

MEN AND MASCULINITIES IN ASEAN LITERATURE

Orathai Piayura

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, Thailand, E-mail: opanya@hotmail.com

Abstract: Social impact on the construction of masculinity became central of gender studies in recent trends. Research on men and masculinities has grown quickly. Interest in the study of the issue across the disciplines has also increased in different countries worldwide. This article is a part of the qualitative research entitled Gender and Sexuality in ASEAN Literature. The focus of the article was to study the issues of men and masculinities of male characters presenting in the selected literature by SEA Write awarded authors. Data were collected from the short stories composed by the authors of ASEAN nations. Selected literature was analyzed by gender and sexuality theoretical frameworks. The study found that despite the different political ideologies and social contexts, ASEAN societies share the similar value. Male characters were presented as a leader, protector, workaholic or being serious about life. Male sexuality was not mentioned as important issue because 'good men' were expected to have control over their sexual desire.

Key Words: Men, Masculinity, Gender, ASEAN, Literature, SEA Write Award

INTRODUCTION

Masculinity has been seen to be constructed as the necessary counterpart to heterosexuality. In addition, socialization and the influence of biological factors, the media, language, and education formed masculinity. However, Different societies value different masculinities. Although the countries in ASEAN were unique on the aspect of culture, they do share some similarities. The uniqueness, differences and similarities could be examined via the literature of each country. One of the activities on the aspect of literature these countries held together was the S.E.A. Write Award, or Southeast Asian Writers Award competition. This award is presented annually since 1979 to poets and writers of Southeast Asia. The awards are given to the writers from each of the countries that comprise the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, though not all countries in ASEAN are represented every year.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This research aimed to study the presentation of men and their masculinities in selected literature from member of ASEAN countries.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data were collected from SEA Write Awarded literature and being analyzed within the scope of gender and masculinity frameworks.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE: MASCULINITY THEORIES

One of the theoretical framework applied significantly to the study of masculinity is Abbott (1992)'s. Marie Richmond-Abbott 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

Men in ASEAN countries as represented in ASEAN literature, however, still possessed the characteristics of the traditional man which could be illustrated in the following analysis.

MASCULINITY IN THAI LITERATURE: CHENG MENG

Cheng Meng was the S.E.A. Write Award winning short story written in 1997 by Win Leowarin. The story was about a man called 'Ah-tek' who was a Chinese-Thai. He came to join Cheng Meng, the Chinese ceremony, to pay respect to his passed away parents. His relative asked him where he had been as they did not see him for years. They blamed him for not joining the Cheng Meng, and that was considered to be a bad Chinese. Ah-tek was not proud to be Chinese because he thought he was Thai. He was born in Thailand, went to a Thai school and spoke Thai. He hated being teased by his friends at school for being Chinese. He had been working hard and was too

busy to have a girlfriend. So, he stayed single. At the end of the story, it was revealed that Ah-tek only joined the ceremony as a part of his marketing research for his company.

In this selected short story, Ah-tek the narrator of the story was presented as a hard working man who was blamed by his family for not having time to join family activities. Following are the illustrations of how he got blamed by his relatives.

...Your sisters didn't expect to see you here. So, they've left. All of them are married but they came here every year.

And

I haven't seen you for years. You didn't join Cheng Meng. I thought you forgot about being a Chinese.

(Win Leowarin, 2008:211-212)

Apart from being presented as somebody who was too busy to join family activities, Ah-tek, the narrator of the story was also being presented as a person who was too busy to think about love and marriage as exemplified:

"And when are you getting married?"

I thought of our network's organization chart.

"I don't even have time to look for a girlfriend."

(Win Leowarin, 2008:220)

The narrator then run out what to talk about with his brother because he found the issue of marriage was not interesting. His mind was occupied with work as illustrated:

Silence. I've run out of things to talk about with my own brother. So, I think about my company, my big boss, and my new project. We haven't seen each other for years and we should have plenty of things to talk about, yet I can think of nothing.

(Win Leowarin, 2008:220)

The writing of this male author, Win Leowarin, therefore, represented the writing style of men who received S.E.A. Write Award that supposed to reflect the 'reality' of life and society. Most of the male characters were presented as workaholic or serious about life and things they do, as if it was accepted as a good a characteristic of men. Sexuality was not mentioned as important issue, or even hardly being mentioned about, because it was seen

as 'too little' issue in human beings' life and not a part of masculinity or behavior of maleness. This could be supported by the quote from Whitehead (2010) that '...those behaviors of males that are violent, dysfunctional and oppressive are frequently excused or explained away as 'natural' masculine behavior, being understood in common-sense terms as fixed and, thus, as an inevitable aspect of social 'reality' (Whitehead, 2010:8).

MASCULINITY IN LAO LITERATURE: STAYING OVERNIGHT

The selected literature was *Staying Overnight in the Jungle*, the S.E.A. Write Awarded Lao literature written in 1999 by Chanthi Deuanesavanh. The story was about a woman named Maaijai who was assigned to walk from Vientiane head office to Paewai area to organize the 'Lao Woman Love the Nation' Club. The walking distance was one day and the chaperone for this journey was a male soldier called Yiajer. There was heavy rain during the journey which made the two travelers unable to carry on with their journey and had to stay overnight in the jungle. Yiajer took care of Maaijai and there was no sexual encounter between them. The writer revealed at the end that the two characters admired each other but had to hide their duties first. After that night Maaijai and Yiajer had to part to complete their assignments. The story ended with the death of the male character, Yiajer, in the battle field. His death was praised because it was considered as a great sacrifice for the nation. The female character had to hide her sorrow and love for him.

The analysis of the main male character, Yiajer, was found to be 'Not emotionally sensitive or self-revealing'.

The male character in Lao literature was gentle to a woman and had to hide his desire. This could be because of the nature of Lao literature written after 1975 or 'revolution literature' as it was influenced by political ideology that good citizens had to act according to their prescribed gender roles to serve the nation and to conserve Lao tradition. Janthee Duangsawan, a S.E.A. Write Awarded writer composed his short stories according to the tradition of writing in Socialist society. The male character in this short story, *Staying Overnight in the Jungle*, was composed to agree that the roles of

men and women were naturally different but complimentary. Yiajer, the main male character in the story performed every aspect of their lives including sexualities according to Socialist value. He had to stay overnight in the jungle with a woman he fancied but could not express his desire to her at all. He was presented as a clam person and showed no sign of uncomfortable to be alone in the jungle with the woman. He built a shelter for woman, Maaijai, When it rained while he himself stood in the rain and prepared the food for her while he ate nothing. When Maaijai was frightened by the sound of the animals, he said "Go to sleep and fear of nothing. As long as I am alive, you will be safe (Janthee Duangsawan (1999) in Weerapong Meesathan (ed.), 2005: 8)."

The author, however, did not illustrate the other characteristics like preferring the company of men, developing strong male bonds but no intimacy, seeing marriage as a necessity, believing in the domination of women, having sexual double standards, seeing women as either good girls or bad girls and not being romantic. In addition, the main male character in Lao literature was not represented to possess any characteristics of the 'new man' at all.

MASCULINITY IN VIETNAMESE LITERATURE: THE END OF A SEASON OF BEAUTY

The End of a Season of Beauty is the SEA Write Awarded Vietnamese literature written by Nguyen Ngoc Tu in 2008.

The story was about the elderly society in Vietnam. The focus was on the group of Buoi Chieu House where old people got together to perform Vietnamese classical theatre. The narrator of the story was Chin, an old man who had true love for Hong, the heroine. The story was told through Chin's main stream of consciousness that he came from a rich family but decided to abandon everything to follow the wandering Vietnamese opera troupe everywhere after he fell in love with the most beautiful actress, Hong. He gave her support for everything. Unfortunately, Hong did not love him because she was engaged with the actor, Thuong Khanh, who was a Viet Cong and arrested by the military police. Chin was also arrested but freed after ten days as the police

could not find any evidence against him. However, after his freedom; he found that the troupe did not wait for him. Hong could not wait for him because she was afraid that the police might use her and her child's safety as leverage against her lover. Chin spent half his time looking for Hong and found her wandering on the street selling sweets. She was in her seventies and all her beauty was faded. Thuong Khanh heard about Hong and visited her at the Buoi Chieu House. He was well dressed and came in a nice car. He seemed disappointed to find that Hong was not beautiful anymore. He left and never returned. Hong was upset and became sick. Chin looked after her until the last day of her life.

Similar to Yiajer, the main male character in the selected Lao literature, Chin, the main male character in Vietnamese literature was presented to be 'Not emotionally sensitive or self-revealing' which was the characteristic of the traditional man. He had loved Hong since she was beautiful until her beauty was faded and never show his desire to her. He, actually, was an ideal man who had a long lasting love or a so called 'true love' for one man. Although it was her beauty that attracted him, he still loves her when she was old and her beauty faded away. He kept a secret about Hong's lover and devoted himself for Hong and her son. Throughout the story, Chin did not show his emotional feeling or sexual desire for her.

MASCULINITY IN MYANMAR LITERATURE: A FIVE KYAT NOTE

A Five Kyat Note was the S.E.A. Write Award winning short story written in 1999 by U Kyaw Aung. The story was about a man name Ba Sein. He was at the casino and lost all of his money that evening. He left the casino and wandered on the quiet street in late night because he had no money to catch a bus home. He happened to walk pass a girl who slept on the side of the street with a five Kyat note in her hand. Ba Sein wanted that money for gambling but he also felt sorry for the girl. He thought the girl must have begged so hard to get this money out of somebody's pocket. There was a conflict in his mind that he wanted the money for himself but he also felt sorry for the girl. However, he decided to steal the money from the girls' hand while she was still asleep. Ba Sein

took the money to the casino. He gambled and made a lot of money from that five Kyat. He stopped gambling at dawn and walked back on the same route. He planned to bring the five Kyat back to the girl and gave her a lot more money to thank her. She should be very happy to get the money and invest it on some kind of small business. Unfortunately, when Ba Sein arrived, he found the dead body of the girl.

The composition of the Myanmar S.E.A. Write Awarded literature had something in common with the S.E.A. Write Awarded literature from other countries in the region that the writing supposed to reflect the 'reality' of life and society. Most of the male characters were presented as workaholic or serious about life and things they do, as if it was accepted as a good a characteristic of men. Sexuality was not mentioned as important issue, or even hardly being mentioned about, because it was seen as 'too little' issue in human beings life and not a part of masculinity or behavior of maleness (Orathai Piayura, 2013).

Ba Sein, the main male character who was the narrator of the story was presented with the masculine quality as a gambler. According to Angela Goddard and Lindsey Mean Patterson (2000), 'masculine' was the quality or attribute of 'man' (Goddard & Patterson, 2000:2). Whitehead (2002) generalized that those behaviors of male that are violent, dysfunctional and oppressive are 'natural masculine' behavior. In ASEAN countries where women were primarily domestic gender, men were expected to participate in outdoor and public activities. Going out drinking and gambling were perceived as 'masculine behavior'.

Be Sein was described as a daring gambler as the following quote:

"Ba Sein has just left the Chinese gambling den. When he had entered that gambling place, he had 50 Kyates. When he left the gambling den, he even left his watch and necklace besides the 50 Kyates".

(U Kyaw Aung(1999) cited from Nitaya Masavisut (et.al), 2013:111).

The above quotation illustrated the daring of the main male character of the story that he dare to gamble with

everything he had. Apart from being a daring man on paying for gambling, he was presented as a brave man to walk along the quiet street in late night by himself as exemplified:

“The waxing moon seems to be glooming. Rangoon has fallen asleep under the waxing moon light...Ba Sein is walking steadily along the Latter Road towards Kyone Gyi Road...”

(ibid.)

Apart from trying to give masculine attributes to the main male character, the author avoided presenting anything sexual. For instance, he described the scene of night life which had to involve night girls, he only made one sentence as the following paragraph:

“Sometimes the noise of the motor car engines can be heard from Dalbousie Road. The voice of the bus conductor for Insein is carried by the north winds. He could even hear the faint strides of prostitutes wearing slippers who are usually loitering around the down town area.”

(ibid.)

There was no further discussion or description about those prostitutes. The way the author chose to use the term ‘prostitute’ instead of ‘sex worker’ or any other terms indicating sexual business could be the illustration of the sexual underrepresentation in the story as the term rather implied social problem than sex itself.

When Ba Sein saw a girl sleeping on the side of the road alone in the mid of the night, the reader could presuppose of sexual plots because the readers were foregrounded with the description of a dark, quiet and cold night. The illustration of the scene was as follow:

“...He sees a girl sleeping in front of the school gate. Ba Sein walks up to her.

“Oh a young girl’s sleeping alone”

The girl lies curled up and sound asleep. In the cold winds and the heavy mist, she is not wearing any blanket. Her left hand is on her head and she is asleep on her right side. There’s a tin bowl near her. She wears all ragged old clothes. “Is she a juvenile girl? No, absolutely not.” He accepts her as a poor beggar.”

(ibid.:114)

The main male character of the story saw a girl sleeping alone on the side of the road in the mid of the night and he only ‘accept her as a poor beggar’. He had no sexual desire for her because the author made him saw her only as ‘a poor beggar’ not ‘a juvenile girl’

Apart from being presented as somebody who was obsess with gambling, Ba Sein the narrator of the story was also being presented as a person who was not think about sexual desire. His mind was occupied with gambling as exemplified:

“Ba Sein has great experience in playing cards. He even dares to draw only one card each to gamble. His greatest interest lies in playing a game of play cards.

“Sir, there is no more service to Insein.” says the bus conductor trying to take his hand.

But Ba Sein only saw the card of king with a big moustache in the hand of Chinese bookies...”

(ibid.:112)

When he saw a girl lying alone on the street with a five Kyat note in her hand, his reaction was as the following:

“At that moment Ba Sein can picture the smiling face of the King with a big moustache...”

(ibid.:115)

The above analysis illustrated that the male character was determined in gambling and paying no attention to women and sex though he was at the gambling site and lived a night life.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the selected short stories reflected the images and roles of men in contemporary societies of ASEAN countries that a men took control of power in both private and public spaces. Sexuality and marriage was perceived as meaningless by men in Thai, Lao and Burmese Literature. Vietnamese, however, was different from the other countries that the main male character devoted his life for a woman he loved. The main male characters in Thai, Lao and Burmese were presented to possessed the characteristics of ‘traditional man’ to focus on work, patient, self-control and gambling. Although the Vietnamese man was presented to possess the

characteristic of the 'new man' by being emotional as he was not focus on work but love and a woman, he still possess the characteristic of the 'traditional man' by being patient and controlling his feeling.

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