

SOCIAL CRITICISM IN MODERN THAI NARRATIVE FICTION

by

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The confrontation with social ideas imported by the West and the resulting clash between them and traditional values can be seen in Thai prose writing from the beginning of this century. There is a fascination for Western ideas and, as a result of this, a growing consciousness of one's own tradition with efforts to preserve its values. This intellectual crisis provided writers with a great variety of themes in the field of human relations. The normal gap between the ideas of the elder and younger generations was widened by the introduction of social norms alien to traditional Thai society. It is of interest to see how the writers tackle the conflicts arising, whether they try to defend traditional values, or rather prefer a gradual change to be brought about, or fight for the new ideas through their literary figures.

The early writers belong to the upper middle class or even the nobility. Therefore, the characters they are describing in their fictitious prose writing are members of their own class. One figure, for example, often dealt with is the student abroad returning home, a case writers like Mom Rachawong Agatdamgoeng Raphiphan or Phra Mongkut Klao (Rama VI) experienced for themselves. The influence of a Western way of life brings them into conflict with their parents' traditional outlook when they return home.

One significant incident, which makes the difference of opinions very obvious, is the case of marriage. The question of these writers, dealing with this theme, is to choose between a love marriage and the traditional fixed marriage by the parents. Phra Mongkut Klao in his story 'Hua cai chai num' (The heart of a young man) indicates in a subtle way to his readers that even a Western-educated young Thai student is better off, when depending on the wiser judgement of the older generation. His example shows the young man's

failure to see for himself the faults of a woman behind the facade of her emancipated behaviour. It was the King's intention to advertise his own ideas, obviously to preserve traditional paternal authority.

Dokmai Sot (Mom Luang Bubpha Nimmanhaemind) writing most of her novels between 1929 and 1940 and *W. na Pramuanmak* (Mon Chao Wiphawadi Rangsit) are both women writers belonging to the nobility. The main themes of their novels are love and the main characters are women of their own class. Though they cannot do without love in married life, a complete break with their parents is avoided in the case of any opposition. A situation with complete disobedience of a child is never shown; they also never allow much suffering on the child's part. There is usually obedience as well as a happy ending in a successful marriage.¹

Even though both writers are conservative and the characters in their novels represent this attitude, tradition is never defended so strictly as to forsake love completely. Love was in any case the main subject in all the epic-romances in classical Thai literature. The unpleasant consequences of a realistic conflict do not appeal to readers and writers; thus there should always be a way out. It comes as no surprise that even a writer like Siburapha (Kulab Saipradit) was caught up in the major trend of traditionalism, not challenging paternal authority.²

Should there be signs in a plot of a future match between two people not belonging to the same upper class society, a cunning way to solve this problem is presented. As for example in the story of 'Ratanawadi' by *W. na Pramuanmak*, where the reader can thoroughly enjoy the unhappiness of the heroine of noble birth who fell in love with her driver. In fact the driver belongs to the aristocracy himself,

1) See Dokmai Sot, *Nanat wan*, Bangkok 1962.

Even though the girl is more or less sold to her future husband, she ends up by getting to love him.

2) Siburapha, *Sing thi chiwit tongkan*, Bangkok 1953.

The young woman divorces her husband of a marriage fixed by her parents. Her life with the second husband she chose for herself proves to be an unhappy episode, which makes her return to her first partner.

so the reader, knowing this right from the start, anticipates the happy ending. But even if an author like Asa Bochartmet forces his public to accept that the heroine belongs to the poor, he seems to yield to popular taste, making her an orphan of unknown aristocratic origin. When this secret is revealed, there can be no more obstruction to her marriage with a member of the upper class.³

Divorce as a means of solving misunderstanding in human relations was not a solution favoured in early novels. This is specially true for a couple from upper class society in urban areas. Dokmai Sot's views are more enlightened about this problem in certain respects.

She does not want her characters to behave in all cases as emancipated women, and fight for a divorce in an unbearable situation.⁴ But there is one instance where she does, when the husband wants to take a second wife. Dokmai Sot's novel about this situation, 'Khwan phit khrang raek' was written shortly before 1930, and indicates that there was already at that time a tendency in society against polygamy, although it was officially made illegal only in 1935, and the tradition dies hard.

So far most of the novels taken into consideration cannot help but illustrate a moral. It seems to be the intention of the writers to supply their readers with an example of correct conduct in a transitional period, where traditional norms are changing rapidly.⁵ In contrast to this, K. Surangkhanang (Kanha Khiangsiri), a contemporary of Dokmai Sot, provides her heroines with a real fighting spirit.⁶

3) See Asa, *Nong sao*, 3rd edition Bangkok 1952.

4) W. na Pramuanmak, *Ni rue chiwit*, Bangkok 1964. Laksana is to be married to a tyrannical man and finds a solution in drinking alcohol and taking drugs, thus gradually ruining her body.

5) See Chintara (Mom Luang Chitti Nophawong), *Vimnan pa*, Bangkok 1960. The uncontrolled social freedom of a young Thai girl, following the Western model, moving around freely with men, and even making them love declarations, is condemned and contrasted with an ideal picture of a Thai girl: modest, respecting elders, shy in association with men, forgiving, charming and patient.

6) K. Surangkhanng, *Kulap daeng*, Bangkok ?. The heroine demonstrates the life of an emancipated woman. She not only leaves her parents' house, as they oppose her marriage to a journalist, but also leads the life of a writer.

Not only does she dare to challenge paternal authority, but she introduces as well a new character and a new subject to Thai literature. She writes a very touching story, nevertheless critical, about the deplorable life of a prostitute. Her criticism is directed against the habit of seducing pretty naive village girls to come to Bangkok, where they finally end up in a brothel.⁷

This kind of fighting spirit, whether finally successful in improving the situation or not, is very rare for first novels. Instead, fatal destiny will usually be accepted, as in cases of unsuitable partners. This belief in destiny is based on the Buddhist conception of Karma, which hinders the person of action to stand up and fight against what seems to be his fate, and try to find a solution after his own liking.⁸

The theme of the student abroad returning home, introduced in the early novels, by Phra Mongkut Klao as well as Prince Phithyalongkon, also offers the possibility of discussing another problem, that of a mixed marriage. The King himself rejected the possibility of success of such a union, based on the argument that close intimacy between two people belonging to utterly different cultural spheres would not be possible. He personally might not have been against it, but certainly did not want to propagate it to his people. This would have been a contradiction to his efforts to foster the consciousness of being a 'real Thai'.

The author Agatdamgoeng, also a member of the aristocracy, follows the King's line in his autobiography, 'Phiu Lueang-Phiu Kao'. He renounced marrying a European wife and living with her in such a backward country, as he says, as Thailand, although this meant a fairly high sacrifice for him. If it had not been for his nationalistic feelings (he regards it as a duty to return home and serve his country), there would have been no objection for him to live with her in Europe. Later on in the 1930's we will meet with two prominent cases of mixed marriage among the high Thai nobility, Prince Chula

7) K. Surangkhanang, *Ying khon chua*. First edition, Bangkok 1937.

8) As for example Malai Chupinit, *Phaen din khong rao*, in: *Kho Khit*, Bangkok, 1964, saying: 'Remember there is no day we can flee from the law of Karma and our destiny, because everybody is a tool in the hands of the thevada.' p. 166.

and Prince Bira, so it does not surprise one to find a change of attitude in the novels as well.⁹

The change from absolutism to constitutional monarchy was accompanied by a change in outlook of society. Literature ceased to be under the patronage of the royal family, so authors of other social backgrounds than the nobility took to writing. Writers from the new urban middle class, coming from poor families or from rural areas dominate the scene. The reading public is less exclusively the preserve of a small group in the capital. As educational programmes begin to show their results there is a growing interest in literature among the common people. This not only asks for a change in heroes, but also in setting, scenery and plot. Henceforth there is a group of professional writers who did not necessarily get their education from the West.

In contrast to the Western educated writers is Sot Kuramarohit, who had his education in China. The subject he is concerned with shows his interest in contemporary political events, such as the liberation movement of the Chinese against the Japanese.¹⁰ In Sot we meet one of the representatives of the writers whose intention is to show the devastating effect of city life on the minds of men.¹¹ They are completely submitted to the power of money. This critic of the modern industrial world becomes not only a critic of the West, which

9) Kukrit Pramot, *Si phaen din*, Bangkok, 6th edition 1963.

One of the sons of the main character, Bloi, is studying in Paris. He surprises his parents by bringing home a French wife. But very soon the mother comes to like the daughter-in-law very much. The more so, as she tries hard to make herself understood in Thai language. "When Lucille could talk to Bloi, and could explain her feelings, Bloi knew that whether Thai or foreigners, we are still the same people." p. 268, 2. vol.

See also Bunlua (Mom Luang Bunlua Thephayasuwan) *Saphai maem*, Bangkok 1962.

10) Sot Kuramarohit, *Khabuan seri chin*, Bangkok 1960.

See also *Chianfe*, Bangkok 1953. It deals with the protest of Chinese students of Peking university against the results of the Versailles conference.

11) Sot Kuramarohit, *Lueat si nam ngoen*, and *Lueat si daeng*, Bangkok 1958. This deals with the life of a young man who is madly searching for money, and does not mind becoming a criminal.

introduced this system, but also a propagandist of the people.¹² Sot prophecies a better future for mankind, to be achieved through cooperative societies in the countryside. The organisation of such cooperative societies will develop the economic situation of the rural areas. Prosperity will then provide a useful weapon against communism. Raya, the hero of Sot's lengthy novel fighting for the realisation of this utopian socialism¹³ is a simple peasant boy, with no special education but a strong sense of freedom and justice. Sot believes more in the natural capacities of a human being than in education. The earnest intention of Sot can be seen in the fact that he also tried to prove his ideas by his own deeds.¹⁴

A friend of Sot, Sirat Sathabanawat, though coming from a well-to-do family of Suphanburi, is concerned mainly with poor people in his novels and short stories. One of his prominent themes is human exploitation by the rich. A poor family depending on the whims of the rich has to endure the fact that their daughter has to become a mistress.¹⁵

Sirat does not leave his characters in a fatal situation with a feeling of weakness and resignation, thus submitting to the power of the rich. The atmosphere in his novels is full of criticism of upper class people, as for example attacking their inefficient way of working in offices or their bad habit of corruption.¹⁶

12) Another fervent propagandist of the pure and happy country life is Manat Chanyong. He wrote plenty of excellent short stories dealing with the life of simple country folk and their simple philosophy not yet spoiled by money. See 'Pu tale', handwritten manuscript by the author.

13) Sot Kuramarohit, *Raya*, 4 volumes, 54-58.

"Everyone in this future town will have a good place to live and have enough to eat, everybody will be rich and they will love each other like brothers and sisters." *Raya*, vol. I, p. 497.

14) In 1948 Sot bought a big piece of land in Cholburi, in order to show the peasants how the cooperative society would work.

15) Sirat Sathabanawat, *Phrung ni tong mi arun rung*, Bangkok 1959.

16) *Ibid.*, p. 68-69. 'They want employees, who do not think, but work only according to plan, day after day. If low people like us were to develop a new idea and propose it to our superior, he would say that it is not our business. As a civil servant one has to remember that only a high official has the right to think and make work more efficient.'

Sirat's father was a man of society, liking fun and gay life. So there was little time for him to care for his family. His wife left him together with her little son. Hence there is a very strong affection between Sirat and his mother, which is reflected in most of his women characters, as he shows very much understanding for their deplorable situations as mistresses or prostitutes.

According to Sirat only the upper class people have the possibility to do away with social injustice. That is his motivation for writing, to make the upper class understand the sad facts about the life of the poor. His books are written for them and not for the poor, as they would need romantic stories to give them some dreams and illusions to bolster their dreary lives. The experience of working five years in a tobacco factory left a strong impression on Sirat. His first book appeared only after leaving the factory (1952). 'Muang that' deals with the life of the workers, shows their helpless situation in face of the exploitation of the factory owners, as they are not protected by any laws. He shows the organisation of a workers' union and their successful strike.

There is a whole scale of discrimination between different classes in present day Thailand. And this fact is realistically illustrated by Kulab Saipradit. The dividing line not only goes through the nobility and ordinary people, rich and poor, but also through country folk and city dwellers, Thai and Chinese. Two little boys, one from a rich Chinese family, and the other, a poor Thai village boy, endure discrimination from their classmates and school-teachers.¹⁷

The main difference between the first group of writers and writers like Sot and Sirat lies in their motivation for writing, as they are very serious about their social duty. Through their books they want to make their countrymen realise the problems of poor people, giving a stimulus for them to improve their situation. They are professional writers, earning their living by writing. One of the examples is Manat Chanyong (1907-65), who praises the freedom and independence of the writer's profession. He kept on fighting his whole life for this freedom, even though he had to encounter poverty.

17) Siburapha, *Lae bai khang na*, Bangkok 1956,

This earnest conviction is supported by a certain change in the taste of the reading public, who came to like more realistic and problematical stories. "Literature should be worthwhile, should give people something to think about, sometimes even hurting them."¹⁸

The reason for pointing out in this rather narrative way details in some of the authors' lives and the subjects of their writings is to show that despite the innovations which took place, there is a certain consistency. The problems of the early novels were confined to a very narrow field concerning human relations in a family, whilst later we find the writers dealing with the problems of different social classes. The view of a safe and sound world is changed into a world full of grievances. But the method of presenting characters facing critical situations is still more or less a placid relation of facts. There is hardly any deeper psychological evaluation of character traits¹⁹ in a certain situation in the individual's life. It is not the purpose of the books and apparently of the writers to illustrate the possibilities of conflict in human characters, the intellectual challenge certain situations in life pose them, to show that life is an existentialist problem and to point to solutions of this predicament. The intention of giving a moral code of conduct,²⁰ as in the early novels, is retained, in the respect that the writers with social obligations want to stimulate the reader to do certain things. The idea about what to do is already implicitly contained in the novel, thus the author has already given his moral judgement about the action to be taken. Innovation lies in that the characters in the stories take certain actions rather than making no effort to avoid conflict.

Little attention has so far been given to contemporary literature by Thai intellectuals, although most of the prose writing is widely known. There are hardly any critical reviews of any writers. Sometimes one hears the view that modern Thai literature is not worthwhile. This is an unjustified statement, as this branch of literature is still very young for Thailand. A sign that there might be a change in this attitude might be deduced from the fact that Chulalongkorn University has recently held lectures about contemporary Thai writing.

18) From a discussion with Sirat Sathabanawat, August 1965.

19) The only exception may be Kulab Saipradit with '*Songkram chivith*'.

20) One of the best representatives is Kukrit Pramot, specially in his stories based on the Buddhist religion, like '*Lai chivit*',