THE REPRESENTATION OF MASCULINITY IN THAI CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

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Abstract- This article is a part of qualitative research of the same title. The study examined Thai contemporary literature from 1932-2012. The selected literature in the first decade of the study was ‘Khang lang pap’ (Literally means ‘behind the painting’). The male characters in this story were presented to be well behaved, politely spoken, good mannered and honor the female characters in all aspects. These characteristics were contrasted to the Thai patriarchal ways of life. The selected literature was analysed employing Abbott (1992). The result of the study revealed that the masculinity of the main male character being represented in ‘Khang lang pap’ was a combination of Abbott’s ‘traditional man’ and ‘new man’.

Key words- Masculinity, Thai Literature, Contemporary Literature

I. INTRODUCTION

Treesilp Bunkhajorn (1980) generalized that there were three forms of relationship between literature and society. One was the reflection of society whereas the author could illustrate his own experiences or things that happened in the society in his life time through literature. Another was the influence of society on the literature. The last form was the influence of the writer and his work on the society (Treesilp Bunkhajorn, 1980:6-10). Thus, studying literature could provide sources of social information and illustration of the same period of that literature or author. There were many aspects of societies could be traced from literature, for instance people’s ways of life, languages used, beliefs, value and many more.

One of the elements of literature being studied was the characters. This is because characters play an important role of providing the dynamic of the story. The recent trend of study about characters in literature seemed to emphasize on the construction of masculinity and femininity because more critical studies on men have been increased in recent years. The emphasis was on the questioning and exploring men’s position in society and men as a social category (Reed, 2008:101).

Masculinity and femininity experts and critiques emerged with their analytical studies and theories. One of the masculinity critique recognized was Richmond-Abbott, Marie (1992) who claimed that the gender role stereotypes exist in order to maintain the balance of power that exists in our society (Abbott, 1992:12, 13). Since males were dominant in society, they had the power to control the socializing institutions. As a result, masculine traits became those lead to success (Abbott, 1992: 5), and feminine traits become those which lead to submission. Abbott’s analysis became significant theoretical framework in the study of masculinity.

Marie Richmond-Abbott (1992) argued that socialization and the influence of biological factors, the media, language, and education formed masculinity. Different societies value different masculinities. However, masculinities changed throughout different periods of time and can be roughly divided into two categories: the traditional man and the new man. The so-called traditional men are supposed to be:

1. Physical and aggressive
2. Not emotionally sensitive or self-revealing
3. Prefer the company of men
4. Develop strong male bonds but no intimacy
5. See marriage as a necessity, not romantic
6. Believe in the domination of women
7. Have sexual double standards
8. See women as either good girls or bad girls

However, due to social and economic change, the characteristics of the ‘real man’ were changed. These changes were categorized as the ‘real man’.

The queering of the mainstream brought eroticized images of the male body into fashion and advertising. Thus, contrary to the traditional men, the new men were supposed to be:

1. Economically well-off, intelligent, and have interpersonal skills
2. Emotionally sensitive and self expressive with women
3. Prefer the company of women
4. View heterosexual relationships as a source of support
5. See marriage as romantic
6. Believe in equal relationships
7. Have less of a sexual double standard
8. See women more as individuals

Male characters as represented in Thai contemporary literature, however, still possessed the characteristics of the traditional man which could be illustrated in the analysis of Khang lang pap (Behind the Painting).

Khang lang pap: The Synopsis

Khang lang pap is a story about Nopporn, the main male character who fell in love with Lady Keerati, an
Khang lang pap and Abbott’s Theory of Masculinity

Khang lang pap was composed in 1936, four years after the political revolution in Thailand. When Thailand was under the absolute monarchy regime, the majority of Thai literature reflected the lives of kings and knights. Khang lang pap was one of the literature composed in early democratic Thai society. The illustration of society was, therefore, still about upper class Thais with a mixture of ordinary people. Nopporn was a man from the ‘new rich’. His characteristics was of an ordinary man who tried to act politely in order to avoid being looked down from the ‘elite’ Thai. His masculinity, thus, did not fit in the category of Abbott’s traditional man entirely but rather a mixture of both traditional and new man. The illustrations of Nopporn’s masculinity were as follow:

1) Responsible

One of the ‘good man’ characters Nopporn possessed was being responsible. When Nopporn was asked to find an accommodation in Japan for his father’s friend’s visit, he managed to find a nice house and a Japanese maid for them. His father’s friend and his wife were much appreciated and praised him for being responsible. Nopporn was very proud of himself as illustrated in the following quote:

“I have to admit that I’m overwhelmed with joy to learn that Jao Khun complimented me to other people and expressed his appreciation about my responsibility, intelligence and careful which he couldn’t find in other young men of my age. That night I came home with happiness about my success which was beyond my expectation.”

(Behind the painting, 1936: 10-11)

2) Proud

When Jao Khun had to go for his business, Nopporn was asked to take care of his wife, Keerati. He was very proud of that duty as he expressed:

“However, I am surely proud to receive an honor to act like a bodyguard of MR. Keerati.”

(Behind the painting, 1936: 15)

3) Intelligent

Nopporn was praised by his father’s friend, Jao Khun being an intelligent young man and he was very proud of it as the following illustration:

“I have to admit that I’m overwhelmed with joy to learn that Jao Khun complimented me to other people and expressed his appreciation about my responsibility, intelligence and careful which he couldn’t find in other young men of my age.”

(Behind the painting, 1936: 11)

4) Caring and Sensitive

Nopporn was always care about Keerati’s feeling and observe her emotion and thought. The illustration of his sensitivity was as follow:

“MR. Keerati was a peacefully quiet lady like I was told by her husband. During the 20 minutes journey from Tokyo, she spoke a couple of sentences with me. When we arrived at the house, I could see that she was appreciated with what I have prepared for her. She was undoubtedly excited but she could control her excitement…She did not say much but I could read her appreciation from her eyes. At that very moment, I realized she was not like any women I ever met.”

(Behind the painting, 1936: 13)

5) Emotional

Nopporn was madly in love with Keerati and could not control his feeling for her. His emotion was expressed in the following quote:

“I am crazily falling in love with MR. Keerati, the lady who is a wife of my father’s friend. I have sufficient intelligence to aware that expressing this feeling would only tear down myself and the lady I love. There would hardly any sympathetic from anyone. The only solution was to ventilate my madness to her.”

(Behind the painting, 1936: 92-93)

6) Prefer the company of women

Nopporn was assigned by Jao Khun to take care of his wife and he did well. His relationship with MR.Keerati grew rapidly because of Nopporn’s friendliness and interpersonal skill. The following quote was an illustration:

“My closeness between MR.Keerati and I grew rapidly. I was easily attached to people and MR.Keerati was so attachable. When I had an opportunity to be near her, she always shown her kindness to me.”

(Behind the painting, 1936: 15-16)

7) Sexually Behave

Although Nopporn was a young man, he was conservative about sexual practice. When Keerati asked him to look at a young couple embracing each other and walking into a coffee shop, he expressed his disgust about that scene as the following illustration:

“Seeing two men holding women walking like drunkards to the coffee shop, Keerati said ‘Young
man like you must like it’ and Nopporn’s reply was ‘Quite the opposite, I find it disgusting’…”
(Behind the painting, 1936: 21)

CONCLUSION

Early Thai contemporary literature Khang lang pap, took place in Thai traditional society of 1937. The male and female characters in the story were composed to represent upper class Thais who were rather conservative in many aspects. However, the representation of masculinity in the story contrasted to the theory of Abbott’s about the characteristics of the traditional man and the new man. Although, Nopporn, the main male character possessed the characteristic of the ‘traditional man’ for seeing marriage as a necessity when he agreed to the arrange marriage instead of marrying somebody he loved; and seeing women as either good girls or bad girls when he admired Keerati for being such a nice lady and looked down at young girls who were sexually misbehave, he also inhabited the characteristics of the ‘new man’ for being caring, sensitive and emotional.

REFERENCES


Biographical data:
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