

Love Poems in Modern Thai Nirat

The paper considers love themes in modern Thai Nirat to demonstrate how they have changed and developed from the old conventions, focussing on the works of three contemporary Thai poets: *Lam Nam Phu Kradung* (Melody of Phu Kradung) by Angkhan Kalayanapong, *Khian Phandin* (To Write Homeland) by Naowarat Pongpaiboon, and *Ma Kan Kluai* (Banana Tree Horse) by Paiwarin Khaongam.

Nirat as Love Poems

In Thai literary tradition the term ‘Nirat’ is clearly associated with a kind of love poem—a lamentation of love when the poet is on a journey and separated from his beloved. The essence of Nirat lies in the charm of the expression of longing and desire and in the descriptions of places and people. The three modern Nirat we are going to study here are quite different from the Nirat of the past. Yet they remain a kind of moving love poem in the modern literary convention.

Lam Nam Phu Kradung: Melody of Ideal Love for Nature

This Nirat is one of the most outstanding examples of how a modern poet, in this case the

well-known Angkhan Kalayanapong, makes use of the conventions of Nirat to create his work.

At the end of the work the poet states that this Nirat is composed out of the greatest love for nature.

จบเสรีจนิราศลิ่วพูน	ภูกระดึง
เพราะรักธรรมชาติถึง	แก่นแก้ว
ทุกภพเพ็งใจพิง	เป็นหนึ่งเสมอมา
รู้ค่าดินฟ้าแก้ว	ลึกซึ้งสุดสมัย ¹

Thus ends the Nirat of Phu Kradung
Blossoms of my greatest love of Nature
May I gain wisdom in every life
To forever love the Earth and the Sky!

translated by Suchitra Chongstitvatana.

The poet expresses the convention of lamentation in his Nirat at two levels. The first level is genuinely conventional in so far as it is a lamentation of love and suffering of the poet for his beloved. Yet the poet laments that he suffers not because he is separated from his beloved but because he is too poor to find any true love.

The second level of lamentation deplores the lack of love in modern society. It is this that leads the poet to turn to nature as the ultimate consolation. Thus he composes one of the most beautiful Nirat as a love poem for nature in

Lam Nam Phu Kradung or Melody of Phu Kradung.

This modern Nirat is truly a celebration of the beauty and the grandeur of nature. The poet indulges in an extravagant praise of nature with elaborate and vivid images. The 'liveliness' and 'vividness' of nature described reflect the poet's profound love and appreciation of nature.

Besides the 'physical' beauty of nature, the poet also appreciates the 'spiritual' beauty of nature. He encourages his reader to find and appreciate the spiritual value of nature as an inspiration for an ideal way of life. The poet portrays the role of nature as a 'teacher' and 'giver' to human beings. In fact, the poet declares that nature is his teacher and that its virtue is comparable to the virtue of a Bodhisatva.²

Seen in this light, the love theme in this modern Nirat has transcended an expression of personal love and has become an expression of idealistic love which relinquishes self-interest for the selfless sacrifice for the good of all. The poet proclaims this idealistic love as a solution to the crisis of modern civilization.

Khian Phandin: An Expression of Love for the Motherland

Khian Phandin (To Write of the Homeland) is a special Nirat composed to celebrate the sixtieth birthday of Her Majesty the Queen, dedicated as a gift of beauty for Her Majesty the Queen on that very auspicious occasion.

The poet travelled around Thailand to record the beauty of his homeland in various verse forms. The work is a record of the poet's journey with fine descriptions of the loveliness and charm of the places visited. The poet reveals his intention to extol mainly the beauty of nature as he considers nature "the foundation of the land". He also reveals his fear that the beauty of nature seen today might disappear very soon. Therefore it is of vital importance to 'preserve' it in his verses. Thus his Nirat is in a sense created out of his love and appreciation of the beauty of his homeland as well as of his 'fear' for the loss of the present beauty or the 'separation' of the poet from the exquisite beauty of the present.

In the work the reader can easily read this 'tearless' lamentation of the changing beauty of nature of the homeland. The poet's great achieve-

ment is to express both appreciation and lamentation in a harmonious art of poetry. The love theme expressed in this work is therefore unique. Love is an appreciation of nature and an attempt to preserve nature for the next generation.

Though the joy expressed by the poet is a 'personal' feeling, the reader can share the poet's pride and love for his homeland. Thus the work is an invitation from the poet to explore and appreciate the beauty and value of nature. It is worth noticing that he always employs a gentle tone. He hardly criticizes or expresses any bitterness in his work. Even when describing Bangkok where nature is obviously in crisis, he chooses to emphasize the grandeur of the sacred Temple of the Emerald Buddha and the Chao Phraya River rather than the chaos of the city.

Yet this does not mean that the poet tries to escape from reality. On the contrary, he attempts to cherish the 'positive' side of the capital while portraying the 'chaos' of the city, the buildings and traffic, with subtlety.

พระแก้ว

ปลั่งทองเปลวปลาบพื้น	ประทีป
ศรีรัตนเจดีย์	สว่างด้าว
สถิตพระธาตุเป็นศรี	อริยสังัจ
สถิตพระศรัทธาน้าว	เนื่องฟ้าดินสมัย
เจดิกระจิงไพจิตรแก้ว	กระจำงไส
มณฑปมณฑิราลัย	สลักสร้าง
พุทธบาทยาดรยงใจ	วิจิตรจิต
สถิตแทบรอยพระบาทค่าง	ตลาดคัลลยครรลง
ผ่องพระปราสาทปราสาทไท้	เทพบิตร
เหลี่ยมสลักรับชวยชอน	ข้อฟ้า
บูรพกษัตริยานุสรณ์	ศักดิ์สิทธิ์
สถิตพิภย์สถิตธรรมท่า	ทวีปแจ้งจักรวาล
บรรสานพระอุโบสถพริ้ง	พรายทอง
พระสี่กรทรงครุทผยอง	ขยับเขยื้อน
พระแก้วพระเกศครอง	ใจโลก
สถิตพิสุทธธรรมสะท้อน	สะทีกแจ้งใจสยาม ³

The Emerald Buddha

Radiant with gold from tile to terrace
Is the temple of the glorious Emerald Buddha
Where the Buddha's relic abides
As the grace of Noble Truths
To cherish eternal faith
Glorious is the crystal ornaments
Of all the elaborate pavillions

The Buddha's footprint is sacredly adorned
To inspire the followers of the Path

Gold-shining is the Prasat of Royal Ancestors
With elegant shapes harmoniously adorned
Sacred is the Majesties of the previous kings
Whose protection of virtues defies eternity
Narai riding Garuda appears a-moving
While the gold-gleaming Temple a-singing
The heart of sacredness is the Emerald Buddha
Reigning serene and supreme
Bestowing purity of Dhamma to all Siam!

translated by Suchitra Chongstitvatana

กรุงเทพ

เกลื่อนกลาดกระจัดกระจายกระจจร
เมืองฟ้าอมรนครสวรรค์
พริบพริบไสวสว่างสุวรรณ
คลุ้มคลั่งคละควันคละเคล้าคละคลา
แสงแก้วก็แจ่มวะแวมจวี
ฤาการองตุลีสลัว ณ หล้า
รำไพพะพรายพระเจ้าพระยา
ทอดล้าชลาตวันจะวาย
เขี้ยวเขี้ยวคะครีมคะคลับคะคล้อย
แผ่นดินระรอยละลายสลาย
ดึกลิวละไลดและโบสถ์ระบาย
รจกกระจายกระจจกระแจ
กรุงเทพทวารวดี
สิ่งสรรพศรีระล้ำกระแสด
ทั้งคืนและวันมีมันมีแปร
เมืองมิ่งพระแม่พระธรณี⁴

Bangkok

Scattered, scattered all around
Oh City of Angels
Twinkle, twinkle gold stars
Of maze and smoke lingering
Brightly, brightly a-shining
Dimly darkening smoke
Hovering over the grey sky!
Glittering, smoothly and serenely flowing
Oh the Chao Phraya River of Dusk
The sadly setting sun sobbing
The blue hues of grey and green!
The tumbling land slowly dispersing
Soaring skyscrapers, towering temples
And screaming traffic jam of joys!
Beloved Bangkok
All in a mess

Day in day out with no end
Oh, the Jewel of Motherland!

translated by Suchitra Chongstitvatana

This lack of 'bitterness' is a sharp contrast to Angkhan Kalayanapong's strong criticism of materialism and modernization in *Lam Nam Phu Kradung*.

Thus *To Write of the Homeland* is a unique modern Nirat conveying love for nature and the country in a most serene and subtle manner. The expression of 'love' in this modern Nirat is hopeful and therefore renders a sense of comfort rather than suffering. This aspect may be considered a turning-point in the creation of 'Nirat' in Thai convention.

The contemporary Thai Nirat is no longer a personal or emotional lamentation of the poet. The form and convention of Nirat are subtly manipulated to serve a more serious purpose. As a sensitive description of nature and the landscape of the whole country this modern Nirat fulfills the poet's ideal to create the work as a poetic record to 'preserve' the essence of beauty of the country for generations to come.

Banana Tree Horse: A Lamentation of Lost Dreams

Ma Kan Kluai or *Banana Tree Horse* is the most recent Nirat of the three in this study. The work was composed by a young poet from Isan northeast of Thailand, Paiwarin Khaongam.

Banana Tree Horse is a modern Nirat lamenting the lost values and cultures of Isan and ultimately of the traditional Thai values as a whole.

At the same time it is a celebration of beauty of the poet's homeland, Isan. The idealized description of Isan reflects the poet's nostalgia for his home and longing for a past that can never return.

The poet portrays Isan as a land of happiness and contentment despite the lack of material wealth. Yet as time changes the people of Isan are forced to leave home for Bangkok, drawn by dreams of a better life.

The phrase 'Ma Kan Kluai' or 'Banana Tree Horse' is used as a symbol for Isan people who come to Bangkok to struggle for material goals. The phrase also symbolizes the fragility of the

old values and the old Thai culture. A 'Banana Tree Horse' is only an imaginary horse, a toy for children who probably cannot afford other toys. Yet it is a simple toy of great fun originated from the root of the old Thai culture.

In contrast to the radiant description of the poet's homeland Isan, Bangkok is portrayed as a depressing city of strangers and loners. The poet represents a young generation which suffers the side-effects of changes in Thai ways of life. His lamentation is the lamentation of many who do not appreciate the spiritual values of the past yet have to accept the present changes for the worse.

In 'Banana Leaf Maiden' the poet describes how he resents the use of the plastic that has taken the place of banana leaf in modern life.

เจ้าสาวใบตอง

เธอเจ้าสาวใบตองในร่องสวน
เคยขอนวลมาพ้อห่อข้าวขาว
จะออกทุ่งออกทางทุกครั้งคราว
ต้องห่อข้าวของแล้วท่องไป
จึงยามทิวแกะห่อก็ข้าวหอม
ถึงกลางแดดแดดดอมาก็หอมได้
ละคำเคยอ้อมหอมถึงหัวใจ
หอมแต่น้อยคุ้มใหญ่หอมไม่จาง
รักเจ้าสาวใบตองในร่องสวน
เคยหวงนวลนักหนาเจ้าทำง
กระแสนลมยุคทั้งรุกบาง
จนเร็ดทิศแรมทางอยู่ร้างโรย
อยู่ร้างโรยโดยทางของยุคใหม่
อยู่เหน็บหนาวกับสมัยซึ่งให้ไทย
อยู่รวดราวกับรักที่กระอักไอย
คืนและคืนจ้านนโดยสถานเดียว

พบเจ้าสาวพลาสติกระริกระรี่
หว่างวิถีทางแยกปลอมแปลกเปลี่ยน
มากแต่ยิ้มยั่วใจให้ลดเลี้ยว
หลอกให้ลิมนวลเขียวเคยเคียงครอง
โอเจ้าสาวใบตองในร่องสวน
ยุคจะนี้เขี้ยวवलตงตันหอมอง
ยีนแต่เพลงพลาสติกระริกร้อง
หรือสิ้นเพลงใบตองเสียแล้วเอ๋ย⁵

Banana Leaf Maiden

My banana leaf maiden from plantation,
Used to wrap white rice for provision;
On each field trip or a journey away,
You'd provide rice parcels to last my day.

You offered me rice, when hunger loomed;
Its aroma heartened e'en the mid-day sun;
Each mouthful was fragrantly perfumed
With a light, lasting scent, yet heady one.

I had loved you, my banana frond fair,
I once guarded you with a jealous zeal;
Then we parted, with an indifferent air
That no winds of change could conceal.

Lonesome in the age of modernity;
Lonely in the epoch of emptiness;
Lovelorn in the era of frivolity;
Lost in the hour of hopelessness.

I met a giggly polystyrene vamp
At bizarre crossroads; this strange malady,
With the smile of a coquettish tramp,
Lured me to leave my banana lady.

My plantation beauty, cease flapping;
Your green garb will turn grey before long;
When we hear music with plastic wrapping,
T'is the end of our banana love song⁶

Nevertheless, this Nirat does not advocate hopelessness or bitterness. The poet ends his work in a hopeful tone. He emphasizes the importance of real understanding and appreciation of the past in the creation of the future. The future can be bright and glorious if mistakes are corrected and new ideals are created through the preservation of the 'spirit' of the past.

This 'message' is beautifully expressed in his poem 'Real Silk from Mother's Hand', using 'silk' as a symbol of the preservation and continuation of the spiritual values of the past.

ลูกก็ถือผ้าทอที่แม่ให้
เป็นเยื่อใยไหมและแม่ที่กล้าหาญ
ผ้าทั้งผืนมีชีวิตจิตวิญญาณ
ถักประสานสอดสร้งอย่างแยบยล
มือน้อยน้อยของแม่ดูแลนี้
เคยเขียนดีลูกบ้างในบางหน
แต่มือเดียวกันนี้แหละสู้ทน
ประคองลูกให้พ้นภัยอันตราย
แหละมือนี่ที่บันดาลงานชีวิต
มิเคยคิดค่าแรงแข่งซื้อขาย
ยังถักทอหมานยังทำทาย
ยังมั่นหมายผ้าไหมผืนใหม่มา
พร้อมทั้งสอนลูกสาวเจ้าศรีเรือน

อยู่เป็นเพื่อนแม่ทอปรารถนา
เพื่อสืบทอดแรงงานกาลเวลา
ก่อนมือแม่จะอ่อนล้าต้องลาพัก
และสอนเจ้าลูกชายให้ห้พระนง
รักแม่ก็ขอจงทำงานหนัก
ด้วยละเอียดอ่อนในเชื้อใยรัก
พลีชีวิตเพื่อถักและทอไท

สักวันหนึ่งถึงไม่มีชีวิตแม่
ลูกที่แท้ก็คงทอสืบต่อได้
แม่ก็ทอ ลูกก็ทอ ต่อเส้นใย
ผ้าชีวิตผืนใหม่จะต้องงาม.⁷

I hold up my shawl, mother's gift'
Inter-woven of her precious silk,
Her brave soul and moral uplift,
With the blessing of mother's silk.

I can clearly see her delicate hand
That she sometimes used to spank one;
Single-handedly she will withstand
Every danger to defend her son.

With this hand she builds lifetime's work,
With no recompense or relief,
Then sits at the loom round the clock
To labour on this silken kerchief.

She has trained her fair daughter
To obey the weaver's behest
And follow her footsteps thereafter;
For mother's weary hands must rest.

She taught her son to be proud:
If you love me, she says, ne'er relent,
Even if they put you in a shroud,
To fashion free men's covenant.

One day surely I will be gone.
You, children, can continue to weave,
With mother's silk and children's yarn,
So the old cloth can turn a new leaf⁸

Thus *Banana Tree Horse* can be considered a love poem of a young generation which struggles to cherish the spiritual beauty of Thai culture amidst a torrent of changes. In this Nirat the poet does not try to 'condemn' the changes but subtly reveals the harm and the sufferings caused by uncontrolled 'modern civilization'.

The 'lamentation' of the poet in this Nirat is

probably more 'tragic' than the lamentation in the other two Nirat. The poet fully realizes that it is no use lamenting a past that is no more. However, the poet is comforted by the conviction that the future is not hopeless as long as the longing for truth and beauty still lives on in human mind.

The Use of Convention in the Creation of Modern Nirat

Our study of three modern Nirat above shows clearly how modern poets make use of Nirat conventions to create new and distinctive works.

All three Nirat employ the 'framework' of Nirat to convey their message to the reader. In the past the Nirat form was mainly a variety of love poem whose values lie in the poet's mastery of literary arts. The beauty of the expression of love and lamentation is perhaps the most significant feature that endears the Nirat form to most Thai readers. The popularity and appreciation of the Nirat form in the Thai literary tradition are undeniable. Therefore it is understandable why the form is chosen, intentionally or unintentionally, by all three modern poets.

The familiar form of Nirat obviously makes the messages of the poets more vivid and captivating. The expectation of the reader is 'pleasantly betrayed' by the unconventional message of love in these modern Nirat.

Angkhan claims unselfish love as an answer to the modern world's crisis and emphasizes love and understanding of nature as the first step to true happiness for humanity.

Naowarat employs a unique Nirat form as a series of description of the beauty of nature and the beauty of Thai culture as a whole. His deliberate use of a wide range of verse forms can be considered a part of his attempt to extend the 'convention' of Nirat. The main message of his Nirat as an expression of love for the homeland and an appreciation of nature as a foundation of the country is however far from conventional. Yet the message is more or less in tune with the message in Angkhan's work.

Paiwarin's Nirat form is probably hidden discreetly in the work. However, the elements of Nirat are obviously present . . . a journey, separation and lamentation. The poet succeeds

in exploiting the convention of Nirat and establishing a unique kind of 'hopeful' lamentation at the end of his Nirat.

In summary, we can clearly see how these three modern Nirat illustrate the change of love theme in the work. The message of love in these

Nirat is different from Nirat of the past. The expression of love is ultimately 'love for all mankind. A modern Thai Nirat is no longer a love poem on a 'personal' level but an expression of selfless and spiritual love for a better world of the future.

Notes

¹ Angkhan Kalayanapong, *Lam Nam Phu Kradung*, (Bangkok, 1969), p. 163

² See Suchitra Chongstitvatana, "The Green World of Angkhan Kalayanapong : A Vision on Nature and Environment" in *Thai Literary Traditions*. (Chulalongkorn University Press, 1995, pp. 148-157).

³ Naowarat Pongpaibun, *Khian Phandin*. (Bangkok, 1993), p. 473.

⁴ Ibid, p. 474

⁵ Paiwarin Khaongam, *Ma Kan Kluai*, (Bangkok, 1995), p. 43

⁶ B. Kasemsri, (translator), *Banana Tree Horse*, (Bangkok, 1995), p. 59.

⁷ Paiwarin Khaongam, *Ma Kan Kluai*, (Bangkok, 1995), pp.54-55.

⁸ B. Kasemsri, (translator), *Banana Tree Horse*, (Bangkok, 1995), pp. 50-51.

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