel progresses, it suggests the possibility of the protagonist making an exit from the denial and disavowal of ambivalence and his ability to envision a relationship with both Thai and Australian men while at the same time acknowledging the complications of such a breakthrough.

*The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* is a significant text because it endeavours to show that recognition of difference is pivotal and that Western hegemony must be resisted. As a novel which explores cross-cultural encounters between gay men, it seeks to show that Western concepts of masculinity and sexuality are not synonymous with their non-Western counterparts and it is crucial to avoid imposing white gay men's experiences on gay men from other cultures. In the second part of this chapter, I look at two Thai novels and one short story about Thai homosexual and transgender males in order to pursue what is suggested in *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* —that Thai gay and transgender culture is shaped by the indigenous gender system and, despite the influence of the Western gay model, there are key aspects that differentiate Thai gay men's experiences and their perceptions of homosexuality from those of Western gay men. The chapter concludes by suggesting that in spite of different experiences, it is possible for the marginalised to learn from one another and employ the knowledge to combat prejudice and discrimination suffered by sexual minorities across cultures.

### ***The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* (1994)**

Set in the 1980s, *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* relates the story of a young Australian gay man in Thailand and his unhappy relationships with his Thai lovers. His failure with Thai men contrasts with his initial construction of them as ideal lovers and companions—a construction which is crucially shaped by his past rejection and alienation from people back home. As a gay man in a predominantly heterosexual culture, the protagonist always feels that he never belongs in his own society. Since his childhood, he has been keenly aware of the disapproval and derision regarding his sexuality and his inability to achieve or act in a way a boy is normally expected to:

Among these thoughts are memories of school friends' hopeful smiles that became grimaces when I dropped the cricket ball yet again; and of encouraging shouts from classmates that ended with taunts, "How ya gon'? Poofter!" These neglected thoughts included recollections of friendly questions that were really accusations: "You don't have a girlfriend yet, do you?"; and the memory of a single intimate touch that became a lasting source of humiliation when my closest friend pushed me away and sneered. (169)

The novel shows how the dominant model of masculinity in Australian society during that time exerts great pressure and emotional damage on the protagonist. He spends his youth struggling to live up to what mainstream society expects of a man and cannot reveal his true self. He finds the predominant code of how to be a man highly restrictive and oppressive yet he forces himself to submit to it so as not to be treated as an outcast:

At school I studied men's behaviour more seriously than my academic subject. I learnt early that success in the discipline of being a man was the key to my survival, to evading the suspicion, derision, hostility and, even worse, the ostracism that not being seen as a man entailed. That was the true education of my schooling, not the simpler, less fraught game of getting high exam scores to land a job or go on to university. (6)

Homophobia deeply intimidates the protagonist and he is haunted by the fear that his homosexuality will be publicly revealed and denounced. He lives his life in fear as if he had committed a terrible crime and has to hide it from the world. Even when he is on holiday in Thailand, he still feels the presence of contempt and reprehension:

Thousands of kilometres from home I still feel the hostile stares. I almost see them out of the corner of my eye, lingering in the shadows behind the old tree, the glares of disgust that I try to deflect by carefully choosing all my words, controlling the tenor of my voice, constraining the ways I move. I think rational thoughts, telling myself I'm 'alone' here, that this long contact with the young monk is as good as unobserved, that the frown-framed eyes narrowed by reproving stares are only phantoms. But ghost or not, their presence is real enough to make me sweat and my heart palpitate. (5)

Despite the protagonist's desire for men, he finds that Australian men around him treat one another like enemies. They wear masks as a way to hide their vulnerability

and when they want to show their friendliness to other men, they do so in a way that reminds others of their toughness, strength and power. The protagonist comes to believe that he can never form satisfying relationships with Australian men:

...most Australian men put on armours in their teens. It's sad to see stony signs of manliness showing in Australian boys even before their pubic hair....They shake your hand as if they're grappling with you and only show they like each other by back slaps in the pub, punches to the shoulder in imitation of boxers' jabs, tackles on the football field or measured hugs after a goal is scored or an opposing batsman is bowled out. It's a battle loving an Australian man. You have to fight to get past his sun-hardened skin and the bristles on his cheeks and chin. I was never strong enough to attack another man or withstand his blows against me. And so because of my incompetence in the odd language of the place, I couldn't tell another man I loved him or bear to know his love for me. (175)

Dominant gay culture appears to be dominated by the same model of masculinity accepted in the 'straight' world. White gay culture's hyper-masculinity intimidates the protagonist and he is unable to find his place there. Talking about Sydney's commercial gay scene, he describes the men there as "too intimidating, most of them lined up, hard and unyielding, against the walls (52)". The protagonist is thus alienated from both the 'straight' world and the masculinisation of white gay subculture.

Of note is that *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* is set in the late 1980s when the notion of 'queer' was emerging and gaining ground among those who felt excluded from the dominant white gay subculture. The protagonist's alienation suggests the limitations of the white gay model and the need for other forms of homosexual identity and community. This corresponds with queer emphasis on the importance of imagining and constructing alternative, more inclusive theories of sexuality, gender and sex/gender politics.<sup>91</sup> Jackson's protagonist, however, is depicted as unable to

---

<sup>91</sup> For discussion of queer theory and related issues, see for example Sullivan (2003), Morland and Willox (2004), Richardson, McLaughlin and Casey (2006), Jackson and



move beyond the confinement of the ideology that regulates white gay desire. While he criticises the model of masculinity considered as normative during the time he was growing up and matures into adulthood as oppressive and inhibiting, his objects of desire are largely men who are more or less conventionally masculine, particularly strong men who can make him submit to them. Although he sees himself as weak and inadequate, he seems to compensate for his shortcomings by fantasizing about surrendering himself to the strength and power of men whom he perceives as powerful. The protagonist's childhood fantasy about Sabu and the genie suggests his desire for love, protection and guidance from stronger or wiser men and also his image of himself as a powerless little boy. Seeing himself as a little boy implies the desire to evade taking responsibility for his own life and relationships with others. This self-perception also corresponds with the novel's attempt to depict the protagonist as someone who tends to dwell too much on his own inadequacies and victimisation. It also partly explains his subjugation to the dominant model of masculinity and failure to make use of alternative models of homosexual identity emerging within Australian society during that time:

I remembered an old movie I'd seen on TV as a boy one rainy Saturday afternoon, *The Thief of Baghdad*. I recalled the star, the young Sabu—bare-chested, lithe, dark-skinned—flying across the world in the hand of a huge genie he'd set free from a bottle that had washed up on a deserted seashore where Sabu had been shipwrecked. The genie had promised to take Sabu back to Baghdad in return for freeing him from the bottle. The movie had been in black and white, but the absence of colour from those few scenes I could remember after more than half my lifetime only rendered the images more potent, as if over the years they had lain unthought, they had become imbued with the tones of my own hopes and wishes. I remembered wanting to be Sabu—bare-chested, lithe, dark-skinned—being shown the world from the hand of that genie.... I recovered the ambiguous peace of mind of that not-quite adolescent boy lying on his stomach in front of the TV, imagining himself in the hands of a giant man whose power and strength, if mishandled, could easily destroy him. (14)

During his visit to Thailand, the protagonist accidentally meets a young Thai monk who makes friends with him and invites him to his temple. He is deeply impressed by the monk's enthusiasm and friendliness. The monk's ready smiles make him feel that Thai men are not afraid to approach or expose themselves to other men. It seems to him that here men are not wary of or hostile to one another as back home. For the protagonist, the monk's friendliness seems to represent a new way that men can react towards one another with none of the restrictive code of masculinity:

Beaming at me across the temple, he elbowed his companions in the ribs like an excited boy trying to make a drowsy friend aware of some unexpected event.

Many men I've known can't smile at strangers. They think it an intolerable sign of weakness, too much like a pup rolling over belly-up deliberately exposing its vulnerability. Some men can't accept the possibilities other men offer, the little accommodations that dismantle the stiff formalism of manliness. But the young monk's smile was an invitation, not an admission of weakness. This morning at the Golden Mount I learnt that a smile between men in Thailand, even when unsought and unexpected, is as good as an introduction. Indeed, a defusing smile may be the shortest bridge to conversation. (9)

The visit to the young monk's temple further convinces the protagonist that being a man in Thailand is different from being a man in Australia. He meets young college students who reside at the temple so as to save money on accommodation. The protagonist notices that the students' manners and gestures are different from those of men in Australia and similar to those of children who genuinely enjoy the company of one another and do not hesitate to show their fondness for each other. The emphasis on the Thai men's boyishness can be seen as the attempt to restore intimate relationships between men to something normal, natural and innocent and thus a challenge to mainstream stigmatization and problematisation of homosexuality and the gender codes that forbid men in his society to reveal their gentle side to one

another. At yet another level, the approximation of the protagonist's desire for Thai men as a boy's eagerness to be close to another boy rather than a Western man's desire for Thai men, can also be read as the evasion of the discussion of the unequal East-West power relation that such a desire potentially engenders:

But it wasn't only their faces that made them look young. It was also their boyishness. They acted like fourteen or fifteen year olds, not men ten or more years older, and had the engaging intimacy of boys still not self-conscious about touching or sharing simple excitements. They lacked the cynicism most Western men present to other men and didn't hide behind assumed veneers of adult remoteness. They were like boys who'd escaped the souring of fickle, moody adolescence. When I relaxed into the contact of their legs and arms, I became a boy with them, a boy who touched and felt other boys, someone I'd never been, even when I was young. (19)

Afterwards, the monk's farewell gesture also leaves a deep impression on the protagonist. Remarkably, the young monk is constructed as an external source of strength and guidance similar to the strong and powerful genie of the protagonist's childhood fantasy who shows young Sabu the world. This betrays the protagonist's desire for stronger and wiser men who can compensate for his perceived weakness and inadequacy:

The young monk is still holding my hand. I don't want him to let go. His touch has an initiating force, like a master's slap against an inattentive student's slouching back. It's awakening a slumbering dynamism in my torpid life. I doubt he knows the power he's passing into me, an innocent conduit for rousing messages from his life, provoking long-checked wishes in me. The friction of his palm on mine kindles a quick warmth, sparking an ember in me. As much felt as seen, it glows in a place I haven't looked before. Is the ember burning out a new space in me or giving light to something I've been asleep to? Whatever, with its kindling I have a new need to act. I need to find a fuel that can ignite it fully, so by its light I can see the field in which it burns. (20)

Interestingly, the young monk is also the one who unconsciously arouses the protagonist while holding his hands before inspiring him to embark on a quest to learn more about Thai men. As the monk represents spirituality and purity, such a role lends

moral approval to homosexuality and therefore suggests the desire to counter traditional Christian perception of male-male eroticism as sinful and despicable:

The young monk arouses me. I shuffle, changing the balance between my feet and holding my free hand in front of my crotch to hide the indications of his affect on me. Despite my discomfort, I'm reassured that this disconcerting closeness is part of the everyday normality of the monk's life. The unselfconscious simplicity of his grip changes my improper feelings back into what they used to be, ordinary things not warranting even a cursory glance or a comment. I'm like a felon in a city where crime is the norm, where my particular compulsion is an everyday desire of everyday men, unremarked upon because it is unremarkable. (13)

The desire to challenge homophobic attitudes is suggested further through the evocation of the image of two young Thai men holding each other's hand on the street. The image can be seen as a fearless show of a man's love for another man as well as a rebellion against a rigid heterosexual norm that denies legitimacy to the public expression of love between two men. The two young men can also be seen as representing the ideal image of gay lovers that the protagonist aspires to. They are not anxious or self-conscious but very relaxed and carefree, and their affection for each other as conveyed through their act of holding hands appears to be spontaneous, not dissimilar from that of 'two five year olds'. Yet the young men's masculinity is also emphasized through their masculine bodies and the casual way they wear their school uniforms. This suggests that it is possible to be 'manly' and at the same time responsive to, and able to show affection to, another man openly and sensitively:

Two teenage boys stand together on the kerb at the bus stop where the young monk said I should wait. They're in school uniform: white shirts; black shoes and socks; grey, boys' short trousers that are too tight in the legs and look out of place against the hair on their exposed calves and thighs. Their shirt tails hang out raggedly over their belts in a deliberate schoolboy gestures of untidiness, and each has undone the top buttons of his shirt, spreading the grime-edged collar to expose the hairless skin covering his breastbone. The teenage boys are holding hands....

They hold hands as unselfconsciously as two five year olds off to school, keeping together for comfort and so as not to get lost. The two

teenagers aren't talking or looking at each other, just standing waiting for a bus, holding hands. Watching the boys at ease in each other's grasp, the currents churning my moods and thoughts break surface, and I'm certain this is where I should be. (22)

The protagonist not merely searches for an alternative model of masculinity but also seeks to address his marginalisation from the 'straight' world and white gay world. Thailand is imagined as a true homeland, a more open and caring community that offers him the possibility of being accepted. According to Chris Berry, the journey towards the realisation of full subjecthood in which gayness is located in and defined by alternative community at the cost of leaving blood family behind echoes an Anglo-American model of gay identity ("Asian Values, Family Values" 223-25). In *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin*, the protagonist sees his biological family as having little role in his life and regards it with a detached attitude as contrasted to an alternative community which he imagines as a long lost 'mother' for an 'orphan'. Significantly, by imagining his relation with Thailand as that of mother and orphan, and his desired physical appearance as that of a Thai, the protagonist betrays his hidden longing for ties with blood family. This longing undermines the Anglo-American gay model that separates gayness from biological family and severs ties with it. In the second part of this chapter, the Anglo-American model's definition of gayness and its relation with biological family will be contrasted with the one espoused and represented in Thai stories:

Watching the men, smelling the bland mustiness of their clothes and bodies, listening to their words I feel relaxed and accepted. I always felt I was a 'cuckoo child'—born and raised in the wrong nest. There were pleasant people who looked after me as a child, but there was always a space between us. Maybe I was unexpected, or perhaps they expected someone other than the person I turned out to be. For me, parents are something other people have. Other people have many things—wives, children, families, jobs, careers, cars, mortgages. I know the details, the rituals that go with these things and how people build their life around them. But I've always known these things from outside. They've always been other people's, and I've looked on Australians'

lives like an ethnologist studying a foreign people. I think they find me clinical and aloof, but it's because I find their lives irrelevant.

But in Thailand everything is mine. This is where I should have been born. I should have a low, broad nose like theirs, the earthy colour of their skin, the blackness of their straight hair and oval eyes. My own body and language are mistakes. Perhaps my spirit became lost on its way to be born, overshooting its true destination and flying out past the rim of Asia to the island-continent to the south. I'm like an orphan who, after so many years, chances to find his mother. I've found the mother that the orphan in me has never known, foreign and different but instinctively familiar and instinctively recognizable. (30-31)

The desire to find alternative community that offers a sense of acceptance and belonging is projected on the protagonist's construction of Thai people. It appears to him that the college students he meets at the young monk's temple are not only very friendly and at ease with one another, but also possess the readiness to accept a stranger as one of them. He draws this conclusion from the way the young men do not mind sharing the small space with him and touching him, not dissimilar from the passengers in a crowded bus he has boarded earlier. The protagonist seems to regard the young Thai men's different perception of personal space as indicative of their openness and strong communal sense:

The men sitting around me on the platform were strangers, but they made no effort to avoid touching me or to live any private space between us. They reminded me of the passengers on the crowded bus on which I'd traveled to reach the Golden Mount. I had tried to keep my distance from the other passengers when they'd pressed in around me, with each stop, more and more people boarded the bus and hardly anyone got off. But the effort was pointless....I finally surrendered to the inevitability of being pushed against others on all sides....The initial annoyance of sweat trickling down my back and legs, as I hung swaying from the ceiling handrail, was soon replaced by a comforting sense of closeness with the mass of unknown people around me.

Now, settling in around me and talking in Thai among themselves, the young men in the monks' room were unworried by the need to squeeze against me or each other on the narrow platform as the passengers had been on the crowded bus. And as on the bus, I enjoyed the sense of blending in. Like the bus passengers, the young men treated me no different than they would a Thai man—not a white man, a *farang*. (16)

The protagonist, however, seems to be unaware that the warm welcome he receives may not be inseparable from his Western-ness. Although he knows that the main interest the monk and the students have in him lies in their desire to practise English, he fails to read their eagerness to make friends with him as a possible sign of their subjugation to the power of someone from a more affluent part of the world. Also, as McCamish observes, in Thailand smiles, friendliness and the seemingly willingness to share are not necessarily capable of translation into support or suggestive of a desire for genuine friendship. When problems are faced, the willingness to share can rapidly disappear and be replaced by fierce independence (“The Friends Thou Hast” 175-76).

The protagonist’s yearning for acceptance and his ignorance of his unequal authority over the Thais are revealed further through his perception of working-class Thai men. On his way to a bar on Bangkok’s Silom Road, he walks past a construction site and sees a group of laughing construction workers taking a bath on the street where they put up their temporary shelter. He notices that no passersby pay attention to the workmen whose ability to share simple joys with one another fascinates him. Distancing himself from the well-dressed Thais around him, he criticises them for treating the workmen as invisible, unaware that the construction worker’s class and poverty exposes them to his voyeuristic gaze and that he is exerting power over their near-naked bodies in more or less the same way as the well-to-do Thais exercise the power to ignore the labourers:

I view this bathing scene as if it were a painting, composed of three prime elements: skin hues that shade from copper to deep chocolate; bright white clumps of shampoo foam and streaks of lather, and clear water that cascades over the men’s bodies and hangs in drops from their noses, ears, chins, elbows and fingers. I see the men as naked, their soaked briefs and bathing cloths clinging to their skin and exposing them to careful eyes almost as completely as the naked children behind them. Yet they soap and rub themselves, heedless of the traffic and the people walking by, as if they were gathered at a secluded village well or stream, not exposed to public view in the

middle of Bangkok....

It's ironic that in this city's constant heat, the more clothes a man wears in public, the more he's noticed. The generals and politicians who dominate the papers and TV are always overdressed. But the fewer clothes a Thai workman wears, whether labouring in the fields or in the city, the less he's noticed. The bathing labourers are all but naked, but it seems that to everyone's eyes, but mine they are the most invisible men on the street. People around me look through them as if they were transparent sheets of glass waiting to be fixed in place in the new building's windows. If the disinterested people finishing and starting work do see the labourers' naked skin, that's probably all they see—just bare, brown, cheap workmen's skin. (47-48)

Moving to a small town, the protagonist has a chance to observe working class Thai men more closely. The town's train station is a major place where men gather for hours and even overnight while waiting for the train to Bangkok. Watching Thai men who stay in groups around him, the protagonist wants to discard his Western identity so that he can be physically similar to the men surrounding him. His difference is seen as an obstacle and impediment and thus needs to be erased. Hidden beneath the desire to rid himself of his Western identity is the desire for self-abasement to achieve sexual union with Thai men:

There's a common odour about the men who sit and stand around me on the platform. Their perspiration has the bland smell of men who survive mainly on boiled rice. It's not acrid like the perspiration of some *farangs*, but rather is musty and close. It's the smell of clothing that's constantly damp with sweat in the humid climate. It's also the smell of old polyester shirts, cotton trousers, and underwear that have been dried indoors out of the sun or on shaded apartment balconies. The smell of the men isn't pleasant, but even so it is intimate and attractive. It's a smell of the density of the men's shared lives, of communality and involvement, and I hope that one day I'll smell the same as them. (29)

At the train station, the protagonist meets Wiset, his first Thai lover who works as a bus conductor. He sees a sexual relationship with Wiset as a means through which he can become more Thai and less white. Crucially, his attempt to get rid of his whiteness and formulate the new identity mimics the structure of fetishism which, as



Berry remarks, involves the repudiation of ambivalence that might challenge or undermine the self's power or the coherence and unification of the new identity (Berry, "Dennis O'Rourke's Original Sin" 37-38, 42-43). Whiteness is repudiated as it is seen as an obstruction to the 'intrinsic quality of skin', rendering the skin unattractive, lifeless and insensitive to pleasures. On the other hand, Thai skin, representing the unobstructed innocence or pristine state of skin, is overvalued and fetishised. As contrasted with white skin, Thai skin is regarded as full of life, highly receptive to pleasures and sexually desirable:

When I run the back of my hand against the silkiness of his skin which in hidden places is warm and moist with sweat but cool and dry where it has been exposed to the breeze, I wish I could exchange my sun-sensitive skin for his with its coppery sheen. His skin is tight as if barely holding in a vitality about to burst out of the confines of his body. My own skin is slack and sags inwards under the exuberant pressure of his life-force. Lying beside Wiset, contemplating the revelation of his pleasure-tightened body and his face made taut from almost painful satisfaction, I learn about possibilities that may still lie in my own skin. With Wiset, I've started excavating my knowledge-interred body. And each time we have sex, I conduct an archeology of my unfeeling flesh, digging back through the callouses and caked layers of rough scurf that have made it coarse and all but dead to pleasure.

I sometimes tremble when Wiset holds me. His hairless chest is smooth, but I feel the soft friction of his skin against me as a violent scraping, as if he were tearing off great dead sheets of my past the way you peel itching, sunburnt skin. And each time he goes away, he leaves me more exposed, with a new surface, a thinner, finer skin alive to more of what's happening around me. The longer I know Wiset, the more I feel the layers separating me from Thai men's lives being stripped away, and the more I feel like them and speak the way they do. (37)

As the novel progresses, it seeks to show that the protagonist's attempt to form a new identity through the process of fetishisation is an impossibility. While telling himself that he wants to be a Thai man and wants to learn what Thai men have to teach him, he is unaware that he is carrying with him class and culturally specific concepts of sexuality and identity which his Thai lovers may not identify with. As someone from a Western gay culture in which to his mind self-worth is almost exclusively measured

by one's sexual desirability or ability to attract other men, the protagonist's concept of homosexual identity differs significantly from a working-class Thai man like Wiset who does not seem to identify as 'gay' and views his sexual relations with other men as simply a form of pleasure and little to do with self-esteem or love for another man.<sup>92</sup> While Wiset is the one who first approaches the protagonist and shows his sexual interest in him, Wiset does not invest much emotion or attention in their relationship. He hardly keeps appointments with the protagonist and only stops by at his convenience. He also sees no possibility of two men forming a committed relationship and living together. The protagonist eventually realises that he and Wiset have very different attitudes towards their relationship. Despite his desire to keep their relationship going, when Wiset comes to tell him that he is moving to Bangkok, the protagonist finally gives up trying to persuade Wiset to stay, knowing that such a relationship will lead nowhere:

...he was going to live in Bangkok, where he'd share a room with some other ticket collectors in an apartment close to Morchit, the terminal for buses traveling to the north-east. Wiset seemed too excited to realize he was telling me goodbye.

I couldn't respond at first. Unable to put my thoughts and words together, I simply rinsed the remaining soap from my face before it dried onto my skin. His sudden announcement that he was going, perhaps for good, broke through my cautious reticence so I could tell him what I'd been wanting to say. I asked him point blank to move in with me.

"I can't," he replied straightforwardly. "It won't be convenient when I'm working the buses out of Bangkok. I might have to go out on other routes too." He was almost trembling with excitement as he mentioned the prospect of traveling around the country.

"Not just living together," I insisted, trying to bring his attention to the point. "I mean staying together, like we have been sometimes." I tried to

---

<sup>92</sup> Jackson remarks that in white gay culture, the goal of many gay men is to be 'the object of another man's lustful gaze' and sexuality is intricately linked with self-esteem ("That's What Rice Queens Study!" *White Gay Desire and Representing Asian Homosexualities* 184).

avoid analogies to marriage, but I couldn't find the words to express my wishes without referring to either myself or Wiset in feminine terms.

"But how can we live together? We're men," Wiset objected, detecting the implications of my words.

"But what do you think we've been doing, sleeping together all this time?"

"That was just fun."

"Don't you want to keep having fun?" I attempted to build an argument around his own words.

"Sure, it'll be great fun in Bangkok."

Engrossed in the vision of his possible future, Wiset seemed incapable of considering extraneous comments from me or of understanding the type of life between two men about which I tried to tell him. I gave up attempting to convince him to stay. (41-42)

Interestingly, the protagonist tries to explain Wiset's perception of their relationship in deterministic terms. He attributes Wiset's character and the way he responds to life to the physical environment and the determination of the senses without taking into account socio-economic context and cultural specificities. His failure to take these factors into consideration becomes clearer as he struggles unsuccessfully to establish relationships with other Thai men. The protagonist's way of explaining human behaviours also betrays his tendency to accord little significance to human responsibility for their actions. :

Wiset was an enthusiast for life, latching fervently onto life's excitement, lunging at every chance to taste a stronger, sharper flavour of living and devouring the things that hone his sense of being alive. I saw that Wiset's attitude to life came from being raised in Thailand's physical embrace. Thailand incites the senses. In this country, the tastes are sharper and more piquant, the smells are more aromatic and more pungent, the sounds are louder and more clashing, and the sights are more complex and more confused. Even the air here is a felt presence that massages the skin like penetrating oils. I had been one of the enthusiasms that Wiset sought out, and now he'd found another. (42-43)

After his relationship with Wiset ends, the protagonist soon moves back to Bangkok where he begins a love affair with Ari, the ambitious, but unsuccessful writer whose

poverty forces him to work as a bar boy to earn extra income. Ari is, in a number of ways, different from Wiset. He is better educated, more urbane, and identifies as gay. Unlike Wiset who takes same-sex activities as simply another form of pleasure, Ari takes his sexual identity seriously and is angry and frustrated by discrimination against gay men in Thailand. He tells the protagonist that he cannot write his short stories the way he wants as gay stories are hardly accepted by publishers and he needs to change his stories into heterosexual romances. His dream of being a writer is thus destroyed by mainstream prejudice against homosexuality:

Then, turning back to me, Ari said, “I’ve tried to make a living from writing, but it’s never paid enough. I’ve always had to have other work.”

Ari then gave me summaries of the flood of ideas he obviously had for stories about men he’s known or would like to know....

After giving me summaries of half a dozen of his stories, Ari stood up, took off his wire-rim glasses and put them down on a small cupboard beside the double bed. He walked out onto the balcony and took a couple of towels off the clothesline. Holding the two towels, Ari turned around to face me from the open doorway. He stood still twisting a corner of his mouth into a half grimace of disgust.

“I’ve always had to twist my stories into women’s romances to make them sell,” Ari snarled as he spoke. (63)

Working in a bar that caters for Western tourists, Ari also develops contempt for Western tourists who spend money on him but look down on him and treat him with no respect. Listening to Ari talking about his life and the Western clients he hates, the protagonist comes to believe that he and Ari are hurt by the same type of Western males who have maltreated and alienated him back home:

In our subsequent meetings, usually on weekends at my flat or mid-week dinners at Ari’s when his roommate was out, I soon recognised familiar signs in Ari’s contradictions and mood swings. Ari and I were so similar. When he talked about himself, I often felt he was telling me my own life. I felt especially close to him when he criticized *farangs*, and I realised that the same types of men had damaged us both.

“*Farangs* are so selfish in sex,” Ari said one night at my flat two or three weeks after we’d met. “They treat smaller men like they’re servants they

can push around. At first I trusted them, but some *farang* men act like smaller or weaker men are disgusting. They think I should worship them because their cocks are big, as if that's important, and that I should be grateful to have them mawl me."

"You know, the *farangs* you've slept with for money were probably the same ones I was forced to meet, because they were the only men around," I replied in English, because I didn't know how to express these thoughts in Thai. On that occasion Ari didn't cut me short for speaking English and responded in English himself.

"How could they be the same men?"

"Maybe I knew them at home, and you've known them when they've been here on vacation. From what you've said, they sound like the same men. They're the kind of men who treat you like you don't exist, ignoring you in conversations they have with other *farangs*, not asking anything about you or your life when you're with them, only interested in your cock or arsehole." (67-68)

This attempt to universalise the experience of marginalisation and discrimination to overcome difference is shown as a mistake. While the protagonist is intentionally blind to the difference and only wants to see the similarity between himself and Ari, Ari wills himself to see only the difference between them. He does not share the protagonist's sense of identification and shows few signs of warmth or gentleness to his Australian lover. Worse, Ari enjoys hurting the protagonist physically and seems to derive great pleasure from it. Yet the protagonist's desire for self-abasement and self-hatred contributes to his own victimisation as he seems to regard Ari's abuse as a way to relieve the guilt and shame of his Western identity:

Before leaving, Ari leaned over the bed to kiss me goodbye. He looked calmer than I had ever seen him, and I closed my eyes as his lips approached my face. But he didn't kiss me. He punched me hard against my bare right shoulder, and I wore that bruise for more than a week. But each time I felt the stiff soreness when I lifted my arm or carried something heavy, I felt purged of *farang* men, including the man who still dogged me in reflections from shop windows and taxi rear-view mirrors. (70)

While Ari's abusive actions cannot be generalized as typical of Thai bar boys' treatment of their Western partners, the expectation he has for his Western lover is not

unusual among Thai gay men who work in bars frequented by Western tourists. As McCamish observes, a number of Thai bar boys share the dream about finding a rich Western man who will generously support them financially. In many cases their motive is not purely mercenary, but a compromise of economic needs and erotic and emotional attachments (“The Friends Thou Hast” 170-171). This suggests that for many Thai gay men of low economic status, their sexuality is inseparable from socio-economic factors and it might not be possible or desirable for them to privilege their sexuality over their economic needs. Ari’s decision to leave the protagonist to marry a wealthy Western woman shows that for him, his sexuality is less important than being economically well-off. As a middle-class Western gay man who does not need to negotiate his sexual desire with economic demands, the protagonist fails to comprehend Ari’s treatment of him:

Ari couldn’t keep his desire for me separate from his economic wants. He both craved and resented the wealth he assumed all *farangs* must have....He couldn’t separate the colour of my skin, the shapes of my eyes, or the narrow prominence of my nose from what he hoped to be my true economic status. Ari couldn’t see me as other than the mythical *farang*. The closer I got to him, and the more he saw I wasn’t rich and couldn’t save him, the more he battered me during sex and pushed me away from him afterwards. Ari could never see in me the Thai man I want to be. (74)

It is only after a brief relationship with Rawit, another working-class Thai man, that the protagonist begins to realize that his middle-class, Western concept of sexuality needs to be negotiated if he wants his relationship with Thai men from a working-class background to work. Being mature, sensitive and good-natured, Rawit seems to be the Thai man that the protagonist is looking for. Yet the protagonist, who is still hurt from Ari’s treatment of him, unrealistically insists that the relationship between them must be that between two equals. Rawit, being very poor, is unable to accept the terms. They break up but the protagonist soon regrets his decision and blames himself

for being naïve and inflexible:

I see now it might have worked....if only I'd been more open to what's outside the tight-frames of my picture-book fantasies... Supercilious and privileged, I'd refused to acknowledge the dimensions of what Rawit wished he could give me and, knowing that, accept the little he could in fact offer. I've given back a poor man's gift of carefully fashioned brass merely because it wasn't gold. (91)

The protagonist has yet another unfulfilling relationship with Chai, a poor labourer who yearns to be white. Chai's knowledge of the West mainly comes from Hollywood movies and he assumes that all Westerners lead an affluent and happy life, a stark contrast to his impoverished and miserable life. Chai is created to be the protagonist's mirror image which suggests to the reader that the protagonist's construction of Thai men is a projection of his own subjectivity and it is little different from Chai's fantasy about happy lives of white people as derived from glittering Hollywood images:

In Chai's body I saw the darkness I want to be, but his mind was only a reflection of my own whiteness. He wanted to be me as much as I wanted to be him. He'd stared at me in bed like an excited puppy, but he didn't really see me. He was looking past me towards another image.

Chai is a shell of a Thai man, with a heart that beats with the pulse of foreign hopes and alien images. He mistakes as gods the demons I'm escaping, confusing simple difference with his hope for liberation. His bright images are just illusions to me, and he doesn't see the traps inside their novel patterns. I'd thought—hoped that in getting close to Chai, I'd end up becoming more like him than me. But he only reflected back the ugliness I'm fleeing and the poverty in me he mistakes for wealth. (131)

Travelling to a small rural Thai town, the protagonist has a brief sexual relationship with a Thai farmer and witnesses how poverty-stricken Thai villagers actually live their life. Trying to see his life through a Thai perspective for the first time, the protagonist finally understands that the new identity he is struggling to formulate never exists. He is forced to acknowledge the 'intrinsic quality' of both Thai skin and

white skin, namely the racial and socio-economic specificities that they carry. His 'white skin' gives him the privilege to live a life totally different from that of the deprived Thais:

I arrived here gorged fat on the possibilities of Australian affluence. With money, you can be and do so many things. I built great, illusory structures on the hopes I had for my Thai life. But in this gritty town my rich illusions are like great mechanical harvesters and irrigation pumps set up in a land of rough-wheeled bullock carts and hand-turned grindstones. They break down without their expensive, refined fuel, rusting and clogging up with weeds like metal hulks left in the wake of a misguided aid project, cluttering the landscape and left as cracking curiosities to mark the folly of someone who reached out for more than was there to hold.

I wanted to become a Thai man to assume a more fitting form for the feelings that tear at me from inside. Covered by this farmer's clothes, I saw my Thai body naked in my mind....All I saw in my Thai life were begrudging perseverance and futile drudgery, repeated unchanging seasons of debt and pointless labour, a multitude of identical days spent living with a family who didn't know me. In that life there was no hope in an anticipated future, only a mind pressed inside a single-pointed present, not from any joy in the immediacy of living but from fear of considering what best forgotten memories suggest the future will surely bring. (145)

Disappointed and disillusioned with his quest for liberation and emotional fulfilment, the protagonist is convinced that Thai men have nothing more to offer him. Thailand which is initially imagined as his 'mother' now becomes a foreign, alien country populated by people with whom he shares nothing in common. The fetishised discourse that has dominated the protagonist's imagining of Thai men transforms into the racist discourse in which racial and cultural differences denote discomfort, hostility and even inferiority. By showing his protagonist's drastic change in the perception of the country and the people which so fascinate him in the beginning, Jackson is suggesting that fetishised and racist discourses are closely related as both rely on the disavowal of one side or the other of ambivalence so as to construct a



more secure identity.<sup>93</sup> The protagonist's fetishisation of Thai men and Thai identity, which involves the disavowal of white skin's attractiveness, is the attempt to address his rejection and alienation from Australian men and his own society. Similarly, the racist discourse, which later dominates his perception of Thai men, disavows Thai men's attractiveness and essentialises Thai people as an undifferentiated, undesirable and hostile mass as contrasted with Westernness, which now signifies home and true identity:

I'm no connoisseur of classical music and couldn't judge the performance against standards that European or American audiences might expect. But the mere fact I was listening to the music's intricacies in the middle of Bangkok made the performance sublime....

Almost as soon as the music began, I felt a cultural pride that I didn't think myself capable of. I was proud I came from a place where music as richly beautiful as this was played every day and where musicians and audiences shared its colours. Watching the musicians' hands and following the involved expressions on their faces, I was suffused and penetrated by the music's intensity....it was as if the music had roused a race memory that showed me I was closer to long-dead composers who'd lived in countries I've never visited than I was to the men I've lived with and slept beside these past years.

Leaving the auditorium after the performance, I was disoriented to find I was still in Bangkok. The Thai crowds seemed indifferent and insensitive to what had taken place inside the theatre. I felt the people walking by should be speaking English, French or German, or perhaps even Czech, Russian or Hungarian. Instead the people of Bangkok moved on in their busy, divergent lives, untouched by the music I'd heard. I knew the music, had they heard it, would have done nothing for them. Any note it struck in them would probably be discordant or jarring.

It's clearly time I left Thailand. The environment has turned hostile. The people aren't aggressive or unfriendly as individuals, but it's the whole expanding mass of them together. The last year or so I've cut myself off from Bangkok. I've put a cushion between myself and Thai people to keep myself from being bruised.... the people's persistent differences rankle me. (173-174)

Nevertheless, the racist discourse only briefly dominates the protagonist's imagining

---

<sup>93</sup> See Jackson's comment on his own novel in " 'That's What Rice Queens Study!' White Gay Desire and Representing Asian Homosexualities " 187-88.

of Thai people and it soon gives way to a more positive resolution. There is a suggestion that the protagonist is able to move beyond racist and fetishised discourses and envision the possibility of forming relationship with both Thai and Australian men. His relationship with Glen, the young Australian tourist, makes him realise that being with an Australian man can be sexually and emotionally fulfilling, and that it is possible for him to settle in Australia once more and find a compatible partner. He also hopes to use what he learns from Thai masculinity to challenge the dominant model of masculinity in his society. The protagonist's imagining of male-male relationships, however, is still dominated by the metaphor of hostility, defeat and conquest and thus betrays his internalization of the dominant ideology that governed men's relations during the time he was growing up:

...I've learnt that there are more ways to be a man than Australian men admit. And if adroitly wielded, that knowledge could lacerate a hostile man's arrogant self-certainty. The ways that Thai men touch cut through to affections and sensations that most Australian men ignore. This knowledge is my knife-blade souvenir of Thailand, and I'll hone it in Australia and wear it like a weapon.

I'll return little stronger than when I left. But now, when I fight an Australian man for his love, I will have a chance of winning. (175)

The protagonist's ability to go beyond the fetishising discourse is suggested through his second meeting with Rawit, the Thai man who has impressed him the most. This time he no longer perceives Rawit's attractiveness as derived from his race, but sees it as emanating from personal charms and manners. The novel therefore seeks to show that it is possible to move beyond fetishisation and establish a form of relationship that is more or less egalitarian in nature:

Rawit looks older. I probably do too. Even so, he looks attractive. Not because he's Thai and his skin is brown. He's attractive because of the quiet, self-confident way he sits; his observant eyes, which let me know he's interested in me; and his relaxed, patient manner that makes me feel he demands nothing of me. These are small, handsome things that make a man of any race attractive.

(177)

While it is clear that the novel intends to deconstruct the stereotyping of the Caucasian man who fetishises Thai men, it is possible that the protagonist may not have entirely abandoned his inclination to ignore specificities and universalize. By appearing to displace the brown skin and to install the quiet manner as one of the things that ‘makes a man of any race attractive’, has he now overridden preference based on race with preference based on a belief in ‘sensitive’ manners?

In addition to demonstrating the potential of moving beyond fetishising and racist discourses, *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* also conveys a powerful political message that aims to empower the marginalised across cultures. The final episode sees Rawit and the protagonist holding hands while walking to a hotel without any fear of being stared at. This episode recalls the earlier evocation of two young Thai men holding hands in the street and it endorses the challenge to the heterosexual norm thorough the collaboration of sexual minorities from different cultures. Of note is that when Rawit first met the protagonist over a year ago, he kept a distance from the protagonist when they walked together in the street for fear of being seen as a homosexual and as engaging in a sexual relationship with a Westerner. As popular discourse in Thailand stigmatises both homosexuality and Western-Thai sexual relations, the change in Rawit shows him as a more rebellious person than before as he not only defies the heterosexual norm but also shows no concern about being seen as a sex worker who services a Westerner:

As we cross the main road to get to the side street leading to the Krung Kaw, Rawit grabs my hand and pulls me out of the way of an accelerating motorcycle. He doesn't let go of my hand when we reach the safety of the side street. Some people in the street look at us, but no one looks twice.

“Will you come back to Thailand?” Rawit asks.

“I really haven’t thought. I suppose I will if there’s a reason to”....

As Rawit and I walk in through the hotel’s gate and a porter directs us towards a downstairs room, I know that even if nothing else takes place between us, at least I’ll be able to hold Rawit’s hand, let him hold my hand as long as he wants and calmly look him in the eye without flinching or needing to turn away. (178-179)

The message that sexual minorities across cultures experience prejudice and discrimination and that it is crucial to fight against the stigmatisation of non-normative sexual practice is no doubt appreciated by people who breach heterosexual norms and expectations. Although Thailand has no religious or legal sanctions against non-normative sexual behaviour, Thai academic discourses largely problematise and pathologise homosexuality and transgenderism. Among the general populace, the disapproval of same-sex sexual relationships usually comes in indirect and subtle forms, but can be emotionally and psychologically damaging. Additionally, while Thai people, in general, do not confront sexual minorities with homophobic attitudes, things are very different if people find out that their children or close relatives engage in homosexual activities. Rejection and even ostracism are not uncommon when parents discover that their children have homosexual preference, which is predominantly regarded as a family’s disgrace (Rakkit ix). A family with a homosexual or transgendered child is also stereotyped as problematic and parents are usually blamed for failing to provide appropriate sex roles for children (Jackson, “Studies of Rates of Same-Sex Sexual Experience in Thailand” 38).

Remarkably, while the Australian protagonist in *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* has no hesitation leaving his blood family, and even home country, behind in search of a community where he can find a space for his homosexuality, for most Thai homosexuals, being ostracised by one’s parents or leaving one’s biological family in order to pursue one’s sexuality are both highly undesirable because the ability to

fulfill family obligations is highly crucial to one's self-worth. A large number of Thai homosexuals face great difficulty reconciling homosexual identity with family obligations and social norms. Additionally, as Jackson and Sullivan observe, although there are "local networks linked loosely by a common argot and ethos", the notion of 'gay community' as understood in the West is generally absent ("A Panoply of Roles" 6).<sup>94</sup> Thus, the Anglo-American model of gay identity which advocates the quest for an alternative family to replace biological family can be problematic in a Thai context. Interestingly, while admitting that family can be a great source of oppression for a large number of homosexual and transgender males, many of them unfailingly struggle to find a space for homosexuality or transgenderism within a family through the ability to take care of or support elderly parents and other close relatives. In many cases, the ability to perform filial duties well and support family members can be a way in which homosexuality and transgenderism are rendered unproblematic. Thai parents may come to accept their homosexual or transgendered children who behave well and fulfill their responsibilities toward family. In his *Gay's Heart Disclosure* (2005) the prominent Thai gay activist, Natee Teerarojjanapongs, also promotes filial duties and contribution to one's family as a way to integrate gayness within family and redeem it from popular discourse that problematises homosexuality (151-154). Thus, unlike the Western model of gayness which largely separates gayness from family and relies on alternative community as a means to find a space for gayness or normalize it, in Thailand blood family is crucial to gay and transgender males' negotiation for recognition and acceptance.

Further investigation of male-male homoeroticism in Thailand reveals a

---

<sup>94</sup> See also Sullivan and Leong (1995).

number of other differences from the Western model of gayness and, as suggested in *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin*, Western concepts of homosexual identity and homoerotic desire are culturally specific and may not be translatable to non-Western societies. In the following section I examine two Thai novels and one short story about Thai homosexual and transgender males and discuss in detail Thai homoerotic culture and some of its culturally specific aspects. The Thai works under consideration are *The Male Sex Worker* (2006), *The Story of Girly Boy* (2006), and “The Feminine Man” (2006). These three works, written in Thai, are directed at a mainstream audience and while “The Feminine Man” is written by the woman writer, Piyamard Tiemsawet, it is not possible to identify the true identities and genders of the authors of *The Male Sex Worker* and *The Story of Girly Boy* who merely use the pennames ‘Jor Jae Jang’ and ‘Seven Angles’ respectively. Worth noting here is that in a number of bookshops I visited, both novels and their like are shelved with sensational and horror stories and this betrays the popular presumption that the lives of gay and transgendered people are sensation-provoking subjects with the potential to fascinate some readers in the same way as ghost or horror stories do.

### **Thai writing**

According to Stephen O. Murray, the primary idiom of male-male homoeroticism in modern Western societies is that of homosexual relations between males of similar age, status, and masculinity (80). The valorisation of the white male body in dominant white gay culture leads to the cult of hypermasculinity which marginalises and alienates other forms of masculinity. The characterisation of the Australian protagonist in *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* is based on the figure of the ‘rice queen’, a gay man who does not fit in with the dominant white gay subculture and occupies a

marginalised position. He is regarded by other white gay men as sexually unattractive and can only find Asian partners. The desire of the ‘rice queen’, however, inverts the dominant anti-Asian ideology by fetishising Asian men and excluding white men from being sexually attractive (Jackson, “‘That’s What Rice Queens Study!’” 184). This is illustrated in *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* through the protagonist’s initial idealisation of Thai men and the disavowal of the sexual attractiveness of white men, although as previously discussed, the novel seeks to transcend such a fetishisation of Thai men.

Contemporary Thai male-male homoerotic culture differs in a number of aspects from the Western one. Despite the increasing visibility of male-identified gay men, the primary idiom of male-male homoeroticism in Thailand is in terms of gender-nonconformity.<sup>95</sup> The most visible figures of men who love other men are *kathoeys*, usually rendered into English as transgenders, transvestites or transsexuals. *Kathoeys* are effeminate men who prefer to act and dress like women and they are largely associated with negative stereotypes which cast them as sources of humour, objects of ridicule and even oversexed and promiscuous beings (Rakkit viii-ix). As the word *kathoeys* is predominantly derogatory, many transgender males prefer to call themselves ‘lady boys’ or ‘Phuying/Sao Praphet thi song’ (a second type of woman) or ‘Nangfa Jamleang’ (a transformed goddess) for post-operative transsexuals. As Graeme Storer remarks, the increasing masculinisation of Thai gay men who identify as masculine is not merely the importation of Western gay identity or the valorisation of the male body per se, but the attempt to differentiate themselves from *kathoeys* and to challenge the notion that gay means *kathoeys* (149). Of note is that there are also

---

<sup>95</sup> See for example Morris (1994). In this study, which focuses on Thailand, Morris discusses the visibility of gender-variant males and females as advertising for lovers who are gender-conforming.

Thai men who identify as 'gay' but see themselves as more or less 'feminine' by nature and distance themselves from *kathoeys*. Thus, unlike Western gay men whose perceived fundamental task is to live up to the dominant model of masculinity, the more immediate task for Thai gay men, both masculine and 'feminine' identified, is to distance themselves from *kathoeys* and the negative stereotypes associated with them. Nonetheless, as it is still a predominant popular assumption that homosexuality and male sexual availability are conveyed through flamboyant effeminacy, many Thai male teenagers who love men find it confusing to differentiate their homosexuality from transgenderism or 'being *kathoeys*' and some may lead *kathoeys*'s life for a number of years before realising that they are not *kathoeys*.

Remarkably, in contemporary Thailand medical technologies have become crucial to many Thai *kathoeys*' life due to a popular belief that beauty and feminine looks can increase *kathoeys*' sexual desirability and self-esteem. The damaging impact of excessive use of beauty-enhancing hormones, medicines and surgery on *kathoeys*' physical and emotional health has been increasingly debated. Recently, there has been a trend among young Thai *kathoeys* or 'lady boys' to have their testicles removed in the belief that it will make them look more feminine and beautiful. As the operation is relatively inexpensive compared with real sex transformation, many teenagers have been able to afford it. However, there is a great risk involved as it is not certain whether the operation can cause long-term health-damaging side effects or not ("Testicles Removal: Health Issue or Rights Issue?" 01.04.08). Natee Teerarojjanapongs has recently appealed to the authorities concerned to investigate the practice of doctors who remove teenagers' testicles as he is concerned that teenagers might unwittingly decide to have the operation and regret it later. Arguing that young people have yet to learn what their true sexual and gender



identity is and voicing deep concern about health issues, he demanded that testicle removal be banned. Natee, born in 1956, recounted that when he was a teenager, he thought he was *kathoey* as he loves men and he also looks effeminate. He even considered having a sex change. It was only when he became older and had been living in America for a few years that he knew he was not *kathoey*, but gay (“Natee Teerarajjanapongs: Life as a Gay” 08.04.08). Natee’s account of the transformation in his homosexual identity reveals the deep impact of the Thai gender system that equates homosexuality with gender non-conformity and the effects of the indigenous gender category, *kathoey*, on Thai homosexual men’s perception of their gender and sexual identity. It can be argued that the boundary between ‘gay’ and transgender males in a Thai context may be much less clearly differentiated than in the West. To fully understand the difference between contemporary Thai and Western homoerotic cultures, it is important to explore the traditional Thai gender system and the way it operates.

As Jackson maintains, in the past Thai language designated only two sex/gender categories for males: the gender normative ‘man’ (*phu-chai*) and the non-normative *kathoey*. *Kathoey* was used to refer to “all males who were regarded as breaching normative male biology or normative masculine behaviour” (“The Persistence of Gender” 115). There was no word for homosexually active people who are gender normative until the English term ‘gay’ was borrowed into Thai in the 1970s and 1980s. When first borrowed, the meaning of ‘gay’ in Thai was almost interchangeable with *kathoey*. Gradually, the notion of masculine-identified male homosexuality as a distinct category from *kathoey* gained currency (116).

Arguing against Rosalind Morris who proposes that contemporary Thailand sees the co-existence of two ‘irreconcilable’ sex/gender systems—the indigenous one

and the new Western-modeled discursive domain of sexualities<sup>96</sup>, Jackson contends that the Thai gender system resists the construction of the new domain of sexualities as distinct from gender and people's sexual relations have been persistently defined in terms of their genders. Sexuality and gender are not two separate domains in the Thai worldview, and *kathoey* is both a gender and a sexual identity. There is only one indigenous term *phet* that refers to sexual difference, gender difference and sexuality and Thai discourses have not borrowed the Western 'gay'/'straight' binary. The term 'gay' has been borrowed but reinscribed within a traditional Thai gender discourse ("Thai Research on Male Homosexuality and Transgenderism" 52-85). In Thai 'gay' does not exist by itself but usually comes with or implies suffixes—*king*, *queen* and *quing*, a combination of the English words 'king' and 'queen'. *Gay-king* and *gay-queen* are respectively masculine-identified and feminine identified homosexual males while *gay-quing*'s identity is marked by his sexual versatility. 'Gay' thus comes to signify both a sexual and gender identity existing in between the traditional gender categories of 'man' and *kathoey*. Sexual relations between Thai homosexual men are defined by their gay genders, with masculine *gay-king* being paired up with feminine *gay-queen*. *Gay-quing*, a homosexually versatile gay identity, is accommodated within this gendered framework by being seen as having both the elements of the *queen* and *king* gay identities (Jackson, "The Persistence of Gender" 115-117). While sexual relation between *gay-quings* is more or less that of males of similar masculinity, sexual relations between *gay-king* and *gay-queen* is based on gender-nonconformity with *gay-queen* being the 'woman' in the relationship. As gender-nonconformity is more visible and fits in with the predominant idiom of male-male homoeroticism in Thailand, the representations of *gay-queens* and *kathoeyes* in Thai

---

<sup>96</sup> See also Morris (1994:15-43).

discourses overshadow those of *gay-kings* and *gay-queens*. When mentioning the term ‘gay’ in Thailand, not a few lay people recall the image of effeminate males, and some still conflate ‘gay’ with *kathoey*. Some *kathoey*s also use the term ‘gay’ to refer to themselves (Borthwick 63-64). While *gay-kings* and *gay-queens* prefer to keep a masculine self-image and may see themselves as ‘real men’, they are also denied ‘real masculinity’ as their gender category is ‘gay’, not ‘man’, although they are regarded as closer to ‘man’ than *gay-queen* and *kathoey*. Also, as remarked earlier, the boundary between Thai *kathoey* or ‘lady boy’ and ‘gay’, especially *gay-queen*, can be blurred and it is generally acknowledged that border-crossing can take place. Indeed, the term ‘gay’ in Thai has taken on connotations of effeminacy to the extent that even masculine-identified *gay-kings* and *gay-queens* are regarded as capable of transforming into effeminate *gay-queen* and *kathoey*.

In the two Thai novels under consideration, *The Male Sex Worker* (2006) and *The Story of Girly Boy* (2006), *gay-queen* and *kathoey* are depicted as two gender categories yet very closely related. *The Story of Girly Boy*, in particular, centres on the life of a gay protagonist who used to be *kathoey* or ‘girly boy’ during his adolescent years. Through the depiction of male-male homoeroticism in these two Thai novels, we also witness the persistent strength of the Thai gender system that determines sexual relations on the basis of gender. Nonetheless, while largely conformist, there are signs of challenge to the rigidity of the indigenous gender structure in *The Story of Girly Boy*.

### ***The Male Sex Worker* (2006) and *The Story of Girly Boy* (2006)**

‘Jor Jae Jang’'s *The Male Sex Worker* is written in first person narrative and the

narrator, a young man named Mon, directly addresses a mainstream audience to whom he confides the story of his life as a gay man. Mon initially believed that he was a ‘real man’ and had enjoyed having sexual relationships with women. His sexual preference, however, drastically changes after being seduced by a male acquaintance while he is drunk. He becomes less and less interested in women and increasingly attracted to good-looking men. The change in sexuality brings about the transformation of his gender identity and he doubts whether he is a ‘real man’. His conviction that he is not ‘man’ but ‘gay’ comes after his sexual relationship with his classmate who becomes his first male lover. From then on, Mon’s manners and gestures become increasingly effeminate. Mon’s change corresponds with the cultural presumption that equates homosexual males effeminacy with sexual availability and endorses the dominant pattern of male-male homoeroticism that involves gender-conformity. While simply referring to himself as ‘gay’, Mon’s effeminacy and his perception of himself as a man ‘with the heart of a girl’ (18-19) places him in the category of *gay-queen*, an effeminate gay man who supposedly assumes the role of ‘woman’ in his sexual relations with another man:

Since Eak and I become lovers, I develop into a real ‘gay’ and I begin to flirt with good-looking young men. My femininity becomes increasingly obvious although I still try to hide it from my family. If those girls who had been my lovers had seen me now, they would have been shocked to death. Days pass and I’m more and more woman-like. (42-43)<sup>97</sup>

Predictably, Mon’s relationship with his male lovers is modeled on heterosexual relations, with himself acting as ‘woman’. When dating Mark, a Western man, Mon feels that he must not allow Mark to presume that he will agree to spend the night with him on their first date. Considering himself as ‘feminine’, he believes that he

---

<sup>97</sup> All translations from *The Male Sex Worker* are my own.

must act like model Thai woman who cherishes her virginity, at least on his first date with Mark, so that “Westerners would not gossip behind our back that Thai gays are no different from tarts”. (49-50)

In spite of Mon’s rambling about ‘feminine’ virtues and preserving a good image, he admits that he is little different from some Thai women who want to find a Western husband in the hope of becoming rich. Pondering his relationship with Mark, Mon tells himself that, like these women, he also wants to find a lover who may one day take him overseas for a good future there. Nevertheless, Mon tries to justify himself by stressing his love and emotional commitment to Mark. Mon’s attitude towards his relationship with Mark recalls the way working-class Thai men in *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* conflate their sexual and emotional attachments with economic needs. Mon’s perception of himself as a woman who wants to find a rich husband, and thus, his implied lower sexual and economic status, also contrasts with the way the Australian protagonist in *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* prefers his relationship with Thai men to be that between two males of equal masculinity and status:

I secretly dream that one day Mark will take me home with him. It’s not only women who fantasize about having a Western husband who can take them overseas for a life of wealth. Gay men like me also have similar dream... a friend who used to live overseas told me that there were many Thai sex workers who formed relationship with Western men and in the end followed the men abroad. When these women came back home for a visit, they looked very rich and took lots of money back to share with their relatives.... this probably explains why so many women want to find Western husband... Mark is my hope. One day he might take me overseas with him. This may sound like I only want to exploit him but actually I do love him. (61-62)

Although perceiving himself as ‘feminine’, Mon does not cross-dress and he differentiates himself from *kathoeys*. He disapproves of the behaviour and manners of some *kathoeys*, especially teenage Bangkok *kathoeys*, although he does not overrule

border-crossing between gay and *kathoey*. Mon perceives the possibility of himself being a *kathoey* if he were born in Bangkok where there are more temptations and teenagers have more freedom to flaunt their sexualities. According to him, exposure to a licentious lifestyle and freedom to cross-dress can hasten the development into *kathoey* whose effeminacy is much more obvious than ‘gay’ and are more likely to attract negative attitudes from the public. Mon’s definition of ‘gay’ and *kathoey* suggests that in Thai male-male homoerotic culture, transgenderism is less clearly differentiated from gayness than in the West:

...if I had been born or had lived in Bangkok since I was a kid, I might not be just a gay man as I’m now. I might have become a *kathoey*, showing signs of my real gender from a very early age. In Bangkok budding *kathoeyes* are everywhere. They act like girls, put on girls’ fancy clothes and do not seem to be aware of how dreadful they look. These teenage *kathoeyes* are really a horrifying sight. In fact, I have seen some of these *kathoeyes* in my neighborhood, but they do not act or dress this outrageously. (45-46)

Not wanting to attract discrimination and prejudice in the same way as *kathoey*, Mon carefully chooses his self-representations. He allows himself to act effeminately only when he is with close friends and there is no one present who might disapprove of his homosexuality. When Mon attends university to study law, he always presents ‘manly’ looks as he is concerned about the image of his university and himself as a law student. Mon’s adjustment of his image to suit university life is suggestive of a less tolerant attitude towards homosexuality within Thai academic institutions<sup>98</sup>:

I choose to study law and I have to be ‘a gay in a man’s body’ so as not to tarnish the good image of my prestigious university and my fellow classmates who will become our nation’s future lawyers and judges.... I don’t know what

---

<sup>98</sup> Rakkit (1999: ix-xi ) and Jackson in “Tolerant but Unaccepting: The Myth of a Thai ‘Gay Paradise’ ” mention a discrimination against homosexuality in Thai academic institutions. Jackson comments that such a discrimination not only makes the life of people with homosexual preference difficult but also hinders research on homosexuality within Thai academia (228).

will happen if one day after I graduate, I forget myself and reveal the secret that I'm gay. (46-47)

Mon also takes pains to hide his effeminacy from his family and finds it easier to deal with strangers' attitudes towards his homosexuality than disclose his homosexual identity to his family. This experience can be attributed to the largely non-interventionist and subtle way the Thai public deals with homosexuality. People may gossip if they know you are *kathoey* or gay, but they will not show their disapproval or embarrass the person openly as sexuality is considered a very private matter and people will largely refrain from interfering with one's personal life. Within a family, however, things are much more difficult for homosexual people as parents may ostracise or take forceful actions to 'cure' their homosexual or transgendered child. This is a different situation from the protagonist in *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* who appears to suffer more from the general public's confronting homophobic attitudes than from family pressure:

I have to pretend that I'm not gay when I am with my relatives. I have been living with them since I was a little kid and I do care for them. I can't possibly shock them by changing my gender so suddenly. I will have to wait until I leave home before I can be someone I really want to be. Actually, I'm quite frustrated having to pretend to be someone else and I wish I could be true to myself. (42-43)

Despite his reluctance to reveal his homosexuality to his family, Mon nonetheless sees the possibility of finding a space for gayness within his family through academic success and the ability to find a good job after graduation. Believing that he can make his family proud of his success, he is hopeful that they will be able to reconcile with the fact that he is gay. Mon's belief that being a well-behaved and successful son who brings pride to his parents can redeem his homosexuality corresponds with Natee Teerarojjapongs's attempt to seek parental approval for homosexual children who

behave well, study well and can be the source of support for parents in their old age (*Gay's Heart Disclosure* 151-54). This attempt to de-problematise homosexuality through familial and parental approval differs from the Anglo-American model of gayness, also echoed in *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin*, which separates blood family from gayness and largely relies on alternative community as a source of acceptance and self-worth for gay people:

None of my family members know that I'm gay. I try very hard to keep it a secret from them....Why I don't tell them outright that I'm gay? I just don't want to upset and disappoint them because I respect them. One day when I'm ready—when I complete my university degree and find a good job—I will tell them the truth because by then I will be able to prove to them that they can be proud of me even if I'm gay. (48-49)

Mon's path to acceptance, however, is by no means easy as his family is depicted as 'dysfunctional'. His parents are divorced and he has lived with his relatives since he was a child. Although his father supports him financially, he feels that he does not get enough love from his parents and he attributes his homosexuality to the lack of parental love. As remarked earlier, the attitude that homosexuality and transgenderism are caused by family problems has long been accepted in both popular and academic discourses. This attitude helps aggravate the shame felt by the parents of homosexual and transgendered children as it puts the blame on them for failing to perform their parental role successfully:

I believe that a child born in a dysfunctional family has a high tendency to develop a wrong gender identity. I believe this because it is my own experience... I was brought up by my relatives since I was very young and no matter how kind they are, their kindness is not the same as parental love. I have repeatedly told myself that I have enough love from people who look after me, yet I still yearn for love from my parents. When I grow up, I get to know that 'men' can somehow fulfill my craving for parental love. Through emotional, physical and even eye contact with men, I feel warm, safe and secure. Maybe girls feel the same way towards men? Is it because my heart is that of a girl that I feel this way? (18-19)



Mon's family problem is further complicated when he later discovers that his father is gay. Hurt and ashamed, Mon leaves home and wants no more contact with his father. He abandons his dream about being a good son who brings pride to his family and his hope to redeem his homosexuality through his success. Mark who had been his hope for a chance to go abroad has recently cheated on him and this worsens Mon's depression. He neglects his studies and begins to frequent gay bars. When his money runs out, he sells himself for money and eventually earns his living by providing sexual service to other males. Estrangement from family is constructed as a very undesirable state and Mon feels that he is debasing himself further and further. In the past, his concern for his family and his wish to protect family reputation had acted as a constraint on his behaviour and sexuality. Losing contact with his family means that he has more freedom, yet this freedom is more destructive than positive as it deprives Mon of the emotional and financial support that his family used to give him. There is also no suggestion of an alternative community that can replace biological family and provide support for sexual minorities like Mon. Mon's networks of friends and acquaintances are unable to help him except to recommend clients who want to buy sexual service from him. *The Male Sex Worker*, thus affirms the pivotal role that family ties have for Thai homosexuals and the absence of the notion of a 'gay community' as understood in the West:

I sit at the bus stop the whole night and I feel so sleepy. My fever gets worse and I know I should go home but I don't want to. I don't want my aunt to see me in such a dreadful condition and the thought of seeing my father again was not at all appealing. I decide to go to a friend's place. I no longer want to go to school. Days pass and all I want to do is to forget everything... I drink, smoke and frequent bars with friends ... I haven't realised that this is the path to hell....

I suspend my studies and no one at home knows...when my money is used up, I resort to sexual tricks as a way to survive. I don't reject men who make advances to me, but cajole them into paying for my meals and drinks, and even ask for some cash from them in exchange for sexual service....when

I go out and see anyone I like, I usually end up having a one-night stand... I fawn on those who lavish money on me and curse others who don't. Each day I degrade myself more and more. (77-79)

*The Male Sex Worker* ends with Mon repenting the way he leads his life and promising that he will reform himself. The didactic and moralistic conclusion reveals the attempt to please a mainstream audience who presumably condemn the way Mon leads his life. Despite the plea for equal opportunity and more understanding for homosexual people, the novel firmly locates homosexuality in dominant discourses that pathologise it. Homosexuality is viewed as a very unfortunate condition that some people are born with and they are warned not to worsen their life in the same way as Mon:

What you have read is the story of my horrible life. It is fact, not fiction. Deep down I want to quit prostituting myself, but I need to think how I can make this real. I also have to cope with the fact that my father is gay. Even now I have yet to come to terms with this knowledge, but I'll try my best to accept things the way they are and struggle for a better future. For some of you who are thinking about earning easy money by selling yourselves, don't even think about it... You'd better get a decent job ... You might earn less, but you keep your dignity. See my life as a lesson. Although I can't change my past, but I hope you can make use of my experience....

Although I'm destined to be gay, not a real man, I will try to be a better gay in the future... No one wants to be gay and if you don't like gays, I won't blame you, but please do not trample or look down on us... Being gay is awful enough. I hope society will give us equal opportunities so that gay men can live happily with other people. (152-153)

While *The Male Sex Worker* relates the story of a gay man whose life is a failure because of his estrangement from his family and his amoral and promiscuous life, *The Story of Girly Boy* tells the story of a relatively successful gay man who is able to subordinate his non-normative sexuality to family expectations and dominant gender norms. Set in contemporary Bangkok, the novel is a first person narrative about the life of X, a protagonist-narrator who sees himself as *kathoey* or 'girly boy' during his

teenage years, and as 'gay' when he becomes an adult.

As with *The Male Sex Worker*, *The Story of Girly Boy* depicts the boundary between 'gay' and *kathoey* as porous. 'Gays' can change to *kathoeyes* and *kathoeyes* can build up a masculine image and become 'gays'. Men's sexual relationships in this novel are also predominantly based on gender differentiation in which one partner takes the masculine role and the other assumes the feminine role. Effeminate *gay-queens* and *kathoeyes* are shown as looking for partners who are 'men', namely *gay-kings* or *gay-queings*, and vice versa. Nevertheless, while *The Story of Girly Boy* largely adheres to the dominant gender system in its representation of homosexual identities and male-male sexual relations, the novel allows a space for same-sex relations that deviate from the rigid binarism of the traditional gender system. By showing that two men who identify as *kathoey*, and thus are both 'feminine', can form a sexual relationship, the novel admits the possibility of violating the gender norm which ordains that only people who belong to opposite gender categories can fall in love or engage in sexual activities with each other. The novel also undermines the traditional gender system that uses gender to determine a person's sexual acts by depicting a *kathoey* as capable of taking a masculine role or acting as an insertive partner during the sexual acts with his 'male' partner.

*The Story of Girly Boy*, by 'Seven Angels', centres on the sexual adventures of X, who as a teenager, frequently cross-dresses although, unlike many of his *kathoey* friends, he does not attempt to inject hormones or use medicines to change his body to be more feminine. In the evenings after school is over and teachers are not around, X and other *kathoey* friends usually gather in a school backyard to organize a 'beauty pageant'. They dress themselves up as 'beauty queens' and parade in front of the laughing audience, comprising of other school students and janitors. Annual school

performances give X and his friends more formal opportunities to appear on stage in full female regalia. When going out, X and his friends also derive great enjoyment putting on and showing themselves in girls' outfits:

We will meet up at a big city mall at 4 in the afternoon, but at noon we already begin to dress up. Everyone wants to make sure that their looks are no less stunning than the others'. There are altogether nine of us and six are adorned in girls' fancy outfits while the other three don't cross-dress as they aren't daring enough.

I'm in a bright red spaghetti strap top and yellow shorts. (Looking back, it's incredible that in those days I could wear such things!). Cherry is in a strapless top and slacks. Another friend, Too, simply wears boy's clothes but she puts on a heavy make up. Ton is in a pink dress and Mod wears yellow spaghetti strap top and white shorts. Taa is in a loose black top, which comes above her waist, and she also puts on high-heels. (85)<sup>99</sup>

During his schooldays, X feels that acting effeminately and dressing as girl are the daring and provocative assertion of his true gender and sexual identity. However, this assertion is only possible when his parents and relatives are not around. As his school is far from home, he has to live with his relatives whose house is nearer to school. Living far away from his parents and having friends of similar sexual inclination allow him a certain amount of freedom to do what he likes. He has sexual relationships with many boys from the same school and men from outside. Regarding himself as 'a girl with a boy's body', X is sexually interested in men who look typically masculine and he models his attraction for and relationships with them on heterosexual terms. Nonetheless, when going out with boyfriends, X never cross-dresses and tries to look as 'manly' as possible so that people would not notice that he and his boyfriend are lovers. The fact that X does not change his body to be more girl-like through the use of medicines or hormones makes it easy for him to put on a

---

<sup>99</sup> All translations from *The Story of Girly Boy* are my own. While this story is written in Thai, it has both Thai and English titles. This reflects the popularity of English in contemporary Thai discourses although this does not necessarily mean that people always adhere to the correct usage of English.

masculine-self image. This also makes it possible for him to transform his gender identity from *kathoey* to gay when he becomes an adult.

When X moves to live with his relatives, he is immediately drawn to Duke, an elder cousin whom he both looks up to and desires. Duke is popular at school because he is good-looking, lively and cheerful. He introduces X to a new school and protects him against bullies. Duke's good looks, strength and brotherly kindness impress X who soon develops an infatuation for Duke in the same way as a young girl falling for an older boy whom she considers her hero. Duke, however, is not aware of X's romantic attention and he does not know that X is *kathoey* as X never cross-dresses or acts effeminately at home:

My whole attention is directed at my cousin who is my uncle's son. We will share the same bedroom. He is a good-looking guy and lots of girls like him. He has just begun his first year at high school and I'm going to junior high school for the first time. I'm new to the place and don't know a thing. Duke, my cousin, helps me a lot....

I'm head over heels in love with Duke.... Although I know that he is my close relative, I can't help falling for him. Maybe because I don't have a big brother and I'm not very close to my dad. I have yet to find my hero so this might explain my crush on Duke. (17-18)

At school X finds himself sexually drawn to his teacher, a young man with exceptionally good looks. The teacher is married but discreetly engages in sexual relations with his effeminate male students. *Kathoey* students surround him and try to catch his attention and X is one among them. X later has a sexual relationship with the teacher and is kept as his 'mistress' for a while. The relationship between X and the teacher is based on a very unequal power relation. Apart from the fact that the teacher is someone of authority and many years X's senior, X also relegates himself to an inferior position of a kept woman who acquiesces in all her lover's wishes and demands. When he is afterwards discarded by the teacher, X also accepts it without

protest:

Am I the teacher's wife now? No, only his mistress because he is already married....On the evenings that he doesn't have to drive his wife home, he takes me to an empty house which belongs to his friend. Each time we go there, we have sex until he is satisfied. I'm always the receptive partner and I feel my body is overused. He is really a guy with excessive sexual desire. The affair lasts only a month and after that the teacher no longer pays attention to me. Perhaps he is afraid that his wife will become suspicious. I'm nothing but a thing that helps release his pent-up lust. (44)

X's relationships with his other lovers are also modeled on male-female relationships. Describing his infatuation with Pon, a close friend and classmate who later becomes his lover, X wants to take care of him in the same way that a traditional Thai girl serves and takes care of her lover. Visiting Pon's family, X fantasizes about being Pon's wife and becoming part of Pon's family:

I wait for him at the edge of the football field. I'm overjoyed and can't help imagining myself as a young girl waiting for her boyfriend for a walk home after school is over. When Pon finally finishes the game and walks my way, he is full of sweat. He looks so strong and manly and the smell from his perspiration makes me hot. I want to help wipe off his sweat and wash his clothes for him....

Pon has a warm and loving family.... I have dinner with him and his family and feel as though I were a daughter-in-law. (28-29)

X's perception of his role in relation to his male lovers implies that male-male homoeroticism that involves gender non-conformity of one partner frequently means that the 'feminine' partner has to forego 'masculine' privileges and accepts a more or less inferior position. Yet it is too simplistic to assume that Thai *gay-queens* and *kathoeys* always mimic the traditional role assigned to woman and accept an inferior position. Class, educational level and economic status also play a significant role in determining the power relations between *gay-queen* or *kathoey* and his male partner. In a recent talk show, Natee Teerarojjanapongs, a self-identified *gay-queen* who is a prominent social activist and real estate manager, revealed that he is a breadwinner

and largely works outside while his male partner who is a *gay-king* does not work and is responsible for taking care of their home. Natee added that he is the one who asks his partner, who is a hairdresser, not to work and simply stay home. What can be inferred from Natee's account of the relationship is that Natee, as the breadwinner and presumably a better-educated partner, must have a significant amount of power over his lover despite his self-identification as the feminine partner ("Natee Teerarojjanapongs: Life as a Gay" 08.04.08).

Remarkably, in *The Story of Girly Boy* the male partners or *gay-kings* are not seen as 'real men' although they may act and behave like other men. *Gay-kings'* masculinity is seen as temporary or transient and they may change their gender identity into feminine *gay-queens* or even *kathoey*. At a reunion party years later, X is very surprised to see how Pon, one of his former lovers has changed. Pon is transformed from a straight-looking athletic type into a longhaired *gay-queen* who hardly looks different from a *kathoey*. Looking at Pon, X is not sure how effeminate his other lovers may have become:

I was very surprised to see how Pon, my ex-lover, has changed. He has become very effeminate with his shoulder-length multi-coloured hair. Anyone can tell that he is a *kathoey* even though he still tries not to be overtly feminine. I couldn't believe that once he was my boyfriend. I don't want to think about my other ex-lovers who might have gone through the same transformation as Pon. Time changes and so do people... (187-188)

Of note is that in Thailand there are men who engage in sexual activities with *kathoey*s or other men, but reject homosexual identity either out of fear of discrimination or the desire to keep their masculinity and the privileges associated with it. Such men are often feminised and dismissively referred to as 'e-aep'. 'E' is a derogative pronoun used to refer to a girl or woman of low social status and 'aep' means 'hidden' or 'closeted', hence 'e-aep' literally means 'a woman hidden inside a

man's body'. This feminisation of homosexually active men who pretend to be 'straight', as well as the depiction of 'gay king' as capable of becoming effeminate, reveal the tendency to equate the term 'gay' and homosexuality with effeminacy and gender nonconformity in Thai discourses.

Interestingly, while *The Story of Girly Boy* largely affirms the predominant assumption about the effeminacy of gay men and the use of gender to determine sexual relations, it also accepts that normative gender codes can be breached. This is conveyed through X's ability to perform a masculine role during the sexual acts despite his identification as a 'feminine' partner. He and his lover are able to take turn being the insertive and receptive partner. The challenge to the traditional gender rule is also suggested when the novel admits the possibility of two men who identify as *kathoey* falling in love with each other. X is approached by Koh, a younger *kathoey* who is infatuated with him. Despite X's attempt to tell Koh that he is also a *kathoey* and is only interested in 'men', Koh persists and eventually, because of Koh's constant attention, X falls in love with him and realises that gender is not an obstacle for two people to fall in love:

I suppose I have fallen for Koh. I can't help it.... I haven't seen him for three days and I miss him so much although I know he is a *kathoey*, just like me...I thought we could never be lovers and that the closest we could be are schoolmates....

I eventually realise that love can take place between anyone, either between people of opposite sexes or same sex. Even effeminate *kathoey*s can fall in love with each other. (160-161)

This challenge, however, is weakened by the transformation in X's gender identity. Although X still sees himself as *kathoey* and enjoys associating with *kathoey* friends, X has lost interest in cross-dressing and becomes more 'manly' at the time when the relationship with Koh begins. While his sexual orientation remains the same, X no



longer conveys his love for men through acting effeminately:

Apart from studying, my daily activities revolve around going shopping, having dinner with friends and playing sports in the evenings. My personality has changed a great deal. I no longer cross-dress when going out with friends although I don't feel embarrassed walking with my *kathoey* friends who dress like girls.... This seems to please my cousin who doesn't want me to be *kathoey*, but I tell him that I still like men and haven't changed my sexual preference. (155)

As X grows older, he no longer identifies as *kathoey* but as 'gay'. Arguably, X's earlier self-identification as *kathoey* can be seen as the impact of the cultural presumption that equates homosexuality and sexual availability with effeminacy. For male teenagers, in particular, homosexuality is largely conveyed through the image of 'lady boy' or *kathoey*. As they become more mature, however, some of them may find a 'gay' identity and masculine image more preferable either because they want to dissociate them from the stigma of being *kathoey* or because they discover that their true gender identity is not *kathoey*, or both.

While referring to himself as gay, X does not come out of the closet. Only a few close friends know that he is gay and he keeps his homosexuality a secret from his family. As a successful fashion model, X finds it necessary to conceal his homosexual identity and presents his public image as a 'straight' guy. Worth noting here is the naming of the protagonist as 'X'. While X is a common nickname in Thailand, it also conveys to the Thai reader, just as it does to the Western reader, the fear of or the need to, conceal true identity. Ironically, the one who keeps reminding X about maintaining 'good image' (read acting 'straight') to evade job discrimination is his *kathoey* boss whom X perceives as little different from him when he was a teenager. Once again the boundary between gay and *kathoey* is depicted as porous although the use of hormones and surgery helps increase the difference between 'gay'

and *kathoey* and implicitly impedes the transformation of *kathoey* into 'gay':

Sis Tor seems to worry about my public image more than other things because she knows what kind of person I was in the past. In fact, we were very similar in our younger days. However, unlike me who had fun with school friends and moved on so that my life can become better, she didn't. Instead, she went on to have a breast operation. If I still acted like a *kathoey*, I would be no different from her now and I wouldn't be able to get the job I like. (186)

Acting 'straight' not only helps X to evade job discrimination, but is also crucial to his relationship with his family. Even as a teenager who identifies as *kathoey*, X needs to act like a normal boy when he stays home with his parents during school holidays. Similar to Mon in *The Male Sex Worker*, X never suffers from direct homophobic attacks or confrontations even when he cross-dresses or acts effeminately, but he is continually tortured by the fear that his family will know about his homosexual orientation and the frustration of having to suppress his sexual and gender identity:

School break is a very repressive time for me. I can't wear make-up or dress the way I like and have to pretend to be normal boy. When I'm home, I mostly watch TV and help my father do the gardening. I don't enjoy this at all and really want to meet up with friends, put on fancy clothes and go out to have fun together. (113)

As an adult with a successful career, X negotiates his homosexual orientation and social expectations by having a 'girlfriend' while discreetly engaging in sexual relationships with men. X's 'girlfriend' is one of his close friends who knows that he is gay and is willing to act the role of 'girlfriend' in public for him. For her private life, she is free to have relationships with any men she likes. The relationship is seen as good for both of them because it allows the two to explore their sexualities and search for fulfilling relationships without having to worry about public image. Having a 'girlfriend' also helps X solve the problem of having to come out to his family:

Lukket, my close friend, is now acting as my girlfriend. She knows that I'm gay, but she is happy to be with me and tell others that I'm her boyfriend. She

has her own reason for doing this. She used to have boyfriends who are real men but they all had hurt her so now she wants a break from real men. She wants someone who can be her close friend and at the same time can take care of her like a boyfriend does. Both Lukket and me are happy with our relationship. I can see anyone I like and so does she. She tells me that she will let me know when she finds someone who is right for her....We can sleep in the same bed without anything taking place between us. I have never had sexual relations with girls and I have no interest in it so Lukket does not need to worry about anything when sharing the same bed with me....When we go shopping together we hold each other's hands and treat each other as if we are boyfriend and girlfriend. When other people look at us, they will immediately feel that we are boyfriend and girlfriend. (184-186)

While strained and not highly plausible, X's concealment of his homosexuality through the construction of pseudo-heterosexual relationship is telling of the way many Thai men of homosexual orientation deal with their sexuality against the prevalent expectation to marry and raise a family. Unable to withstand the pressure to marry, especially from parents, many homosexual men disguise their homosexuality, get married and eventually cause problems to themselves and their wives as they are unable to change their sexual preference. Natee Teerarojjanapongs has voiced concern about this kind of disguise and deception and appealed to gay men not to resort to marriage as a way to please their parents and shield themselves from the stigma of being gay. He encourages gay men to be open about their sexuality and accept and be proud of themselves the way they are. As a gay man, Natee was also pressured by his parents to get married and it took him many years to gather the courage to come out. By the time he eventually disclosed his homosexuality to his family, his father had passed away. Natee is lucky that his mother understands him and allows him to lead his life the way he likes instead of insisting that he gets married. As a social activist, Natee has actively campaigned for equal opportunity and rights for gay and transgendered people. In 2004, he set up an organization called 'Gay Political Group of Thailand' whose aim is to motivate gay and transgendered people to become more

politically active. Natee also hosts a radio programme which provides consultations to young homosexual and transgender males and their parents. Natee's constant advice to them has always been about the importance of parental understanding and acceptance of homosexuality and transgenderism and how homosexual and transgendered children are able to prove to their parents that they can fulfill all parental expectations except getting married and having children. In his *Gay's Heart Exposure*, Natee lists a number of advantages that gay and transgender children have over gender-normative children in the attempt to find a space for gayness or non-normative sexual behaviours within a family. He argues that parents and other relatives can always rely on gay children for financial and other supports because gay children do not normally have to raise a family of their own, and thus are usually able to afford to be generous to their elder and younger relatives. Besides, gay children generally try to behave well to make their parents feel proud of them to compensate for their non-normative gender/sexual identity. (151-154)

In "The Feminine Man", the next Thai writing under consideration, we see a similar drive towards the reconciliation of conflicts between non-normative gender identity and parental expectations. The story can also be read as a challenge to the traditional model of Thai masculinity and the popular perception of people of non-normative sexual orientation as inferior children who bring shame to the family. Remarkably, while the Australian protagonist in *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* finds Thai masculinity more liberating and less demanding than the one he is familiar with back home, the representation of Thai masculinity in "The Feminine Man" reveals that some models of Thai masculinity have a dark side that can be highly destructive and damaging.

### “The Feminine Man” (2006)

Piyamard Tiemsawet’s “The Feminine Man” is set in a rural Thai village and tells the story of Chim, the beautiful transsexual who earns her living by playing a heroine in a traditional Thai opera. Chim’s popularity earns her a good and regular income which she uses to support her widowed mother. Chim’s seemingly happy and successful life has a painful past. When she was a small child, Chim was aware that she could not and did not want to be a man. Young Chim loved to dress like a girl and was very feminine by nature. This outraged her father who hated his son’s effeminate manners and looks. Despising his son for failing to be ‘a man’ and regarding this as a disgrace to the family, the father tried to ‘cure’ Chim by verbally and physically abusing her:

“Stop acting like a *kathoey*! You are a shame!” Father was short of breath because he had exhausted himself beating up Chim until the poor boy was almost unconscious. Father would have continued kicking Chim if Mother hadn’t rushed to intervene.

“Will it ever sink into your thick skull that you are a man? If you still want to be my son, never act like a *kathoey* again. If I catch you acting this way once more, I’ll kill you!” Father threatened before stomping angrily downstairs....

“Look at those kids. They are so tough and full of guts, but you are hopelessly wimpish like a woman. You disgust me! Piss off!...” (68)<sup>100</sup>

The father is depicted as subscribing to the traditional model of masculinity in which a man is expected to be emotionally and physically tough and fond of activities that show strength and stamina. Integral to this model of masculinity is the ability to drink, smoke, and socialize. A Thai man is also traditionally regarded with admiration by others if he has many lovers (Sinnott 106-107). Although in contemporary Thailand, new models of masculinity have emerged and posed a challenge to the traditional one, the popular attitude still condones men’s drinking and womanizing behaviour and

---

<sup>100</sup> All translations from “The Feminine Man” are my own.

allows men license to do many things that women are not permitted to do. Such a licence leads a number of men to engage in destructive and criminal activities, including violence against women. In “The Feminine Man” traditional notions of masculinity are depicted as oppressive to *kathoey*s and highly damaging to society as a whole. This is illustrated through the characterisation of Chim’s father as a heavy drinker who usually becomes violent when he is drunk. His wife and child are victims of his drinking habit and abusive behaviour, and he eventually dies from excessive drinking. Thinking about her father, Chim can only remember him as an abusive drunkard:

The only image of her father that Chim could recall was that of a bad-tempered drunkard. He had never hugged Chim the way he hugged a bottle of liquor and whenever Father walked near he smelled like liquor. In fact, the smell was an intrinsic part of him....

Chim walked over to the cabinet, picked up Father’s picture and caressed it ruefully. Father was gone. The liquor that had enslaved him all his life had eventually killed him. (68)

The characterisation of young village men who are Chim’s neighbours further depicts Thai masculinity as problematic. Chim’s neighbours smoke, drink, and try all sorts of risks and adventures to prove their ‘manliness’. They also treat drug use and criminal activities as part of their ‘manly’ exploits. Eventually they go so far as to commit a horrible crime, raping and killing a woman. Significantly, even this horrific crime is seen as a test of man’s courage:

Niew looked around and when he was sure that people were totally absorbed in the opera, he nodded to his friends. Then all of them discreetly followed the girl:

“Are we really gonna do this?” Ting whispered uncertainly and checked the crowd again. No one seemed to be looking at them and although the light was on, the opera appeared to capture the attention of everyone around them.

“Are you a man? Be brave!” Niew whispered back and they silently waited for the girl to come out.

Soon the girl opened the door and before she could cry for help, they thrust their hands over her mouth and dragged her away... (67)

Chim is depicted as superior to her father and the male neighbours. She is well-behaved, has a good job and is very loving and caring to her mother. The villagers' warm reception of Chim as a heroine is suggestive of folk acceptance of *kathoeyes* as public entertainers<sup>101</sup> and is contrasted with the oppression and rejection of Chim's father who is deeply anxious about losing face for having a son who is a *kathoey*:

Tonight the spacious temple yard was fully packed with people until hardly any space was left. The nearby stalls also enjoyed a lot of customers. The highlight of the temple fair was an opera by a well-known local troupe, featuring a handsome hero and beautiful heroine. Even before the opera began, many eager fans were sitting and standing in front of the stage waiting for their favorite entertainment. They were not in the least distracted by other forms of fun going on around them. (67)

While the story is critical of the traditional Thai notions of masculinity and depicts a *kathoey* as superior to 'real men', transgenderism is still seen as a family problem. As Chim's father is a drunkard, Chim has to turn to his gentle, warm and beautiful mother as her role model and it eventually leads to her self-perception as a 'woman inside a man's body'. Such a construction of transgenderism thus affirms dominant discourses that pathologise it and attribute it to parents' failure to provide 'correct' gender roles to their children:

Father was completely different from Mother who was warm, loving and always prettily dressed and sweetly perfumed. As a child, Chim loved to watch Mother getting dressed, especially when she put on lovely clothes and applied light-coloured lipstick to her lips. When no one was around, young Chim usually stayed in front of the mirror and tried Mother's lipsticks until his face was all messy with them. She would turn left and right and look at her image in the mirror with great satisfaction then tell herself that one day she would be beautiful just like her mother. (68)

---

<sup>101</sup> See for example Borthwick (2000) who observes that drag entertainment is generally accepted as entertainment for the whole community, especially in Northern Thailand (63).

Despite its depiction of transgenderism as a result of family problems, 'The Feminine Man' differs from *The Story of Girly Boy* and *The Male Sex Worker* in its suggestion that it is possible to reconcile non-normative sexual orientation with family obligations without the need to disguise one's preferred sexual and gender identities. The story is also different in its construction of Chim as a transsexual who is proud of her gender identity in spite of her late father's attempt to humiliate and ostracise her. Chim's self-worth largely derives from her ability to fulfill filial duty and prove herself a much better person than those who boast about being 'real men':

Chim wondered whether Father could know that the neighbours' kids whom he had often praised for being so tough and stoic had grown up to be criminals and murderers. They had no 'manly' dignity left to be proud of now.

Chim gazed into Father's eyes, but it seemed Father was still the same Father.

"I know you hated *kathoeys*, but I don't know why I'm proud to be one."

Then she gave Father her sweetest smile. (68)

Crucially, "The Feminine Man", *The Male Sex Worker* and *The Story of Girly Boy* all represent biological family as pivotal to the life of Thai transgender and homosexual males. Life without any ties to family is seen as unhappy and undesirable and there is no suggestion of the possibility of leaving biological family and heterosexual norms behind for alternative community that can be a source of emotional and psychological support. The emphasis on the importance of ties with blood family, no matter how oppressive it is, closely resembles the representation of gayness and non-normative sexual behaviours in East Asian films which, as Berry observes, do not envisage the existence of an alternative community which has the potential to replace biological family. Berry, however, comments that to constrain gayness or non-normative sexual relations within acceptable family norms, or to completely separate gayness from



family as in the Anglo-American model of gayness both pose problems. The East Asian model that seeks to locate gayness or non-normative sexual practice within family usually comes at the cost of great strain whereas the complete separation of sexual minorities from blood family severs ties with family that these people may still want to maintain (“Asian Values, Family Values” 223-26). Significantly, the writing examined in this chapter confirms Berry’s argument. In the *Intrinsic Quality of Skin*, the gay protagonist regards his biological family with a detached attitude and leaves his home country for Thailand, initially perceived as his preferred community. Yet his perception of Thailand as a long lost mother and himself as an orphan betrays the yearning for family ties and thus undermines the Anglo-American model of gayness that privileges alternative community over ties with blood family. The Thai works examined, on the other hand, strain the efforts to reconcile homosexuality or transgenderism with family obligations and at times fail to achieve a satisfactory outcome. In *The Male Sex Worker*, the protagonist is eventually estranged from his family despite his earlier determination to study hard and find a good job so as to bring pride to his family and redeem his homosexuality. In *The Story of Girly Boy*, the protagonist has to remain in the closet and finds a ‘girlfriend’ in order to maintain a ‘straight’ image and avoid disclosing his non-normative sexual orientation to his family. While “The Feminine Man” depicts the protagonist’s success in reconciling her transexualism with filial duty, this is only possible after the death of the homophobic father.

Thai sexual minorities are aware of the limitation of having no defined space within which they can develop a more complete sense of self and address the difficulty involved in seeking parental acceptance of non-normative sexual practice. In *Daring Kathoey on Stage*, Prempreeda Pramote Na Ayutthaya, a self-identified

*kathoeys*, argues that the cabaret show business, which has emerged as a popular form of entertainment in Thailand's tourist spots such as Pattaya and Chiang Mai, helps create a space for transsexual performers to exert their gender identities and explore their sexualities more freely. As the show provides regular and good income, many performers are financially independent and able to support their parents and relatives who eventually come to accept these transsexual males' preferred gender identity despite their initial rejection. The cabaret show business also provides self-worth, pride and the sense of belonging to transsexual males who are rejected by their family, and even those who maintain contact and good relationships with their family value the emotional and psychological support provided by their work peers. Although the space within this business has yet to develop into a community with structured and well-established networks of support, its further development can be anticipated. Acknowledging the importance of empowering sexual minorities socially and politically, Prempreeda implicitly advocates the application of a number of aspects of Western gay movements and notions of gay community to the Thai gay and transgender subculture. Thai gay men and *kathoeyes* are encouraged to assert their sexual and gender identities and form political groups and social networks which could serve as their long term source of support and power (79). Such an approach shows that cross-cultural learning can be highly beneficial in helping to alleviate the problem of the marginalised. Unfortunately, this thesis does not include the discussion of the representation of Thai lesbianism. The key reason for this omission is that at the time of writing, I have not encountered Australian literary representation of Thai lesbianism. Similarly, in Thailand representation of lesbian relations in mainstream literary works is very rare. As this thesis seeks to compare Australian representation of Thailand with the way Thai authors represent their country in works of fiction, I

realise that it is not possible for me to provide a satisfactory examination of Australian and Thai representation of lesbian relationship in Thailand without adequate primary materials.<sup>102</sup>

Despite this limitation, the Thai writing examined in this chapter reveals the hardship and difficulties in the life of Thai sexual minorities. Due to cultural difference, casual Western visitors to Thailand may fantasize that here is a sexual paradise, but this is a far cry from reality. Thai sexual minorities are burdened with the major task to combat prejudice and discrimination and it is useful to learn from strategies and models adopted by Western sexual minorities to fight for equal rights and opportunities although changes or adjustments need to be made to suit indigenous social and cultural contexts. Studying how people from other cultures deal with injustice and discrimination can significantly contribute to more egalitarian gender, social and political relations in one's own society. Since it is most conveniently through representations, whether in the form of media or written texts, that we can access other cultures, the act of representation is thus very crucial. Representations which are most worthwhile are perhaps those that question and destabilize stereotypes, hegemony and binary opposition between self and other.

Some of the Australian works examined previously tended to continue, if more subtly, age-old Orientalist modes of perceiving the East. In these works Thailand is still utilised as Australia's other and is made to function as the confirmation of self, both individually and collectively. Nevertheless, there are attempts by a number of Australian authors to contest dominant ways of perceiving and representing the other

---

<sup>102</sup> For lesbians and lesbianism in Thailand, see the collection of essays edited by Virada Somswasdi and Alycia Nicholas (2004). See also Sinnott (2000) for a discussion of Thai lesbian women and their creation of personal identities.

in popular discourses. Such attempts are informed by a contemporary sensitivity to cross-cultural situations and strive to critique cultural hegemony.

## Conclusion

To bring this study to a conclusion, I want to take a look at yet another Australian author whose representation of Thailand also questions existing verities and makes an exit from both the racist and fetishising discourses. The author under consideration is Noel Rowe whose poetry collection *Next to Nothing* (2004) won him the prestigious William Baylebridge Award. Rowe is an exceptionally talented poet, a highly original critic and an inspiring, devoted teacher. His approach to cultural difference, as demonstrated by his poetry, is marked by respect, compassion and informed enquiry.<sup>103</sup> Rowe's respect for and keen interest in another culture is perhaps best articulated in the following poem which relates the poet's stay in Thailand and his appreciation of what the place and its people have to offer. The poem also suggests that travel should be an act of respect and a movement of the mind:

The night before the festival  
 The women make the offerings they'll give  
 Tomorrow to the monks: sticky rice wrapped  
 In parcels made of palm leaf, ideal for travellers.  
 ...  
 Then one of them asks, "Are you happy here?"  
 "yes," I say: because for the moment I am,  
 a traveller grateful for what has been offered,  
 a guest whose duty is to recognize the beauty here,  
 to know whose house it comes from.  
 ("Songkla" 47-48)<sup>104</sup>

---

<sup>103</sup> For commentary on Rowe's philosophy and approach to poetry see [http://australia.poetryinternationalweb.org/piw\\_cms/cms/cms\\_module/index.php?obj\\_id=683](http://australia.poetryinternationalweb.org/piw_cms/cms/cms_module/index.php?obj_id=683)

<sup>104</sup> All quotations of Rowe's poems are from the 2004 collection *Next to Nothing*.

Rowe's depiction of Thai people parallels that of Peter Jackson in *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* in the recognition of the importance of cultural difference and local specificities while not precluding the possibility of people from different cultures forming genuine friendship and identification. Perhaps the poem that lends the most obvious comparison with *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin* is Rowe's "Someone from the Family"; a poem that deals with the alienation and estrangement of the gay protagonist from his biological family and his reliance on alternative family for acceptance and sympathy. As with *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin*, the poem suggests that alternative family may be comprised of people who are racially and culturally different.

"Someone from the Family" concentrates on Gary, a dying Australian gay man whose story is told through the voice of his sister, a jealous, self-righteous woman. Condemning his homosexuality and accusing him for breaking their mother's heart, the sister justifies her insensitive and vindictive treatment of her brother:

It hit mother worst, it broke her heart,  
 my brother was her favourite, we all knew that,  
 his music gave her a great deal of comfort, she'd had it hard,  
 she didn't deserve this as well. The family thought it best  
 not to tell him she was dead. At the time  
 he was in the city, no doubt sinning, sliding  
 with one of his men. He would not have come.  
 And mother, at the last, didn't ask for him. (38)

Rejected by his family, Gary finds the one who genuinely cares for him and acts as a substitute for his blood relatives in the person of his Thai lover. Unlike the sister who has maliciously wished for his punishment and shows little sympathy when he falls ill, Gary's Thai lover tries to bring peace and consolation to him during his few

remaining days. Although referring to herself ‘as someone from the family’, the sister is clearly no longer part of Gary’s ‘family’. She apparently acts out of duty when she visits him in hospital and pretends to be concerned about the funeral and things that should be done afterwards:

Of course, he caught the dread disease,  
and now, of course, someone from the family has got  
to do the cleaning up, the flat, the funeral arrangements,  
the will, if there is one. I don’t believe it’s possible still  
to save his soul. The friend this time is Thai, a pagan and useless.  
I threw his Buddha out of the door and he’ll be next.

I’ve got a lawyer looking into it. I tell you,  
he had the cheek to call a Buddhist monk, the monk even asked  
to speak with me. “I don’t need to speak to you,” I said,  
“I’m a Christian.” As soon as Gary dies, I’ll be on the phone  
to Immigration. If I have anything to do with it,  
he’ll be lucky to even see the funeral  
...  
but, would you believe, the silly Thai  
wanted to take him home to die,  
as if anyone could call what they had home. (38-39)

While Gary’s Thai lover in the above poem appears as a caring and considerate figure, Rowe avoids fetishising Thai men and portrays them as fully human whose actions may stem from self-serving motivations. Thai men in Rowe’s other poems are shown as capable of common human flaws and errors yet they are always depicted with sympathy and understanding. Significantly, Buddhist thoughts play an important role in informing Rowe’s perception of and ability to sympathize with both Thais and Westerners.

In “Bangkok Never Really Sleeps”, the poet is unable to sleep upon

discovering that his Thai lover has lied to him. By opening the poem with the image of Bangkok as a restless city with streets which are “fierce cement, where motorbikes and cars, / quick and greedy, grasp each other’s fumes”(44), the poem implies that it is perhaps the poet’s desire for possession and yearning for lost beauty and innocence that led him to be too easily deceived by his lover’s nostalgic account of rural life and romantic love. The poet, however, eventually realises that it is unwise to feel bitter and angry. Evoking the image of the emerald green Buddha and the free-fall temple bells, the poem makes use of the Buddhist thought of impermanence in overcoming wistfulness and eventually succeeds in reaching beauty, compassion and forgiveness:

He spoke of love, water buffaloes and going home,  
 And if you know now  
 it was a lie, do not hate him, there isn’t time.

Today, when you visit Wat Phra Keo  
 to see a Buddha carved green as deep water,  
 you’ll hear the wind release the temple bells:

Ani’chung. Impermanent. There isn’t hate,  
 isn’t love. Ani’chung. There isn’t time.

Ani’chung, ani’chung, ani’chung. (44)

There are other poems in which the themes of impermanence, transience and the need to let go dominate. The following lines illuminate the special place of Buddhism in Rowe’s heart:

No photographs allowed. No shoes.  
 You kneel and keep your feet  
 facing from the elevated shrine. You watch  
 the angel-figures, how their gold



becomes a dream, a flaming balm,  
 how their open hands,  
 facing up against the air, having nothing left  
 to lose, are poor and therefore unafraid,  
 so climb the hands  
 stairs within a barely-breathing waterfall  
 to see the Buddha's emerald face.

It is the way: each pair of hands  
 allows another step, another emptiness,  
 with neither shoes nor camera,  
 beckons you  
 more closely  
 the cool and greening mind.  
 ("A Vagrant Letter" 40)

Lest we think that Rowe's impression of Thai Buddhism is purely spiritual, the poem, "Songkla", reveals that Rowe regards religion as it is practised and believed by ordinary people as equally important as spirituality. In this poem, the poet stays at his Thai friend's house and participates in the annual Buddhist ceremony in which the locals celebrate the descent of the Lord Buddha from heaven. Here religion is depicted not so much as a spiritual guidance as something that makes possible communal bond and creates a festive mood:

I will abandon myself to the rhythm of a day  
 that starts with drums, drums drawing buddhas  
 down the country roads, through the city streets,  
 buddhas carried on the back of old and battered utes.  
 buddhas lifted high on trucks made up to look like boats,

boats beautiful as pieces broken off and drifting down  
from a brightly papered heaven. (49)

“Songkla” also illustrates how Thai Buddhism mingles, co-exists with and accommodates indigenous beliefs in spirits. Such a representation of Buddhism and superstition is particularly revealing of mainstream religious practice in Thailand where monks may act as the locals’ advisor with regard to the spirits’ ‘demands’ and how to appease them:

After the house was built,  
before you could come to live in it,  
you had, for seven nights, to stay somewhere else.

You choose the temple where, as a boy,  
you were taught that nothing lasts. Nothing does:  
time is a worried cloth that hangs over the place

and cannot hold itself together,  
When, in the night, there is a storm,  
it can’t be kept outside:

the rain comes to make you wet, the wind  
to make you cold, to make you think  
of poverty until to *show the heavens more just*

you decide to build another temple here.  
That night your dreams are bound  
upon a wheel of noise.

Yet the monks in the morning say  
there was no storm; what you heard  
was the spirits saying they were pleased. (50-51)

Of note is Rowe’s depiction of Thai monks, who are treated as fellow human beings

rather than solely figures of abundant wisdom or pious otherworldliness. In “Songkla”, the poet seeks out a monk who is genuinely human and true to his feelings. The depiction of the monk reveals Rowe’s skepticism of rigid mannerism, inflexible religious code and dogma:

I will abandon myself to the rhythm of a day, *Lak Phra*,  
that comes, as always, after the rain and its prayers,  
drawing monks with buddhas into town, monks who seem  
to me correct, pious, sleek, satisfied, disciplined and wise,  
until I find the one I’m looking for, the one who’s learned  
how not to care, the one who’s laughing as he scrubs  
my hot head with a blessing made of sticks and water. (49)

We are given another human depiction of a monk who is the relative of the poet’s friend. The following portrayal of the monk is suggestive of Rowe’s compassion for human beings despite his acknowledgement of their desires and weaknesses:

...we are drinking tea with your cousin,  
the monk, who has come to talk  
about the new temple being planned.  
He would like, he says, to see  
Australia. His eyes are restless,  
but he’s been a monk for twenty years.  
“It is a good life,’ he says,  
“But lonely.” (47)

Rowe’s ability to sympathize with other human beings and his attraction to the weak and the disadvantaged is also evident in the poem about Gaysom, a Thai woman from rural Northeastern Thailand who works as a maid in a guesthouse that caters for foreign tourists. The poem endows Gaysom with the power of imagination that seems to enable her to overcome her longing for home and rise above those who treat her difference with condescension:

Gaysom: everything she does  
is slow. She doesn't think  
clearly enough, she dreams.

Here to clean the room, she stands  
instead beside a wooden goose,  
secretly she strokes its wings.

Issan, she came, two years ago, South  
to cook and clean for foreigners.  
Now she touches wood because

it takes her home again, up-country,  
where the geese are real and used  
to clean the fields of insects.

("Gaysom" 66)

Rowe's sympathy and admiration for the strength of the poor and women is also conveyed through the following depiction of his Thai friend's mother, a woman who works side by side with men and achieves no less than her male counterparts. This contrasts sharply with the fetishised construction of Thai women predominantly endorsed in Australian male authors' works discussed in chapter five. Unlike the Thai women in those works, women in Rowe's poems are not created to fulfill male fantasy, but are allowed to function as fully-realised characters:

Out the back your housekeeper builds  
an open fire where, late as it is,  
she'll boil the offerings, cooking rice  
until it feels the flavour of the leaf.

She's tough. Before this she worked  
construction sites, hard among the men,  
with three small sons she wouldn't give away.

Yours was the last house she helped to build. (48)

To add a further positive note to this conclusion, I should like to present yet another of Rowe's poem that encapsulates the beauty of friendship between an Australian and Thai man. The poem relies on observation and the mundane yet it carries a powerful message that a cultural barrier and disparity in personality between two individuals can be overcome through respect for, and appreciation of, difference. Simple things such as what one does during a journey, the type of music one likes and different tastes in food serve as metaphors for complicated issues revolving around interpersonal and cross-cultural relations. Significantly, the poet's non-judgmental attitude and his empathy with his Thai friend suggest a wise breakthrough in the negotiation of difference:

We were late getting under way, delayed at Central half an hour,  
while the winter morning drew our breath in thickening lines.

But now we're on the move: heading North to Macksville,  
once a place of timber mills and farms easy on the river.

By the time we come to Maitland, the milking's done.  
the yards are cleared, the cows are stepping out,  
shy-proud at having given. My father, as a child, used to plant his  
bare feet

in fresh cow dung to keep them warm. This time he won't  
Be waiting at the station. (Amazing how, on a hill,  
a dying gum can draw a whole paddock to itself.)

A young musician sitting just in front of us is chatting up  
the woman next to him, telling her, "Art is what you know but  
music is love."

These two were talking God a moment ago, while the priest in  
 front of them,  
 having lowered his prayers, was watching how the hills near  
 Gloucester take a longer breath.

At Wingham a fresh grandmother, in her brutally best red, waves,  
 glad to be rid of them. Taree in the old days was fifteen minutes,  
 meat pie and sauce. Now there's barely time to grip another's hand.

You notice none of this. You've hooked your ears to music, turned  
 Your body to the train's curve, and drifted off to sleep.  
 Perhaps you are a boy again and back in Songkhla, watching  
 fishermen catch  
 another day. They're pulling sunlight from the sea and scraping it  
 with scaling knives. The waves are shouldered gold.

Perhaps you've stepped again inside your mother's carved house.  
 She has a way  
 of letting her worker's hands rest upon her lap as if they were an  
 empty bowl.  
 "Keep your heart simple," she says, "Keep it clear."

No doubt the songs you listen to are Thai, full of *sia jai* and *sabai*  
 and all  
 the hot, happy, sad, good hearts that are the different tones that  
 love can hold.

Across from us an old couple talk of lunch, each knowing what  
 the other wants;  
 they've been together so long they clear their throats in tune.

Almost home. My mother, who doesn't know your taste in spicy  
 foods,  
 will have made a stew: potatoes, peas and mince. She always  
 does. She says

it's quick and easy to warm, whatever time we finally arrive.  
("But Music is Love" 69-70)

The empathy and identification conveyed through "Music is Love" suggests that cross-cultural encounter does not necessarily lead to ineradicable differences that render genuine friendship or relationship impossible. Australian authors such as Rowe, Jackson, Mandoki and Thai authors like Rattawut Lapcharoensap demonstrate in their works that it is possible to overcome cultural divide and barrier and from the negotiation of differences, a number of new and hopeful possibilities emerge. These authors' attempts correspond with my own, as I also try to demonstrate in this thesis that the differences between Thai and Australian perspectives should not be treated as irreconcilable opposites. Investigation into these differences brings about a number of important and constructive insights. The chapter on Thai politics is most illustrative of this. In that chapter I discussed the different ways the Australian and Thai authors perceive the political problems in Thailand and demonstrated how this difference is intricately linked with the different ways the Thai and Western concepts of freedom originated and developed. In the West, the notion of freedom emerged as the reaction to and opposition of slavery. Freedom in the sense of possessing self-determination and not having to answer to superiors is of crucial importance to an individual. In Thailand, however, this notion of freedom is very much eclipsed by the other concept of freedom which was constructed by the Thai elite to promote their nationalist campaign amidst the threat from colonialism in the late nineteenth century. This elitist notion of freedom encourages individuals to regard 'freedom of the nation' from foreign threats and interference as the most important concept of freedom. It also reinforces a number of unequal power relations in traditional Thai worldview, helps sustain the status quo, and hinders the development of civil society in Thailand. The

juxtaposition of the different ideas of freedom and other related issues conveyed through the Australian and Thai works help us to understand more clearly the way the dominant political ideologies in Thailand work, and how this contributes to the current Thai political dilemma.

The impact of colonial threat on the Thai ruling class that resulted in their reinvention of the Western concept of freedom could be seen as a form of hybridity. Its eventual effect, however, is clearly meant to serve a group already in a position of power and functions to maintain an hierarchical social structure. Ironically, while Western ideas and concepts could be reconstructed and employed by the Thai elite as a means to preserve their power, some Thai academics have attempted to use different form of East-West hybridisation to challenge elitist notions of freedom, power relations, rights and interpersonal relationships that hinder the development of civil society, and ultimately democracy, within Thailand. Their attempt, however, has yet to make an impact on the Thai public and mainstream Thai political thought.

In the chapter on Buddhism, I discussed the Thai and Australian authors' different approaches to religion. While the Australian imagining of religion tends to position religion away from the public sphere and places it firmly within the private realm, Thai people see religion as having a crucial role in the public sphere. Both the Australian and Thai authors examined, however, provide harsh critiques of mainstream religious practice. These comparisons and contrasts demonstrate both the strengths and weaknesses of different forms of Buddhism in Thailand. The Australian representation of mainstream Buddhism reflects the attitude that religion should be separate from the public sphere and that religion which is part of the public sphere is merely a socio-political tool used for maintaining the status quo. There is also an attempt to replace established or major religious traditions with a personal form of



belief whereby private faith or a religion of personal fulfillment is privileged over public or institutional religion, which is seen as standing in opposition to life's natural desire for freedom.

The Thai authors under consideration provide equally severe criticism of mainstream religious practice, but their criticisms stem from a different basis than that of the Australians. While the Thai works examined reveal dissatisfaction with the secularization and degradation of mainstream Buddhism, they do not advocate the removal of religion from the public into the private realm. Indeed they betray an anxiety that Thai society will be governed by greed, selfishness and shameful exploitation if Buddhism ultimately fails to perform its spiritual role in the public arena.

Religion may still have a crucial role to play, both publicly and privately, in Thailand and many Thais support the reformation of mainstream Buddhism to make it able to respond better to modern people's spiritual and psychological needs. Nevertheless, the overemphasis of the role of religion in the public sphere runs the risk of promoting an oppressive form of moralism that undermines democratic principles. Unlike in Australia or a number of other Western countries, it may not be possible to totally sever religion from the socio-political sphere in Thailand. Still there is a need to critique and be more suspicious of the move to indiscriminately moralize political issues.

Interestingly, while mainstream or institutional Buddhism is seen by some Australian authors as oppressive and dogmatic, Australian poet, Noel Rowe is able to employ certain Buddhist teachings as a guiding philosophy in his life. In many of his poems, Buddhism, particularly its concept of impermanence, helps the poet cope with the unpredictability and uncertainty of life and the ensuing troubled state of mind. In

Bryan Clark's *The Edge*, however, the encounter with Thai Buddhism and animism largely functions to enhance the Australian protagonist's self-esteem and power over the Thais. The issues of power relations and desire for a self confirming other, and how they tend to undermine genuine Thai-Australian dialogue and egalitarian contact, are also evident in the texts discussed in the chapter dealing with women. That chapter examined Australian male authors' portrayal of Thai women finding crucially that Thai women are virtually imagined as the projection of the desire and demands of the Australian male protagonist. They are made to assume the role of the idealised female who heals male emotional inadequacies and redeems men to the position of power. Interestingly, many Thai male authors employ similar strategies in their portrayal of Western women.

The Australian film "The Good Woman of Bangkok", however, tries to foreground the futility of utilizing the female other to confirm one's identity. Despite being a highly controversial and disturbing film, it destabilizes the fetishising discourse, problematizes the desire for self-confirming other, and advocates the move beyond the othering of Asia. Echoing Spivak's notion of the 'complete other' as distinct from the 'self-confirming other', the film presses forward the need to move beyond the desire for self-fulfillment so that one can relate to those from a different culture, not as a projection of the self's desire or fantasy but as fellow human beings. Significantly, the attempt to challenge Western males' othering and fetishisation of Thai women can also be seen in works by Thai author, Rattawut Lapcharoensap, and Australian poet, Noel Rowe, who depict Thai women as strong, resilient, but not without flaws.

Australian academic and novelist, Peter A. Jackson demonstrates further how the fetishising discourse can be transcended and stereotypes contested. Jackson's

novel, *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin*, underlines the issue of cultural specificities, deconstruct stereotypes and seeks to establish a more egalitarian mode of homoerotic relationship. The novel also shows that while people who breach heterosexual norms in Thailand may not encounter the same experience of marginalisation as those in Australia, they do suffer from various forms of disapproval and stigmatization. This portrayal corresponds with what Thai authors write about homosexuality in Thailand and therefore suggests to us the need for sexual minorities across cultures to join hands to fight against prejudice and discrimination.

While it cannot be denied that both Thai and Australian representations of the other in popular genres such as crime stories still subscribe to cultural stereotypes and reveal fear and mistrust of the other, more literary authors, both Thai and Australian, deal with representations with greater sensibility. Their works reveal to us that reflections on self and other which avoid the imposition of the self's desire or repression on the other can lead to worthwhile dialogue, and opportunities to create genuine friendship, understanding and collaboration.

## Works Cited

- ABC. "Academics Call for Thai Monarchy Law Reform." 5 March 2009. *ABC News*. 6 March 2009  
<<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/03/05/2508196.htm?section=entertainment>>
- Abraham, Matthew, and Andrew N. Rubin, eds. *Edward Said and After: Toward a New Humanism*. Spec. issue of *Cultural Critique* 67 (2007).
- AFP. "Thailand To Send 190 Hmong Refugees Back To Laos." 2 Feb. 2009. *Easybourse*. 23 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.easybourse.com/bourse-actualite/marches/thailand-to-send-1-0-hmong-refugees-back-to-laos-607721>>.
- . "Thailand Upset with Angelina Jolie Refugee Comments." 12 Feb. 2009. *Prachatai*. 14 Feb. 2009  
<<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=988#2869>>.
- AHRC. "Time to Talk Openly about Lese-majesty." 12 Feb. 2009. *Prachatai*. 20 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=989#2889>>.
- Akard Damkerng. *Lakorn Haeng Chiwit [Life is a Play]*. 20<sup>th</sup> ed. Bangkok: Prae Pittaya, 1974.
- Alampay, Roby. "A Royal Offence." 23 Jan. 2009. *Prachatai*. 1 Feb. 2009  
<<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=957>>.
- Amnesty International. Open Letter from AI to 'Responsible' Governments on Rohingyas. 30 Jan. 2009. *Prachatai*. 3 Feb. 2009  
<<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=965>>.
- Asian Legal Resource Centre. "The Rise of the Internal-Security State and Decline of Human Rights in Thailand." 18 Feb. 2009. *Prachatai*. 25 March 2009  
<<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=1002>>.
- Anderson, Benedict R. O'G. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.
- . Introduction. *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era*. Ed. and trans. Benedict R.O'G. Anderson and Ruchira Mendiones. Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1985. 9-87

---. "Studies of the Thai State: The State of Thai Studies." *The Study of Thailand: Analyses of Knowledge, Approaches, and the Prospects in Anthropology, Art History, Economics, History and Political Science*. Ed. Eliezer B. Ayal. Papers in International Studies. Athens: Ohio University, Center for International Studies, 1978.

---"Withdrawal Symptoms: Social and Cultural Aspects of the October 6 Coup." *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*. 9.3 (July-September 1977): 13-30.

Ang, Ien. *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

Asian Human Rights Commission. "Thailand: AHRC Strongly Condemns Police Raid on News Outlet." 6 March 2009. *AHRC* 7 March 2009<<http://www.ahrchk.net/statements/mainfile.php/2009statements/1925/>>.

Asian Legal Resource Centre. Written Statement Submitted by the Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC), a non-Governmental Organisation with General Consultative Status. 18 Feb. 2009. *Prachatai*. 20 Feb 2009 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=1002>>.

Associated Press. "Jolie Asks Thailand to Help Burmese Refugees." 6 Feb. 2009. *Prachatai*. 7 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=974>>.

Baker, Chris, and Pasuk Phongpaichit. *A History of Thailand*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005.

Bangkok Post. "PAD Siege Broken." 7 Oct. 2008. *Prachatai*. 10 March 2009 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=822>>.

Barmé, Scot. *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity*. Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 1993.

---. *Woman, Man, Bangkok : Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand*. Oxford :Rowman&Littlefield, 2002.

---, ed. and trans. *Kulap in Oz: A Thai View of Australian Life and Society in the Late 1940s*. Melbourne: Monash Asia Institute, 1995.

Basham, Richard. *Political Authority in Thailand*. RIAP Occasional Paper No 2. Sydney: The University of Sydney, Research Institute for Asia and the Pacific, 1992.

BBC News. "Thai Website to Protect the King." 5 Feb. 2009. *BBC*. 7 Feb. 2009 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/7871748.stm>>.

Beauford, Tom. *Whatever Happened to Rosie Dunn?* Ringwood: Penguin, 1989.

Bennett, Andrew, and Nicholas Royle. *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism, and Theory*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2004.

Berry, Chris. "Asian Values, Family Values: Film, Video, and Lesbian and Gay Identities." *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, Identity, Community*. Eds. Gerard Sullivan and Peter A. Jackson. New York: Harrington Park Press, 2001. 211-231.

---. "Dennis O' Rourke's Original Sin: *The Good Woman of Bangkok* or "Is this what they mean by 'Australia in Asia'." *The Filmmaker and Prostitute: Dennis O'Rourke's The Good Woman of Bangkok*. Eds. Chris Berry, Annette Hamilton, and Laleen Jayamanne. Sydney: Power Publications, 1997. 35-55.

Bewley, Geoffrey. "After the Storm." *Southerly* 44.2 (1984): 143-51.

---. "The Visitors on the Beach." *Southerly* 46.4 (1986): 456-65.

Bhabha, Homi K. "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Ed. Jonathan Rutherford. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990. 207-221.

---. *The Location of culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Bhabha, Homi, and W.J. T. Mitchell, eds. *Edward Said: Continuing the Conversation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Bhaumik, Subir. "Thais Leave Boat People to Die." 15 Jan. 2009. *BBC*. 17 Jan. 2009 <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/7830710.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7830710.stm)>.

Bishop, Ryan, and Lillian S. Robinson. "Genealogies of Exotic Desire: The Thai Night Market in the Western Imagination." *Genders and Sexualities in Modern Thailand*. Eds. Peter A. Jackson and Nerida M. Cook. Chiang Mai: Silkworms, 1999. 191-205.

Borthwick, Prudence. "HIV/AIDS Projects with and for Gay Men in Northern Thailand." *Lady Boys, Tomboys, Rent Boys: Male and Female Homosexualities in Contemporary Thailand*. Eds. Peter A. Jackson and Gerard Sullivan. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2000. 60-78.

Botan. *Letters from Thailand*. Trans. Susan Fulop. Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1982.

Brennan, Bernadette. *Brian Castro's Fiction: The Seductive Play of Language*. Amherst, N.Y.: Cambria Press, 2008

---. "Brian Castro's Tokyo: Schizophrenic Semiotic." *Australian Writing and the City*. Ed. F.de Groen and K. Stewart. *ASAL* (1999): 129-137.

---. "Drift: Writing and/of Annihilation." *Southerly* 60.2 (2000): 39-50.

Brennan, Michael. Online commentary. 28 July 2007. *Poetry International Web*. 26 Jan. 2009

<[http://australia.poetryinternationalweb.org/piw/cms/cms/cms\\_module/index.php?obj\\_id=683](http://australia.poetryinternationalweb.org/piw/cms/cms/cms_module/index.php?obj_id=683)>

Brissenden, R.F. *Poor Boy*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987.

Broinowski, Alison. *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1996.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. *Dhammic Socialism*. Trans. and ed. Donald K. Swearer. Bangkok: Inter-Religion Commission for Development, 1986.

Campbell, Duncan. "British Professor Flees Thailand after Charge of Insulting King." 9 Feb. 2009. *The Guardian*. 15 Feb. 2009  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/feb/09/professor-thailand-charged-king>>.

Chairat Charoensin-o-larn. "Military Coup and Democracy in Thailand." Paper Delivered at the Thailand Update Conference 2007, the Australian National University on August 31, 2007. *Scribd*. 25 March 2009

<<http://www.scribd.com/doc/8837827/Military-Coup-and-Democracy-in-Thailand-CHAIRAT-CHAROENSINOLARN>>.

Chan, Dean. "The Poetics of Cultural Theory: On Hybridity and the New Hierarchies." *Diaspora: Negotiating Asian- Australia*. Spec. joint issue of *Journal of Australian Studies* 65 and *Australian Cultural History* 19. Eds. Helen Gilbert, Tseen Khoo, and Jacqueline Lo. Brisbane: U of Queensland P, 2000.52-57.

Chard Kobjitti. "Puen Kao [An Old Friend]." *Borrikaran Rap Nuad Na[Face Massage]*. Bangkok: Samnak Pim Horn [Horn Publishing], 2005.37-47

Chataway, Lynette. *Noble Sindhu Horses*. Canberra: The Australian National University, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies: Pandanus Books, 2005.

Chen, Xiaomei. *Occidentalism: a Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*. New York: Oxford UP, 1995.

Chitr Phoumisak. "Fishiness in the Night." *Modern Thai Literature With an Ethnographic Interpretation*. Ed and trans. Herbert P Phillips. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987. 288-294.

Chuwat Rerksirisuk. "Preah Vihear as the Last Struggle, How History will Remember You." 27 June 2008. *Prachatai*. 29 June 2008

<<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=686>>.

Clark, Bryan. *The Edge*. Hartwell: Sid Harta, 2005.

Clarke, J.J. *Oriental Enlightenment*. London: Routledge, 1997.

CNN. Interview with Samak Sundaravej. 19 Feb. 2008. *CNN*. 16 March 2009 <<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/02/18/talkasia.samak/index.html>>.

Cohen, Erik. "Thai Girls and *Farang* Men: The Edge of Ambiguity." *Annals of Tourism Research* 9.3 (1982): 403-428.

Connors, Michael K. "Article of Faith: The Failure of Royal Liberalism in Thailand." *Journal of Contemporary Asia*. 38.1 (2008): 143 – 165. *Sameskybooks*. 20 March 2009 <<http://www.sameskybooks.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/02/j-of-contem-asia-2008-connors-michael-k-article-of-faith-the-failure-of-royal-liberalism-in-thailand.pdf>>.



Connors, Michael K. "Lese majeste and Solidarity: The Case of Ji Giles Ungpakorn." 21 Jan. 2009. *Sovereign Myth*. 23 Feb. 2009 <<http://sovereignmyth.blogspot.com/2009/01/lese-majeste-and-solidarity.htm>>.

Cook, Nerida M., and Peter A. Jackson. "Desiring Constructs: Transforming Sex/Gender Orders in Twentieth-Century Thailand." *Genders and Sexualities in Modern Thailand*. Eds. Peter A. Jackson and Nerida M. Cook. Chiang Mai: Silkworms, 1999. 1-27.

Copeland, Matthew P. "Contested Nationalism and the 1932 Overthrow of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam." Diss. Australian National University, 1993.

Crowell, Todd. "Thailand Caught in an Amulet Craze." 28 June 2007. *Asia Times Online*. 15 Feb. 2009 <[http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast\\_Asia/IF28Ae01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/IF28Ae01.html)>.

Curriss, Peter. "Bit Parts." *Intimate Armageddons*. Ed. Bill Congreve. Wollongong: Five Islands, 1992. 120-126.

D'Alpuget, Blanche. *White Eye*. Ringwood: Penguin, 1993.

Darling, Frank C. *Thailand and the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1965.

Deutsche Presse Agentur. "Thai Authorities Submit Royal Pardon Request for Australian." 17 Feb. 2009. *Prachatai*. 25 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=1001>>.

Economist. "Thailand's Monarchy: The King and Them." 4 Dec. 2008. *The Economist*. 5 Dec. 2008 <[http://www.economist.com/opinion/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=12724832](http://www.economist.com/opinion/displaystory.cfm?story_id=12724832)>.

Evans, Grant. "Modern Monarchy and Inviolability." 13 Feb. 2009. *Bangkok Post*. 15 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/11535/modernmonarchy-and-inviolability>>.

Farrelly, Nicholas. "Harry Free But Others Languish under Draconian Law." 2 March 2009. *New Mandala*. 3 March 2009 <<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2009/03/02/harry-free-but-others-languish-under-draconian-law/>>.

---. "Heath Dollar on Harry's Literary Ambition." 23 Feb. 2009. *New Mandala*. 25 Feb. 2009 <<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/2009/02/23/heath-dollar-on-harrys-literary-ambition/>>.

---. "Reports on Lese Majeste Conference." 5 March 2009. *New Mandala*. 5 March 2009 <<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/2009/03/05/reports-on-lese-majeste-press-conference/>>.

Fishel, Thamora V. "Romances of the Sixth Reign: Gender, Sexuality and Siamese Nationalism." *Genders and Sexualities in Modern Thailand*. Eds. Peter A. Jackson and Nerida M. Cook. Chiang Mai: Silkworms, 1999.154-167.

Foong Ling Kong. "Postcards from a Yellow Lady." *Asian and Pacific Inscriptions: Identities, Ethnicities, Nationalities*. Spec. book issue of *Meridian* 14.2. Ed. Suvendrini Perera. La Trobe: La Trobe University, School of English, 1995.83-97.

Gerster, Robin, ed. *Hotel Asia*. Ringwood: Penguin, 1995.

Ginsborg, Paul. "Where to Now for Italy?" Sydney Idea Series. The University of Sydney. 30 Aug. 2006.

Girling, John L.S. *Thailand: Society and Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.

Greene, Stephen. "Thai Government and Administration in the Reign of Rama VI (1910-1925)." Diss. University of London, 1971.

Gunew, Sneja. *Framing Marginality: Multicultural Literary Studies*. Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1994.

Hage, Ghassan. "Complex Race Debate Loses Sight of Real Evil." Key Concepts Public Lecture Series. The University of Sydney. 31 May 2006.

---. *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*. Sydney: Pluto Press, 1998.

Hall, Colin Michael. *Tourism in the Pacific Rim*. Melbourne: Longman Chesire, 1994. 99-100.

Hallam, Elizabeth, and Brian V. Street, eds. *Cultural Encounters: Representing Otherness*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Hamilton, Annette. "Fear and Desire: Aborigines, Asians and the National Imaginary." *Australian Perceptions of Asia*. Australian cultural History 9. Ed. David Walker. Sydney: University of New South Wales, School of History, 1990.14-35.

Hamilton, George. "Royal Rumpus over Thai book." 14 Feb. 2009. *Prachatai*. 15 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=992>>.

Handley, Paul. *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

Hanks, L.M. "Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order." *American Anthropologist*. 64(1962): 1247-1261

Harrison George. "Fighting Spirits." 14 Nov. 2008. *Prachatai*. 15 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=862>>.

Harrison, Rachel. "Prostitution, Politics and Power: Issues of the 'Foreign' in Western Television Documentaries of Female Sex Workers in Thailand." *Images of the 'Modern Woman' in Asia: Global Media, Local Meanings*. Ed. Shoma Munshi. Richmond: Curzon, 2001.138-168.

---. "The Madonna and the Whore: Self/ 'Other' Tensions in the Characterization of the Prostitute by Thai Female Authors." *Genders and Sexualities in Modern Thailand*. Eds. Peter A. Jackson and Nerida M. Cook. Chiang Mai: Silkworms, 1999.168-190.

Head, Jonathan. "Police Arrest Thai Website Editor." 6 March 2009. *BBC*. 7 March 2009 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asiapacific/7928159.stm>>.

Head, Jonathan. "Thailand's Frenzy for Amulets." 3 Sept. 2007. *BBC News*. 25 Feb. 2009 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asiapacific/6976705.stm>>.

Head, Jonathan. "Where are Thai Protestors Now?" 3 Feb. 2009. *BBC*. 7 Feb. 2009 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7865911.stm>>.

---. "Why Thailand's King is So Revered?" 5 Dec. 2007. *BBC*. 3 Jan. 2009 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7128935.stm>>.

---. "Writer Held for Insulting Thai Royals." 9 Sept. 2009. *BBC*. 26 March 2009 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7604935.stm>>.

Hewison, Kevin. "A Book, the King and the 2006 Coup." *Journal of Contemporary Asia*. 38.1 (2008): 190-211. *Informaworld*. 25 March 2009 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00472330701652026>>.

Hink, CJ. "Thai Means Free: FACT Coordinator CJ Hinke Comments on Lese Majeste." 29 April 2008. *Prachatai*. 11 March 2009 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=619#2285>>.

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. "Protest Groups and Government Should Reject Political Violence: End of Protests Is Time for Accountability." 4 Dec 2008. *Prachatai*. <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=883>>.

---. "Violence: End of Protests is Time for Accountability." 4 Dec.2008. *Prachatai*. 6 Dec. 2008 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=883>>.

Iverson, Duncan. "Duncan Iverson on Freedom." Key Concepts Public Lecture Series. The University of Sydney. 17 May 2006.

Jackson, Peter A. *Buddhadasa: Theravda Buddhism and Modernist Reform in Thailand*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2003.

---. *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict: The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989.

---. "Studies of Rates of Same-Sex Sexual Experience in Thailand." *Lady Boys, Tomboys, Rent Boys: Male and Female Homosexualities in Contemporary Thailand*. Eds. Peter A. Jackson and Gerard Sullivan. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2000. 28-59.

---. "Thai Research on Male Homosexuality and Transgenderism: The Cultural Limits of Foucauldian Analysis." *Journal of the History of Sexualities* 8.1 (1997): 52-85.

---. "'That's What Rice Queens Study!' White Gay Desire and Representing Asian Homosexualities." *Diaspora: Negotiating Asian- Australia*. Spec. joint issue of *Journal of Australian Studies* 65 and *Australian Cultural History* 19. Eds. Helen Gilbert, Tseen Khoo, and Jacqueline Lo. Brisbane: U of Queensland P, 2000. 181-88.

---. *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin*. Bangkok: Floating Lotus, 1994.

---. "The Persistence of Gender." Australian Queer. *Meanjin* 55.1 (1996): 110- 120.

---. "Tolerant But Unaccepting: The Myth of a Thai 'Gay Paradise'." *Genders and Sexualities in Modern Thailand*. Eds. Peter A. Jackson and Nerida M. Cook. Chiang Mai: Silkworms, 1999. 226-242.

Jackson, Peter A., and Gerard Sullivan. "A Panoply of Roles: Sexual and Gender Diversity in Contemporary Thailand." Introduction. *Lady Boys, Tomboys, Rent Boys: Male and Female Homosexualities in Contemporary Thailand*. Eds. Peter A. Jackson and Gerard Sullivan. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2000. 1- 27.

Chuwat Rerksirisuk. "Preah Vihear as the Last Struggle, How History will Remember You." 27 June 2008. *Prachatai*. 29 June 2008

<<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=686>>.

Ji Giles Ungpakorn. *A Coup for the Rich: Thailand's Political Crisis*. Bangkok: Workers' Democracy Publishing, 2007.

---. "Fascist Thugs Terrorise Passengers at Bangkok International Airport." 26 Nov. 2008. *Prachatai*. 27 Nov. 2008

<<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=872>>.

---. "Thailand's Second Coup Completed: The Cockroaches Take Over." 16 Dec. 2008. *Prachatai*. 10 March 2008

<<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=900>>.

---. *The Struggle Against the Military for Thai Democracy*. Murdoch: Asia Research Centre, 1996.

Jones, Lee. Report on "Lèse Majesté in Thailand: The Enemy of Democracy." 27 Feb. 2009. *New Mandala*. 6 March 2009

<<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/2009/02/27/lmajeste-in-thailand-the-enemy-of-democracy/#comment-6206271>>.

Jor Jae Jang. *Puu-Chai Khai...[The Male Sex Worker]*. Bangkok: It Takes Two Publishing, 2006.

Keyes, Charles F. "Political Crisis and Militant Buddhism in Contemporary Thailand." *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos, and Burma*. Ed. Bardwell L. Smith. Chambersburg: ANIMA books, 1978. 147-164.

Khamsing Srinawk. "The Politician." *The Politicians and Other Stories*. Trans. Domnern Garden. Ed. Michael Smithies. Oxford in Asia Modern Authors. 1973. Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1975. 1-13.

King, Richard. *Orientalism and Religion: Post-colonial Theory, India and the 'Mystic East'*. London: Routledge, 1999.

Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian. *Thailand's Durable Premier: Phibun through Three Decades, 1932-1957*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford UP, 1995.

Krauth, Nigel. *Freedom Highway*. 2000 ed. St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2000.

Kukrit Pramoj. "Venerable Sem." *Many Lives*. Trans. Meredith Borthwick. Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1995. 24-48.

Kwai Jok Foong. "The Aphisit Tragedy." 25 Jan. 2009. *KhiKwai.com*. 24 Feb. 2009 <http://khikwai.com/blog/2009/01/25/the-abhisit-tragedy/>.

---. "Democracy. Thai Style?" 9 Dec. 2008. *KhiKwai.com*. 24 Feb 2009  
<<http://khikwai.com/blog/2008/12/09/democracy-thai-style/>>.

---. "Dictatorship of the 'poo yai'." 18 Jan. 2009. *KhiKwai.com*. 24 Feb. 2009  
<<http://khikwai.com/blog/2009/01/18/dictatorship-of-the-poo-yai/>>.

---. "Don't Call Me Daughter." 22 Feb. 2009. *KhiKwai.com*. 23 March 2009  
<<http://khikwai.com/blog/2009/02/22/dont-call-me-daughter/>>.

---. "Thai Culture and Democracy." 20 March 2009. *Khikwai.com*. 21 March 2009  
<<http://khikwai.com/blog/2009/03/20/thai-culture-and-democracy/>>.

---. "Thailand's Orange Revolution?" 9 Feb. 2009. *KhiKwai.com*. 24 Feb. 2009  
<<http://khikwai.com/blog/2009/02/09/thailands-orange-revolution/>>.

---. "The PAD's Real Forebears." 7 Dec. 2008. *KhiKwai.com*. 25 March 2009.  
<<http://khikwai.com/blog/2008/12/07/meet-the-pads-real-forebears/>>.

---. "The Thaksin Parable." 2 Feb. 2009. *KhiKwai.com*. 24 Feb. 2009  
<<http://khikwai.com/blog/2009/02/02/the-thaksin-parable/>>.

---. "Who Sold Thailand?" 3 Dec. 2008. *KhiKwai.com*. 24 Feb. 2009  
<<http://khikwai.com/blog/2008/12/03/thailand-for-sale-by-whom-exactly/>>.

---. "Why Prem Won the Day?" 12 Jan. 2009. *KhiKwai.com*. 20 Feb. 2009  
<<http://khikwai.com/blog/2009/01/12/why-prem-won-the-day/>>.

Lee, Donald. *The Silvered Shovel*. New York: Vantage, 1989.

Lin Leawarin. *Prachathippatai Bon Sen Kanan [Democracies on Parallel Lines]*. Bangkok: Samakkeesarn, 1994.

Lo, Jacqueline. "Beyond Happy Hybridity: Performing Asian-Australian Identities." *Alter/Asians: Asian-Australian Identities in Art, Media and Popular Culture*. Ed. Ien Ang, et al. Sydney: The University of Western Sydney, 2000.152-168.

Lo, Miriam Wei Wei. "'Possible Only on Paper?' Hybridity as Parody in Brian Castro's *Drift*." *Diaspora: Negotiating Asian- Australia*. Spec. joint issue of *Journal of Australian Studies* 65 and *Australian Cultural History* 19. Eds. Helen Gilbert, Tseen Khoo, and Jacqueline Lo. Brisbane: U of Queensland P, 2000. 69-74.

Lynette, Chataway. *Noble Sindhu Horses*. Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University: Pandanus Books, 2005.

Macan-Markar, Marwaan. "Police Target Websites Unflattering to Royalty." 8 March 2009. *IPS*. 11 March 2009 <<http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=46023>>.

---. "Thailand: Don Challenges Lese-Majeste Law - Risks Jail Term." 27 Jan. 2009. *IPS* 5 March 2009  
<<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=45566>>.

Macfie, A.L. *Orientalism: A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000.

---. *Orientalism*. London: Longman, 2002.

Mandoki, Anna. "Night Swimming." *Westerly* 46(2001): 76-82.

Manop Thanomsri. "Greenie." *The Lioness in Bloom: Modern Thai Fiction about Women*. Ed. and trans. Susan Fulop Kepner. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. 266-276.

Marshall, Andrew. "Is the Temple of Buddha's Footprints the Temple of Doom?" 13 April 2008. *The Sunday Times*. 19 March 2009

<<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article3721675.ece>>.

Matichon. "Chiang Mai University asked to sack dean for signing Ji's petition against lèse majesté law." 17 Feb. 2009. *Prachatai*. 28 Feb. 2009

<<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=1000>>.

Matthew P. Copeland. "Contest Nationalism and the 1932 Overthrow of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam." Diss. Australian National University, 1993.

Maxwell, Anne. "Theorising Settler Identities: Racial and Cultural Difference in Colonial Exhibitions and Photographic Tourism." Perera 193-211.

McCamish, Malcolm. "The Friends Thou Hast: Support Systems for Male Commercial Sex Workers in Pattaya, Thailand." Jackson and Sullivan (2000) 156-184.

McCargo, Duncan. "Thai Politics as Reality TV." 2 March 2009. *Prachatai*. 3 March 2009 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=1021>>.

McQueen James. "A Million Swallows." *Lower Latitudes: Stories of the tropics*. Ringwood: Penguin, 1990. 164-184.

---. "The Night Market." *Lower Latitudes: Stories of the tropics*. Ringwood: Penguin, 1990. 44-53.

---. *White Light*. Ringwood: Penguin, 1990.

McQueen, Humphrey. *A New Britannia*. Rev. ed. Ringwood: Penguin, 1976.



Morland, Iain, and Annabelle Willox, eds. *Queer Theory*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Morris, Rosalind C. *In the Place of Origins: Modernity and its Mediums in Northern Thailand*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.

---. "Three Sexes and Four Sexualities: Redressing the Discourses on Gender and Sexualities in Contemporary Thailand." *Positions* 2.1 (1994): 15-43.

Murray, David. *The Coup d' etat in Thailand, 23 February, 1991 Just Another Coup?* IOCPS Occasional Paper No 7. Indian Ocean Centre for Peace Studies, December 1991.

Murray, Stephen O. "Increasingly Gay Self-Representations of Male-Male Sexual Experiences in Thailand." *Lady Boys, Tomboys, Rent Boys: Male and Female Homosexualities in Contemporary Thailand*. Eds. Peter A. Jackson and Gerard Sullivan. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2000. 79- 93.

Mydans, Seth. "In Thai Protests, a Divide between Urban and Rural." 13 Oct. 2008 *The International Herald Tribune*. 25 Oct. 2009  
<<http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/10/13/asia/13thai.php>>.

Nagpal, Sahil. "Social Critic Urges Thai Premier to Act on Lese Majeste." 11 Feb. 2009. *Prachatai*. 12 Feb. 2009  
<<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=986>>.

Nakkharin Mektrairat. *Kan-patiwat sayam ph'o s'o 2475*[*The Siamese Revolution of 1932*]. Bangkok: Foundation for the Social Sciences and Humanities [Mulaniti sangkhomsat lae manutsat], 1992.

"Natee Teerarojjanapongs: Life as a Gay." *Krissana Luang Luk*. Nation Channel, Bangkok. 8 April 2008.

Natee Teerarojjanapongs. *Gay's Heart Disclosure*. Nonthaburi: Amathyst, 2005.

Nation. "Police Raid Prachatai News Online Office." 7 March 2009. *The Nation*. 7 March 2009 <<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/topstory/30097341/Police-raid-Prachatai-news-online-office>>.

Nation. "Thai Politics are Still in the Grip of the Spirits and the Stars." 9 June 2008. *The Nation*. 10 June 2008

<<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/search/read.php?newsid=30075053&keyword=Newin+Chidchob>>.

Nation. "UK Police Smash Thai vice Ring." 25 Jan. 2009. *The Nation*. 1 Feb. 2009

<<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/search/read.php?newsid=66033&keyword=thai+women+arrested+in+the+uk>>.

Nelson, Michael H. "'People's Sector Politics' (*Kanmueang Phak Prachachon*) in Thailand: Problems of Democracy in Ousting Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra."

Working Papers Series No 87. City University of Hong Kong, Southeast Asia Research Centre, May 2007.

Nidhi Eowsriwong. "Monarchy III: Critical Comments on Paul Handley's *The King Never Smiles*." Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on Thai Studies, Jan 9-10, 2008. *Prachatai*. 21 March 2009

<[http://www.prachatai.com/05web/th/home/page2.php?mod=mod\\_ptcms&ID=10893&Key=HilightNews](http://www.prachatai.com/05web/th/home/page2.php?mod=mod_ptcms&ID=10893&Key=HilightNews)>.

---. "Reang Rit tae Oon Pol [Militant, But Not Productive]." 2 March 2009. *Matichon*. 6 March 2009

<[http://www.matichon.co.th/matichon/view\\_news.php?newsid=01act01020352&sectid=0130&day=2009-03-02](http://www.matichon.co.th/matichon/view_news.php?newsid=01act01020352&sectid=0130&day=2009-03-02)>.

---. "Web Min [Websites Deemed Disrespectful to the Monarchy]." 19 Jan. 2009. *Matichon* 21 Jan. 2009

<[http://www.matichon.co.th/matichon/view\\_news.php?newsid=01act01190152&sectid=0130&day=2009-01-19](http://www.matichon.co.th/matichon/view_news.php?newsid=01act01190152&sectid=0130&day=2009-01-19)>.

Nostitz, Nick. "What happened on 7/10/2008?" 11 Oct. 2008. *New Mandala*. 20 Feb. 2009 <<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/2008/10/11/what-happened-on-7102008/>>.

O'Neill, Margot. "Sex Tours Bring Shame and Dollars to Third World: Report." *Melbourne Age*. 15 August 1993: 85.

O'Rourke, Dennis. Afterword. *The Filmmaker and Prostitute: Dennis O'Rourke's The Good Woman of Bangkok*. Eds. Chris Berry, Annette Hamilton, and Laleen Jayamanne. Sydney: Power Publications, 1997. 209-217.

Ouyang, Yu. *Chinese in Australian Fiction, 1888-1988*. Amherst, N.Y.: Cambria Press, 2008.

Pakwadee Weerapatpong. "The Thai Coup in the Eyes of Foreign Media." *19 September Coup: The Coup for Democracy under the Constitutional Monarchy*. Ed. Thanapon Aewsakun. Bangkok: Samesky Books, 2007. 230-253.

Pasuk Phongpaichit, and Chris Baker. "Thailand: Fighting over Democracy." *Economic and Political Weekly* 13 Dec. 2008: 18-21.

---. *Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand*.

Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2004.

Pasuk Phongpaichit, and Sungsidh Piriyarangsan. *Corruption and Democracy in Thailand*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1994.

Pattaya Daily News. "Brit Ex-cop Arrested for Involvement in UK-Thai Sex Slave Ring." 22 May 2008. *Pattayadailynews.com*. 1 Feb 2009

<<http://www.pattayadailynews.com/shownews.php?IDNEWS=0000006070>>.

Pavin Chatchavalpongpan. "The Thai Perception of Rights Protection." 10 Feb. 2009. *Bangkok Post*. 6 March 2009

<<http://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/11347/the-thai-perception-of-rights-protection>>.

Perera, Suvendrini. *Asian and Pacific Inscriptions: Identities, Ethnicities, Nationalities*. Spec. book issue of *Meridian* 14.2. La Trobe: La Trobe University, School of English, 1995.

Pira Sudham. *Monsoon Country*. Bangkok: Shire Books, 1988.

---. *People of Esarn*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Bangkok: Shire Books, 1991.

---. *Siamese Drama and Other Stories from Thailand*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Bangkok: Shire Books, 1989.

---. *The Force of Karma*. Bangkok: Shire Asia, 2002.

Piyamard Tiemsawet. "Luk Pu-Chai Hua Jai Yai Oon Num [The Feminine Man]." *Matichon Weekly* 1362, 22-28 Sep. 2006. 67-68.

Post Reporters. "Yellow Shirts to 'Invade' Red Bastions: PAD to Rally in Northern UDD Bases." 15 Feb. 2009. *Bangkok Post*. 27 Feb 2009

<<http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/11651/yellow-shirts-to-invade-red-bastions>>.

Powers, John. "An Unreliable Memoir." *The Filmmaker and Prostitute: Dennis O'Rourke's The Good Woman of Bangkok*. Eds. Chris Berry, Annette Hamilton, and Laleen Jayamanne. Sydney: Power Publications, 1997.103-116.

Prachatai. "Design of New Parliament Focuses on Morality in Politics." 15 Dec. 2009. *Prachatai*. 16 Dec. 2009 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/node/1541>>

---. "Destinies of Two Female Lèse Majesté Offenders." 9 Jan. 2009.

*Prachatai*. 15 Jan 2009 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=933>>.

---. "Manager Columnist-Turned-Senator Considers Ji's Manifesto a Rebellion." 12 Feb. 2009. *Prachatai*. 13 Feb. 2009

<<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=987>>.

---. "MICT Asks ISPs to Block 'Red Siam.'" 14 Feb. 2009. *Prachatai*. 16 Feb. 2009

<<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=995>>.

---. "Nidhi: Signing the Petition was for the Principle of Free Speech." 12 Feb. 2009.

*Prachatai*. 20 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=990>>.

---. "Pangdaeng Repeated nightmare." 19 Oct. 2007. *Prachatai*. 8 March

2009 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=321#3292>>.

---. "Sondhi Limthongkul's Solution to the Preah Vihear Dispute." 2 Aug. 2008.

*Prachatai*. 10 March 2009 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=732>>.

Prathip Chumphon. "Water and Earth." *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era*. Ed. and trans. Benedict R.O'G. Anderson and Ruchira Mendiones. Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1985. 261-284.

Pravit Rojanaphruk. "Army Comeback through Soft, Silent Coup." 24 Dec. 2008. *The Nation*. 26 Dec. 2008 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=911>>.

---. "Close and Friendly with the New Isoc." 11 Feb. 2009. *Prachatai*. 12 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=985>>.

---. "Computer Crime Law Arrests Creating a Climate of Fear." 13 March 2009. *The Nation*. 13 March 2009 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=1047>>.

---. "Held Hostage." 28 Nov. 2009. *Prachatai*. 30 Nov. 2009 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=878>>.

---. "Is Sondhi's PAD Now a Brainwashed Political Cult?" 5 Dec. 2008. *The Nation*. 22 March 2008 <[http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2008/12/05/politics/politics\\_30090273.php](http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2008/12/05/politics/politics_30090273.php)>

---. "Question Loom over New Prime Minister's Legitimacy." 17 Dec. 2008. *The Nation*. 10 March. 2009 <[http://nationmultimedia.com/2008/12/17/politics/politics\\_30091207.php](http://nationmultimedia.com/2008/12/17/politics/politics_30091207.php)>.

Prawase Wasi. *Kaan Deun Thang Khong Kwam Kid: Patiroop Kanmueng [The Journey of Thoughts: Political Reform]*. Bangkok: Mor Chao Ban Publishing, 1997.

---. *Pawa Punam: Panha Sangkom Kab Kan Khae Khai [Leadership: Current Social Issues and How to Address Them]*. Bangkok: Mor Chao Ban Publishing, 1997.

Prempreeda Pramoj Na Ayutthaya. *Kathoeys Yuei Wethee [Daring Kathoeys on Stage]*. Bangkok: Matichon Publishing House, 2006.

Rakkitt Rattachumpoth. Foreword. *Lady Boys, Tomboys, Rent Boys: Male and Female Homosexualities in Contemporary Thailand*. Eds. Peter A. Jackson and Gerard Sullivan. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2000. vii-xiv.

Rattawut Lapcharoensap. "Don't Let Me Die in This Place." *Sightseeing*. New York: Grove Press, 2005. 119-150.

---. "Farangs." *Sightseeing*. New York: Grove Press, 2005. 1-22.

---. "Priscilla the Cambodian." *Sightseeing*. New York: Grove Press, 2005. 95-117.

Reilly, Tom. "Australian Author Released from Jail." 21 Feb. 2009. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. 23 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.smh.com.au/national/australian-author-released-from-jail-20090221-8dxa.html>>.

Reporters Without Borders. "Another Internet User Arrested for Lese majeste as Internet Regulation Dialogue Gets under Way." 14 Jan. 2009. *Reporters Without Borders*. 11 March 2009 <<[http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id\\_article=29980](http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=29980)>>.

---. "'Immense Relief' after Harry Nicolaides is Pardoned and Flies Home." 22 Feb. 2009. *Prachatai*. 28 Feb. 2009

<<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=1010>>.

---. "In Major Free Speech Violation, Australian Writer Gets Three Years in Prison for Lese Majeste." 19 Jan. 2009. *Reporters Without Borders*. 11 March 2009 <[http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id\\_article=30031](http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=30031)>.

Reynolds, Craig J. Craig Reynolds on *The King Never Smiles*. 17 March 2008. *New Mandala*. 1 Jan 2009 <<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/wp-content/uploads/2008/03/reynolds-on-handley.pdf>>.

---. "The Plot of Thai History." *Historical Documents and Literary Evidence*. Collected Papers from the International Conference on Thai Studies, Bangkok, August 22-24. 1984.

---. "On the Gendering of Nationalist and Postnationalist selves in Twentieth-Century Thailand." Jackson and Cook, 1999. 261-274.

---. Introduction. *National identity and Its Defenders*. Ed. Craig J. Reynolds. Chiang Mai: Silkworm books, 1993. 1-39.

---. *Thai Radical Discourse: The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today*. Studies on Southeast Asia. Ithaca: Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program, 1987.

Richardson, Diane, Janice McLaughlin, and Mark E. Casey, eds. *Intersections between Feminist and Queer Theory*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Roberts, John. "Airport Siege Heightens Thailand's Political Crisis." 27 Nov. 2008. *WSWS.org*. 10 March 2009 <<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2008/nov2008/thai-n27.shtml>>.

---. "Thai Military Plays Key Role in Forming New Government." 11 Dec. 2008. *WSWS.org*. 10 March 2009. <<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2008/dec2008/thai-d11.shtml>>.

Rowe, Noel. "A Vagrant Letter." *Next to Nothing*. Sydney: Vagabond Press, 2004. 40-43.

---. "Bangkok Never Really Sleeps." *Next to Nothing*. Sydney: Vagabond Press, 2004. 44.

---. "But Music is Love." *Next to Nothing*. Sydney: Vagabond Press, 2004. 69-70.

---. "Gaysom." *Next to Nothing*. Sydney: Vagabond Press, 2004. 66.

---. "Someone from the Family." *Next to Nothing*. Sydney: Vagabond Press, 2004. 38-39

---. "Songkhla." *Next to Nothing*. Sydney: Vagabond Press, 2004. 47-51.

Roydhouse, T.R. (Rata). *The Coloured Conquest*. Sydney: n.p., 1903.

Rutherford, Jonathan. "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Ed. Jonathan Rutherford. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990. 207-221

Said, Edward. Afterword. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin, 1995. 329-354.

---. *Orientalism*. London: Routledge, 1978.

Samruam Sing. "The Necklace." *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era*. Ed. and trans. Benedict R.O'G. Anderson and Ruchira Mendiones. Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1985. 245-59.

Sandilands, Ben. "Ticket to Die." *Bulletin*. 23 July 1992: 35.

Santikaro Bhikkhu. "Buddhadasa Bhikkhu: Life and Society through the Natural Eyes of Voidness." Eds. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King. *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996. 147-193.

Seven Angels. *Dek Chai Sai Deaw [The Story of Girly Boy]*. Bangkok: Jikabooks, 2006.

Sifa Ladawan. *Wild Rice*. Trans. Ted Strehlow. 3 vols. Melbourne: n.p., 1988- 1993.

Sinnott, Megan. "Masculinity and *Tom* Identity in Thailand." *Lady Boys, Tomboys, Rent Boys: Male and Female Homosexualities in Contemporary Thailand*. Eds. Peter A. Jackson and Gerard Sullivan. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2000. 94- 116.

Skinner, G. William. *Chinese Society in Thailand*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957.

Sky News. "Raids target Internet Brothel Trade." 20 April 2008. *Sky News*. 25 March 2009 <<http://news.sky.com/skynews/search>>.

Southeast Asian Press Alliance. "Thai Government Says 10,000 Websites Have Lese majeste Messages." 20 Jan. 2009. *Prachatai*. 21 Jan. 2009

<<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=950>>

---"Thai PM Rejects Calls for Reforming Lese majeste Law." 6 march 2009. *SEPA*. 11 March 2009 <<http://www.seapabkk.org/newdesign/alertsdetail.php?No=1047>>.

---. "Thai Opposition Lawmakers Propose New Bill on Lese majeste Online." 20 Nov. 2008. *Prachatai*. 22 Nov. 2008

<<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=865>>.

Spiro, Melford E. *Buddhism and Society*. New York: Harper & Row, 1970. 38-44.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg. London: Macmillan, 1988. 271-313.

---. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Methuen, 1987.

Sri Dao-nuea. "Whose Preah Vihear Temple is it, and What does It Matter Anyway?" 1 July 2008. *Prachatai*. 30 July 2008

<<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=690>>.



Sri Dao Ruang. "Mother of Waters, Thaokae Bak, and a Dog." *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era*. Ed. and trans. Benedict R.O'G. Anderson and Ruchira Mendiones. Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1985. Anderson and Ruchira 167-177.

Steadman, J. M. *Myth of Asia*. London: Macmillan, 1970.

Storer, Graeme. "Rehearsing Gender and Sexuality in Modern Thailand: Masculinity and Male-Male Sex Behaviours." *Lady Boys, Tomboys, Rent Boys: Male and Female Homosexualities in Contemporary Thailand*. Eds. Peter A. Jackson and Gerard Sullivan. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2000. 137- 155.

Streckfuss, David. "The Law is the Problem." 13 March 2009. *Prachatai*. 13 March 2009 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=1049>>.

Straits Times. "Thai PM: Lese Majeste Law Must Not Be Abused." 15 Feb. 2009 *Prachatai*. 20 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=996>>.

Suchit Wongthed. "Lord Buddha, Help Me?" *Modern Thai Literature With an Ethnographic Interpretation*. Ed. and trans. Herbert P Phillips. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987. 241-250.

Sulak Sivalak. "The Monarchy and the Constitution." *Pacarayasara Magazine* Dec. 2006-Jan. 2007: 40-47.

Sullivan, Gerard, and Lawrence Wai-Teng Leong. Introduction. *Gays and Lesbian in Asia and the Pacific: Social and Human Services*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 1995. 1-10.

Sullivan, Nikki. *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. Melbourne: Melbourne Publishing Group, 2003.

Sunait Chutintaranond. "The Image of the Burmese Enemy in Thai Perceptions and Historical Writings." *Journal of the Siam Society* 80.1 (1992): 89-103.

Suntaree Komin. *Psychology of the Thai People: Values and Behavioral Patterns*. Bangkok: National Institute of Development Administration, Research Centre, 1990.

Suthachai Yimprasert. "The Historical Background of the 19 September 2008 Coup." *19 September Coup: The Coup for Democracy under the Constitutional Monarchy*. Ed. Thanapon Aewsakun. Bangkok: Samesky Books, 2007. 204-228.

Swearer, Donald K. "Centre and Periphery: Buddhism and Politics in Modern Thailand." *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-Century Asia*. Ed. Ian Harris. London: Pinter, 1999. 194-228.

---. "Sulak Sivaraksa's Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society." *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. Eds. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996. 195-235.

Symonds, Peter. "Thai Court Dismisses the Government." 3 Dec. 2008. *WSWS.org*. 10 March 2009 <<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2008/dec2008/thai-d03.shtml>>.

"Testicles Removal: Health Issue or Rights Issue?" *Kom-Chad-Luek*. Nation Channel, Bangkok. 1 April 2008.

Thak Chaloemtiarana. "Distinctions with a Difference: The Despotic Paternalism of Sarit Thanarat and the Demagogic Authoritarianism of Thaksin Shinawatra." *Crossroads* 19.1 (2007): 50-94.

---. *The Sarit Regime, 1957-1963: The Formative Years of Modern Thai Politics*. Diss. Cornell University, 1974. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1977.

Thanet Aphornsuvan. *Rebellion in Southern Thailand: Contending Histories*. Policy Studies 35 (Southeast Asia). Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2007.

---. "Slavery and Modernity: Freedom in the Making of Modern Siam." *Asian Freedoms*. Ed. David Kelly and Anthony Reid. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. 161-186.

Tharoor, Ishaan. "Abandoned at Sea: The Sad Plight of the Rohingya." 18 Jan. 2009. *Time*. 19 Jan. 2009 <<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1872426,00.html?cnn=yes>>.

*The Good Woman of Bangkok*. Dir. Dennis O'Rourke. Perf. Yaowasluk Chonchanakun. Home Cinema Group, 1991.

Thitinan Pongsudhirak. "It's the Tyranny of a PAD-led Minority." 2 Sept. 2008. *Prachatai*. <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=771>>.

---. "Thailand Since the Coup." *Journal of Democracy* 19.4 (2008): 140-153. *Prachatai*. 22 March 2009 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=831>>.

Thomson, W Scott. "Bhumibol, Thailand's Remarkable King." 11 Dec. 2008. *Los Angeles Times*. 2 Jan. 2009 <<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-thompson11-2008dec11,0,7501175.story>>.

Thongchai Winichakul. "Anti-Democracy in Thailand." 10 Nov. 2008. *New Mandala*. 1 Feb. 2009 <<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/2008/11/10/anti-democracy-in-thailand/#more-3506>>.

---. *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*.

Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994.

Thorn Pitidol. "Abhisit's Talk in Oxford: From the Inside." 16 March 2009. *New Mandala*. 17 March 2009  
<<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/2009/03/16/abhisits-talk-in-oxford-from-the-inside/>>.

Times. "Disrespect: Thailand's Drastic Use of Lèse-majesté Laws is Damaging the Monarchy and Freedom." 20 Jan. 2009. *The Times*. 1 Feb. 2009 <[http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/leading\\_article/article5548987.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/leading_article/article5548987.ece)>

Townsend, Don. *The Thai Swing*. Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1994.

"U.K. Police Arrested Five Thai Human Smugglers" *Kom-Chad-Luek*. Nation Channel, Bangkok. 25 April 2008.

Vasit Dejkunchorn. "The Conspiracy to Abolish Thailand's Constitutional Monarchy." 17 March 2009. *Matichon*. 20 March 2009  
<[http://www.matichon.co.th/matichon/view\\_news.php?newsid=01act03170352&sectid=0130&day=2009-03-17](http://www.matichon.co.th/matichon/view_news.php?newsid=01act03170352&sectid=0130&day=2009-03-17)>.

---. "Lese Majeste." 16 Dec. 2008. *Matichon*. 20 March 2009  
<[http://www.matichon.co.th/matichon/view\\_news.php?newsid=01act05161251&sectid=0130&day=2008-12-16](http://www.matichon.co.th/matichon/view_news.php?newsid=01act05161251&sectid=0130&day=2008-12-16)>

---. *Pakasit Asun [The Order from Satan]*. Bangkok: Matichon Publishing House, 2006.

---. *Sarawat Tuen [The Savage Police Chief]*. Bangkok: Matichon Publishing House, 1985.

---. "Concerning *Farang*." *Modern Thai Literature With an Ethnographic Interpretation*. Herbert P Phillips. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987. 99-103.

Vella, Walter F. *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii press, 1978.

Virada Somsawasdi. "Domestic Violence against Women: Focusing on Masculinity and Male Perpetrators." Position Paper Submitted to the Asian Women's Fund for the Workshop on Expert Meeting on Domestic Violence Against Women, August 7-9, 2000. Chiang Mai: Women's Studies Center, 2000.

Virada Somsawasdi and Alycia Nicholas, eds. *A Collection of Articles on Lesbians and Lesbianism in Thailand*. Chiang Mai: Women's Studies Center, 2004.

Virada Somsawasdi, and Sally Theobald, eds. *Women, Gender Relations and Development in Thai Society*. 2 vols. Chiang Mai: Women's Studies Center, 1997.

Walker, Andrew, and Nicholas Farrelly. "International Scholars Call for Reform of Thailand's Lese Majesty Law." 4 March 2009. *New Mandala*. 19 March 2009  
<<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/2009/03/04/international-scholars-call-for-reform-of-thailands-lese-majeste-law/>>.

---. "Lèse majesté and Harry Nicolaides." 2 Oct. 2008. *New Mandala*. 4 Oct. 2008  
<<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/2008/10/02/lese-majeste-and-harry-nicolaides/>>.

---. "Right Royal Reasons to Change the Law That Stifles Thai Democracy." 9 March 2009. *Sydney Morning Herald*. 9 March 2008 <<http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/right-royal-reasons-to-change-the-law-that-stifles-thai-democracy-20090308-8scf.html?page=-1>>.

Walker, Andrew. "Dishonorable But Parliamentary." 9 Dec. 2008. *New Mandala*. 11 March 2009 <<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/2008/12/09/dishonourable-but-parliamentary/>>.

---. "Scum of the Earth." 11 Sept. 2007. *New Mandala*. 3 March 2009  
<<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/2007/09/11/scum-of-the-earth/>>.

---. "Samak Sundaravej." 26 Aug. 2007. *New Mandala*. 25 March 2009  
<<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/2007/08/26/samak-sundaravej/>>.

---. "Sufficiency Economy Gurus." 28 Oct. 2008. *New Mandala*. 25 Feb. 2009  
<<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/2008/10/28/sufficiency-economy-gurus/>>.

Walker, David. *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1999.

Warrag, Ibn. *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2007.

"Wat Prabaht Nampu [The Temple of Buddha's Footprint]." *Kom-Chad-Luek*. Nation Channel. Bangkok. 27 April 2008.

West, Morris. *The Ringmaster*. Port Melbourne: Heinemann, 1991.

Wimon Sainimnuan. *Khon Jon [The Poor]*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Bangkok: Tantawan, 1987.

Wyatt, David K. *Thailand: A Short History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.

Yeldham, Peter. *Two Sides of a Triangle*. Sydney: Pan, 1996.