

## Dignity in Humility: The Representation of Central Female Characters in Thai Literary Works

สง่างามในความอ่อนน้อม: การนำเสนอตัวละครเอกหญิงในงานวรรณกรรมไทย

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### Abstract

This paper employs a cultural feminist perspective to explore the representation of central female characters in three classic Thai literary works, namely *Inao*, *Kritsana Sorn Nong Kham Chan*, and *Si Phaendin*. Although all central female characters are made to fit into the stereotype of a virtuous woman in Thai patriarchal society, the result of the study shows that they are able to turn the stereotypical notion of a “good woman” - as dictated by the patriarchal system - into power, thereby making their thoughts, feelings, sensations, and behaviours recognized and accepted by the people around them. On the one hand, it is possible to say that Thai gender-coded rule of conduct seems to place more demand on women than on men. Women are expected to perform their defined gender roles both in society and within marriage by remaining obedient, gentle, humble, and hardworking. On the other hand, it is unarguable that such female gender roles imposed upon women are as important as those of their male counterparts. Without women fulfilling their traditional roles of a wife and a mother, it would be impossible for men and other family members to live their lives decently. The traditional ideal of femininity should not therefore be considered a degradation of women but rather an aspect that makes other people value their honour and dignity as individuals who sacrifice their lives for the well-being of the families.

**Keywords:** Central Female Characters, Thai Literary Works, Cultural Feminism

### บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาวิจัยครั้งนี้ มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อวิเคราะห์การนำเสนอตัวละครหญิงผ่านมุมมองของสตรีนิยมสายวัฒนธรรมในงานวรรณกรรมของไทยจำนวนสามเรื่อง ได้แก่ อิเหนา กฤษณาสมบัตินองคำจันทร์ และสี่แผ่นดิน ถึงแม้ว่าตัวละครหญิงในงานวรรณกรรมเหล่านี้จะถูกนำเสนอให้มีคุณสมบัติตามแบบฉบับของการเป็นผู้หญิงที่ดีในสังคมปิตาธิปไตย ผลของการวิจัยพบว่า ตัวละครหญิงในงานวรรณกรรมทั้งสามเรื่องสามารถเปลี่ยนคุณสมบัติต่างๆ ให้กลายเป็นอำนาจที่ช่วยให้ตนเองได้รับการยอมรับและเห็นคุณค่าจากบุคคลต่างๆ ที่อยู่รอบข้าง ทั้งในแง่ของความคิด ความรู้สึก อารมณ์ และพฤติกรรม กล่าวคือ ในด้านหนึ่ง วิถีคิดแบบปิตาธิปไตยได้กำหนดมาตรฐานทางด้านความประพฤติของผู้หญิงไว้สูงกว่าผู้ชาย ผู้หญิงถูกคาดหวังให้แสดงออกถึงบทบาททางเพศทั้งในสังคมและในครอบครัว โดยการรักษาดำเนินการของผู้ตามที่ดี มีความนุ่่นนวล รู้จักอ่อนน้อมถ่อมตน และเป็นคนขยันขันแข็ง

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แต่ในอีกด้านหนึ่ง บทบาททางเพศตามแบบฉบับของผู้หญิงดังกล่าวถือได้ว่ามีความสำคัญเทียบเท่ากับบทบาททางเพศของผู้ชาย หากไม่มีผู้หญิงมาเป็นผู้เติมเต็มบทบาททางเพศในฐานะของภรรยาและมารดาแล้ว ผู้ชายและสมาชิกอื่นๆ ในครอบครัวคงจะไม่สามารถดำรงชีวิตได้อย่างมีความสุข ดังนั้น การดำเนินบทบาททางเพศตามแบบฉบับของผู้หญิงจึงไม่ควรถูกมองว่าเป็นการถูกลดคุณค่าความเป็นมนุษย์ แต่เป็นพื้นที่ที่ช่วยให้ผู้หญิงได้รับการยอมรับและเห็นคุณค่าในฐานะปัจเจกบุคคลที่เสียสละเพื่อความสุขของสมาชิกในครอบครัว

**คำสำคัญ:** ตัวละครหญิง งานวรรณกรรม สตรีนิยมสายวัฒนธรรม

## Introduction

There is not much question that Thailand has long been considered a male-dominated and patriarchal society.<sup>3</sup> One of the most well-known traditional Thai proverbs that is often cited to demonstrate the unequal status between men and women is *phu-chai pen chang thao na phu-ying pen chang thao lang* (men are the front legs of the elephant and women are the hind legs of the elephant). Based on this *na/lang* (front/behind) cultural logic, the Thai gender politics normalises the role of men as the leader and women as the follower since they are always seen portraying such roles in that manner and not the other way around.

In order to fulfil these gender roles, Thai men and women are expected to maintain a code of social conduct. As *chang thao na* (the leader), the ideal image of Thai men is represented by the notion of *chai chatri* (a real man): authority, courage, self-assurance, physical and emotional strengths. On the other hand, the ideal image of Thai women, as *chang thao lang* (the follower), is restricted by the notion of *kulasatri* (a virtuous woman). A proper role of *kulasatri* is characterised by the image of the mother-nurturer who must remain conservative in her sexuality, provide for the well-being of her family, serve her husband faithfully and work longer and harder than her husband.

In relation to Thai literary studies, this manifestation of unequal power relations between men and women has long been a focus of study for those who are interested in gender politics and ideology. Among others, the representation of central female characters in Thai literary works is one of the most common topics that has been widely discussed at length by a number of researchers. Nearly all of them have mainly concentrated on exploring the role and status of female characters through the aspects of liberal feminism – how those female characters are oppressed by patriarchal power and whether or not they are able to overcome multiple obstacles and challenges resulting from the unequal gender relations. (See review of related literature for more details)

<sup>3</sup> Although it is debatable whether traditional Thai communities were characterised by certain aspects of matriarchal culture, the idea that Thailand is a patriarchal society has been widely supported by both Thai and international scholars. See, for example, Satha-anand, ed. (2004) discusses how the enduring gender biases and the unjust subjection of women have been operated under the temporal-historical, legal, socio-political and medical practices.

Despite a considerable amount of research on this subject matter, there are still not many empirical works that deal with such issues from different feminist perspectives of gender inequality. As people working in the field of Thai studies, the researchers are interested to explore gender politics and ideology in selected Thai literary works through a lens of cultural feminism, with emphasis on re-examining the notion of *kulasatri* or the stereotype of a virtuous woman that might have been undervalued to a certain degree in the previous studies. The current paper aims to demonstrate that, in contrary to the general view of liberal feminist, the traditional image of central female characters in Thai literary works acting according to the code of *kulasatri* should not be considered negative aspects of women but a designation of female power in areas inaccessible to men. In order to build a logical path through this article, two research questions are proposed as follows:

1. How are the central female characters in selected Thai literary works made to fit into the stereotype of a virtuous woman dictated by the Thai patriarchal society?

2. Do the stereotypical feminine qualities shown by the characters lead to any female advantage? If so, how and to what extent are those advantages reflected in each selected work? If not, in what ways are they not being reflected?

### **The Scope of the Study**

This study qualitatively investigates the representation of central female characters in three selected Thai literary works, namely 1) *Inao* by King Phutthaloetla Naphalai (King Rama II), 2) *Kritsana Sorn Nong Kham Chan* by The Supreme Patriarch HRH Prince Paramanujitajinorasa, and 3) *Si Phaedin* by M.R. Kukrit Pramoj. The first two pieces of literary works are poetic narratives written during the reign of King Rama II and King Rama III in early Bangkok period (1800s-1850s) while the last piece is a novel written in 1950s during the reign of King Rama IX. On the surface, it seems that *Si Phaedin* fairly reflects a socio-cultural context similar to the first two literary pieces since its story first starts out in late 1890s during the reign of King Rama V. Looking more closely, however, one may argue that the influences of modernisation and radical reforms during the reign of King Rama V together with a contemporary view of the author should also be taken into account when considering a socio-cultural context of *Si Phaedin*. Although its story first starts out in less than fifty years behind the time when *Inao* and *Kritsana Son Nong Kham Chan* were written, *Si Phaedin* may inevitably represent its central female character differently from the other two earlier works.

Due to such complications, *Si Phaedin* is purposively selected for analysis in line with *Inao* and *Kritsana Son Nong Kham Chan* in order to reaffirm that the notion of a virtuous woman has actually remained unchallenged as socially expected roles of women in Thai literary works regardless of the time they were written. As proposed by Penny Van Esterik (2000), this construction of Thai gender relations in which the remnants of patriarchal beliefs are still pretty much at work can be described as a “palimpsest” - a metaphor referring to the process in which newer discourses are



written on top of older ones which have never been fully erased. (Van Esterik 2000: 41) If there are any changes in the construction of gender relations, those new gendered discourses will only be added on top of the old ideas that have been preserved. This observation is consistent with Siraporn Nathalang (2004) who asserts that, “in any traditional society, the stream of tradition and the stream of modernity can well go along side by side. Some old values will still be transmitted while new social values are being developed along with social change.”

On this basis, it is therefore no coincidence that the traditional roles of being *kulasatri* as seen in *Inao* and *Kritsana Son Nong Kham Chan* still exist side by side with, and even have a big influence on, the impact that modernisation may have had on the good behaviours expected of women in *Si Phaendin*. Through this similarity in their representation of traditional femininity, this study then attempts to re-examine gender stereotypical messages inscribed in those selected works in order to discern the importance of certain previously overlooked and undervalued feminine qualities.

### **Review of Related Literature**

As previously mentioned, there has been a considerable amount of research carried out in subject areas related to unequal gender relations in Thai literary works. This section aims to outline the major findings from previous studies, as well as the highlights of some related research conducted by others. In order to restrict the literature review to a manageable yet representative account of the development of the concepts and constructs employed in this current study, this review focuses only on two main areas: 1) the (re)production of the notion of a virtuous woman in Thai literary works and 2) the representation of central female characters in *Inao*, *Kritsana Son Nong Kham Chan* and *Si Phaendin*.

### **The (re)production of the notion of a virtuous woman in Thai literary works**

To date, the notion of a virtuous woman and its unchallenged existence over time in Thai literary works has been observed by many Thai and international scholars. In her introduction of *The Lioness in Bloom: Modern Thai Fiction about Women*, Susan Kepner (1996) offers a very insightful observation regarding the traditional perceptions of Thai women. Based on her findings, the depiction of an ideal Thai woman began to change from a proud and courageous one who could mount a war elephant in the early Sukhothai period to be compared to the elephant's hind legs four centuries later during the Ayutthaya period. The rigid class system during the Ayutthaya period extended to gender: “inferiors served superiors; women [as inferiors] served parents, husbands, and children; sisters served brothers.” (Kepner 1996: 2)

Surprisingly, as exemplified by Kepner, these traditional perceptions of Thai women have not yet undergone any remarkable change regardless of the multiple waves of modernisation and social reforms that Thai society has experienced over the past hundred years: “Thai women must still contend with the ideal image of

the dutiful daughter, the lovely, chaste, and loyal wife, and the self-sacrificing and devoted mother.” (Kepner 1996: 2) An example of how these traditional perceptions are still consciously reflected in contemporary Thai literary works can be seen in *A Pot That Scouring Will Not Save*, a 1985 short story by Anchan in which a female character recalls her mother’s advice: “The woman must be like the hind legs of the elephant...the husband like the front legs, which, though they must always lead, cannot move the elephants by themselves.” (Kapner 1996: 1)

The observation noted above is consistent with several Thai studies. Considered as the first study on Thai women in literary works, Pachanee I-yarawong (1978) illustrates how the ideal conduct of women is strongly reflected *Suphasit Sorn Ying Kham Klon*, signifying the rigid social expectations on social and personal conducts of women. The analysis portrays how women should behave themselves, treat their parents, select their spouses, and treat their husbands. Similarly, Ruenruthai Sujjapan (1991) analyses characteristics, roles and characters of female characters in didactic poetry, Niras and narrative poetry from the Ayutthaya to the early Bangkok period (1830-1851). Her study reveals that female characters in didactic poetry are ideal wives and that such concept of a perfect wife influences the characterisations of female characters in Naras and narrative poetry. They are always portrayed as perfect women in both of their beauty and qualification. These traditional literary works, as asserted by Natthanai Prasannam (2010), serves to perpetuate patriarchal ideology by objectifying women into men’s property, transforming women’s bodies into “docile bodies” using ethical practice on manners and perfecting bodies.

This traditional view of gender relations also appears in contemporary Thai literary works. Examples can be drawn from the two previous studies conducted in 2009 by Wasinee Sutiwipakorn and Pornsawan Suwanathada. While Suthiwipakorn (2009) examines the portrayal of female characters in sixteen novels written between 1967 and 2006 by Khunying Wimol Siripaiboon (Thomyantee), Suwanathada (2009) investigates the same topic in nineteen award-winning novels written between 1972 and 2005 by six Thai female authors.<sup>4</sup> Both studies reveal that all female characters have been made to fit into a stereotype of a virtuous woman. Although they are encouraged to succeed in acquiring the new image of strong and independent women, the idealized images of devoted wives, dedicated mothers, and good housekeepers still remain as the good behaviours expected of them. All the feminine virtues have always been considered negative attributes that prevent them from reaching their full potential.

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<sup>4</sup> The six contemporary Thai female authors included in this study were Sukanya Chonlasuk (Kritsana Asoksin), Pratumpon Watcharasatien (Duangjai) Supa Sirisingh (Botan), Rampaipan Suwarnasarn (Sopak Suwan), Khunying Vinita Diteeyont (W. Winitchaikul), and Piyaporn Sakkhasem.



### **The representation of central female characters in *Inao*, *Kritsana Son Nong Kham Chan* and *Si Phaendin***

Over the past few years, the representation of central female characters in the three selected Thai literary works have been explored through different approaches. Compared to Korean and Laotian didactic literature for women<sup>5</sup>, *Kritsana Son Nong Kham Chan* is found to share similar concepts of an ideal woman with the selected texts from the two countries despite differences in cultural and historical backgrounds. As reflected in the works studied, all didactic literature for women in every culture are similarly influenced by patriarchal ideology, emphasizing the well-established assumption that women are expected to be grateful, pleasant, modest in social manners, specialized in household duties, and very conservative in their sexualities. (Keun-Hye Shin 2000; Malaykham 2001)

While *Kritsana Son Nong Kham Chan* is examined from a cross-cultural perspective, *Inao* and *Si Phaendin* have often been studied individually. Vassachon Reakwande (2005) conducts a research on Thai socio-cultural reflections in *Inao* by analysing a wide range of social institutions and roles of individuals within each institution. Her analysis reveals that one of the most important social institutions in *Inao* is the family in which female characters are only good enough to serve as passive and obedient followers. The researcher points out that such roles and responsibilities imposed upon female characters are means of establishing a social order in which they are expected to conform and behave according to their assigned roles. Anyone who violated traditional gender roles is in some way unnatural, unhealthy, or even immoral.

*Si Phaendin* has been recently studied by Orathai Piayura (2011) and Pornsawan Suwanathada (2011). Similar findings are found by both researchers, indicating that Phloi, the central female character is stereotypically depicted in accordance with the conventional notions of good behaviours expected of women. She is an obedient and grateful daughter, a kind and patient wife, and a devoted and caring mother. According to Piayura (2011), the male author of this novel makes it clear that any anti-patriarchal ideas are rendered wrong by making those characters who do not behave according to their prescribed gender roles have unsuccessful lives in comparison to Phloi's life. The study by Suwanathada (2011) further adds that although Phloi is represented as having decision-making power, it is limited only to such domestic affairs as housekeeping and child care. It is thus safe to assume that patriarchal mindset is still placed above feminist ideology.

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<sup>5</sup> Keun-Hye Shin (2000) compared The Supreme Patriarch HRH Prince Paramanujitajinorasa's *Kritsana Son Nong Kham Chan* and Sunthornphu's *Suphasit Son Ying* to Korean didactic literature for women, Queen So-Dye's *Naehun* and Song Si-yol's *Genyoso*. Bouaphon Malaykham (2001) compared *Kritsana Son Nong Kham Chan*, *Supasit Son Satri* and *The Phetchaburi Recension of Kritsana Son Nong Kham Klon* to Laotian didactic literature for women, *The Laotian Recension of Intiyan Son Luke* and *The National Library Recension of Yod Kham Son Boran*.

This review of related literature shows that the investigation of gender stereotypes and representation of central female characters in Thai literary works has been conducted mainly from the perspective of liberal feminism. The previous research has been devoted only to find out how female characters are oppressed by patriarchy and whether or not they are successful in achieving gender equality. Despite different approaches, all previous studies give consistent findings – a large number of Thai literary works are solely the products of conventional patriarchal ideology of gender relations. Instead of being seen as a source of female power, the representation of central female characters in more conventionally feminine ways is therefore considered negative aspects of womanhood.

### **A Cultural Feminist Perspective towards Gender Inequality**

In order to re-examine feminine qualities that have long been overlooked and undervalued in previous studies, this paper employs a cultural feminist perspective towards gender inequality as a frame of analysis. Cultural feminism refers to a specific set of discourses and practices that aims to promote the idea that a range of biologically-based gender differences exist. (Alcoff 1988; Ghodsee 2004) According to Alcoff (1988), cultural feminism grows out of an assumption that feminists should have the exclusive right to describe and evaluate women. For cultural feminists, one of the biggest challenges facing women is the process in which they are defined by men who are totally different from them in terms of point of view and set of interests. In other words, what cultural feminists have challenged is not the defining of women but the definition of women given by men. Rather than keeping women in subordinate positions, cultural feminists call for highlighting and valuing the differences between men and women as they believe that what have culturally and historically been defined as feminine values are in fact healthier than their opposites.

Based on Jyed and Murray's observations (2008), cultural feminism has receded in the literature on diversity and equal opportunity because it has often been suppressed by other more popular and hegemonic perspectives (e.g. liberal feminism), which promotes the idea of sameness of women and men, and radical feminism, which is interested in weakening the barriers between the public and private sphere. However, this form of feminism provides an excellent framework for accessing, analysing, and evaluating the positive aspects of what is seen as the female character or feminine personality when considering social relations of male privilege and female disadvantage. In relation to this, Jyed and Murray (2008) employed a cultural feminist approach to analyse the major differences in masculine and feminine values in top management teams (TMTs) in order to find out the relationship between feminine values, team member diversity, and team effectiveness. The result of the study suggested that TMTs benefit when learning to accommodate and integrate feminine values, along with masculine values, into an inclusive work culture that enhances teams' performing capacities.



Informed by a cultural feminist perspective, this paper similarly attempts to reclaim and redefine definition of femininity through recognizing and celebrating women's unique characteristics. As the differences between male and female are often perceived as the foundation of women's subordination, the analysis will begin by discussing how the representation of central female characters in each Thai literary work is restricted by the notion of *kulasatri* (a virtuous woman). It should be noted here that this notion of *kulasatri* refers to character traits not individually chosen but biologically essential to women, for example, nurturing, kind, gentle, and non-violent. The analysis will then turn to challenge the dominant cultural discourse that women are believed to be inferior and subservient to men by focusing on the positive aspects of womanhood. The analysis will demonstrate the extent to which the traditional image of central female characters in Thai literary works acting according to the code of *kulasatri* should not be considered a degradation of women. Rather, it should be perceived as something that each female character should encompass as these essential qualities help them gain recognition and respect from other people.

## Findings and Discussion

### Bussaba: The notion of a virtuous woman in the epic

Bussaba is a central female character in *Inao*, the royal composition by King Rama II. Written as a long and much admired poem based on the Javanese Panji theme, *Inao* tells a love-story between two cousins; Inao, the prince of Kurepan, and Bussaba, the princess of Daha, whose arranged marriage has been planned since their time of birth. The conflict of this story begins when Inao refuses to marry Bussaba because he is in love with Jintara, a daughter of the King of Manya. As he is disappointed with Inao's rejection of his daughter, the King of Daha agrees to marry Bussaba off to anyone who proposes. The first marriage request by the king of Joraka is accepted but another wedding proposal from the king of Kamangkuning on behalf of his son is turned down as it comes too late. The war between Daha and Kamangkuning then commences. Inao, who is sent to help fighting the war, eventually falls in love with Bussaba and regrets for his former actions. He is forced to undergo various adventures and trials before he is reunited with Bussaba at the end.

In this epic poem, Bussaba is clearly presented according to the stereotype of "a virtuous woman." First of all, she is obedient to her parents. She agrees to marry Joraka even though he has a wicked and unattractive appearance. She takes it as a way to protect the honour of her family as her father has already promised that he would marry her off to the first who proposes:

ซึ่งจะคอยท่าหลานตามสารศรี	อีกร้อยปีก็ไม่จากเมืองหมั้นหย่า
แต่จะเวียงนงงานการวิวาห์	จะซ้าร้ายอายหน้ายิ่งนัก
แม้ใครมาขอก็จะให้	ไม่อาลัยที่ระคนปณศักดิ์
ถึงไพร่ประดาชาติทรลักษณ์	จะแต่งให้งามพัศตร์พงศ์พันธุ์

[King of Daha believes that it is an absolute waste of time to wait for Inao who is now madly in love with Jintara. Yet a wedding cancellation will bring him a greater shame. He then declares that he will marry Bussaba off to anyone who proposes. Even if the one who proposes will be ugly-looking or a commoner, he will properly arrange a royal wedding]<sup>6</sup>

Bussaba is well aware that King Daha's decision will only bring embarrassment to her, but she knows that, as a dutiful daughter, she must obey her father. Bussaba's passive acceptance of her father's decision reflects the traditional belief that a daughter is a property of a father. A daughter is expected to submit to a father's right to take control and make any decision on her behalf as a way to express gratitude toward him.

Another example can be found from Bussaba's role in marriage. Although she comes from the most prestigious and powerful family, Bussaba is so humble that she never regards herself as more superior to any other wives of Inao. She is willing to let Inao have Jintara as his highest-ranking consort. When she realises that Jintara is still upset over her relationship with Inao, she always shows her consideration for Jintara by encouraging Inao to seek for her forgiveness:

น้องนี้เจียมตนเป็นพันคิด	ที่จริงจิตอยากจะใคร่ให้ผายผัน
เชิญเสด็จภูธรจรรจรัล	ทรงธรรมอย่าถวิลกินใจ

[Bussaba tells Inao that she feels very guilty for Jintara. She encourages Inao to seek reconciliation without having to worry about her.]

After reconciliation, Bussaba also properly welcomes Sakarawatee and Mayarassami, Inao's other two wives, when Jintara sends them to her place in order to pay her respect. She understands that all Inao's other wives should be treated fairly as they have come before her own marriage to Inao:

เมื่อนั้น	ระเด่นบุษยามารศรี
ฟังสองสุดาพาที่	เทวีจึงตอบวาจา
เจ้าอย่าประหวั่นพรั่นจิต	เราไม่คิดเคียดขี้งี้หึงสา
จะรักเจ้าเท่าน้องทั้งสองรา	ด้วยเราร่วมภักศดาเดียวกัน

[After listening to their words, Bussaba sincerely tells Sakarawatee and Mayarassami not to worry since she never gets jealous of them. She will love both of them as her own sisters because they all share the same husband.]

In addition to indicating her caring nature and her ability to tolerate the inevitable frustrations, Bussaba's reactions towards the situation she is facing also exemplify the "proper" conduct for women within marriage. As *chang thao lang* (the follower), a woman is traditionally expected to consider her husband's happiness as more important than her own personal comfort. Whenever there is a problem, it is a woman's responsibility to adapt herself by making necessary accommodations or adjustments to keep her husband happy.

<sup>6</sup> The excerpts from Thai literary works written in English throughout this article are the researchers' own translations.



On the surface, Bussaba is a mere victim of patriarchal power wielded over her by her father and her husband. As shown in the analysis, Bussaba does not have the right to make a choice even when it comes to her own marriage. Although she eventually marries a man whom she loves, Bussaba does not receive the highest honour that should have been given to her. Yet it is undeniable that such a sympathetic role played by Bussaba is actually beneficial to others. Whenever there is a problem, Bussaba's characteristics of "a virtuous woman" always enable her to find a positive means of resolving it. For example, the conflicted relationship between Inao and Jintara in which Bussaba herself is partly involved will not be easily settled if Bussaba does not resolve it in a mutually satisfactory manner. In other words, the situations each character is facing will be much more complicated if Bussaba is represented as a strong character who insists on choosing her own way of life by making her own decisions. As a result, as suggested by cultural feminists, Bussaba's acts of obedience and humbleness should be celebrated and perceived as positive aspects of womanhood.

Apart from being beneficial to others, Bussaba's characteristics of "a virtuous woman" also lead to her own advantages. She is able to turn the stereotypical notion of a "good woman" - as dictated by the patriarchal system - into power, thereby making the people around her recognize her thoughts, feelings, sensations, and behaviours. To begin with, all the other wives of Inao, including Jintara, sincerely respect her and finally recognise her importance. Sakarawatee and Mayarassami are so grateful for Bussaba's kindness that they say "ตัวข้าทั้งสองขอรองบาท" [we both would like to bestow ourselves to your service] when they first meet Bussaba. This phrase connotes a deep sense of respect and royalty. Moreover, Bussaba is transformed from a woman who is initially denied to the one who gains love and attention from Inao. Compared to Jintara who is rather self-centred, Bussaba makes Inao feel that it is more comfortable to spend his time with Bussaba:

เมื่อนั้น

ระเด่นมนตรีขอบอ้อชมาลัย

พระโคมลูปฤษฏางค์นางทราวมวย

เจ้าดวงใจของผู้ยอดรัก

[Inao appreciates the way Bussaba expresses her understanding towards his situation. He touches her lovingly while saying that he is giving her his whole heart.]

Once again, the representation of Bussaba according to the stereotype of "a virtuous woman" should therefore not be considered a degradation of women but the expression of unique feminine qualities that should be acknowledged and appreciated, especially if we consider it in today's social context, where tolerance, compromise, and collaboration - all female strengths, are highly prized.

### **Kritsana: The notion of a virtuous woman in didactic literature for women**

Kritsana is a central female character in *Kritsana Sorn Nong Kham Chan* ("The Advice of Kritsana to her Younger Sister"), a didactic literature for women written by

The Supreme Patriarch HRH Prince Paramanujitajinorasa. As the title suggests, this piece of literary work focuses on the advice about keys to a good and successful marriage that Kritsana gives to her younger sister, Jiraprapa. Both Kritsana and Jiraprapa are daughters of the King of Varanasi. Compared to Kritsana who is married off to five noble men, Jiraprapa's marriage life is not as good as her older sister even though she is married to only one husband. In response to a request for help from Jiraprapa, Kritsana tells her younger sister that her five husbands love her because of her role in providing for the well-being of the family. Kritsana then summarises the virtues that a woman should have in order to serve as a virtuous wife and good mother.

In her study of the construction of gender relations in Thai society, Suwadee Thanaprasitpatthana (2004) points out that language and literature served as an important means to reinforce female subordination. She adds that there were various pieces of long poetry directly aimed at instructing women in “proper” conduct written during early Bangkok period. Apart from *Kritsana Sorn Nong Kham Chan*, other examples of such poetry include *Suphasit Sorn Ying* (“Words of Wisdom for Women”) by Sunthornphu and *Owat Kasatri* (“The Teaching for Women”) by an anonymous poet. Since the authors of this kind of poetry were men, the “advice” to women given in each piece of literary work reflected two important facts; first, the right to define women's roles and behaviours were absolutely given to men, and second, men were concerned about women's roles and behaviours to the extent that they set up the criteria for “proper” conduct. (Thanaprasitpatthana 2004: 57-58) While Thanaprasitpatthana (2004) backs up the results of her study by citing examples from *Suphasit Sorn Ying*, the following analysis aims to further add that *Kritsana Sorn Nong Kham Chan* also works in a similar way to reinforce what seems to be considered as female subordination.

Based on the advice given by Kritsana, it is clear that Thai gender-code rule of conduct seems to place more demand on women than on men. As a good wife and mother, a virtuous woman needs to work harder and longer than her husband. She should carry on her domestic responsibility attentively both during the day and at night:

ตื่นก่อนเมื่อนอนหลัง	ฟังเฝ้าฟังบรรหารแสดง
ตรัสใช้รไวรวาง	ระวังศัพท์รับสั่งสาร

[A good wife should get up earlier and go to sleep after her husband. She also needs to be attentive to her husband's concerns and listen carefully to her husband's order.]

ปัดปูยู่ภูลาด	บรรจถรณ์อาสน์ภูทรมพม
ยามราชนิทราภิรมย์	บริรักษ์ภักดีผดุง

[At night, a good wife should prepare a clean and proper bed for her husband to sleep in.]

Kritsana also advises her younger sister that cooking is an expected part of a woman's domestic role. It should be noted here that Kritsana's advice is closely relevant to a traditional Thai proverb that is often cited to emphasise the importance



of a woman's cooking ability as a means to win her husband's affection and attention; *sanae pai jamak, phua rak chon tai* (the charm at the tip of the ladle makes a husband love his wife forever):

ตรวจดูสุธาโภช	อันเหมโชบบำเรอบำ
รุงราชผู้ฟ้า	นักินเนื่องคณาประชา

[A good wife should exquisitely prepare food that both look good and taste good for her husband and everyone in the household.]

Apart from the housekeeping and cooking ability, a virtuous woman is also required to have proper and decent manners. A woman who does not behave as such would face social disapproval. With regard to this issue, the way a woman behaves herself in public is often seen as associated with the level of her physical attractiveness:

หนึ่งน้องสำรวมโอษฐ์	ผรุสโทษทำลายโฉม
เสียดินทรีย์โทรม	ศุภลักษณ์พิศตราหมอง

[A good wife must be careful with her words. Using bad and inappropriate words makes her less lady-like and less appealing.]

All these behaviours and attributes traditionally expected of women, however, can be considered positive aspects of womanhood based on a cultural feminist perspective. Similar to a role of Bussaba discussed above, Kritsana is able to turn patriarchal standards towards women's behaviours into female power to make people aware of the important role she plays within family and society. In contrast to the traditional Thai belief that the honour of a woman is tied to that of the man whom she marries and his place in society<sup>7</sup>, Kritsana suggests that male and female honour are in fact mutually dependent. As presented in the poem, the politeness and gentleness of women's words and manners in public do not only bring grace and honour to themselves but also to their husbands:

สมศักดิ์อัศวราชประยูร	วรอุทิศตระกูล
อย่าพึงเสื่อมสุญ	ในสิ่งสัตย์

[A good wife should bring grace and honour to her family by showing her decent, correct, and proper manners in public.]

Apart from bringing grace and honour to her husband, Kritsana also plays a very important role by standing beside her husband and giving him strength and support. A sense of caring and nurturing enables her to understand how her husband feels and finds a way to help him lessen his problem:

ร่วมทุกข์สุขร่วมภริมย์สัม	ฤทธิฤทยบำ
เรอบำรุงทำ	คุณาสนอง

<sup>7</sup> Examples of traditional Thai proverbs that are cited to demonstrate this belief include *sami muean chat kao kan ket ngam net ngamna thuk wela* (a husband can be compared to a royal umbrella placed over the head of his wife, indicating her social status and honour) and *pen satri sut di tae phiang phua* (a woman's honour depends completely on the man whom she marries to).

[A good wife should stay beside her husband, regardless of the situation - whether good or bad. She must also find a way to make her husband feel better whenever he has a problem.]

In addition, Kritsana acts as a pillar of unity in her family. At the same time as providing them a decent standard of living, Kritsana turns what have long been perceived as feminine qualities into power to unite people in a way that men are unable to do. As suggested by Kritsana, women are able to foster a strong and lasting bond among family members, relatives and neighbours because of their interpersonal skills and ability to tactfully negotiate whenever a conflict arises and when interacting with people. This role of women can be considered especially vital to those in a polygamous marriage. In order to maintain peace and harmony in the family, women who are primary wives must be able to take on a leadership role by minimising potential rivalry and jealousy among the co-wives:

ดูถ้วนทุกนวลนาง

สุรสว่างคนารี

ปองโปรดปรานี่มี

มิตรธรรมอันเที่ยงธรรม

[A good wife should be able to take care of her husband's concubines and treat them with empathy, kindness and fairness.]

After re-examining the stereotypical feminine qualities shown by Kritsana, it is apparent that the common perception of women as naturally inferior to men seems to undermine the important and valuable roles women play within family and society. The analysis reveals that women are able to draw on their femininity as a source of power, enabling them to perform their multi-roles, which men are incapable of fulfilling. Apart from attending domestic duties, women are expected to take charge of maintaining family honour, providing their husbands emotional support, and promoting family harmony – all the duties that cannot be accomplished without female power gained from those long socially undervalued feminine qualities. Rather than being seen as female subordination, the representation of Kritsana according to the stereotype of “a virtuous woman” should therefore be perceived as positive aspects of womanhood.

### **Phloi: The notion of a virtuous woman in novel**

Phloi is a central female character in *Si Phaendin* (“Four Reigns”), a novel written by M.R. Kukrit Pramoj. Originally written as a serial for Thai daily, Siam Rath, *Si Phaendin* was first compiled into a book in 1953. Since then, it has been accepted as a classic Thai novel, subjected to many media adaptation. The book was later translated in English as *Four Reigns* by Chancham Bunnag in 1981.

*Si Phaendin* is the rich story of the life of Phloi and her family, both inside and outside the palace walls. The story unfolds through time periods of four reigns, starting in 1890s during the reign of King Rama V and ending in the mid-1940s with the death of King Rama VIII. The book basically explains Thai history and its transition to “modernity” through Phloi’s eyes, mostly based on her relationships with the people



around her. The story follows Phloi's life, as she starts her life as a maid-in-waiting in the inner court of the Grand Palace during a time of absolute monarchy at the age of 10, until she grows up and has a family of her own. The reader witnesses how Phloi's life has gone through series of changes, socially, politically, and economically and how she struggles to understand and to adapt herself to those changes.

Throughout the story, the influences of modernisation and social reforms on gender relations are clearly evident. For example, based on a true historical event, Queen Saowabha was appointed the Regent while King Rama V was absent from the Kingdom on his European tour in 1897. At the age of 15, Phloi's reaction towards this change is described as "a sense of discovery, of awakening":

If the queen could become ruler like the king, it followed then that women as human beings were on the same level as men and could step into positions usually held by men if given the opportunity. That men were lords of their households and women more or less their dependents might be prevailing situation but by no means as unalterable one. (Bunnag 1981: 107)

When taking a close look at how the story unfolds, however, it is absolutely arguable that the traditional view of gender relations still plays a pivotal role in shaping the characters' attitudes and behaviours. This sense of discovery that Phloi has experienced a few years before her marriage does not override the traditional expectation of feminine ideals. Like Bussaba and Kritsana, Phloi upholds the traditional ideologies of Thai *kulasatri* which may seem old fashioned to modern readers. Her obedience, humbleness, and gentleness can be seen throughout the story.

As a daughter of a minor wife, Phloi is always treated unfairly by her half-sister, Khun Un. Phloi's mother and Khun Un, the eldest daughter born to the first wife, do not get along since Khun Un believes that Phloi's mother takes away everything that should have belonged to her mother. This sour relationship leads to the divorce of Phloi's parents. When Phloi's mother decides to leave, her father does not resist the idea of taking Phloi away and putting her under the care of Sadet (a princess – the king's sister) in the Grand Palace. Although they do not have a close relationship, Phloi still loves and respects her father. When Phloi grows up, she agrees to marry Khun Prem, as suggested by her father, although she knows very little about him. This arranged marriage is influenced by the traditional belief that it is better to marry someone who is carefully chosen by the family rather than to marry a person for love. Similar to Bussaba, Phloi takes it as a way to show gratitude to her father:

Phloi would have liked to express herself at length about her desire to bring nothing but comfort and peace of mind to Sadet and Chao Khun Father, and be credit to them always; that she placed herself with complete trust in their loving hands and would willingly consent to marry Khun Prem or any other man of their choice and, once a wife, intended to fulfil her wifely obligation to the best of her ability. (Bunnag, 1981:195)

After getting married, Phloi upholds the traditional belief that a wife is a property of her husband. Phloi serves as a good housewife who is always expected to be obedient and grateful to her husband, and to manage the household chores. Phloi describes her feeling a few days after her marriage as follows:

I feel myself as belonging to him. This is something absolute and unarguable. I belong to him absolutely and completely. I take him as my owner, as centre and mainstay of my life, forever, unless and until he himself should wish to cease being so. (Bunnag, 1981: 221)

As *chang thao lang* (the follower), Phloi always agrees with her husband and does things to keep him happy. When she knows about Khun Prem's son whom he did not inform her about before their marriage, Phloi does not get angry but blames Khun Prem for not letting her know earlier so that she could have taken care of the boy long before. She finally adopts the boy and treats him as her own son. During the reign of King Rama VI, Phloi also changes her dressing style by growing her hair long and polishing her betel-stained teeth as requested by Khun Prem. Although she feels uncomfortable, Phloi agrees to do so just to please her husband, who wants to follow the royal taste of the king:

As always, Phloi was pleased to have done something that pleased him. These days she did take some more interest in her personal appearance, and when they went out together she and Khun Prem made a handsome couple. (Bunnag, 1981: 354)

Furthermore, Phloi never does anything without asking for Khun Prem's consent. For example, she asks for Khun Prem's suggestion when Khun Un comes asking for financial support. In other words, she waits for Khun Prem's approval before helping Khun Un and inviting her to come and live at their place.

Paradoxically, Phloi's act of obedience, gentleness, and humbleness does not make her lose her dignity. As mentioned by Phloi, one of the happy consequences resulting from her decision to adopt Khun Prem's son is that everyone in Khun Prem's family feels more comfortable about her and accepts her as one of them:

The first was that in adopting On, Phloi herself came to be adopted by Khun Prem's family. Not that they had not consistently shown her much kindness and goodwill from the very beginning. But she had nevertheless remained a relation by marriage, someone from "outside," whose true mettle they had not enough time to observe. Not anymore. They approved what she had done for On, liked her all the more for it and now considered her as one of their own without any reservation. (Bunnag, 1981: 236)

In terms of her relationship with Khun Prem, Phloi's role as a conformist follower does not make him take advantage of her. Rather, Khun Prem always shows his trust, respect, and affection. Only a few days after their marriage, Khun Prem gives Phloi the authority to control over the house. He gives her the keys and tells her that



everything in his house belongs to her. In response to Phloi's comments that she owes him everything, Khun Prem also makes a remark that it is actually he himself who is in debt to Phloi:

"It's not true. You owe me nothing. It's the other way round. You could have found a husband a thousand times better than this one. If there should be any debt at all, then it is I who owe it. I'll make it up to you, Mae Phloi. I'll try in every way to make myself worthy to you." (Bunnag, 1981: 227-228)

Apart from that, Khun Prem refuses to have minor wives considering the fact that polygamy is widely accepted and considered common among Thai aristocratic at that time, and that Phloi willingly agrees to let him have so.

In addition, Phloi's constant humbleness eventually changes Khun Un's negative attitude towards her. Khun Un regrets not being a good sister to Phloi when they were younger and she asks for Phloi's forgiveness:

"Forgive me, Mae Phloi," she said. "Forgive me for what I did to you, for all the wrong I ever committed against you. I know now how wrong, how despicable I was. And so stupid." (Bunnag, 1981: 339)

Once again, it is clearly evident that the representation of Phloi according to the stereotype of "a virtuous woman" should not be considered a degradation of women but an expression of unique feminine qualities. The recognition and acceptance that Phloi has gained from people around her is often emphasized throughout the story by having them praise and show admiration towards everything Phloi does. Khun Prem is always delighted and says such phrases as "You are so good, Mae Phloi" (Bunnag, 1981: 229) and "You are an angel, Mae Phloi" (Bunnag, 1981: 235) whenever Phloi does something good for him and the family. Khun Un also calls Phloi "Mae Khun Mae Thun Hua" – a term used to express the speaker's great affection and admiration for the addressee. (Bunnag, 1981: 340) Khun Prem even once compares Phloi's ability to win people's affection to a magic spell:

"Tell me, Mae Phloi, have you cast a spell on the people in this house? They adore you and I am jealous." (Bunnag, 1981: 230)

## Conclusion

Informed by a cultural feminist perspective, this current study suggests that the way of perceiving the representation of central female characters in more conventionally feminine ways as degradation of women is in fact a negative generalisation and misconception about women. While the unequal power relations between men and women have been strongly reflected in selected Thai literary works, the analysis reveals that such roles and responsibilities imposed upon each central female character are actually as important as those of their male counterparts. At the same time as simply serving as household managers, they also carry out some other influential roles, for example, maintaining their own and their family's honour, providing emotional support and encouragement to family members, and promoting harmonious family relations.

In other words, it is possible to say that family strengths depend greatly on women's ability to create a healthy and safe environment for themselves and their family members.

In addition, the analysis shows that the roles played by each central female character are characterised by feminine qualities, such as being gentle, nurturing, benevolent, and humble – all the qualities that have traditionally been expected of *kulasatri* or a virtuous woman. While the concepts associated with femininity have often been socially undervalued and disparaged, all the three central female characters in selected Thai literary works are able to draw on their feminine attributes as a source of power to perform their multi-roles which men are incapable of fulfilling. Each of their roles in turn helps them obtain acceptance, recognition, and appreciation they deserve for their contribution to family and society. Apart from being praised for their social manners, it is revealed in the analysis that all the central female characters gain trust, respect, understanding, and affection from people around them.

All the positive aspects of womanhood discussed above attempt to redefine what have long been considered undervalued female attributes. Although this revalidation seems to tie women down to how they are traditionally perceived, it is certainly arguable that this unequal power relations experienced by women is solely based on the existing system of male domination and female subordination. Without such gender-based relations, feminine qualities would not have been regarded as inferior to those of men in the first place. As suggested by cultural feminists, the best way out of this recurring pattern is not to have a woman assume a man's role in society in order to overcome their cultural and social blocks resulting from what seems to be their subordination. Rather, what is required is a more nuanced understanding of gender relations. Instead of being conceptualised as one gender is having higher status than another gender, both male and female should be regarded as equally important as they need to work together in a positive and complementary way in order to fulfil what each side may lack.

By acknowledging and celebrating feminine qualities and sex-role stereotypes as positive qualities, it does not only validate women and their experiences but also allows men to accept and embrace within themselves those feminine qualities they would otherwise have denied. If men are compared to the front legs of the elephant and women to the hind legs of the elephant as suggested by traditional Thai proverb, it should be noted that the hind legs are as important of the front legs since both legs have to move relatively together while walking. Without the hind legs, elephants will not be able to walk properly. Likewise, male will not able to live decently without the support from their female counterpart.



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