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The first Thai novels and the Thai literary canon

Modernity in Thailand is commonly associated with the reign of King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910), who modernised Thailand by appropriating many advancements made in the West. The general discourse on ‘modernity’, *khwam than samai* or *samai mai* in Thai, which mean ‘being in step with the present era, or the new age’, is closely related to the Thai obsession with *khwam jaroen* or ‘prosperity and progress’.¹ This prosperity can be manifested by material wellbeing or intellectual prowess. For the state, prosperity is reflected in the material things—buildings, transportation, public works, etc.—that were more highly developed in

1 *Siwilai* resounds of the English ‘civilised’, which the Thai appropriated to represent high international culture mostly based on English aristocratic culture. *Khawm jaroen* has connotations of industrial artefacts of modernity—good roads and transportation, running water, electricity, brick buildings, radio and television, etc. *Khawm than samai* includes both cultural, behavioural and material artefacts of modernity based on a model of a secular and industrialised society. To the Thai, there is a *khawm than samai sakon*, or universal modernity that is not necessarily tied to the West. Japan by the turn of the 20th century, for example, is an example of a modern society for Thailand to emulate. And so is colonial India—the official dress code for males appearing in state ceremonies in Thailand today can either be the *chut ratcha pataen* uniform based on the ‘Raj Pattern of British colonial India’ or *sut sakon*, which is the ‘universal Western suit’. Thai identity is not compromised when it is clothed in a universal form of modernity. Also see Thongchai Winichakul, ‘The quest for *siwilai*: A geographical discourse of civilizational thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Siam’, *The journal of Asian studies*, 59(3) (August 2000): 528–54.

the West after its industrial revolution. Modern Thai literature is also dated to this period, and, as the National Identity Board has recognised, Thai literature also partakes of this modernisation process.²

In the West, following Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1615), the novel came to reflect socio-historical reality that represented a clear departure from the symbolism and allegory found in literature of the Middle Ages. As a new way of writing/thinking, the plot of the novel became grounded in a specific historical context, with a real geographical location. In fact, the historical rise of the novel is a history derived from, and directed to, the rise of the middle class. And in contrast to the long tradition of the novel in the West, the novel in Thailand was altogether new. The first novel introduced to an emerging literate middle class was a translation of Marie Corelli's *Vendetta* (1886), which was published in 1902.

It is clear that, by the reign of King Mongkut, the Thai court had concluded that the centre of the civilised world had shifted from China and India to Europe. But, unlike the influence or allure of India and China, the two major hegemonic powers that flanked Thailand, the allure of the West was more dangerous, ambiguous and problematic. India and China never exercised direct political or military control of states in Southeast Asia, except perhaps in the case of Vietnam.³ But European imperialism threatened to impose political, economic, intellectual and military domination of Thailand as indeed had happened elsewhere.

2 The National Identity Board, *Treasury of Thai literature: The modern period* (Bangkok: Prime Minister's Office, 1988), 5. Literary scholars also endorse this idea, see Suphanni Warathorn, *Prawat kan praphan nawaniyai thai [History of the Thai novel]* (Bangkok: Thai Textbook Project Foundation, 1976), 24–39.

3 The Thai court participated in the Tribute Economic Regime from the Sukhothai period up to the early Bangkok period (13th–19th centuries). The Thai courts sent tribute missions to China, symbolically accepting the superiority of the Chinese court. Thai tribute gifts of local raw material, such as aromatic woods, deer hide, antlers and spices, were exchanged for silk, jewellery and precious ceramics. In this unequal exchange, the Thai court came out richer. Parenthetically, it should also be noted that the Thai also replicated this system locally and demanded 'tribute' from its vassal states such as Pattani. One should view the new European economic regime of *laissez faire* and free trade as replacing the Tribute Economic Regime. But, in the case of the new regime, it came hand in hand with military and political threats. What was mostly cultural hegemony on the part of China was replaced by Western imperialism that had already imposed direct economic, political and military control over Thailand's neighbours. The Thai court had to find ways to participate in this new trade regime without falling prey to direct colonialism. David Wyatt, *Thailand: A short history* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 56. For a detailed account of Thai trade with China, see Sarasin Viraphol, *Tribute and profit: Sino-Siamese trade, 1652–1853* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), doi.org/10.2307/lj.ctt1tfb0r.

To understand fully the adoption and adaptation of the novel in Thailand as part of a larger survival strategy, it is also necessary to understand the political forces faced by Thailand and the defensive strategies that its leaders took. The Bowring Treaty of 1855 with Britain, which opened Thailand to the new free trade economy, is quite problematic. On the one hand, one can view the treaty regime as a humiliating imposition on Thailand's sovereignty. But from the Thai perspective, the acceptance of extraterritoriality that was part of this treaty can be seen as a price to be paid for participation in the new trade regime, as well as the cost for maintaining control over its own citizens.⁴ The court's strategy also included social engineering and intellectual improvement. The court believed Thai society should look modern/civilised to the West, so there would be no excuse for the West to colonise it. At the same time, it should

4 In fact, the opening up of the Thai market and the trade in rice in large quantities to feed the British colonies enriched the coffers of the Thai court. In addition, adopting the new political paradigm provided by the West allowed the Central Thai court in Bangkok under Rama V to consolidate its power over its provincial rivals. As a pragmatic strategy for maximising local power and survival, acceptance/submission to Western demands was logical and unavoidable. The Thai court was also careful in portraying itself as an 'equal' of European royalty. In dealing with outsiders, the court made sure that, for domestic consumption, the royals were to appear as 'royals' in their interaction with the West. After the turn of the 20th century, Thai kings did their best to make themselves appear as members of the international family of royalty. For example, Queen Saowapha, Rama V's consort, made it a point to show foreign visitors her intimate knowledge of her distant 'relatives' in Europe. See Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of things: The fashioning of the Siamese monarchy's modern image* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 32. Kannikar Sartraproong's excellent study of Chulalongkorn's visit (*pai thiau*) to Singapore and Java tells us that the Thai officials wanted to make sure that the British and Dutch authorities treated the Thai king (and therefore Thailand) as a monarch and not as one of the 'local princes'. The colonial authorities did their best to put the Thai monarch in his place, but the local Malay papers used his visit to criticise the colonial authorities (especially in Batavia) for not inviting local leaders to some of the activities, and for not whitewashing government buildings to prepare for the king's visit. To assert his position as equal to Queen Victoria, Chulalongkorn, who was still a teenager, sent her the following telegram:

We have left Bangkok on the 9th or 10th to see *Our Provinces*, and we have arrived at our most gracious *Majesty's colony* at Singapore, the first time that a *King of Siam* has landed on an English Country. His Excellency the Administrator has received us with the highest honors, and *made us most comfortable at Government House*. We are delighted to see the Country and people prospering so well under Your Most Gracious Majesty's rule. We repeat *Our grateful thanks to Your Majesty for your friendly reception of Us*, and we wish you long life, health, and prosperity in every respect.

Telegram from the King of Siam to Her Majesty, Dispatches from the Secretary of the Straits Settlements, COD/12, 01-06-1871 (emphasis added), quoted in Kannikar Sartraproong, *A true hero: King Chulalongkorn of Siam's visit to Singapore and Java in 1871* (Bangkok: Tana Press and Graphic Co. Ltd, 2004), 218. Kannikar's meticulous study uses English, Dutch, Malay and Thai sources to compare and contrast the various accounts of the visit. This excellent study shows the intent of the Thai court, and the stakes involved. For another account, see Imitip Pttajoti Suharto, *Journeys to Java by a Siamese king* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, 2001). Also see Lysa Hong, 'Extraterritoriality in Bangkok in the reign of King Chulalongkorn, 1868–1910: The cacophonies of semi-colonial cosmopolitanism', *Intinerario: European journal of overseas history*, 27(2) (2003): 25–46.

learn about Western culture and language in order to understand better the people they had to deal with. This policy can either be seen as a pragmatic strategy of the weak, or as what others have called auto-colonialism, self-colonisation or crypto-colonialism.⁵

Coming to terms with Western culture by appropriating what is seen as helpful to national survival, Thailand did its best to maintain some control over its own affairs, and to find ways to maximise profit from trade. Adopting Western clothing, architecture, music and artistic tastes may have made the Thai people appear more Western, and therefore ‘civilised’ (*siwilai*), but the core of Thai beliefs and character remained essentially unchanged. For example, Christianity never replaced Buddhism as the predominant religion. Nevertheless, adopting Western modernity had its drawbacks—the allure of modernity compromised and changed local social and ethical values.

As survival strategy, the Thai ruling elite began to send their children to Europe to learn the ways of the West and therefore become more effective leaders who understood the West—not just speaking their language, but understanding their culture and mindset. In fact, there were more Thai who were familiar with the West than Westerners who knew anything about Thailand. Because the West was the new hegemonic power centre, the new Mandala,⁶ it was best that the Thai public should know something about this new threat to Thai identity and Thai culture. I think that from the Thai point of view, ‘knowing’ the West, is to ‘conquer’ the West—to make Western knowledge part of Thai knowledge.

Many of these students, particularly those who studied in England, were exposed to European literature. Most, of course, were exposed to the readily available popular novels. Before the age of film, novels offered an altogether seductive initiation into the ways of the world. The young Thai

5 In his opening remarks at the ‘Ambiguous Allure of the West’ conference held at Cornell University, 5 November 2004, Peter Jackson proposed that ‘semi-coloniality’ might be a useful concept to explain Thailand’s relationship with the West. Jackson argues that it was Thailand’s own elite emulating the Western colonisers that helped changed Thailand into a society that resembled colonies in the region. In addition, the Thai elite also used colonial policies and practices to consolidate their power. He referred to Kasian Tejapira’s idea that the Chakri monarchy was an ‘auto-colonial’ power. Jackson also referred to Michael Herzfeld’s notion of ‘crypto-colonialism’, see note 9 below.

6 See Oliver W. Wolters, ‘Among the Mandalas’, in *History, culture, and region in Southeast Asian perspectives* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1999), 126–54.

students studying in England would have read Victorian novels not only to improve their grasp of English, but to explore imaginatively this new world of Western culture.

Although postcolonial literary scholars debate whether the indigenous novel is written ‘to mimic’, ‘to ridicule’ or ‘to resist’ the colonial masters, such an analysis does not apply neatly to the Thai case. There is no question that the Thai novel is directly influenced by the European literary tradition, but the nature of that influence is complicated and ambiguous. Thais tended to look at translation not in the literal sense but as a version of the looting accompanying conquest. Nor were Thais reticent about admitting that they were looting good ideas from the West. In other words, the influence of Western literary ideas was not part and parcel of direct colonial rule where education and cultural influence is the official policy of the foreign power. The influence of the West in Thailand was self-induced, not as a form of submission but as a weapon for resistance. With official support from the court, Thai authors freely borrowed from the West with ease and without anxiety. They were not submitting to the West but doing what Rama V had urged in a speech to prize-winning students at Suan Kulap School in 1886. To wit:

There are few of us who are authors and knowledgeable about other countries that can transfer knowledge from their texts to make it our own ... But we have hopes that when our students learn enough they will strive to write books that will be useful. In addition, those who have studied abroad should be diligent in translating texts from foreign languages into Thai in order to support and to spread education.⁷

The king and the promoters of the new literature took a thoroughly pragmatic attitude. How best to learn about the West if not through appropriated and ‘translated’ Western forms? Translated articles with Western content also educate the Thai public about the foreigner in a controlled way to keep them part of a Thai construction of the *farang*

⁷ Quoted in Suphanni, *History of the Thai novel*, 32. In the first editorial of the magazine *Lak wittaya*, published in 1900, Jaophraya Thammasakmontri urged writers to consider the prose narrative form to express modern ideas. Translations were also encouraged as a defensive strategy to prevent Thailand from falling victim to colonisation. For a discussion of the use of translation in the colonial context, see Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting translation: History, post-structuralism, and the colonial context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). Postcolonial studies focus a lot of attention on translation as control and as resistance. Also see Vincent Rafael, *Contracting colonialism: Translation and Christian conversion in Tagalog society under early Spanish rule* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993). Rafael argues that translation and mistranslation is the Tagalog Filipino’s way to cope with and to participate in the colonial process.

Other. This counter-hegemonic strategy parallels colonial translation of colonised texts that is part and parcel of the colonisation process that portrays the colonised as inferior.

Rather more than straightforward translation is involved here. The Thai intellectuals acknowledged and even proclaimed that they were ‘stealing knowledge’ or ‘plagiarising’ from the West. They clearly felt no shame about this theft. To the Thais, appropriating the novel from the West was in fact seen as a ‘clever’ mastery of the West, and not as the bankruptcy of indigenous genius. Western influences were not seen as impositions because Thailand had not been colonised. Having escaped direct colonisation, the Thai elite focused on appropriating what they saw as good, and perhaps less on ‘rejecting’ what can be seen as bad, outside influences. Rejection and exclusion of what is seen as bad outside influences do appear within the context of the novel, but more as a way to control the boundaries of culture through the use of satire and ridicule.⁸

Also in this regard, the debate over the dichotomy between what is *than samai* (modern) and what is *siwilai* (civilised and Western) is moot in the Thai case. The outward appearance of *siwilai* and *than samai*, albeit based on the West, would not compromise local identity so long as it was done consciously—and it was. *Than samai* connotes modernity or the best of the era—in science, technology, industry, education, statecraft, business, etc. It is not necessarily seen as Westernisation per se.⁹ In fact,

8 Stephen Greenblatt, ‘Culture’ in *Critical terms for literary study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 226. In a sense, many of the translators took liberties to insert a Thai voice or perspective. For example, in a clever use of translation, the first novel to appear in the Thai language in 1902, *Khwan phayabat*, a translation of Marie Corelli’s *Vendetta*, elevates Thai culture to an international level comparable to English culture. The translator assumes the persona of the author and superimposes the Thai over the English to ‘provincialise’ Italy. Mae Wan [pseud.], *Khwan phayabat* [*The vendetta*], in *Cremation volume of Khunying Nuang Surintharacha* (Wat Thepsirin, Bangkok: 6 June 1967). The idea of provincialising the West is adapted from Dipesh Chakrabarty ‘Postcoloniality and the artifice of history: Who speaks for “Indian” pasts?’ *Representations*, 37 (Winter 1992): 1–26, doi.org/10.2307/2928652.

9 Michael Herzfeld’s talk 15 April 2004 at the Cornell Katin Center takes a slightly different view of Thailand as a semi-colonial state. The reference is based on his paper ‘The absent presence: Discourses of crypto-colonialism’, *The South Atlantic quarterly* (Fall 2002). Herzfeld poses the idea of ‘crypto-colonialism’ where non-colonised states such as Thailand and Greece were also subjected to colonial influences or hegemony but felt too awkward to complain about the effects of colonial influence. Thai nationalism is a complex process of appropriation and resistance. The Thai elite encouraged the embracing of standards of civilisation that originated from the West; admittedly, an example of influence. However, appropriation and accommodation are the hallmarks of Thai identity, where hegemonic influences exist side by side with what is said to be Thai, an essentialist view of Thainess that is based on values derived from Buddhism. See ‘Dialogue between Nai Mun Chuchart and Nai Khong Rakthai broadcast over the radio between 1941–1942’, in Thak Chaloentiarana, ed.,

the Thais have appropriated selectively from outside civilisations but, at the same time, de-privileged their hegemony by not directly emphasising the originating source.

Now, it might be argued that obscuring or hiding the actual foreign source of a cultural form should be interpreted as an interesting cultural strategy within a semi-colonial context of power. From this point of view, hiding the foreign source of a cultural form does not make it any less a form of cultural mimicry. But the situation is perhaps not so easily resolved, for the Thais were simultaneously publishing translations and adaptations of European novels and short fiction. And, far from concealing their Western origins, the magazines in which these works appeared proclaimed the cultural mindset of the Thais about modernity.

Several Thai literary magazines published either translations or adaptations from European novels and short stories. The goals of these magazines were to encourage the composition and translations of prose fiction and to spread this new form of entertainment to an expanding literate public clamouring for more works in Thai.¹⁰ But note what these magazines were called by the intellectuals who founded them. One representative

Thai Politics, 1932–1947: Extracts and documents, volume 1 (Bangkok: Social Science Association of Thailand, 1978), 260–316. In the dialogue between Nai Man and Nai Khong aired over the radio in the mid-1930s, the English were held up as models of the modern and civilised. Thais were urged to emulate the English and not the African who are depicted as the least civilised. But at no point did the elite advocate embracing Christianity. Michael Herzfeld's example that the Thai used Western forks and spoons to eat but adapted these to their own practices can either be seen as evidence of crypto-colonialism or the Thai ability to embrace hybridity.

10 Suphanni, *History of the Thai novel*, 47–50, 63–80. The modern term for the novel is *nawaniyai* (new tale). Wibha Senanan Kongkanan, *The genesis of the novel in Thailand* (Bangkok: Thai Watthana Panich Co., 1975), 39–44. Wibha believes that the term *nawaniyai* was probably coined by Si Burapha's *Klum suphap burut* [*The gentleman's group*] in 1928. The term *nawaniyai* did not appear in the Ratchabanditsathan dictionary until 1982. The term *nawaniyai* is an improvement over *nangseu an len* (books to read for fun), which is the common term used to describe the genre. S. Plai Noi asserts that the journal *Thalok witthaya* was published in 1900 for a few years by Wan Thalok Witthaya, and that it reappeared in 1912. According to him, Khru Liam was the sole writer of the magazine that appeared in 1912. See S. Plai Noi, *Khru Liam phu khian nawaniyai thai khon raek khwam mai phayabat* [*Khru Liam the first Thai novelist who wrote khwam mai phayabat*] (Bangkok: Dokya, 2002), 82–3. Suchart Sawatsi even speculated that *Khwam mai phayabat* was serialised in that journal. Luang Wilatpariwat mainly wrote as 'Nai Samran' [Mr Happy] in that magazine. But he also used other pen names such as 'Kaew Kung' [Glass Shrimp], 'Rang Jiep' [Absolutely Farang], 'Khun Thong' [Minah Bird], 'Pakka Kaew' [Glass Pen], 'Kluae Kaew' [Crystal Salt], 'Malaeng Mum' [Spider], 'Maew Europe' [European Cat], 'Suriwong Songfa' [Lightening up the Sky], 'Sithanonchai' (a famous court figure from the Ayutthaya period), 'Nai Talok Khon Thi Song' [The Second Comedian], 'Hong Thong' [Golden Swan], 'Nok Krathung' [Krathung Bird], 'Editor', 'Gaw Gaw' (the first letter of the Thai alphabet), 'Nok Noi' [Little Bird], and 'Nok Nori' [Nori Bird]. Suphanni, *History of the Thai novel*, 65.

is *Lak wittahaya* [*Stealing knowledge* or *Plagiarism*] edited by Phraya Thammasakmontri. Although it lasted only a few years after it began in 1900, the founders of *Lak wittahaya* included Prince Phitayalongkorn, Jaophraya Thammasakmontri and Phraya Surintharacha.¹¹ Some scholars claim that Crown Prince Vajiravudh and Khru Liam were also members of the editorial board. Another is *Thalok wittahaya* [*Exposing knowledge*] edited by Luang Wilatpariwat or ‘Khru Liam’ or ‘Nai Samran’. The third is *Thawee panya* [*Increasing wisdom*] of Crown Prince Vajiravudh.

The name *Lak wittahaya* by itself is interesting and significant.¹² It could have easily been *lak wittahaya* with a low tone on *lak* meaning ‘principles of knowledge’. It could even have been *rak wittahaya* or ‘love of knowledge’. Instead, the magazine took the unabashed name ‘to steal or plagiarise knowledge’, presumably from the West. There was no pretence about ‘mimicking’ or about denying any debt to European achievements. There was no shame in appropriating something of value. Perhaps the fact that Thailand was not a direct colony of any Western power allowed the Thai elite to view themselves as moral equals of the West and therefore there could be no considerations of inferiority or superiority between Thai and European literature. For the Thais of this period, imitation does not seem to be accompanied by the anxiety of influence. The Thai public is not fixated on the origins of what constitutes Thai culture. In fact, to many Thais, the *Ramakian* is considered Thai and not a copy or a version of the Indian epic, the *Ramayana*. Even though the Thai ‘appropriated’ foreign literature, the act of translating from another culture into the Thai language is regarded as transforming the original work into a Thai one. In fact, Thai culture has been formed through a process of appropriation, translation and adaptation—the invention of a writing system; the adaptation and translation of Indian, Indonesian and Chinese literatures; and the adoption of Buddhism and Brahmanism, are some examples.

The impact of modernity, including its critique, can be glimpsed from several of the early Thai novels, in particular, the first novel written in Thai by a Thai author that is about Thai society. This novel—Khru

11 Officials were given titles and names by the king until the overthrow of absolute monarchy in 1932. In ascending order, these are Khun, Luang, Phra, Phraya and Jaophraya.

12 *Lak wittahaya* can also be translated as ‘Theft of knowledge’. Its editorial staff included Prince Bidyalongkorn (pseudonym No Mo So), Crown Prince Vajiravudh, Jaophraya Thammasakmontri, Phraya Surintharacha (pseudonym Mae Wan) and Luang Wilat (pseudonym Khru Liam). Mattani Rutnin, *Modern Thai literature: The process of modernization and the transformation of values* (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 1988), 21.

Liam's *Khvam mai phayabat* [*The non-vendetta*]¹³—was published in 1915. But before we examine Khru Liam's novel, it should be noted that it was written to parody the first novel that was marketed in Thailand in the Thai language. That novel was Marie Corelli's *Vendetta*, translated by Phraya Surintha-racha, one of the very early Thai scholars sent by the court to study in England.

The candid and complex ways that the Thai engaged with the West are reflected in the appropriation of Western literature through translation. Here again, *Lak wittaya* is especially significant as the publisher of the Thai translation of Marie Corelli's *Vendetta! Or the story of one forgotten, a novel* (1886). Marie Corelli (1855–1924) was a prolific and bestselling writer in Victorian England. The Cornell University Echols Collection contains 48 titles under Marie Corelli's name. Also, as indication of the Thai fascination with her work, of the 48, six are Thai translations of her novels. Marie Corelli is the pseudonym of Mary 'Minnie' MacKay, who imagined herself as hyper-feminine, struggling against the prejudices of male literary critics. Despite outselling her male rivals by a large margin, she never gained the respect of literary scholars. She was seen as an author of popular fiction. On average, each novel sold over 100,000 copies, to the chagrin of her 'highbrow' competitors. For example, H.G. Wells and Arthur Conan Doyle sold about 1,500 each of their novels. She was read by the booming middle class, and perhaps in this one can draw a parallel that explains why she became so popular also in Thailand and elsewhere in Asia. At one point, the *London mercury* asserted that 'Miss Corelli, in her heyday, was read by the entire middle-class'.¹³ Corelli's novels were also a favourite of Queen Victoria and hundreds of thousands of readers in Europe, in America and in Asia. Her works contributed more to English hegemony in Asia than most of her contemporary literary giants like H. Rider Haggard and Arthur Conan Doyle.

Corelli's *Vendetta* was translated by Phraya Surintha-racha, a man, who used the feminine pseudonym 'Mae Wan' (literally meaning 'Mother Wan' or 'Madame Wan'), perhaps to indicate that the original author was a woman. The novel was published in 10 instalments under the Thai title *Khvam phayabat* and was completed in April 1901. The instalments were then collated and published as a book in 1902. It became Thailand's first full-length novel and was highly influential. Not only did the novel

13 The *London mercury* quotation is from Annette R. Federico, *Idol of suburbia: Marie Corelli and late-Victorian literary culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 169.

revolutionise the Thai language with its simplified spelling and use of English punctuation,¹⁴ it exposed the Thai reading public to a new form of narrative.

Before the modern novel appeared, classical Thai literature concerned itself mostly with the lives of the Thai nobility and aristocracy. Although some of the major literary compositions commissioned during the early part of the Ratanakosin period were based on foreign literature—Chinese, Indian and Javanese—they were mostly epics or didactic literature. In contrast, *Khwan phayabat* is about the present and the mundane, and the exciting daily happenings in the lives of people with whom the reader can easily identify—just what we would expect a novel to deal with. But the novel also draws on romance. The story is set in Italy, a foreign and exotic place to the Thai as well as to the English. The novel contains passionate love affairs, adultery, tragedy, betrayal, secrecy, adventure, excitement and revenge.

That being said, Mae Wan's text cannot be considered just a literal translation of Marie Corelli's *Vendetta*. What we may call cultural norms are open to question, or, indeed, to reinterpretation. Mae Wan took the liberties of inserting his own thoughts, asides and explanations of European behaviour (e.g. kissing of the hand). He also excised most of Corelli's criticism of the state of European morality and ethics¹⁵ and substituted his own comments. For example, at the beginning of the novel where the main character, Count Fabio Romani, tells the reader that he is writing from the grave, that is, he is 'already dead', Mae Wan draws the Thai reader in by adding comments about the disposal of the corpse, especially in regard to how the Thai way of cremation is superior to the European way of burial. Mae Wan remarks that 'dead' means that the person has been sent to the *Wat* (Buddhist temple) and that he has already been cremated. He writes that the disposal of the corpse in this manner is clean and 'safe', using the English word spelt in Thai, meaning that cremating a corpse is the safest way to ensure that the person is really dead and gone. This assertion is, however, disingenuous: if Count Romani had been 'cremated', there could not have been a story. In Corelli's original, he was, in fact, buried alive and was able to escape to later plot revenge against

14 Suphanni, *History of the Thai novel*, 153.

15 W. Winichakul, *Pak kai wannakam [Literature from the pen]* (Bangkok: Dokya, 1994), 10.

his wife and her lover.¹⁶ The retention of English words gives the novel an air of authenticity and intimacy. To the newly educated readership, most of whom would have studied English in school, or have studied abroad, those English words have entered into their popular vocabulary as signs of modernity, *siwilai* and sophistication. The insertion of English also allowed the Thai reader to identify with the English narrator who expressed disdain towards the Italians.

Mae Wan also inserts the Thai voice and asserts Thai cultural superiority by asking the reader why other cultures do not emulate the superior Thai practice of cremation. In this rewriting of the narrative, the West is decentred because European fruits become Thai fruits, and ‘South American forest’ is turned into ‘forests in the north of Siam’. In this way, the writer establishes a rapport with the reader and, in addition, places the Thai on par with the English and thus superior to the Italians in the story. In fact, the ending in the Thai version differs from the original because, after the story’s hero achieved his revenge, he disappears not into the jungles of South America, but sets sail to live in Thailand.

Most literary historians assume that *Khwan phayabat* achieved great success following its publication in 1902, and it may indeed be true that it was read so widely and so avidly that no copies of its first printing remain. In fact, I am unaware of the existence of a copy of the first edition because even the National Library of Thailand does not have a copy of the original printing. But it is noteworthy that after the first printing appeared in 1902, the novel seems not to have been reprinted until 11 years later in 1913. The Cornell University Library copy of this novel is a reprint of the 1913 edition, published as a cremation volume of Phraya Surinthaarach’s wife in 1967. Because the 1967 cremation volume edition is based on the second edition of 1913 rather than a later one, I am assuming that no new editions were published and sold during those 54 years.

16 For the story to work, the Count must be buried alive and not cremated. His friend Guido, who was having an affair with the Count’s wife, buried the Count when he had fallen ill with cholera. The Count managed to escape from his tomb to exact his revenge by killing Guido in a duel and later revealing himself to his wife who is tragically killed by a slab of stone falling on her. Mae Wan adds a Thai Buddhist interpretation to Nina’s death by saying that her *karma* had caught up with her.

Even though it seems not to have gone through many editions, scholars agree that *Khvam phayabat* is the first significant novel to appear in the Thai language.¹⁷ As a result, Marie Corelli became an iconic author to the educated Thai. A sign of her acceptance as one of the canonical authors for the new educated class appears in Si Burapha's *Luk phuchai* [*The real man*], published in 1928. In *Luk phuchai*, Si Burapha suggests that the lead female character is not only well-read, but a sophisticated, modern Thai woman because her library holds works by Dickens, Walter Scott, the Greek philosophers, Thai journals such as *Lak witthaya* and *Phadung witthaya*, and Rama VI's *Dusit samit*—and Marie Corelli.¹⁸

As the first modern 'Thai' novel, Corelli's *Vendetta* established a set of conventions for Thai writers to work with. First, it became possible to envision a large and sweeping setting that included exotic and foreign places. Second, authors could begin to describe the places in the novels with enough details (be they real or make believe) to allow the reader to imagine and to see clearly where the story takes place. Third, the characters could become more real, plausible and familiar, and not just kings, princes and princesses. Fourth, plots could be more exciting and fast-moving and full of tension without relying on the occult. Fifth, authors could begin to scrutinise and challenge changing social behaviour and cultural values. And lastly, issues of gender, sexuality and adultery could now be raised. Although sexuality is not alien in traditional Thai literature, the fact that it is written in prose and uses everyday language and not metaphor is tantalising. As we shall see later, the later Thai novel that was written to negate the moral of *Vendetta* uses language that goes a step further, to include mundane and vulgar language. In this later text, eroticism is no longer metaphoric but literal.

The novel, with its portrayal of the modern, also became a way to spread the culture of modernity. A modern public concerned with being up-to-date will demand and presumably reward modern forms of entertainment. Novels at once satisfy that demand while providing a means of criticising aspects of modernity. Deviating from traditional subject matters that focused on Buddhist and religious themes, the new literature explored the impact of modernisation and Westernisation on Thai culture, politics, women's rights, gender behaviour and morality. What we see reflected in

17 Suphanni, *History of the Thai novel*, 54–5; Marcel Barang, *The 20 best novels in Thailand* (Bangkok: Thai Modern Classics, 1994), 60; Wibha, *The genesis of the novel in Thailand*, 39.

18 Si Burapha [pseud.], *Luk phuchai* [*The real man*] (Bangkok: Dokya, 1975), 213.

this Thai mirror held up to nature is a complex interweaving of traditional Thai values and those deemed to be modern and potentially subversive. The *siwilai* project initiated by the Thai elite brought material modernity and new ways to corrupt the morals of young people. Women who have traditionally been insulated from corrupting behaviour are now equally exposed. Open sexuality subverts traditional notions of chastity and modesty. And the impact of Western culture plays out not only on issues of form but also content of the new, modern Thai novel.

Contemporary scholars of Thai literature have known of the publication of Khru Liam's *Khvam mai phayabat*, but they could not read it: all copies were lost. It was only rediscovered in 1997 and reprinted in 2001.¹⁹ Although many scholars conceded that *Khvam mai phayabat* is almost certainly the first Thai novel, the orthodox interpretation has been that it was written to contradict Marie Corelli's Gothic ideas about revenge in *Vendetta*.²⁰ The interpretation of the Thai novel's title has been reified as a 'Thai' novel because it negates the European 'Other' by emphasising

19 The version used for this chapter is Nai Samran, *Khvam mai phayabat [The non-vendetta]* (Bangkok: Double Nine, 2001). This version is the novel's second printing. The typeset and format are reproduced as close as possible to the original. There is also a controversy over its second printing as two publishers have vied for that credit. The other 'second printing' is reproduced by the Dokya Group, which marketed their version of the novel in October 2002. The second copy of this novel was found at the home of Krum Suranan. This copy was signed by the author when he was a monk in July 1923, eight years after its initial printing. Interestingly, the Thai word 'novel' or *nawaniyai* was not used by Khru Liam. Instead he used the term *pralom lok khvam riang*, which translates as 'a composition to soothe the world'. He contends that his book is the first of its genre and that it is a genuine 'novel Thai'—using the English term. Although no longer in common usage, according to the *Ratchabanditsathan Thai dictionary* (1954 edition) novels that focus on romance and sex were known as *nawaniyai pralom lok*. These novels are said to 'please the world or worldly passions'. This is ironic because, in strict Buddhist sense, the concept *pralom lok* is a negative one—that is, it caters to the desires of the flesh. The other irony is that in his desire to make the novel 'Thai', Khru Liam went against the grain of novels of that period where sex is proscribed by Victorian modesty. Coincidentally, Lorraine Patterson writes in her thesis on Cambodian novels, that the novel in Khmer is also '*pralom lok*'. The first Cambodian novel is said to have appeared in 1938, many years after Khru Liam's novel. Lorraine Patterson quotes from Khing Hoc Dy and Mak Phoeun in her chapter 'Cambodia' in *Southeast Asia: Languages and literature: A select guide*, ed. Susan Herbert and Anthony Milner (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1989), 57. Seng Ly Kong, who teaches Khmer at Cornell University, verifies that the Khmer literal translation of *pralom lok* is the same as the Thai. If this true, it suggests that the purpose of the novel is to entertain the reader with romance and sex. The discussion above shows the persistence of Thai erotic culture in the face of Victorian era sexual prudery. It is a good example of Thai agency and selectivity in the face of Western imperialism. The Thais did not copy everything or get rid of all aspects of their culture that may have conflicted with Western values.

20 Bunchuay Somphong said that *Khvam mai phayabat* was written to 'match' Mae Wan's *Khvam phayabat* and to counter Western ideas of revenge with Buddhist teachings of forgiveness. Quoted in Chuay Phunpherm, *Chiwit lae ngan khong khru liam [The life and works of Khru Liam]*, in the introduction of *Sao song phan pi [The two-thousand-year-old maiden]* by Nok Nori, one of Khru Liam's

the value of Buddhist non-vengeance and non-anger. This novel is a fascinating example of appropriating a Western cultural form in order to enunciate an anti-Western position. But, because the negation takes place within a framework at least partly Western in origin, the negation itself is only partial.²¹

The fact that a copy sat on the shelves of a book collector, and that its owner and perhaps others who may have read it had failed to come forward to talk about it, raises one question: What is the novel about?²² We may not be able to know why it was forgotten or ignored, but we can come to it with fresh eyes. When we do so, the novel reveals itself to be problematic, almost elusively so.

To begin with, the publication date of this novel is itself elusive. In mentioning the novel's existence, Suphanni relies on an insert discovered in another book published by Nai Samran in 1915 or 1916 advertising the publication of *Khvam mai phayabat*.²³ The insert announced that *Khvam mai phayabat* is written to impress the Thai reader and that it is an original novel written by a Thai author who does not have to rely on *farang* ideas. The novel is about good and evil and about affairs that will soothe the heart. The advertisement promises that the language used will be sweet-sounding and will reflect the heritage of the Thai language. The advertisement also promises that the novel will have pictures and notes. It boasts that the new novel in two volumes will cost no more than Mae Wan's *Khvam phayabat*.

pseudonyms. This book is the republication of Khru Liam's translation of H. Rider Haggard's *She*. The translation was republished in 1990 by Dokya (Nok Nori, *Sao song phan pi* (Bangkok: Dokya, 1990)).

21 I want to thank Peter Jackson and Rachel Harrison for this insight. Rachel agrees that *Khvam mai phayabat* demonstrates the complex dynamics of adoption, absorption, influence, mimicry, resistance, appropriation, intertextuality, anxiety and ease/confidence.

22 Khru Liam's contemporaries admitted in his cremation volume in 1966 that they remembered reading *Khvam mai phayabat*, but no one said anything of substance about the story itself. The only reference to the plot is given by Bunchuay Somphong, who said that the novel is based on the Buddhist notion of forgiveness that allowed the wronged husband to win back his adulterous wife. Bunchuay Somphong in *Wilatpariwatranusorn*, quoted in Thammakiat Kan-ari, 'Khru Liam poetchak nawaniyai thai rueang raek duay "khvam mai phayabat"', *Silapa watthanatbam*, volume 5 (May 1984): 111. The quote suggests that the husband was a *phon ek* or military 'general', which is untrue. Perhaps it is a misprint and the word should have been *phra ek*, or the leading man. Also see excerpts quoted in Ajin Jantharamporn, *Nakkhian thai nai 'wong wannakam'* [*Thai writers in the 'literary circle'*] (Bangkok: Dokya, 1997), 9–52.

23 Suphanni, *History of the Thai novel*, 57.

Although the insert was found in Nai Samran's *Nang neramit*, which appeared around 1916, Suphanni erroneously dated *Khvam mai phayabat* as appearing during King Chulalongkorn's reign and therefore contemporary with the first publication of Mae Wan's *Khvam phayabat* in 1902. This mistake was also made by Ajin Jantharamphorn, who also asserted that the novel appeared during Rama V's reign. However, he was correct in naming the novel's publication date—1915, which coincides with King Vajiravudh's reign.²⁴ Had the literary scholars made the connection that the *Khvam phayabat* in question is in fact the 1913 second edition, they would have known that *Khvam mai phayabat* was a contemporary of the former's second printing and not of its first. King Chulalongkorn died in 1910.

The other clue that scholars missed is that the novel appeared soon after the promulgation of the Literary Act in 1914, and that fact has some interesting implications. The preface of the novel obliquely refers to the Literary Act's purpose of promoting indigenous works in Thai by Thai authors. The author proclaims:

This story is an imaginary story composed by a Thai. It is a genuine Thai story, not an abridged story, not a translation, and not an adaptation of some other story. It is the inaugural copy of a book in the family of *pralom lok khvam riang* which is a real Thai *novel* which should be appealing to the Thai readership whom I pity. Now they can read a genuinely Thai *pralom lok khvam riang*.²⁵

To bypass for the moment the novel itself and jump ahead to the postscript, Khru Liam reveals there that the idea for the novel was actually an opportunistic commercial venture. *Khvam mai phayabat* reflects, in fact, converging events. Khru Liam admits in his postscript that he was commissioned to write a novel with the predetermined title *Khvam mai phayabat* by a book publisher, presumably the owner of the Thai Printing Company that later published the novel. The timing of the

24 Ajin Jantharamphorn, *Thai writers in the 'literary circle'*, 52. Ajin also claims erroneously that Khru Liam's novel was published during the reign of King Chulalongkorn in 1915 and that it coincided with the publication of Mae Wan's novel. Suchart Sawatsi admits that he too had written about the novel without ever having read it and that he based his conclusions on the (erroneous) assertions of other literary scholars. Suchart went as far as giving credit to Khru Liam's magazine *Thalok wittaya* for publishing instalments of the novel, not realising that it was over 700 pages long and would have taken several years to publish the whole novel in serialised form. We know now that Khru Liam wrote the novel in one sitting—that is, he completed the novel in 22 days writing for six hours a day. See Suchart's introduction in the novel's Dokya edition, 107.

25 Nai Samran, *Khvam mai phayabat*, foreword.

novel also coincided with the recent republication of *Khwan phayabat* in 1913, as well as with the promulgation of the *Literary Act 1914*. That Act intended to curb the proliferation of mediocre works of translation and with them the importation of grammatical forms from the West into Thai. It also urged Thai authors to produce good Thai literature.²⁶ Although Khru Liam does not mention the publisher by name, he admits that his employer supplied him with paper and pencils. He was also told that he could write any kind of story as long as it was not a *farang* (that is, a Western) one.²⁷

Thus charged, Khru Liam wrote a story about the contemporary Thai society that was rapidly changing around him. Even though the language Khru Liam used is colloquial and even vulgar Thai, some borrowed English words still appear. The use of English words does not make the novel less Thai, because it reflects the common usage of language of Thai society at that time. However, Khru Liam did not follow the advice of the *Literary Act* to refrain from the use of Western grammatical forms and punctuation—again a reflection of the popular Thai belief that if something is useful and better, why not appropriate it?²⁸

26 The Act can be interpreted as Rama VI's attempts to 'nationalise' the emerging literature, and to exert some quality control on these new literary forms now that they have taken root. The law lamented the fact that translations of bad novels were sold and that the Thai language was contaminated by Western syntax and grammar. For details of the *Literary Act 1914*, see *Ratchakitchanubeksa*, vol. 31, 310–311, also quoted and translated in Wibha, *The genesis of the novel in Thailand*, 72, 73. Wibha concludes that the law had little impact. However, she does not make the connection between the law and the appearance of *Khwan mai phayabat* the following year.

27 Nai Samran, *Khwan mai phayabat*, 720. It is possible to interpret this requirement as 'resistance' against *farang* novels and the West. But one can also argue that the publisher is responding to Rama VI's call to move beyond translations to original works. Khru Liam's novel is indeed an original work about contemporary Thai society and culture. However, this novel was not a market success, which led to the second original novel written by a Thai author in Thai. That novel, *Nang neramit*, imitates the Western novel form as well as content. Therefore, the resistance to the West is once again only partially successful because the Thai readership demanded stories of adventures by Westerners in far and exotic places. It is only in the late 1920s that Thai novels based on Thai stories came into their own in the market place. In 1929, *Luk phuchai* [*The real man*] (Si Burapha), *Satru khong jao lon* [*Her enemy*] (Dok Mai Sot), and *Lakhon haeng chiwit* [*The circus of life*] (Mom Jao Akat Damkoeng) sold in sufficient numbers. These novels are now considered the first real 'Thai' novels worthy of canonisation. See David Smyth, ed., *The canon in Southeast Asian literatures* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000), Chapter 13.

28 The novel's foreword uses two commas, two full stops, and quotation marks. Rachel Harrison points out that it is not objectively the case that Western grammatical forms and punctuation are useful and better in the Thai language—and the usage of such has not persisted. She thinks that this is a marker of further ambiguous attitudes to the West that are distinctly rooted in the context of those times, i.e. that Western punctuation and grammar were seen, in the early decades of the 20th century, as 'useful and better' and therefore to be appropriated, even while other aspects of 'Western-ness' were not (personal communication with the author).

Perhaps referring to the misunderstanding and the flap over the interpretation of *Sanuk nuek*, Khru Liam asks the readers to be tolerant if they find that he is using real names and real places.²⁹ He even makes fun of this by saying that ‘the factual is more fun than fiction’. By implication, he is saying that his novel is also ‘real’ in many ways. Khru Liam boasts that he finished the novel in 22 days by following a strict regimen of writing five pages per hour for six and a half hours each day. All this was done while the author held down another job. Khru Liam wrote as if he were running a marathon: the novel is 730 pages long!³⁰

29 The first major controversy over prose fiction appeared after the establishment of the Wacharayanwiset library, founded by King Chulalongkorn early in his reign. The library published the monthly *Wachirayanwiset* journal. The members of the executive committee were responsible for producing and writing articles for the journal. In 1886, Prince Pichitprichakorn, a half-brother of the king and a prominent legal scholar, wrote what could have been the first instalment of an original Thai novel titled *Sanuk nuek* [*Fun-filled thoughts*]. The story was about several young monks discussing their plans to leave the monkhood and what they would do after leaving. The monks are from Wat Bowoniwet where Prince Pichitprichakorn had been ordained. Because he was familiar with the temple and the surrounding area, he provided very realistic descriptions of the location of his story. His description of the temple grounds was so accurate that Abbot Somdet Krom Phra Porawet (who was incidentally both the Supreme Patriarch and the king’s uncle) thought that the incident was real. He was worried that the story would reflect poorly on his administration and promptly lodged a complaint with the king. King Chulalongkorn had no choice but to reprimand his brother for upsetting their uncle. The king was worried that his uncle, who was quite old and frail, would become fatally ill from the anguish caused by the story, which was circulating among readers in the palaces, government offices and the monasteries. The king did, however, explain in his letter to the abbot that Prince Pichitprichakorn’s article imitated the *novel farang*, of which thousands and thousands have been written and published around the world. Literary scholars, in deference to the king, have identified Chulalongkorn’s analysis of *Sanuk nuek* as the first example of Thai literary criticism. Unfortunately, the controversy raised by the first instalment put an end to this effort and *Sanuk nuek* never became a full-length novel.

30 When Khru Liam presented a copy of the novel to Mae Wan (Phraya Surinthaecha), his classmate from his English school days, he acknowledged his debt to Mae Wan for writing *Khwan phayabat*. At that meeting, Mae Wan marvelled over the fact that it took less than a month for Khru Liam to finish his novel, compared to European authors who might take a year to finish one. Many Thai authors pride themselves for being prolific and fast writers. To many, writing is like exercising—the more you practise, the faster you get. Such a production schedule meant that the writer had to finish writing the novel in one long continuous process to make the story flow smoothly. This production process and timetable ensured that a book could be finished and marketed in a very short time. It is also a concession to the still limited technology where typesetting is done by hand, and, because of the limited types available, after pages are printed, the type settings were broken down and the types reused for the next instalment. Considering the lack of time to edit, it is amazing that some of the early novels are as good as they are. This sort of literary production, that is, fresh and instantaneous, has its roots in writing and singing competitions such as writing *klon sot* (fresh verses). Many Thais are trained to produce poetry or poetic songs at the drop of a hat. For example, note the pride expressed by Luang Wichit Wathakarn when he wrote his monumental novel *Huang rak haew luk* also in record time. Luang Wichit talks about writing as if it were calisthenics. See Thak Chalocmtiarana, ‘Move over Madonna: Luang Wichit’s *Huang rak haew luk*’, in *Southeast Asia across three generations*, ed. James Siegel and Audrey Kahin (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2003), footnote 1, 5.

Khru Liam had been writing fiction for some time, and had already translated novels by H. Rider Haggard (best-known is *She*), scientific texts on health and cinematography, and movie plots and dialogue. But this effort is his first original full-length novel.³¹ He also admits in the postscript that, although he had avoided writing about adultery in the past, he focused on this subject at the request of a writer friend. This writer was the victim of his wife's infidelity, and he had been pestering Khru Liam to write a story about how modernity had corrupted Thai women. Khru Liam confesses that, once he got started on the subject, he realised that this issue was so important that he could not stop writing about it. The resulting novel exposes the decadence of the Bangkok high society, condemning both men and women who depart from traditional values and thus fall prey to the allure of modernity.

Khvam mai phayabat is perhaps best understood by placing it in the context of Marie Corelli's *Vendetta/Khvam phayabat*. The novel begins with the Buddhist quotation that *non*-revenge is sweet, a clear statement of resistance to Western predilections. The author quotes the Pali proverb, 'We can win against his anger with our non-anger; we can win over his evilness with our good deeds'. The novel claims to be 'Thai' by invoking Buddhist values while simultaneously rejecting the Western proverb so central to *Vendetta*, 'revenge is sweet'.³² The narrator, Nai Jian, argues that the sweetness of revenge is only fleeting and that bitterness and anguish will eventually take over. Revenge is pitiful, cowardly and shameful. Revenge leads to more hostility. The really brave gentleman (*suphap burut*) is one who can control his heart and forgive those who have wronged him.³³

31 Examples of his books are cited in Dr Wichitwong Na Pompetch, *Nakkhian sinlapin lae sangkhom thai [Writers, artists and Thai society]* (Bangkok: Saeng Dao Press, 1999), 33, 35. Khru Liam also left a large body of fiction, and even pornography [*rueang kamarom*], that has not been published.

32 It is Rama VI who associates Buddhism with what is unique about Thai nationalism. Interestingly, following the 11 September 2001 attack on the Twin Towers, the Thai band *Carabao* performed a song asking the rhetorical question of whether the Thai should support the all-powerful America or the Arabs who had nothing but the Koran. Their answer was similar to Khru Liam's as they quoted the same Buddhist teaching of forgiveness.

33 The modern Thai concept of the gentleman (*suphap burut*) is Western because sometimes the English term 'gentleman' is used interchangeably in the early novels. The *suphap burut* has higher standards than the *phu di* (upper class), which is a class concept. The *suphap burut* resists the corruption of the *phu di*. Nai Jian is a *suphap burut* while his tormentors are corrupted *phu di*. This differentiation appears in later novels such as *Luk phuchai [The real man]*, in which the hero Manote from a working class family ends up as the 'real man' because he was a *suphap burut*. Interestingly, George Mosse in his book *Nationalism and sexuality* made very much the same point about European masculine gender culture in the 19th century, with the rising bourgeoisie criticising the effete masculinity of the established European nobility (George Mosse, *Nationalism and sexuality: Respectability and abnormal sexuality in modern Europe* (New York: Fertig, 1985)).

To convince the reader of the merit of Buddhist non-anger, the narrator goes on to say that his happiness, wealth and high social standing are the result of his non-*vendetta* and his victory over *mara* (evil). However, even forgiveness is painful because it brought tears to his eyes.³⁴

The novel begins at the end of the saga. Nai Jian is the unlikely hero of the story. He spent three years in England. He is 30-ish, not handsome, overly sensitive and unassertive. He has not been successful at his job, having worked for several government ministries. His mother wants him to get married and suggests that he visits a lovely woman, Prung, who lives outside Bangkok. She is 22 and full of life. They marry and live on her parents' plantation. After a short and blissful honeymoon, Prung convinces her husband to move back to Bangkok so she can enjoy the benefits of modernity. Soon after, Jian's wife is corrupted by the Bangkok social life and she leaves him for a lover. He saves the young girl Praphai from a dirty old man and in gratitude she becomes his mistress. After Prung's lover abandons her, she returns to ask her husband for charity. He forgives her and eventually takes her back as his wife.

From the opening pages of the novel, the reader is drawn in and perhaps even scandalised by the graphic descriptions of erotic behaviour. Romance is not idealised but seen in tandem with sex. Before the meeting with his adulterous wife, Jian is described as sitting alone crying. He is crying because he was thinking about the evil that roamed the world and the evil that made his wife leave him for another man. He is crying also in self-pity that his wife has cheated on him. Upon seeing his anguish, the teenage girl comes to console him and to sit by his side. Nai Jian is unaware that he is crying, but upon seeing this young dark-eyed beauty (Praphai) he begins hugging and kissing her—a startling and rather unexpected reaction. The narrator says:

34 It is possible that many tears in a novel comes from English or European models. In Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The sorrows of young Werther* (1774), Werther believes that the essence of life is governed by his feelings. When he is sad or disappointed he has no trouble throwing himself on the ground and weeping bitterly. See translation by Burton Pike, *The sorrows of young Werther* (New York: The Modern Library, 2004), 67. In addition, Count Romani in *Vendetta* also cries when he thinks of his lovely wife. I have been unable to verify whether Thai men of Khru Liam's generation were apt to shed tears in public, whether this behaviour is specific to Khru Liam, or whether there are literary antecedents. Khru Liam's description of men crying in his novel, and himself crying during the writing of the novel, seems unusual as it does not fit the ideal of Thai masculinity. Tamara Loos believes that the novel is similar to those that appeared in the 1920s and 1930s (including the writing of Rama VI) in that they are 'sappy, sentimental and nostalgic' and the excessive crying of the protagonists is part of the sensitivity that could characterise the drama of young men's lives in these kinds of novels (email correspondence, 29 April 2004).

I lost my senses and grabbed her body in an embrace. Her flesh is so soft. She is barely twenty and I am twice her age. She with the dark eyes and great beauty is witness to my non-revenge. I continue to embrace her and *to kiss her so many times that I lost count*. She cries out but it is not a scream. Then she lays her face on my body and sobs. Her tears fall and soak my flesh. Then, she says to me while sobbing ‘Oh, dear sir, please forgive my father.’³⁵

Nai Jian tells her that he has already forgiven Praphai’s father and his own cheating wife a long time ago. With this reassurance, she puts her arms around his neck in gratitude and thanks him, promising that she will serve him for the rest of her life. As a reward for her pledge of loyalty, he kisses her again.

After this episode, Praphai tells Jian that Mae Prung wants to see him to ask for a donation that will pay for her ordination. Nai Jian, who has not seen her for over a year, at first refuses, but Praphai convinces him to meet his former wife. Nai Jian is shocked by what he saw. He can hardly recognise the woman with whom he was once madly in love. Without intending to be cruel, he blurts out, ‘Is this what is left of you, Mae Prung?’ She has come to ask for his forgiveness and peace of mind. Jian tells her that he bears her no ill will and that he is willing to pay for her ordination to become a nun. Mae Prung confesses her infidelity and reveals that she recently got pregnant but her lover forced her to have an abortion before leaving her. Instead of blaming his wife, Jian blames his own karma and his wife’s evil lover. Mae Prung is so touched by his generosity that she swoons and faints. But before he summons for help, Nai Jian takes his wife into his arms and looks at her closely.

I touched the body of the woman I once loved. Her flesh used to be so soft but now she is all bones. She used to be so vivacious. Now her face is darkened by suffering. I embrace her with a heavy heart and remark loudly all the while sobbing ‘Oh Mae Prung, how can this happen to you?’... As I continue to sob, I lay my face on her bosom.

Upon hearing someone approaching, I steal another hard look at Mae Prung’s face and *I kiss her on the lips* for old time’s sake, having missed kissing her for a long time.³⁶

35 Nai Samran, *Khwan mai phayabat*, 6–7, emphasis added. All translations throughout this book are the author’s, except where otherwise stated.

36 Nai Samran, *Khwan mai phayabat*, 21, emphasis added.

I would suspect that to the contemporary Thai reader this first chapter was exciting, different and salacious, if not scandalous. I am unaware of any Thai classical romance that starts in this manner. In addition, the description is not in metaphor but in everyday language—perhaps inaugurating a new and modern sensibility. And although it is not unusual to find explicit love scenes in classical Thai romantic literature, those romantic trysts tend to be between kings, princesses, the nobility and mighty warriors. The sexual exploits of the common man are barely featured. It is easier to imagine romance and sex between handsome kings and beautiful princesses, or between mythical beings such as Hanuman and the mermaid, but it is a stretch to imagine a person like Nai Jian as a romantic object of affection.

Jian shows his lust for women by kissing both his young mistress and his unconscious wife.³⁷ This emphasis on sex appears elsewhere throughout the novel. Describing his first meeting with Mae Prung, Nai Jian

37 Krom Silapakorn, *Sepha rueang khun chang khun phaen* [*The tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen*] (Bangkok: Department of Fine Arts, 1950), 89. In the chapter where Plaikaew (Khun Phaen) makes love to Nang Phim, the word *jup* appears. Khun Phaen kisses Nang Phim on the cheeks and on her breasts. Khun Phaen also seduces Nang Phim's sister and does the same with her (i.e. kiss her breasts) (122). The word to describe the kiss here is *jup*, a word that implies planting one's lips on another person's body. The word *jup* is derived from the sound made while sucking on something. The Thai version of a kiss is *horn*, for example, *horn kaem*—kissing the cheek—is inhaling or smelling another person's fragrant scent. Although the Thai version is also intimate, it lacks the eroticism of a European kiss. Kissing on the lips is not openly practised in Thai culture, as it suggests sexual desire. Although the first Thai cinematic kiss took place in 1932, it was not generally accepted or performed on film until recently. See Scot Barmé, *Woman, man, Bangkok* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2002), 212–13. A kissing scene appears in the first Thai talking film *Long thang* [*Gone astray*], released in 1932. A still photograph of the kissing scene appears in Barmé, 212. The scene takes place in a nightclub in Bangkok where three men are drinking beer and whiskey and are entertained by two high-class prostitutes. In *Lilit phra lor* [*The tale of Phra lo*], there is a passage in the 252-stanza *chuey chom chu pak pon*, which has been interpreted as kissing on the lips, that is 'the lovers praise each other and present their lips to each other and touching lips to lips'. See Phra Worawetphisit, *Khumue lilit phra lo* [*A handbook of lilit phra lo*] (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1960), 287. The word *jup* can be found in D.J.B. Pallegoix, *Dictionarium linguae Thai* (Paris: Jussu Imperatoris Impressum, 1854), 101, and in D.B. Bradley, *Dictionary of the Siamese language* (Bangkok: Khurusapha Press, 1971; reprint edition), 151. This word is also found in Laotian, a language that could be considered less adulterated Thai. Wiraphong Meesathan, *Potchananukrom lao thai* [*Lao-Thai dictionary*] (Bangkok: Mahidol University, 2000), 6. A Laotian-French dictionary published in 1912 also identifies the Laotian *jup* as *baiser* (French: 'to kiss'). Theodore Guignard, *Dictionnaire Laotien-Français* (Hong Kong: Imperimerie de Nazareth, 1912), 83. It is possible that the Lao word is derived from Thai. But if such is not the case, the word can be an indigenous one in old Thai. *Jup* also appears in *Phra aphaimani*, which was written by Sunthorn Phu in the late 18th century. The love scenes in classical literature are graphically described in *bot sangwat*, where physical contact such as kissing and caressing are described. Intercourse, however, is described in metaphor such as a kite fight between the large male star kite and the smaller female kite that pursues the male to capture it. The imagery is interesting in that it is not logical to Western thinking that the star kite should be the male instead of the female. The smaller kite has a long tail and could easily be interpreted as the male sperm chasing

admits to an instant attraction to her. She, too, seems ready to work her charms on him. The description of Prung is almost entirely focused on her physical beauty, and the trope of the female exploiting her physical sexuality appears throughout the novel. For example, after a brief and even superficial courtship, the not-so-coy Mae Prung quickly offers herself to Jian as a ploy to speed up their marriage.

At their second meeting, Mae Prung teases Jian by whispering in his ear that ‘the wedding should be arranged quickly. But you can have me even before the wedding, my body is yours just like this bouquet of flowers’.³⁸ Although Jian did not take advantage of her at that point, he agrees with his friend’s crude remark that he could have had Mae Prung any time he wanted. His friend tells Jian *ao mai tong wiwa ko dai saduak*, which means ‘she can be taken easily even without marrying’. The word *ao* is also a vulgar term used to describe ‘having sex’.

The next time Jian visits her, Mae Prung lures the timid Jian to the back of the orchard surrounding her house and invites him to sit next to her on the same bench. Without his knowledge, Jian’s friend has given Mae Prung a love poem that Jian had composed. When confronted with the poem, Jian becomes embarrassed, but it is the woman who initiates the intimacy. Mae Prung tells Jian that they are far away from prying eyes. She then moves closer to him and touches his shoulder. In Thai culture, the act of ‘touching’ is seen as an invitation for more intimacy. And when their hands touch, chills go up and down Jian’s body. Jian then describes his own feelings:

I am shocked. Is Mae Prung engaged in magic or is she using powerful mantras ...? Why is she sitting so close and even touches my shoulder? Why is she sitting shyly here *as if to claim a kiss*?³⁹

Jian becomes bolder, so he embraces her (*kot*) and then kisses (*jup*) her. She does not resist.

the large female star kite or womb. But in this instance, the female is chasing the male. See the seduction of Phra Aphaimani by the Sea Ogress in National Culture Commission, *Phra Aphaimani* (Bangkok: The Interest Co., 1998) 30–2. Given the kite fight as a representation of male and female social interaction, one is not surprised to find stories in classical and modern Thai literature where the man is pursued by the woman.

38 Nai Samran, *Khwan mai phayabat*, 51.

39 Nai Samran, *Khwan mai phayabat*, 59, emphasis added.

Mattani Rutnin asserts that Thai middle-class morality suppresses sexuality in the early Thai novels.⁴⁰ If this is correct, then the erotic passages like the one above suggest that *Khvam mai phayabat* does not fit the norm expected of early Thai novels and, therefore, would be rejected by most middle-class readers. The fact that we know that the novel was not a great market success may or may not support Mattani's observation. My own sense is that *Khvam mai phayabat* employing familiar Thai tropes—women having soft flesh, slender arms and tantalising breasts—found in classical literature is, therefore, not new. What may be unpalatable to Thai readers is the frank criticism of Bangkok high society.

Khru Liam's construction of the Thai male also breaks new ground.⁴¹ Khru Liam does not idealise Thai masculinity but writes about the emerging Thai male as being both good and evil. In fact, aside from Jian, the other Thai males in this novel are unsavoury characters. Khru Liam appears to be chastising the Thai male for his decadence, for having been lured into debauchery by modern Bangkok. His examples of the Thai male suggest that moral values have declined and that overindulgence in sex and alcohol have become rampant in Bangkok society. The Thai obsession with modernisation and their exposure to capitalist conspicuous consumption have degraded Thai morality.

40 Mattani, *Modern Thai literature*, 32. I am not sure if this observation is correct. The focus on sex as human behaviour is not that foreign in Thai culture. In fact, sexuality is viewed as natural human behaviour. I have already mentioned how sexuality is dealt with in classical literature. In addition, one has only to visit and to view temple murals to witness open depiction of sexual activity which include both normative sexual behaviour (men fondling women's breasts and having intercourse), as well as homosexual sex. The paintings also show rabbits, birds and horses copulating. See Niwat Kongphian, *Cherng sangwat: Kamarup nai phapkhian tam prapheni thee mee siang wannakhadee thai* [*Of carnal knowledge: Pornography in traditional paintings that resonate in Thai literature*] (Bangkok: Silapa Watthanatham, 1998).

41 Models of popular Thai masculinity in literature include Phra Lo in *Lilit phra lo*, Khun Phaen in *Sepha rueang khun chang khun phaen*, and Phra Aphaimani in *Phra aphaimani*. Phra Lo is a male character believed to be from Phrae or Lampang who lived in the 12th century. He is said to be the model of the tragic male lover. Khun Phaen is a character who allegedly lived in Ayutthaya at the end of the 15th century. The poetic form, written during the early Rattanakosin period, is said to have been based on a folk tale. Khun Phaen is a good soldier, a lover who has no qualms about seducing another man's wife. Phra Aphaimani is one of Sunthorn Phu's greatest works. It is speculated that he wrote it while in prison during the reign of Rama II. The story is a voyage of fantasy and the hero is based on a Sinitic model of the ideal man—a scholar and artist. It is said that Sunthorn Phu also based his story on the Arabian tales of travel by ship to faraway lands. See Sittha Phiniphuwadol and Nittaya Kanchanwan, *Khwan ru thuapai thang wannakam thai* [*General knowledge of Thai literature*] (Bangkok: D.K. Book, 1977), 100–2, 198–201, 222–4. One of the few studies of literary models of masculinity is Wibha Senanan Kongkanan, *Phra ek nai wannakhadi thai* [*The leading man in Thai literature*] (Bangkok: Thaiwatthanapanich, 1995). Her study suggests that the three characters above represent ideal types of Thai masculinity and romantic leading men.

One specific dilemma faced by many Thai men educated abroad had to do with deciding between two types of women: the traditional woman, or the modern woman; one representing traditional Thai values and the other decadent but alluring Western modernity. All of the now-canonised early novels—Mom Jao (Prince) Akatdamkoeng's *Lakhon haeng chiwit* [*Circus of life*]; Kulap Saipradit's *Luk phuchai* [*The real man*] and Dok Mai Sot's *Sattru khong jao lon* [*Her enemy*]¹—published between 1928 to 1929 also agonised over this dilemma. The main characters of these novels were returning students (*nakrian nok*) who faced the dilemma of finding the ideal wife. In the end, all the men reject marrying a foreigner or a modern liberated Thai woman. Even Dok Mai Sot, who is female, agrees that her American-educated heroine is just too Westernised for the Thai man, even if he is himself a *nakrian nok*.

Although Jian studied in England, he, too, preferred the more traditional Thai woman. He is, however, an unusual prototype for a Thai man. Jian's strength is not physical but moral. He is the virtuous man who follows the teachings of the Buddha. Although he is attracted to sex just like the other men he criticises, his lust is acceptable because it remains within the confines of marriage. Unlike the other men, he resists the temptation to take advantage of Praphai and Prung before they become his wives. His ability to resist temptation comes from the love for his wife and his religious beliefs. These strengths, in spite of his constant tearful whining, are attractive to women. The author is perhaps trying to 'modify' or to 'create' a new male culture where manliness is synonymous with virtuous morality. And to make this point even more forceful, even the whiny and physically weak man such as Jian can win sexual favours from beautiful and desirous women.

Jian lusts only in his heart and he is not, therefore, a male sexual predator. As a good man, he easily wins the hand of the lovely Prung and lives happily in the countryside. After this rural interlude, his life changes after he agrees to move back to his mother's house in Bangkok. Crossing the canal to Bangkok symbolises the crossing from a pristine and traditional Thai life to the modern one represented by the city. The crossing is as transformative for the woman as going abroad to study is transformative for the man. Through his relatively virtuous and rural protagonist, Khru Liam levels a stern criticism at the modern hedonism of Bangkok high society. He describes a dinner party that Khun Phak throws for Jian in honour of his new assignment to a post in the provinces. Aside from Jian, Khun Phak invited eight other guests—all of them male. And even before

the arrival of Jian, who is the featured guest, several of the men have already begun drinking heavily. Several have taken their jackets and shoes off and are laughing and talking loudly. By the time the men settle down to dinner, more jackets, shoes and even shirts have come off. The meal features soup, fried chicken, fresh venison stew, beef tongue, *farang* sausage, salad and pickled vegetables from abroad. Dessert consists of ice cream, fruits and something called ‘jelly’. Although Jian is impressed that these expensive and unusual European dishes were served in his honour, he is uncomfortable with the amount of alcohol already consumed by the other guests. One should note here that both these varieties of food, as well as this excessive consumption of expensive ‘whiskey’, are linked to the West.

Jian is increasingly uneasy in this setting, especially when the drunken men begin to grab the women who served them. He becomes horrified when two women voluntarily take off their blouses. Jian describes them as ‘*wearing just their inner shirts, with belts tied around their round waists and breasts that stood at attention in our honor*’.⁴²

The women must have been used to this situation because they are quite efficient in taking off their clothes. Jian is scandalised by the sight of the old Khun Phra hoarding one of the girls just for himself. She too adroitly disrobes and is soon sitting on the old man’s lap. The two are soon kissing and eventually retire to another room to carry on their coupling on a couch. Before Jian can make a quick exit, one of the drunken guests gives a speech and presents him with a going-away present. It is a package of condoms. Jian throws the package on the floor and says that he did not need such devices to protect himself from venereal diseases. But he decides to be gracious and announces that the remaining partygoers can better use the condoms. This brings loud approving laughter and a mad struggle for the package.

Khru Liam, of course, is having it both ways when he places a virtuous protagonist in titillating scenes of debauchery. This same technique is obvious when he and his friend Nai Khabuan follow Mae Prung to a hotel where she is conducting an affair with the wealthy Khun Phak. The hotel functions as a setting where the Thai can consume the West and behave as Europeans, that is, become un-Thai. The hotel is therefore a site where the confines of Thai culture are loosened and neutralised. The sophisticated

42 Nai Samran, *Khwan mai phayabat*, 257, emphases added.

Thais go there to consume European food and wine, to smoke cigars, to speak English with the guests and among themselves, to relive foreign experiences and to indulge themselves fully in a totally modern milieu.⁴³ But when Jian goes into the hotel and sees his wife embracing her lover, the experience is too much for him. Altogether characteristically, he faints.

Prung's active sexuality is not atypical. All three female characters in *Khwam mai phayabat* exploit their sexuality to get their way from men, though they also become victims of unwanted sexual attention and assaults. What we see then in the novel is the transformation of the traditional woman—innocent girl, good daughter and faithful wife—into the 'modern' female. This transformation, of course, is fraught with pitfalls. The novel appears to suggest a concern on the part of the (Western-)educated Thai male that Thai women are unprepared to cope with the glitter and temptations of modernity that could easily corrupt them.

The novel also suggests the representation of women as beautiful objects to be displayed and to be paraded about for others to see. They are said to be for 'show', a borrowed word that is now part of the Thai lexicon. The idea that certain objects, especially objects that represent modernity and sophistication, or beautiful and valuable possessions, are acquired just for show is as contemporary today as it was when the novel was written 90 years ago. This 'show' culture applies to objects that act as signifiers for modernity and high-class culture.

Even nowadays, it is not uncommon when visiting Thai homes to see expensive whiskey and brandy bottles (as well as cheap souvenirs from abroad) displayed prominently on shelves. Their corks may have long dried up and the alcoholic content may have evaporated, but the evidence of high-class sophistication still remains on those shelves for all to see, even if never to be consumed.

43 Although some educated people of Bangkok may use hotels as sites of modernity, these institutions might not satisfy the *nakrian nok* who think that the hotels in Bangkok are merely parodies of the real hotels they know in Europe. S.N.J. Antonio, *The 1904 traveller's guide to Bangkok and Siam* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1997), 15, suggests that Bangkok is a 'veritable city of hotels'. However, the guide continues to advise that not all are good and many Europeans soon are taken in as house guests by the Thai. This raises the question, who, then, stays in those hotels?

What this novel reveals about Bangkok society at the turn of the 20th century is that beautiful women were treated as objects to be put on show.⁴⁴ This emphasis on ‘show’ is heightened when Jian organises a version of a coming-out party to ‘show’ Prung to his Bangkok friends and acquaintances. Her coming-out party transforms her from the country girl across the canal into a sophisticated Bangkok belle. The transformation is both external and internal. Not only has her clothing changed, but she is ready to consume and enjoy the promises of modernity. In the negative sense, her internal transformation can be described as the Thai *jai taek*, which literally translates as ‘heart falling apart’, a term that is not quite the same as the English one of a heart breaking. In the Thai meaning, the core of a person’s value, which resides in the heart, is open to corruption by bad external influences when the heart itself breaks open.

Khun Phak does indeed corrupt her, as we have seen. She is attracted to Khun Phak’s material wealth and the tantalising life of a liberated woman free to pick her friends and associates. Her transformation and move to the ‘darker side’ are facilitated by the sudden death of the infant baby that she had with Jian. No longer tied to the traditional confines of woman as mother, she becomes free to indulge more fully in the life of bourgeois leisure—opportunities presented to her by Khun Phak. By showering her with expensive jewellery, Khun Phak eventually seduces Prung.

To understand this novel, it is important to remember that in Thai culture, only the woman is regarded as committing adultery. Women who stray beyond the bounds of matrimony are labelled as *mi chu*, or adulterous. Men, on the other hand, are said to commit *nork jai mia* or ‘going outside his wife’s heart’, an act that is not regarded as being as wrongful as adultery. The novel does not show much confidence in Thai women, for it questions their ability to cope with the new freedom that modernity provides. A modernity that pries women away from traditional social structures such as the family, their role as mothers, and as wives undermines traditional Thai culture and values. Women with their newfound liberty are in danger of losing themselves as Thai women. They can be easily corrupted by worldly and material temptations. Women are therefore more likely to use female sexuality as an instrument or means towards ends. And by doing so, they contribute to their own downfall because they are treated as ornaments to be acquired for ‘show’ and for

44 Similarly, in Kulap Saipradit’s *Luk phuchai*, written 15 years later, the woman is still described as a ‘priceless ornament’ (*phuying pen aphon an lam kha*), Chapter 10.

sexual pleasure. Infidelity and adultery soon follow. Khru Liam's novel is thus an indictment of bourgeois decadence that must be curbed by anchoring Thai society onto Buddhism and the sanctity of the family unit. Thai men can gain strength from Buddhism. Women, on the other hand, must rely on the family unit to give them strength.⁴⁵

The novel also levels indictments against the male libido. The novel's message is that, although it is the nature of a man to lust after women, lust should be controlled by a belief in Buddhist morality and, if a man is married, by the husband's concern for the feelings of his wife. Khru Liam is not against polygamy, because at the end of his novel Jian is married to two women. Khru Liam's ideal man is far from a 'man's man', but he is a man of great virtue. The novel's hero is not the epitome of manliness or *khwam pen luk phuchai* advocated in the other novels. The man is supposed to be quiet, thoughtful, circumspect, strong, level headed, unemotional, generous, decisive, loyal to friends and physically strong. Khru Liam's Jian is the antithesis of the *luk phuchai*. Nai Jian is whiny, timid, emotional, weepy, physically a weakling and indulges too much in self-pity. Even his name is not manly because it means 'a long time', or 'to leave'. Jian may be an unattractive male protagonist, but in the novel he wins the favours of two beautiful women because of his virtue.

45 For Thai women raised in traditional ways at the turn of the 20th century, and especially those who grew up in royal and aristocratic households, the ideal woman is still someone who fits the poet Sunthorn Phu's construction. The woman always plays second fiddle to the husband and she is to endure his transgressions quietly. Women also should not take on the behaviour of men but should be true to their feminine upbringing. To wit:

<i>Koet pen ying hai hen wa pen ying</i>	Born a woman one should be a woman
<i>Ya tot thing kariya atchayasai</i>	Do not abandon your feminine ways
<i>Pen ying khreung chai khreung ya phueng jai</i>	Do not be happy in being half woman half man
<i>Khnaï khao mai sanrasern mern arom</i>	Ignore those who disagree
<i>Mae phua duert jao chong dap rangap wai</i>	Hold your passions even if your husband is angry
<i>Ya pho jai kheun siang thiang khrom</i>	Don't be too glad to raise your voice to argue
<i>Khao pen fai rao pen nam khoy phram phrom</i>	He is fire and we are water to sprinkle gently
<i>Mae radom kheun thang khu cha wuwam</i>	If we both escalate sparks will fly

(from *Cremation volume of Phiengthong Devakul Na Ayuthaya* (Wat Mongkut, Bangkok: 11 July 2004)). Khun Phiengthong was born in 1917. The selections of Sunthorn Phu's poetry that she lived by were found in her memoirs. In traditional literature there are poems known as *suphasit son ying*, or wise sayings for women. Sunthorn Phu penned several of these, which have become standards for feminine behaviour. See Sittha Phinitphuwadol and Nittaya Kanchanawan, *General knowledge of Thai literature*, 227–8.

The novel's ending is also quite clever. Although the novel begins with a flashback, that scene is not the final episode of the story. It is only a foundation upon which the story of Prung's downfall as wife and mother is built. Khru Liam uses the story's final twist to impart a lesson to his readers. The novel is both a critique of modern Bangkok society and a didactic story about the pitfalls of modernity. After forgiving his wife for her infidelity and supporting her desire to become a nun, Jian is now at peace, we are led to believe, and that is the last we will hear about Mae Prung. She is also described as physically spent, and no longer desirable as a woman. But Khru Liam wants us to believe that karmic reward need not be postponed to the next life or future lives, but that one can immediately reap the rewards of one's meritorious deeds. Jian's new wife/mistress Praphai rehabilitates Mae Prung and offers her once again to Jian to reward him for being virtuous.

Forgiveness and reacceptance by her husband transforms Prung into the beautiful woman that she was before she was discarded by her lover. This act of full repentance by the corrupt woman restores her to her proper place in society. She becomes physically attractive again to her husband. This reconciliation and rekindling of desire is confirmed by the fact that Prung is made pregnant again by her husband, reconfirming the notion that the woman's role in reproduction as mother is central to the notion of the Thai female. We should remember that Prung was a good mother and wife up to the time of her first child's unexpected death. Her final pregnancy is, however, her redemption. Once again, she is fulfilling her traditional role as wife and mother. The new wife, Praphai, also fulfils her role as a good Thai woman. She, too, becomes pregnant at the same time. The good end happily and the bad unhappily: to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, this is how we know that fiction is fiction.

Although *Khwan mai phayabat* was the first Thai novel, it seems to have been too radical a departure from the translated European novels so popular at the time. It failed to sell. A possible reason for this failure is the persistent fascination with the West as a site of the modern and the *siwilai*. The top-down policy to modernise/Westernise Thailand seemed to have worked well, so much so that there was real consumer demand and fascination for translated stories about the West. The fact that, in the end, Khru Liam capitulated (for financial reasons) and wrote a follow-up novel *Nang neramit* [*Divine nymphs*] (published in 1916) is once again instructive. In that novel, Khru Liam pretends to be an Englishman writing about an English mystery adventure. That novel shows glimpses

of H. Rider Haggard's *She*, a novel that Khru Liam translated some time during the early 1900s. Instead of Africa, the story takes place in Egypt. In fact, the privileging of Western novels over Thai novels lasted until 1928–29 when three major Thai novels—*Luk phuchai*, *Sattru khong jao lon*, *Lakhon haeng chiwit*—were published, which captured the public's imagination. But even these three novels were about Thai characters living, working and studying in the West, who eventually returned to Thailand to cope with tensions between the two cultures. Instead of Western main characters, the new characters were *nakrian nok*, or foreign-trained students—a hybrid of the modern elite who is both Thai and European.

In the postscript to his novel *Nang neramit*, published under pseudonym of SR, or (Nai) Samran, the same pseudonym he used in *Khwam mai phayabat*, Khru Liam writes:

After my novel *Khwam mai phayabat* did not sell that well, I realized that one has little power to change people's belief that the Thai could not write well, that they lacked the ability to write an engaging story. Because of this, I have composed a *farang* novel about divine nymphs. I have also composed other *farang* novels as well, more than stories that I translated. Friends who have been told know that these are my original compositions. In fact, many know that *Nang Neramit* is composed by the same author of *Khwam mai phayabat*.⁴⁶

It appears that *Khwam mai phayabat* was written before its time, so it failed to have a strong impact on Thai society. Only now, in hindsight, can one appreciate the novel's significance. Although it is possible to claim that *Khwam mai phayabat* was written to 'compete' with *Vendetta* as a representation of the West, it could also be seen as a form of resistance to the West. But it should be taken into account that this resistance is itself conveyed through a medium appropriated from the West, that of the novel. It is a truism of literary study that form and content cannot be separated. Borrowing a Western form to emphasise what it really means to be Thai is daringly original, but the financial failure of *Khwam mai phayabat* and the success of *Nang neramit* suggest that Thai readers still

46 Nai Samran, *Nang neramit*, 400. Only a partial manuscript of this ancient novel could be found; the author's copy of this manuscript may be found in the Echols Southeast Asia Collection, Cornell University Library, call number PL4209.W535 N36 2005. All page numbers for this manuscript refer to that copy.

expected to read novels about places and people other than themselves. They wanted to be entertained and to learn about the Other, be they places or people.

If this separation of form and content were not problematic enough, Khru Liam is also attempting to redefine what it means to be Thai during a time when traditional values were coming into question. But his criticism of cultural decline, especially with regard to the corruption of Thai femininity and the exploitation of young girls by modernity, is not a direct condemnation of the West. Khru Liam is also concerned with the ‘allure of modernity’ as a universal phenomenon. With modernity come opportunities for infidelity, for perverted sexual behaviour, and for the exploitation of women. Ultimately, Buddhist forgiveness and virtue overcome the ill effects of modernity and the negative influence of the West. And therefore, far from being merely just another purloined copy of the Western novel, Khru Liam’s *Khvam mai phayabat* is also quintessentially Thai.

Nang neramit [*Divine nymphs*] (1916): Imitation or Thai

To reiterate, the primary strategy used by the Thai elite during the 19th century in order to resist colonisation was to learn more about the West.⁴⁷ The Thai elite has used this strategy for centuries to appropriate what is best from other cultures, particularly Indian, Chinese and Khmer culture—Indian and Khmer science, religion and administration; Chinese trade and political practices.⁴⁸ The new European hegemonic power(s) was also different in that it was multi-centred—England, France,

47 See, for example, David K. Wyatt, *The politics of reform in Thailand: Education in the reign of King Chulalongkorn* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969); William J. Siffin, *The Thai bureaucracy: Institutional change and development* (Honolulu: East–West Center Press, 1966); Abbot Low Moffat, *Mongkut the King of Siam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961). Thai history taught in Thai schools continues to promote a royalist history that credits King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn for saving Thailand from colonisation by ‘modernising’ its administration, education, culture and technology along the European model.

48 Thailand converted to Buddhism from India and Sri Lanka, adapted Khmer script, incorporated Hindu and Khmer science of government and court language, participated in the Chinese tribute trade system, and adapted the Chinese tribute concept to use with Thailand’s own subordinate states. For an excellent study of the formation of Ayutthaya (Ayudhya), see Charnvit Kasetsiri, *The rise of Ayudhya: A history of Siam in the fourteen and fifteen centuries* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976).

Portugal, Spain, Holland and the United States. In addition, the scale of the threat of Western imperialism was becoming alarming as more and more states surrounding Thailand fell under the direct control of European countries.⁴⁹ Facing this enormous threat of colonisation, and still smarting from the loss of Ayutthaya to the Burmese armies in 1767, the Thai were determined to find a strategy that would preserve their autonomy at all costs.

The new free trade international economic regime promoted by the colonial powers replaced the centuries-old Sino-centric tribute system of trade. It appears that the Thai leaders did not want to be left out of the lucrative commercial trade with the West. Therefore, the concession of certain legal jurisdiction over foreign nationals within Thailand's territory seemed to be the price of doing business. This trade filled the coffers of King Chulalongkorn's treasury, which allowed him to fund the modernisation of education, administration and infrastructure.

The concession of sovereignty does not necessarily mean that the Thai leaders felt spiritually or intellectually inferior to the Europeans. The West and its superior technology (seen as signs of modernity) were not just to be feared, but to be emulated. The best features of this 'modernity' were to be appropriated and made Thai. The Thais had a thoroughly pragmatic attitude. The West was—and remains—yet another source for Thai cultural improvement.

Without question, Khru Liam is the author both of *Khwan mai phayabat* and of *Nang neramit*. It is most likely that Khru Liam has also authored many other novels that are passed off as translations. It also appears that the novel-reading public did not have much faith in the ability of a Thai author to write a good novel, nor was it ready for a real Thai novel that focused on their own daily lives: readers, it appears, would rather have read a *farang* novel, written by a *farang* to allow them to fantasise about the Other. In *Nang neramit*, Khru Liam subverts this popular notion by delivering what his audience wants—a *farang* story of adventure in exotic

49 The British took control of Penang in 1786, Singapore in 1819, Burma in 1885, Sarawak, Brunei and North Borneo in 1888; the French colonised Cochinchina in 1866, Cambodia in 1867, Annam and Tonkin in 1887, and Laos in 1893; the Dutch government took over the administration of Indonesia from the East India Company in 1799; the United States colonised the Philippines in 1898 after it defeated Spain, which had held that colony for over 350 years.

Egypt ostensibly written by a *farang* author. The joke is on the readers who, after reading 400 pages, are told that they will never find the English original because there is none!

Furthermore, in this postscript Khru Liam is quite candid about his own willingness to write whatever the public wants to achieve financial success:

An author can always write whatever he wants, but the tastes of his readers tend to force him to write things that will sell easily. So if I want to recover my investment I have to find a story that many buyers want. Because of this, it is not my fault that I have to write this story to recover my investment ...

This is the first story composed by a Thai as a novel that is as expansive a story as a *farang* story. However, you might find the plot to be quite short because as someone with limited capital, I had to make it short.⁵⁰

Compared to *Khvam mai phayabat's* 730 pages, *Nang neramit* is relatively short, a mere 399 pages long. Despite these limitations, Khru Liam was intent upon entertaining his readers by transporting them to a foreign and exotic land, promising a story of adventure, intrigue, magic, battle scenes, romance, ghost stories and a heavy dose of eroticism—all commingled with Buddhist values. Thus, in both of his early novels, Khru Liam inserts Buddhist values into the plot, perhaps to draw in his Thai readers and to make the stories more accessible.

Although I cannot say for certain whether many other novels were published immediately after *Khvam mai phayabat*, I believe that it is safe to say that *Nang neramit* can be considered the second authentic Thai novel, that is, an original novel composed by a Thai author in the Thai language. The fact that it imitates the *farang* novel should not make it less authentically Thai. Khru Liam is doing what authors before him had done, that is, write about another culture as if it were his own. Parenthetically, Khru Liam is emulating his European models: Corelli and Rider Haggard. The former, an Englishwoman, writes about Italy in her novel *Vendetta*; the latter, an Englishman, writes about Arabs and Egyptians in Africa in his novel *She*. Why then should Khru Liam, a Thai, not write about the English in Egypt in his novel *Nang neramit*? The only

50 Nai Samran, *Nang neramit*, 400.

twist here is that Khru Liam was compelled to make his readers think that *Nang neramit* was a translated English novel of adventure and mystery, something that could have been written by Rider Haggard.

Nang neramit is nevertheless a genuine Thai novel about some English, Egyptian, Arab and Negro⁵¹ characters in Egypt. As an early Thai novel, it should be considered a transitional Thai novel that would bridge the gap between the first real Thai novel *Khvam mai phayabat*, and the three successful novels that appeared in 1929—Kulap Saipradit's *Luk phuchai* [*The real man*], M.C. Akatdamkoeng's *Lakhon haeng chiwit* [*Circus of life*] and Dok Mai Sor's *Sattru khong jao lon* [*Her enemy*]. Literary scholars have canonised those three novels as the first authentically Thai novels.⁵²

Indeed, that the characters of *Nang neramit* are *only* foreign suggests that the Thai readership would rather be transported to another world to learn about those Others. But the story about exotic Africa and mysterious Egypt is not that foreign to Thai readers—and that also is due in large part to Khru Liam. Close upon the heels of Mae Wan's translation of *Vendetta*, Khru Liam also translated Sir H. Rider Haggard's *She*, giving it the title *Sao song phan pi* [*The two-thousand-year-old maiden*]. Khru Liam used 'Nok Nori' as his pseudonym for that translation, which appeared in the journal *Thalok witthaya*.⁵³ Thus, the Thai public was already familiar with Africa and Egypt because of this and other translated novels.

It should be noted here that *Sao song phan pi* was also reprinted in 1916, the same year that *Nang neramit* was published. This meant that the Thai public was able to compare the two novels side by side. Of course, the perceptive ones will note that *Nang neramit* was a 'Thai novel' about Africa and Egypt, and *Sao song phan pi* was a Thai translation of an English novel about Africa and Egypt. Because it would seem that, as Khru Liam

51 Khru Liam refers to black Africans as 'Negroes' (*nikro*), the term in Thai usage in his day. There continues to be racial prejudice in Thailand against black Africans as primitive. This term is maintained in this discussion as a reflection of the attitudes that informed Khru Liam's writing, as this is a significant part of his Thai rewriting of the novel.

52 See Smyth, *The canon*, Chapter 13.

53 It is unclear when Khru Liam first translated *She*. Most likely it was not much later than the appearance of Mae Wan's *Khvam phayabat*. According to S. Plai Noi, *Sao song phan pi* was reprinted in 1916, 1934, 1944 and 1991. See S. Plai Noi, *Khvam mai phayabat*, 88. It is also possible that the 1944 copy is, in fact, another translation of *She* by Chaiwat (pseudonym of Charoen Chaichana), published in 1943. Chaiwat used Khru Liam's Thai title. A copy of this latter translation is found in the Chulalongkorn University Library. And, most recently, Sotsai [pseud.] retranslated *She* under the title *Amata devi* (Bangkok: Praphansarn Press, 2004). It is interesting that neither Chaiwat nor Sotsai acknowledged the pioneering translation of the novel by Khru Liam.

hastily wrote *Nang neramit* to recoup his lost investment in *Khwan mai phayabat*, he must have had in mind his translation of *She* and he inevitably borrowed freely from that novel.

Rider Haggard's *She* is about the immortal sorceress Ayesha, or 'She-who-must-be-obeyed', commonly referred to as just She, who has been waiting for her dead lover for over 2,000 years. Ayesha—a white woman who rules over a tribe of Africans—has achieved immortality after immersing herself in a sacred fire. The story concerns a handsome Egyptian high priest who ran off with his lover, an Egyptian princess, to find refuge in Ayesha's realm, only to fall victim to her amorous desires. When the priest refuses to murder his wife the princess, as ordered by the sorceress, She kills him in a fit of rage. Of course, She immediately regrets her action and proceeds to preserve her lover's dead body in a special crypt. In fact, She still has access to her lover's physical being, but not his soul. Through the ages, She continues to visit the body and to sleep at night by its side hoping that one day he will return from the dead. She believes that she has found him again when the young English hero Leo appears in her realm.

Leo is seeking adventure in Africa, following some instructions left to him by his late father. The reason Leo looks just like Ayesha's dead lover is not coincidence. The Egyptian priest in fact is Leo's distant ancestor. Ayesha tries to convince Leo to enter the magic fire so that both he and she can be immortal. But when She re-enters the fire of life for a second time, she immediately ages and dies. Although the novel is a romance, pure and simple, it provided the reader with a wealth of information about Africa—its people, its climate, its culture, its geography and its plant and animal life. The novel is a vivid portrayal of this alluring and exotic place. It is most certain that the insatiable Thai reading public found the idea of 'knowing' Africa and romantic European culture intoxicating and different. It is a parallel experience to drinking imported Scotch whisky and drinking the pungent local rice liquor. The ability to read about and discuss topics related to other cultures were signs of modernity and sophistication. Why should anyone be concerned about the social ills of Bangkok society depicted in Khru Liam's first novel?

Unlike novels written by colonial subjects to mimic the West, Khru Liam's *Nang neramit* written in 1916 appropriates the English as his own characters, exploiting them for purely commercial reasons. One is aware of Francophone literature and Anglophone literature—literature written about former colonies by colonial subjects in the language of the

Metropole. This hybridity seems to be a natural product of colonialism. In the Thai case, the Thai novel is less of a hybrid—the novel *Nang neramit* exploits both the form and appropriates the characters by pretending to be a translated novel. Discerning readers, of course, will find out when they finish reading and glance at the postscript that Khru Liam has played a trick on them.

Nang neramit tells the story of the adventure of a young English scholar, James Billford, on vacation in Egypt. During his explorations of ancient ruins and caves, he and his friends come across mummies that appear to be so well preserved that they look alive. These well-preserved mummies were those of young females. It turns out that a Muslim Arab high priest has discovered a way to revive mummies whose sole existence was to sexually please men, especially the priests. These mummies are so alluring that if a man touches them, he would be forever lost in lust. And the more these revived mummy nymphs have sex with men, the more lustful and the more desirable they become. The story also involves a struggle between the English forces in Egypt trying to rescue Billford's fiancée, abducted by the priests and the Arab armies that were followers of the priests.

Two questions we might want to ask are, first, whether *Nang neramit* presents a caricature of the Thai author's understanding of English and Egyptian characters, and second, whether the plots and stories resonate for the Thai audience. My contention is that most of the Thai readers will accept that the *farang* and *khaek* (Arab) characters in the novel appear odd enough to be genuinely foreign, that the detailed descriptions of the various places in England and in Egypt give the novel an air of authenticity. Yet there is a particular usage of English that has been appropriated into Thai to indicate to the Thai reader that perhaps the author is not a *farang*, but a Thai who is translating a *farang* novel. The plot, however, appears to be somewhat too fantastic and improbable to be a *farang* plot. The ending especially is rather comical and unserious, something that usually appears in Thai popular fiction. Although the magical aspects are present in both *Nang neramit* and in *She*, Khru Liam inserts into *Nang neramit* stories about insatiable sexual appetites and the role of women as objects of desire. But unlike his first novel, *Khwam mai phayabat*, where Thai women are victims of male desire, in *Nang neramit*, they are revived Egyptian women.

Khru Liam's adaptations from *She* are also unmistakable. Both novels have English heroes, that of *She* being Ludwig Horace Holly, who studied mathematics at Cambridge; that of *Nang neramit* being James Billford,

who studied classics at Oxford. Both heroes went to North Africa; both dealt with the occult. One met up with a sorceress, the other with a grand wizard. Both stories focus on the immortality of women.

Yet the way Rider Haggard and Khru Liam depict women is altogether different. The sorceress in the novel *She* is still full of lust, thoughts and feelings of endless desire. The sorceress Ayesha is still looking for her long-departed lover and is scheming to get him back even after 2,000 years. Her love is obsessive. She is a jealous lover who, in a fit of rage, has killed the man she loved. Despite her beauty, no man can trust a woman like her. In contrast, Khru Liam's own version of the immortal woman in *Nang neramit* appears to be an imaginative construct of the Thai male's sexual fantasy. The divine nymphs in *Nang neramit* are devoid of their own desires. Their bodies are like empty vessels that exist as *rupatham* (objective truth) that only absorb the lust of men as content—that is, *namatham* (subjective truth)—and reflect those feelings back at men who are their lovers. These concepts resonate for the Thai audience familiar with Buddhist concepts of form and abstraction. The divine nymphs have no emotions except those given to them by their lovers. If rather obviously limited as individuals, they are altogether trustworthy as lovers and sexual partners. The revived female mummy nymphs are devoid of *namatham*, and only exist as *rupatham*. Any *namatham* is acquired from lovemaking and involves only amorous and lustful emotions.

Khru Liam himself was both a Thai Buddhist and trained in England. Therefore, the author/narrator is a hybrid of sorts. In *Nang neramit*, Khru Liam inserts his Buddhist philosophy into the story right from the opening pages by speaking through James Billford.⁵⁴ James launches into a full discourse about life and existence. He points out that human existence is composed of two dimensions—*rupatham* and *namatham*. It is most likely that in life these two dimensions are conjoined, but following death, the two are separated. It is quite possible, scientifically that is, to revive the dead if a way was found to reunite the two. These terms are familiar to the Thai readers who understand the concept of *rupa* and *arupa*—being and non-being, and the idea of the self and the soul.

There are also other familiar Thai markers in the novel. For example, Khru Liam's description of the ashram would also sound familiar to Thai readers. It was as if he was describing a Thai temple. He also used Buddhist

54 Nai Samran, *Nang neramit*, 3–4.

terms to describe this Islamic compound—*kuti* (monks' quarters), *lan wat* (temple courtyard). And to provide comic relief, which is a common trope in Thai literature and drama, Khru Liam makes fun of Muslim men and the Thai male's fear of circumcision. In the novel, Captain Craig asks if the cult followers must adhere to *latthi khao sunao*—the Muslim practice of circumcision. As the narrator, Khru Liam goes on to remark that perhaps Arabs do not get sick because of this practice. I assume that he is referring to venereal diseases. One should remember that Khru Liam was hired by the Ministry of Health to translate English medical texts. It is very possible that he could not resist adding this medical advice for his readers.

I want to discuss some of the major themes that appear in the novel. Khru Liam is known for writing openly about male and female sexuality, Buddhist religious concepts and the occult. In *Nang neramit*, he highlights the malleable sexual Other (revived Egyptian mummies), the stereotyping of Arab and Negro male sexual appetite and prowess, the binary of male sexual drive and female responsiveness, and how sexuality can be conditioned by the objective and the subjective self. We will discuss this by loosely following the plot of the novel to witness how these themes appear in context.

Sexuality and race

In *Nang neramit*, the English explorers visiting Egypt find a coffin inside a pyramid containing the body of a beautiful female mummy probably dead for over 4,000 years. From her dress and jewellery, she appears to have been the young queen of a Pharaoh. It is amazing that she looks as if she had just died: her face looks fresh but is cold to Billford's touch. In one of the many bizarre incidents in this novel, Billford cuts off the mummy's head as a souvenir. This grisly action would probably have been too risky for a Thai hero to take, for it would have tempted or aroused the anger of *phi* (spirits of the dead). But by having a *farang* as the hero, Khru Liam was able to add this twist to his plot. In fact, in the novel, Billford proclaims 'we are *farang*, we are not afraid of *phi*'.⁵⁵

Many incidents later, the Englishmen explore some caves near the ashram of a wizard reputed to have the power to raise the dead. They have been told that the lights emanating at night from the wizard's ashram are called

55 Nai Samran, *Nang neramit*, 86.

‘the rays of he who represents god’ and that they are used to resurrect female mummies, making them into divine nymphs (*nang neramit*). It is the wizard, in fact, who revives only female Egyptian mummies, to be given to his disciples just for their pleasure. It is this wizard who later reconnects the Queen’s head to her body and revives her to her glorious splendour. He wants the Queen for himself. But of course, in spite of being in love with the Englishwoman, Vivian, Billford cannot help but lust after the Queen.

In these caves, the Englishmen and their trusted Negro servant find treasure, perhaps looted from crypts and pyramids. On the side of the cave walls are ledges where lifelike statues are placed. The explorers get goosebumps when they realise that the realistic statues are, in fact, mummies who were already used and ‘traded in’ for newer models. At one corner in the cave, they are surprised to find a carpet on the ground with a pile of women’s clothing at the side. On the carpet is a pile of human bones, as if someone has made love to the pile of bones. The mummies consist of men, children and lots of women. Strangely, the young female mummies appear to be beautiful young women who look almost alive.

One particular mummy, a very pretty woman who is partly nude, attracts their attention. As the explorers are marvelling at how well preserved she is, they notice that blood is pumping through her veins, and that her lips, skin and even nipples are quite pink. Then they notice that the mummy is actually breathing!

The explorers soon hear footsteps and see a Negro man (an Ethiopian) come into the cave. He goes straight to the breathing mummy, lifts her down from her perch and takes her away to make love to her in the dark. The men notice that when the woman opens her eyes, there is no sparkle in them. In contrast to her originally limp and quiescent state, she is soon actively responding to the lust of her dark partner—her white skin contrasting with his coal-black skin.

The stereotyping of the black man as a virile beast is unmistakable here. Khru Liam, like many Thais of his generation who studied in England, internalised the inherent racism of the West. While the Negro is vilified, the Arabs are depicted as having higher culture and knowledge, as they were the master of the Negro, yet they are *khaek* (a term used to describe

Arabs, Indians and Muslims) and are not to be trusted.⁵⁶ In the story, the Negro is lost in lust and does not even hear the arrival of a pair of Arab priests (*tob khaek*) and a team of six Negroes carrying three stretchers bearing three beautiful nymphs. The bearers proceed to lead the nymphs back to their places on the ledge. Once there, the nymphs close their eyes and go into a state of suspended animation.

Soon the priests become aware of the Negro making noisy love with one of the nymphs in the darker reaches of the cave. They catch him and lash him with their whips. Then they order another Negro to lead the nymph back to her place on the ledge. Upon touching her, he, too, is unable to control his lust and begins to make love to her. In the end, the Arab priest has to intervene. Realising the power of the nymph's *namatham*, which is saturated with sexual desire, he leads the nymph back to a stretcher by his whip to avoid touching her. Three other mummies from the collection are also selected. These three beautiful female mummies are rather stiff and lifeless. On their way out, the priests complain that 'these [Negro] men do not know how to be gentle with the women. They would have destroyed and wasted them. We should raise the punishment for their transgressions'.⁵⁷ Even the Arabs are shown sharing the stereotype of the black African male as a lustful beast. Similar to most objects, the essence (*rupatham*) or the physical being of the nymphs would be destroyed, that is, reduced to dust, if they are overly exploited or used up. That is, once expended, the body (re)turns to dust.

After the Arabs leave with the mummies, the explorers take a closer look at the recently returned mummies, who are still breathing. One of the Englishmen, Captain Craig, touches one and is immediately overwhelmed by sexual desire. James literally holds him back. Not long after, one of the Negro men sneaks back into the cave, takes down one of the nymphs and begins making love to her lustily on the carpet. The man leaves, not wanting to see the nymph reduced to a pile of bones.

This particular section of the novel reflects Khru Liam's fascination with sex, which to him was not necessarily pornography. His first novel, *Khvam mai phayabat*, also contains sexual orgies. But those orgies were realistic ones, ones that imitated what we can presume was actually happening in

56 A popular Thai riddle asks: 'If you come across a cobra and a *khaek*, what should you do?' The answer is 'You would beat the *khaek* first'.

57 Nai Samran, *Nang neramit*, 250.

hotels, in the private rooms of restaurants, and in secret love nests of the rich in Bangkok society in the early 20th century. In that novel, Khru Liam suggests that those orgies were organised by immoral Thai men in an increasingly immoral Thai society under the influence of modernity and urbanisation. And as we know from Khru Liam's own account, that novel did not please the Thai reading public. In *Nang neramit*, however, Khru Liam cleverly allows his readers, especially his male readers, to fantasise about sex in a detached and guiltless way.

The men in this novel are all but helpless once they touch the divine nymphs: they are spellbound and cannot help themselves. The male lust for sex is guiltless in this case because they are responding to female lust. And, perhaps ironically for the reader today, their lust is all-consuming—but with a twist: excessive sex reduces not the male who instigated the contact, but the female into a pile of bones. The sex industry today has created love dolls and other sexual devices. But none of these artificial sexual playthings can compare with Khru Liam's divine nymphs!

The idea of 'wasting a woman' and 'reducing her to dust' is an intriguing one. At what point is too much of a good thing not wonderful, as Mae West would have it, but too much? Is this a comment on the belief that men require lots of women to satisfy their sexual cravings, a common sentiment of Thai men who, in spite of having loving wives, still keep mistresses and minor wives? Metaphorically, the ability to pick and choose and to 'turn in' one woman for another seems like the perfect fantasy for the male. Perhaps Khru Liam is trying to satisfy the (Thai) male's fantasy of the perfect sexual partner—a partner whom he never tires of and who in turn never tires of him. Interestingly, Khru Liam inserts an idea of sexual moderation and the fragility of the woman as a sexual object, that is, if there is too much sex, the female sexual object will be reduced to a pile of bones.

A common belief among Thai men is that 'good' women may not be exciting sexual partners: they tend to be passive because their minds are elsewhere, thinking about the family, their children, parents, servants, etc. 'Good' Thai women are not supposed to exercise their sexual agency.⁵⁸ It is

58 According to Rachel Harrison, Thai women fulfil their role as women by being mothers and wives. Their own sexuality never surfaces. This is true in social behaviour as well as in literature. It is not until Thida Bunnag penned several novels that allowed Thai women to exercise sexual agency that this assumption began to break down. However, most of the women whose stories are told do not necessarily fall within the category of good traditional women. Also see Rachel Harrison,

also not uncommon that wives arrange minor wives for their husbands to lessen the burden of their own sexual responsibilities, especially after ageing. It is widely believed, moreover, that a woman's ardour may wane after menopause, but a man remains sexually active until old age.

These common Thai beliefs give point to much of the action in Khru Liam's *Nang neramit*. Not only are the young Arab priests full of lust, but the ancient grand wizard himself still engages in sex with his beautiful creations. Male sexual lust is treated as universal in the novel because it affects all males in the novel: the Arabs, the Englishmen, the Ethiopians and the Negroes.

The occult

Like *She*, *Nang neramit* features an exotic locale and explores the occult. Yet, much as in *Khwan mai phayabat*, Khru Liam also incorporates tropes and themes altogether familiar to a Thai audience. In classical Thai literature, the appearance of *phi* (ghosts, spirits), magic potions, the sacred, the occult and even sex between humans and demons or gods are familiar tropes. Even though the concept of the separation of the body reflected in the idea of *rupatham* and the soul that is subsumed under the concept of *namatham* is not exclusively Thai or Buddhist, a Thai readership is prone to more seriously believe in the separation of the two dimensions.

The assertion of the presence of 'subjectivity' as distinct from 'physicality' is also easily understood, as it is the foundation of the belief in the existence of *phi* or ghosts and spirits. To give the story an exotic twist, Billford asserts that the *khaek*, which is a Thai category for Indians, Arabs, Egyptians and Muslims, have found a way to preserve the *rupatham*, that is the physical body, and free it from its *namatham*. The belief in *phi* is a cornerstone of Thai culture inherited from the past and relating to the prevalence of animism.⁵⁹ There are both good and bad *phi*. It is also necessary to please, feed and placate these spirits who exist almost everywhere—in caves, in trees, in stones, in mountains. Those who have died a horrible death

'The Madonna and the Whore: Self/Other tensions in the characterization of the prostitute by Thai female authors', in *Genders and sexualities in modern Thailand*, ed. Peter A. Jackson and Nerida M. Cook (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 1999).

59 On the subject of Thai ghosts and spirits see Phraongjao Sisaowaphong, *Nangsue waduwat amnat phi lae phi loak* [*Text on the power of phi and haunting by phi*], B.E. 2464 [1921] (Digital Rare Book, Tha Chang Book Store).

(*phi tai hong*) still roam about, scaring people. It is not uncommon, even today, to hear people say that they have seen *phi* or were frightened by experiences of haunting (*phi lok*). For example, stories like these appeared in Thai newspapers after the 26 December 2004 tsunami disaster. People have reported numerous ghost sightings that, to many Thai readers, are real phenomena. This may also explain the popularity of *nang phi* (ghost movies) until this day.

Over time, these roaming *phi* become weak and lose their power. They turn into peaceful souls before returning to the cycle of birth and rebirth. James Billford, speaking for Khru Liam, says that the *namatham* can be reunited with the *rupatham* before the former disappears, allowing a corpse to be revived. But Khru Liam adds an interesting twist to this Buddhist idea of incarnation, by suggesting that the Arab grand wizard is able to revive dead people with a blank *namatham* (negating *karma* acquired from past lives), which is only receptive to storing feelings of lust and sexual desire. Essentially, Khru Liam inserts Thai world views into *farang* minds.

Eventually, the wizard explains to the Englishmen that the resurrected divine nymphs are pure physical beings (*rupatham*) with empty minds (*namatham*). They only feed off a man's emotions. If the man who they are with is romantic, they too will be romantic. If he is angry, they will also be angry. Because their minds are blank, they can store men's emotions and radiate those emotions back to those near them. If a man touches a divine nymph, he will feel the full force of her emotions accumulated over time like an electrical charge. This charge can get stronger and stronger the more times she is made love to. This is why, over time, the nymphs become absolutely irresistible to any man if touched. If the men are careful and do not over-indulge in sex with a divine nymph, she is good for about seven days. Too much sexual activity, and her body will become overheated: the flesh will fall away, leaving only her bones. After seven days of careful use, the nymphs are sent back to the cave to cool off and to recover.

Khru Liam seems to be playing to the male desire for 'pure sex'—sex without guilt, and sex without attachments. It is purely physical and mental eroticism. The man will no longer have to question his partner's ardour during lovemaking because she only reflects his own lust and those of other partners she has had before. In fact, the nymph, after a period of time, will have more lust and eroticism in her than one man because she

has stored in her *namatham* the lust of several men, or several sessions of lovemaking. As the wizard explains to the Englishmen in highly sexist terms:

women are full of obscene thoughts [*lamok*] and they are full of desire [*kilet*] ... They smear our hearts with sin. They lie, cheat, and mislead. They are elusive, and have debasing thoughts even when they give their bodies to their male sexual partners. But our divine nymphs partake with us our love in innocence. They will not die. They do not give us any other emotion except love.⁶⁰

Khru Liam makes the same point again when the wizard enjoins a young priest to treat his divine nymph with care:

This nymph is yours. Think pure thoughts when you make love to her and she will know only pure sex. Forget all of your miseries before making love and she will incubate only pure love. Soon she will only release that pure love for you to enjoy and you will discover that there is nothing as sweet as pure sex. Most people have sex with women who are both physical beings [*rupatham*] and emotional beings [*namatham*]. Women's emotions are full of desires and evil. But by having sex with a divine nymph who is only a physical being, we men can place only our emotions in them, and that is pure physical love.⁶¹

After a woman dies, her *namatham* or subjectivity dies with the body. All the base and evil thoughts disappear. When the body is revived and takes in the desires and lust of man, the new female can respond shamelessly to her man's sexual desires.

The divine nymphs are not just beautiful and perpetually young, but they are always ready to have sex with men. Men need not fear rejection. In the novel, female sexual agency is also exercised by these divine women. Surely, this is another Thai male fantasy—that all beautiful women would want to sleep with them, and that all women would be physically and emotionally responsive during sex. The divine nymphs as ideal women are neither good nor bad; they are neither shameful nor shameless. They are just beautiful women who respond to man's every sexual need: divine nymphs, indeed, fit for any Thai male's fantasies.

60 Nai Samran, *Nang neramit*, 304.

61 Nai Samran, *Nang neramit*, 315.

But sexual fantasy should appeal to all men regardless of their race, religion or culture. This generalisation is expressed in the novel, which has a very unusual ending. In trying to rescue Vivian, Billford's sweetheart who has been abducted by the priests, clashes between the English expeditionary force and desert Arab forces loyal to the priests take place. The fighting only ends after a volcano erupts, which revives all of the female mummies who wander into the battlefield. It does not take long before all the soldiers are making love with the nymphs and not war with each other. Both the English and the Arabs are soon too weak to continue fighting. And after a long spell of lovemaking, the divine nymphs are all reduced to just bones and the soldiers separate and go their own ways. Billford is not immune to the attraction of the divine nymphs because he, too, falls prey to the lust he has for the Queen. It is only when she has turned into dust that he comes to his senses and returns to Vivian. The two eventually marry, move back to England and live in high style by selling off the jewellery they have taken from the mummies.

In conclusion, *Nang neramit* suggests that Thai readers of the new literature brought in from the West still expected to read stories about places and people other than themselves. They wanted to be entertained and to learn about the Other, be they places or people. The opening of this novel, inspired by Rider Haggard's *She*, seemed to have resonated with the Thai readership. It is unclear how well *Nang neramit* sold, or how popular it became. It is also unclear whether it sold just as many copies as *Sao song phan pi*, which also appeared in 1916. My hunch is that *Nang neramit* was not as popular as *Sao song phan pi* because, unlike the latter, which was subsequently republished and retranslated in 1916, 1944 (1945?), 1991 and 2004, *Nang neramit* disappeared from the public eye, never to be reprinted. I only 'discovered' this novel after a long inquiry to friends and book collectors. A tattered copy was finally located in April 2005.

Even though *Nang neramit* is definitely more sophisticated and more appealing to the Thai reader than his 'authentically Thai' novel *Khvam mai phayabat*, it is still inferior in significance to the latter. One can argue that *Khvam mai phayabat* was a novel before its time, and that it failed as a novel at the time of its publication because it was too realistic, too didactic and too harsh a criticism of the very people it was supposed to appeal to—that is, the emerging modern social classes in the capital city. That novel, too, begins with an explanation of Buddhist beliefs of forgiveness and non-revenge. In that story, the hero was a man much like Khru Liam, who was about 30 and a failed student who had to cut short his studies in England. The hero, Nai Jian, was an ordinary and

weak man, unlike the handsome James or the swashbuckling Captain Craig. The Thai hero finds himself a beautiful wife only to lose her to rich high society rivals in the rapidly modernising Bangkok. Even though he makes good towards the end by gaining the gratitude of a much younger woman and even gains back his repentant wife, his success did not seem to resonate with the reading public.

There is no sense of adventure or the exoticism of foreign places in that first Thai novel. It is almost as if Khru Liam's first novel was too 'modern', too 'realistic', and too 'Thai' for the public, which did not want to read about the reality of a morally corrupt Bangkok society. Traditional Thai literature is both entertaining and didactic. *Khwam mai phayabat* is didactic but not entertaining. *Nang neramit* is primarily entertaining as it allows the reader to be transported into a foreign land, to see life and adventure through foreign eyes. That novel allowed the Thai to imagine faraway places, and to imagine the lives of Englishmen, Egyptians, Arabs and Ethiopians. Yet *Nang neramit* mimics a Western form of entertainment, not a mimicry of colonial masters. In this sense, by allowing the Thai to look at the West and at Egypt and Africa as exotic and mysterious places, in *Nang neramit* Khru Liam *reverses* the Western gaze that looks at Thailand as an exotic and strange place.

It would be much later that the Thai novel would place Thai characters on the world stage. Perhaps this is why literary scholars date the emergence of the Thai novel to the year 1929, when three authors penned novels that portrayed Thai characters in Thai, European and American settings. *Khwam phayabat* had only European characters but whose hero escaped to live in Thailand; *Khwam mai phayabat* only had Thai characters living Thai lives; *Nang neramit* had only Others living outside of Thailand. None of these really included Thai characters in the broader canvas that connected Thailand to the rest of the world. Perhaps this is one reason why Kularp Saipradit's *Luk phuchai*, Dok Mai Sot's *Sattru khong jao lon*, and Mom Jao Akatdamkoeng's *Lakhon haeng chiwit* are canonised as the first (successful) Thai novels. The Thai main characters in these novels lived and studied overseas before returning to live in Thailand. They are also learned, sophisticated (know about the West), and idealistic.⁶²

62 Of the three, *Lakhon haeng chiwit* is said to be the best example of the first Thai novel. It is a story of an aristocratic student who leaves Thailand to study in England. He eventually becomes a journalist writing for a major English paper. He travels to many countries in Europe and to America; his girlfriend is English, but he refuses to marry her because he wants to return to Thailand to

If we ask *why* Khru Liam's novels failed or succeeded, we can give only tentative answers. Perhaps Khru Liam's early works appeared before their time. The Thai reader wanted to read about the West and other exotic places such as Egypt, Arabia and Africa, as described by Western authors who knew those places intimately. The lesson Khru Liam learned was that they were not interested in reading about social realism in Bangkok society. He also learned that a Thai novel about Egypt and Africa would sell better than a Thai novel about Thailand. But even providing such exotic locales would not divert the Thai readers' thirst for real English novels, even if they were translations. Again, it is only after M.J. Akatdamkoeng's placing of sophisticated Thai characters on the world stage that the Thai novel became accepted as genuine. The ambiguous allure of the West through the novel ended only when the novel form was separated from its English content and adapted to authentic Thai material. In what can be best understood as 'clever' mastery of the West, the *rupatham* of the novel is finally joined with the *namatham* of Thai characters and plot to make the novel an accepted Thai literary genre.

Making new space in the Thai literary canon

As someone not trained in literary studies and teaching in America, I propose to contest the Thai literary canon from the margins—disciplinarily and geographically. This chapter has examined three early Thai novels that have not been included in the Thai literary canon. In my assessment, these three novels represent important examples of the Thai novel that helped the Thai public deal with the West during the turn of the 20th century.

My own interest in politics and the novel began in the mid-1970s when I used Kulab Saipradit's *Lae pai khang na* [*Looking to the future*] (1955) in a class at Thammasat University. The novel describes the political awakening of a boy from Isan, Thailand's poorest region, privileged to study at an elite school in Bangkok. There, he meets students from all classes and ethnicity and a favourite teacher who would later become involved in the overthrow of absolute monarchy. The novel focuses on the years immediately following the 1932 coup, showing how the good

promote monogamy. The other two novels also have similar themes of the main characters studying abroad and returning to Thailand to modernise the country. All three are didactic and entertaining. They succeeded where *Khwam mai phayabat* and *Nang neramit* failed.

intentions of the leaders turned sour when the new democratic regime itself became authoritarian and repressive. The novel was to be in three parts, corresponding to human life cycles: formative years, mature years and declining years. However, Kulab was unable to finish the last volume after his self-imposed political exile in China following the Sarit Thanarat coup in 1957.

I used *Lae pai khang na* to help contextualise the cultural and social milieu surrounding the 1932 coup that ended absolute monarchy in Thailand. During the late 1960s and into the 1970s, heated debates occurred frequently on campus between faculty members, who resisted the proliferation of what was seen as trashy leftist novels read by the students, and other lecturers, who were willing to discuss what the students were already reading. The schism took on political and disciplinary dimensions when the Thai language faculty argued that they were the true protectors of not just 'good' Thai literature, but also the nation, religion and the monarchy. Those who did not agree with them were labelled left-leaning *rua hang yao* (long tail boats): lecturers out to destroy Thai culture and the Thai nation by encouraging students to read seditious novels and books that celebrated socialism, communism and social justice.⁶³

The (re)discovery of Thai novels as good sources for social criticism was the work of radical students and some young Thai literary scholars who were looking for ways to critique the inequities of Thai society. Student activists and other young literary critics republished many novels that

63 On 19 February, 1975, faculty members in the Thai Language Department at Thammasat University organised a panel discussion, 'Wannakam hai arai dae sangkhom' [*What does literature give to society?*], as a counterattack against radical students who were accused of trying to destroy Thai literature by reading trashy leftist novels instead of classical Thai literature. The students rejected traditional Thai literature as instruments of the ruling and oppressive *sakdina* (feudal) classes. Tomyantri, a conservative writer and one of the panellists, attempted to explain *sakdina* in a positive light but was booed by the students. I had been one of a handful of lecturers who had assigned students to read recently resurrected 'leftist' literature. For example, my open-book examination question asked freshmen in the 'Thai Civilization Foundation' course to consider the connection between ideology and history when reviewing the works of Prince Damrong, Luang Wichit and Jit Phumisak. Students were asked which history they preferred and why. Students across campus organised study groups to discuss the exam, much to the dismay of some conservative faculty members who accused me and the students of promoting leftist politics on campus. *Rua hang yao* refers to the modern, sleek, fast and flashy boats equipped with powerful Japanese car engines connected to a long drive shaft to the propeller (thus, 'long tail boat'). I assume that these boats motoring up and down the Chaophraya River along the Thammasat campus and the progressive faculty members on campus are seen as dangerous to the preservation of order and tradition. The tension between those in favour of the novel and those against teaching the novel started in the 1960s. See David Smyth, 'Towards the canonizing of the Thai novel', in Smyth, *The canon*, 174–5.

were banned during the previous dictatorial regimes. In addition to *Lae pai khang na*, students were reading, for example, Seni Saowaphong's *Pisat* [*The demon*], the many works of Asani Pholachan, and Jit Phumisak's *Chomna sakdina Thai* [*The real face of Thai feudalism*].⁶⁴

Many years later, beginning in 2000, I began teaching a graduate seminar on the Thai novel at Cornell University. These seminars analysed selected Thai novels in light of Hayden White's theory of tropes, the New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt, and translation theory, especially postcolonial translation theory.⁶⁵ In one seminar, we read in the vernacular several of Kulab Saipradit's novels such as *Luk phuchai* [*The real man*] (1928), *Khang lang phab* [*Behind the painting*] (1937) and *Lae pai khang na* [*Looking to the future*] (1955) to try to understand why his novels are considered by many to be politically radical and socially relevant. In another, we read and compared Mae Wan's *Khwam phayabat* [*The vendetta*] (1902) with Corelli's *Vendetta*, and Nai Samran's (pen name of Luang Wilatpariwat, popularly known as Khru Liam) *Khwam mai phayabat* [*The non-vendetta*] (1915). What I discovered is that, although Kulab's *Luk phuchai* (1928) was one of the three canonical novels designated as the first authentic Thai novels, Phraya Surintharacha's *Khwam phayabat* and Luang Wilatpariwat's *Khwam mai phayabat*, which predated them, were not. I became intrigued by two fundamental questions: 'How is the canon constructed?' and 'What limitations does a canon impose upon the study of literary transmission and the significance of other literary works ignored by the canon?'

64 The standard text on the social and political role of the Thai novel is Trisin Bunkhachon, *Nawaniyai kap sangkhom Thai* [*The novel and Thai society*] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Sangsan, 1980). Also see Hiramatsu Hideki, 'Thai literary trends: From Seni Saowaphong to Chart Kobjitti', *Kyoto review of Southeast Asia*, 8 (March 2007). Among the young progressive literary scholars were Chonthira Kladyu and Suvanna Kriengkraipetch. A comprehensive list of the books that were reprinted during this critical period can be found in Prajak Kongkirati, *Lae laeo khwam khlueanwai ko prakot* [*And then a movement appeared*] (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 2005), 438–42.

65 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Jeremy Munday, *Translations studies: Theories and applications* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

The Thai literary canon

David Smyth's preface in *The canon in Southeast Asian literatures* is instructive in answering my questions. Smyth's preface identifies two important features of the canon:

Traditionally the literary canon is seen as a chronological arrangement of famous authors and major works which 'have stood the test of time' because of their intrinsic merits and which are linked over the centuries by a presumed cultural unity ... the term 'canon' is most widely understood to refer to an institutionally recognized list of exemplary works, such as the body of works constituting the national literature of a country, it is also used to denote a system of rules for creating such works.⁶⁶

First, a canonical work must stand the test of time and reflect an 'authentic' cultural characteristic, at least of the predominant culture. Second, the canon identifies works that have become timeless and 'institutionally recognized' as national literature. This implies that canons are constructed by institutions, in this case, by academic literary scholars who research, teach, and most importantly, write and publish about why a particular work is more important than others. This process, in turn, ensures that the selected works will stand the test of time because other scholars will also write and teach these in academic institutions. This observation answers my second question: that is, even though it is assumed that the canon changes as scholars' opinions change, once a canon is institutionalised, it is difficult to dislodge.

Here I will question the established canon, especially the designation of the first 'authentic' Thai novel, to accommodate several, such as the three covered in this chapter, that have not been considered. It is not my purpose to discuss in detail the complexities of canonical construction. I am only responding to the ontological nature of the canon which I believe puts an undue emphasis on the 'big three', namely, Kulab Saipradit's *Luk phuchai* [*The real man*], Mom Luang Buppha Kunchorn's *Sattru khong jao lon* [*Her enemy*] (writing under the pen name Dok Mai Sot), and Mom Jao Akatdamkoeng's *Lakhon haeng chiwit* [*Circus of life*], all published around 1929. This overemphasis, I would argue, elides the importance of novels published before that date, and at the same time funnels scholarly energy

66 Smyth, *The canon*, vii.

towards only those novels the canon itself identifies. If the year 1929 demarcates the birth of authentic Thai novels, then anything written before that is less important, or worse, is considered unauthentic.

A recent institutional reinforcement of this canon is the publication of a special volume of the influential *Warasan phasa lae nangsue* [*The journal of language and books*], 35 (2004), dedicated to the 100th birthday anniversary of four exemplary authors. That issue celebrates the *Rung arun nawaniyai Thai* [*Dawn of the Thai novel*], suggesting that the Thai novel began with the works of four authors. In that issue, the novels of Mom Jao Akatdamkoeng, Kulab Saipradit and Mom Luang Buppha Kunchorn (Dok Mai Sot) are once again selected, analysed and critiqued. The focus on the three novels ignores, devalues, precludes and omits the importance of pre-1929 novels. In addition, the celebration of the three novels denies the importance of the transmission of earlier literary traditions upon which the canon is based.⁶⁷

The reinforcement and reiteration of this canon in *Warasan phasa lae nangsue* reflects the work of the two influential scholars writing in the mid-1970s. Suphanni Warathorn published her 1973 Chulalongkorn University MA thesis as ‘Prawat kanpraphan nawaniyai Thai’ [‘The history of the Thai novel’] in 1976. A year earlier, Wibha Senanan published her 1974 University of London PhD dissertation as ‘The genesis of the novel in Thailand’. Wibha’s book became the standard text in English and was only revised and published in Thai in 1997. Both books gave a convincing account of how the rise of print capitalism in Thailand helped spawn literary magazines, journals, newspapers and books that introduced European-style prose fiction to the expanding literate and increasingly urban public. Suphanni and Wibha also concurred that the three novels

67 I am not alone in this assertion. Phichet Saengthong’s article on Mom Jao Akatdamkoeng also questions the effects of designating *Lakbon haeng chiwit* as the first Thai novel. He argues that the current canon does not sufficiently cover literary transmission, and the influence of Thai literary traditions on Akatdamkoeng’s novels. Phichet believes that Akatdamkoeng’s novel became an exemplary novel because it fits the leftist inclinations of literary critics of the 1970s who wanted to use the novel to critique class society in Thailand. He suggests that there is a relationship between the canon and the ideological preferences of its constructors. I agree with Phichet that the division between lowbrow *nangsue aan len* (books that are read for fun), and highbrow *wanakam sathorn sangkhom* (literature that reflects social conditions) is artificial and not very helpful. The social and cultural impact of trashy lowbrow novels on the reading masses may be as important, if not more so, than the effects of esoteric literary works on a handful of literary scholars and their students. See Phichet Saengthong, ‘Phatthanakan nawaniyai Thai: korani Mom Jao Akatdamkoeng Raphiphat’ [‘The development of the Thai novel: the case of Mom Jao Akatdamkoeng Raphiphat’], *Warasan phasa lae nangsue*, 38 (2004): 53–86.

published around 1929 by Kulab Saipradit, Mom Jao Akatdamkoeng, and Mom Luang Buppha Kunchorn warranted special recognition as the first 'authentic' Thai novels. These two texts became the definitive study of the birth and evolution of the Thai novel. More recently, Mattani Rutnin (1988), Marcel Barang (1994), and David Smyth (2000) continued to reinforce Suphanni's and Wibha's pronouncements.⁶⁸

Those literary scholars point out that the three 'authentic' Thai novels depict Thai society realistically through main characters who are Thai, and with central themes that are serious and substantive.⁶⁹ As illustration, Wibha asserts that Kulab Saipradit is 'more serious in his imaginative writing than most of his contemporaries whose work normally evolved around the theme of melodramatic love, mystery, or detection'.⁷⁰ More importantly, these literary scholars insist that the three novels had developed a distinct Thai identity. It is not clear to me what constitutes 'distinct' in these cases, or why some novels are more imaginative than others. My own reading suggests that all three of the novels are indeed melodramatic love stories, not radically different from earlier novels which were pejoratively labelled *nangsue an len* (books read for fun), or *banthoeng khadi kblueap* (enamelled entertainment). Authenticity, and what is considered to be Thai, is such an elusive and contingent concept that seems to be important only to regimes that define the Thai nation-state. I am more impressed by the fact that the three texts are modern novels written in the vernacular Thai language, and I feel that a debate about authenticity is unwarranted and distracting.

The canon is inevitably constructed by literary scholars, conditioned by their own subjectivity/ideology, influenced by the intellectual climate of their generation. The period in which the canonical novels were published coincided with the impending crisis of the old regime, the rapidly expanding middle class and bureaucracy, exciting social change, the vast improvement of education, and the emergence of writing as a vocation. The end of the 1920s set the stage for the modern Thailand of the middle class, a period that the scholars of the 1970s were more familiar with. In addition, by the end of the conflict in Vietnam in 1975, young people

68 Mattani, *Modern Thai literature*; Barang, *The 20 best novels in Thailand*.

69 Suphanni, *History of the Thai novel*, 233–4.

70 Wibha, *The genesis of the novel in Thailand*, 83.

were becoming nationalistic and more socially aware. They advocated economic nationalism and in turn searched for ‘authentic’ Thai products, including national literature that critiqued the injustices in Thai society.

The renewed focus on the place of literature, especially the novel, from both the conservative and radical camps, resulted in a struggle to define authentic, relevant and good literature. Nationalistic Thai literary critics concluded that the very early Thai novels were just too derivative, too indistinct from the European novels upon which they were based, and therefore, too unauthentic. On the other hand, the young radical literary scholars were also busy excavating and promoting literature with social and political messages in their own attempt to insert these radical voices into the canon itself. In this strange mix, the fate of the very early novels was sealed. They were summarily ignored.

Reconstituting a genealogy of the Thai novel

We have seen that by the end of the 19th century, short stories began to be published regularly. Many of these were translations of English compositions.⁷¹ By the early 20th century, many students who returned from Europe also found publishing outlets in the emerging magazine market. Although we know about the names of these magazines and some of the very early compositions from the accounts in Suphanni’s book, it is not possible to fully assess the totality of novels that were written during the first decade and a half of the 20th century. Even the titles cited in Suphanni’s book could not be easily found in the national or university libraries. It is more than likely that these are still languishing on private collectors’ bookcases, or feeding termites in boxes stored away in closets.

71 An excellent selection of some of these early translations and original essays can be found in Nawatri Ying Sumali Wirawong, ed., *Roikaew naew mai khong Thai B.E. 2417-2453 [The new Thai prose writing, 1874-1910]* (Bangkok: Samnakphim Sayam, 2004). The short stories were published in *Darunowat*, *Wicharayanwiset*, *Wicharayan*, *Lak witthaya*, *Thalok witthaya*, *Thawi panya*, *Kula satri*, *Samran witthaya* and *Nithranukhro*. This edited volume is an amazing anthology of 40 Thai short stories written mostly during the reign of King Chulalongkorn. Sumali provides a concise tabulated analysis of each short story, documenting names of authors, publisher, length in pages, main characters, plot summaries, writing styles, origin (Thai or translation) and other useful observations. This anthology should be required reading for students interested in Thai modernity, literary transmission, the evolution of modern Thai language, postcolonial theory and intellectual history.

Few examples of the novels of the first period remain in circulation. Printing runs were low and circulation was limited to the elite intellectual class. Suphanni says that most of these early novels were based on Western examples.

Suphanni also identifies two Thai proto-novels—*Nithan thong in* [*Thong-in tales*], and *Darawan*. *Nithan thong in* was a detective story inspired by Arthur Conan Doyle's *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* series. Self-contained episodes were written by Prince Vajiravudh under the pseudonym Nai Kaew Nai Khwan in 1904. Fifteen episodes were published. *Darawan* was the work of Kromamuen Narathip Praphanphong, using the pseudonym Prasertakson. That novel appears to be a proper Thai romance set in Malaya. Aside from Suphanni's excellent analysis, these two early novels have not attracted much interest from other literary scholars. It is puzzling to me why these novels are not included in the canon.

Even more puzzling is the exclusion of *Khwam phayabat*, which has been acknowledged as the first novel to appear in the Thai language. Even though *Khwam phayabat* is a translation, it introduced the Thai public and aspiring authors to the novel form. Neither Suphanni nor Wibha analysed this novel in their influential texts, nor has the novel been mentioned in recent publications that identify/institutionalise important works of literature. Ignoring the importance of this translated novel is, in my opinion, a grave oversight.⁷²

I argue that the three non-canonical early novels covered in this chapter should be included in the Thai literary canon, representing the genre of the vernacularised (translated) novel, the original Thai novel, and the hybrid/imitation/bicultural novel that helped prepare Thailand for modernity and political and cultural autonomy. Contemporary Thai literary scholars have dismissed these novels as unauthentic Thai because they are *nangsue plae* (translated book), *nangsue prae* (transformed book) or *nangsue plaeng* (metamorphosed book), which are distinctions without difference.

72 Suphanni also lists 18 titles published between 1911 and 1919, but it is unclear whether these novels are original compositions or translated novels and whether they are still available to researchers. Undoubtedly, this period is indeed a lively period for novels that deserves serious attention. Suphanni, *History of the Thai novel*, 151–2. Another popular author whose works have been translated into Thai is H. Rider Haggard. The most famous among his translated novels is *She* (1886), first translated by Luang Wilatpariwat using the pseudonym Nok Nori sometime in the early 1900s or early 1910s, under the title *Sao song phan pi* [*The two-thousand-year-old maiden*]. This translation has been reprinted several times, most recently in 1990. The term *sao song phan pi* is now a common description of women who refuse to age. Few, however, remember how the term originated.

Vernacularisation as appropriation

Thai culture over the centuries has benefited from translations of literary works from other cultures.⁷³ The *Ramakian*, for example, is a Thai rewriting of the *Ramayana* that has been accepted as an exemplar of classical Thai literature. I would not be surprised if many Thai do not realise that the epic is in fact an important scripture in Hinduism. In my own case, it was not until I was an educated adult that I realised that *Nithan isop* [*Aesop's fables*] and *Inao* from the Indonesian Panji tales were not Thai.

Translation from a foreign language into Thai predominantly involves sense for sense and not word for word. The accuracy that is demanded of academic translation is not the concern of most of the early translations. Translators have exercised a wide range of agency in adding to, subtracting from, or changing the stories they translate.⁷⁴ For example, the *Ramayana* has been rewritten, reinterpreted, and reformatted, so that as the *Ramakian* it has taken on a new life to celebrate the royals and not the gods as in the original Hindu text. In fact, each Southeast Asian version of the *Ramayana* reflects its own local history and cultural specificity.⁷⁵

Postcolonial scholars like Tejaswini Niranjana and Gayatri Spivak focus on the power relations involved in translation.⁷⁶ Niranjana is concerned with how translations 'inform the hegemonic apparatuses that belong to the ideological structure of colonial rule'.⁷⁷ This is because domination is carried out by the state apparatus. Spivak, on the other hand, highlights how colonial translation is a way to reconstruct or to rewrite the image of the colonised as an inferior culture. Through the process of interpellation, a term coined by the French Marxist theorist Louis Althusser, the colonised internalise this inferiority and thereby perpetuate the myth of inequality. Vince Rafael in his book, *Contracting Colonialism*, however,

73 For a discussion of translation as culture and translation as appropriation, see Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevre, eds, *Translation, history and culture* (New York: Pinter, 1990). Assimilating foreign text into a target culture and language can also be seen as a domesticating process. While generally a negative concept, when used by the subaltern it can be empowering.

74 The translator's ideology generally wins over all other considerations, be they linguistic or poetic: Andre Lefevre, *Translation, rewriting, and the manipulation of the literary frame* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 39.

75 For a study of plot variations, see Nicanor G. Tiongson, 'The rule of Rama from the Bay of Bengal to the Pacific Ocean', *SPAJA journal*, 10(2) (May–August, 2000): 5–25.

76 Gayatri Spivak, 'The politics of translation', in *The translation studies reader*, ed. L. Venuti (New York: Routledge, 2000), 397–416.

77 Niranjana, *Siting translation*, 33.

takes a different tack. He documents how the Tagalog use ‘mistranslation’ as a strategy to resist Spanish hegemony.⁷⁸ Rafael’s work differs from Niranjana’s, even though both are interested in the subjectivity of the colonised, in that Rafael theorises that retranslation or mistranslation widely existed during the colonial period. The agency of the colonised to mistranslate may have puzzled the Spaniard priests, but it was logical to the Tagalog.

The study of early Thai translation of Western literature can gain from Rafael’s conceptual framework. Even though Thailand was never directly colonised, the imposition of extraterritoriality by the 1855 Bowring Treaty compromised its sovereignty. Thus scholars have conceptualised Thailand as a semi-colonial state to try to make it fit into the conceptual framework of colonised Southeast Asia. Although the debate about how to situate Thailand in postcolonial studies is still unsettled, I would argue that even as a semi-colonial state or a crypto-colonial state (a term coined by Michael Herzfeld), the Thai had control over cultural production that served their own needs and not those of the hegemonic colonial powers. In this instance, I would also argue that translation was a way to cushion the impact of Western domination.

The policy urging translations was first announced by King Chulalongkorn in 1886 as a way to improve education and knowledge about the West.⁷⁹ The discourse of resistance was expressed as the necessity to keep abreast of the best achievement of *khwam than samai* (the latest achievement of human civilisation) regardless of where it originated. Asian humanistic culture was to be replaced by Western culture that emphasised rationality, science and industry. Beginning with King Mongkut, Thailand’s leaders wanted to acquire the West’s superior scientific and industrial achievements

78 Rafael, *Contracting colonialism*.

79 Suphanni, *History of the Thai novel*, 32. The sign of a shift from Chinese economic and cultural hegemony to an English/European hegemony is the suspension of tribute missions to China by King Mongkut in 1852 when Thailand began negotiations with the British about trade and legal authority that led up to the Bowring Treaty of 1855. See: B.J. Terwiel, *Thailand’s political history* (Bangkok: Rivers Books, 2005), 145. Historians have concluded that the 1893 incident where French gunboat diplomacy forced Thailand to relinquish claims to territory on the west bank of the Mekong solidified Thailand’s policy to emulate Western civilisation as a strategy to resist colonial conquest. See Patrick Jory, ‘Problems in contemporary Thai nationalist historiography’, *Kyoto review of Southeast Asia*, March 2003, accessed 24 April 2007: kyotoreview.org/issue-3-nations-and-stories/problems-in-contemporary-thai-nationalist-historiography-abstract/. It should be noted that soon after that crisis King Chulalongkorn sent two sons, Prince Vajiravudh and Prince Aphakorn, to study military and naval science in England. Others were soon to follow.

together with the cultural forms that supported those achievements. But the Thai would only select what was best and appropriate them through translation or adaptation.

Translation, interpretation and rewriting are processes that appropriate what is transformed as one's own. Thai translators do not always see themselves as technicians of language, but as artists, authors and composers. It is not unusual to see authors list themselves as such and not as mere translators. In fact, the first Thai author/translators exercised freewheeling agency by including their own stories and ideas that exceeded what was actually in the novels themselves.

Another way to theorise translation is to consider it as vernacularisation or localisation of knowledge—turning something foreign into Thai. The historian David Wyatt has made a strong argument for the emergence of what he calls the 'vernacular kingdoms', which invented their own writing systems in the late 13th century that facilitated the vernacularisation of idioms in art, literature, and music. This is why one can distinguish, for example, Buddha images that are Indian, Thai, Burmese or Khmer. The vernacularisation process in literature when applied to the novel, therefore, makes translated novels 'Thai'. Wyatt's colleague O.W. Wolters equates appropriation to localisation, whereby what is foreign becomes fractured, restated and drained of its original significance before being reconstituted with a new subjectivity.⁸⁰

Translation is also a way to educate readers about other cultures. Many leading Thai intellectuals such as Phraya Anuman Ratchathon and Prince Wachirayan had *farang* patrons to help them with English and to understand Europe.⁸¹ But for the rest of the middle class, translated

80 See Wolters, *History, culture, and region*, 55–7, 173–4, 182–8. David Wyatt's assertions were presented on numerous occasions in guest lectures in my 'Asian Studies 208: Introduction to Southeast Asia'. Appropriation, or to make something one's own, may explain why some of the early translators see themselves as authors and composers of new transformed literary works and therefore did not feel compelled to acknowledge the original manuscript or author. Plagiarism through translation is not seen as the bankruptcy of indigenous genius. Instead of being a prohibited behaviour, stealing knowledge through plagiarism is condoned and taken as clever or *keng*. Outwitting a better opponent is always *keng* in Thai culture. The practice of not crediting the work of previous scholars also occurs in retranslations. Later translations of Rider Haggard's *She* by Chaiwat [pseud.], *Sao song phan pi* (n.p.: 1943), found in the Chulalongkorn University Library, and Sotsai [pseud.], *Amata devi* (Bangkok: Praphansarn Press, 2004), never even mentioned that the first translation was made by Khru Liam. Note that Chaiwat also plagiarised Khru Liam's title.

81 Until recently, scholars believed that Phraya Anuman Rachathon's *Soraida: nangphyia thalae sai* [*Zoraida: The desert queen*], published in 1915, was a translation of Rider Haggard's *Virgin of the sun*. Phraya Anuman translated many English novels—14 in all—with the help of his English

stories provided easy access to help them know the West and other cultures. Moreover, many translated works wrote into their compositions the equality or even the superiority of Thai culture over Western culture and practices.

For the Thai, translation was an appropriation of Western knowledge that helped to boost the Thai sense of self-assurance, cosmopolitanism and understanding of the benefits and pitfalls of modernity that would prepare them to deal with the encroaching West. Even though it was clear that the West was superior in many aspects, there was no need for the Thai to feel totally inferior. To emulate the West did not necessarily mean to submit to the West. ‘Knowing the West’ through translation could be an effective strategy to help prepare the Thai to resist Western hegemony.

Conclusion

Even this necessarily brief account should demonstrate that the current canon identifying *Lakhon haeng chiwit*, *Luk phuchai* and *Sattru khong jao lon* as the first authentic/real Thai novels obfuscates and elides the importance of other earlier novels. The intrusion of ideological sentiments into the formation of the canon prevents a better appreciation of cultural transmission and reception, especially during the period when the Thai had to cope with heightened pressure from the colonial powers. The labelling of those three novels as authentically Thai suggests that earlier novels were insufficiently authentic, too close to their Western models and, therefore, unworthy of consideration. Metaphorically, the ‘bathwater’ from which

supervisor in the Customs Department, Norman Maxwell. This misidentification was recently corrected by Runruthai Satchaphan in her book *Jak kao su mai wannasin thai mai sinsun* [*From old to new: Thai literature is not lost*] (Bangkok: Srinakharinwirot University Press, 2009), 151–86. She argues convincingly that the original novel was, in fact, William Le Queux’s *Zoraida: The romance of the harem and the great Sahara* and that many Thai literary scholars have never really read the original novel for comparison. Over the years this novel has been republished with the error until Runruthai found a copy where Phraya Anuman indicated that it was a translation of Le Queux’s novel. It is not unusual for the early Thai authors to publish translations without attribution, claiming that their translations were their original work. In 1913, for example, Phraya Anuman also published a novel *Amnat haeng khwam phayayam* [*The power of perseverance*] but failed to give the name of the original author or book title. The vernacularisation of Western literature through translation became an honourable pastime for the educated class, both for those who studied abroad, as well as for those who learned English at local schools such as Suan Kulab, Thepsirin and Assumption. These early writers translated and wrote original prose fiction out of duty as well as to seek fame. They did this work while holding down their regular government jobs. Writing did not become a serious profession until the founding of the Suphab Burut group by Kulab Saipradit in the late 1920s.

the three canonical novels sprang forth was unceremoniously thrown out, and with it, some 'babies'. I have discussed the importance of three of these babies. There must be more.

Khwam phayabat is the first proper novel to be experienced uniformly by the literate and increasingly urban Thai. The novel allowed the Thai to form a common imagination and knowledge about the West. Because the novel was read in the vernacular and not in an imperial language, it could not be seen as an imposition of a colonial value upon the Thai public. The West was filtered through a Thai lens that made Western culture accessible, familiar, and less threatening.

But translation is also a process of vernacularisation and localisation that appropriates another culture's knowledge by transforming it into one's own. Thus, Mae Wan's *Khwam phayabat* is more than just a translation of an English novel: it is an original Thai appropriation of the English novel that is representative of a genre of literature that educated the Thai public about the West. Whether accurate or not, these early translated novels taught the Thai about the alluring yet dangerous Other. The cumulative effect of acquired and appropriated information constituted foundational knowledge about Europe, and other foreign cultures, for the Thai.

Prior to the arrival of print capitalism, the Thai foundational knowledge about Indian and Chinese culture came from appropriated translations of two major epics—the *Ramayana* [*Ramakian*] for India and *The romance of the three kingdoms* [*Sam kok*] for China. In both cases, but especially with the *Ramayana*, the transmission of knowledge is based on limited circulation of texts (even though *Sam kok* was printed in 1865, its circulation was rather limited), oral and dramatic performances and representations on mural paintings. But with print capitalism that took root in Thailand at the end of the 19th century and its subsequent flourishing in the early 20th century, foundational knowledge about the West and other cultures was rapidly formed by the process of simultaneous reading of a multiplicity of uniform and mass-circulated short stories, newspapers and novels.

The inclusion of *Khwam phayabat* and perhaps other translated novels in school and university curriculums will give Thai literature studies new directions for teaching and research that will help clarify when, how and what Thais knew about the world beyond, and how novels contributed to

the Thai cosmopolitan world view, its prejudices, its sense of equality and its confidence with regard to Others. These translated novels should also undergo close study within translation theory, contextual historicism and postcolonial critical studies.⁸²

I have also made the case that *Khwan mai phayabat* is not merely a satire or simply a parody of Corelli's *Vendetta*. It is far more than that. Stephen Greenblatt, the leading proponent of the New Historicism, suggests that literature as culture acts as a constraint to enforce cultural boundaries through praise and blame.⁸³ As the first original Thai novel that was highly critical of the effects of urbanisation and modernisation, *Khwan mai phayabat* is a very early example of how the novel can help enforce cultural, gender and moral values that have come under attack by modernity.

Aside from the opening page that refers to the belief of Westerners that 'revenge is sweet', *Khwan mai phayabat* is indeed a very Thai novel. Its plot is Thai. Its setting is entirely in Thailand. Its characters are all Thai and recognisable. Its underlying moral message is also Thai. This novel also suggests historical and anthropological problematics that can be explained by a close reading and a reconstruction of Bangkok middle-class society of the 1910s. I agree with the anthropologist Herbert Phillips who points out that Thai writers can be 'the most sensitive, reflective, [and] articulate ... members of Thai society ... The writing of literature is integral to the social process, as both historical precipitant and product'. He argues further that literature in the vernacular can be considered a 'noetic expression of a social and cultural milieu', and that it is possible to treat 'literary works as embodiments of culture'. Writing in the vernacular is writing for fellow Thais. Therefore, the communication is intracultural and reflects 'the native point of view'.⁸⁴

82 Parenthetically, the fact that many societies in Asia read translations of similar novels could be a subject of investigation: Would different cultural and intellectual traditions lead to different translations and explanations? Would simultaneous literacy of European novels across different Asian cultures and communities conjure up uniform or dissimilar images of the West? How different is each translation intraculturally and intercultural? How does colonial status complicate translation? An excellent study of this line of research is Doris Jedamski's pioneering work 'Popular literature and postcolonial subjectivities: Robinson Crusoe, the Count of Monte Cristo and Sherlock Holmes in colonial Indonesia', in *Clearing a space: Postcolonial readings of modern Indonesian literature*, ed. Keith Foulcher and Tony Day (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002), 19–48.

83 Greenblatt, 'Culture', 226.

84 Herbert P. Phillips, *Modern Thai literature with an ethnographic interpretation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987), 3–4. Phillips said that he owes his ideas to Malinowski.

Nevertheless, *Khwan mai phayabat* is a novel ahead of its time. It failed in the marketplace because it was too drastic a departure from the romances, mystery adventures, and detective stories popular at that time. It contained too harsh a criticism of the very people it was supposed to appeal to—that is, the emerging modern urban middle class. Hidden behind the salacious description of sexual orgies was indeed a stunning criticism of Bangkok society. Thailand's first original Thai novel was perhaps too modern, too serious, and ultimately too Thai for an audience which did not want to deal with the reality of a morally corrupt Bangkok society.

Nang neramit, on the other hand, was written to satisfy to the Thai reading public's thirst to learn about the Other and faraway places. As pure fiction, *Nang neramit* is an important novel because it showcases the professionalism of a Thai author, writing not about the familiar, but about the unfamiliar in convincing ways. As the first full-blown novel written by a Thai author in the Thai language about foreign characters in a foreign land, it represents the prototype of local literary genius. Khru Liam should be considered the first professional Thai novelist capable of composing original stories that transcend the limitations of local culture and space. Because most of his life was devoted to writing, translating and publishing books, he has to be considered the first modern professional literary figure in Thailand.

Nang neramit is entertaining as well as didactic. The novel allows the reader to be transported into a foreign land, to see life and adventure through Thai eyes, to imagine faraway places, and to imagine the lives and the foibles of Englishmen, Egyptians, Arabs, Ethiopians and Africans. Although he appropriates a Western literary form, in *Nang neramit* Khru Liam reverses the usual Western gaze, which looks at Thailand as an exotic and strange place, to allow the Thai to gaze back at the West and other cultures as strange, exotic, immoral and even backward.

Can these three novels be considered authentically Thai? Again, in my opinion, a discussion of authenticity is irrelevant and distracting. These novels are Thai because their authors are Thai and their compositions are in the Thai vernacular. In her essay of otherness in Thai literature, Suvanna Kriengkraipetch remarked that it is difficult to define the Thai 'us', the essential ingredient for Thai authenticity. She concluded that it is much easier to write about others. For example, she points to Rama I's *Inao* that identifies the *khaek* (Javanese Muslim) as people who 'did not

eat pork'.⁸⁵ However, 'eating pork' is not an exclusive Thai characteristic. We know who 'we' are without thinking about it. We also define ourselves by knowing who we are not. The three novels that I have analysed clearly define the Thai 'us' and the foreign 'other'. The vernacular nature of the novels and their Thai authors make them accessible to just 'us' Thais. To reiterate, novels written originally in the Thai vernacular by Thai authors are quintessentially Thai, no different from *kaeng khiew wan kai* (chicken green curry) pizza, which I consider to be a Thai dish.

Some may argue that Khru Liam is just an opportunist, a fake *farang*, and no better than a mimic. But unlike colonial subjects writing in the language of the Metropole to be shared with those educated in their master's language, Khru Liam's work is in the vernacular accessible to a large number of literate Thai. It would be difficult to accuse him of mimicking the hegemonic culture of the West. Even though he had studied in England and would occasionally dress as an odd Englishman in Bangkok, he was far from being a colonial subject mimicking his master. In the colonies, subjects with pretensions who mimicked the mannerisms of their masters were seen as 'almost, but not quite'. They were loathed by fellow natives and masters alike.⁸⁶

Thongchai Winichakul interprets Khru Liam's *Nang neramit* postscript as the semi-colonial subaltern's declaration of freedom and autonomy from Western hegemony. In that postscript, Khru Liam chides his Thai

85 Suvanna Kriengkraipetch, 'Characters in Thai literary works', in Manas chitakasem, *Thai literary traditions* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1995), 135. Suvanna concluded that 'the concept of "the otherness" helps to understand and then to define ourselves as belonging to a particular group'. She agreed with a colleague who she quoted that being Thai was not a set of criteria, but a lifelong process (Kriengkraipetch, 'Characters', 145–6). Another famous assault on Thai identity is Sujit Wongthes, *Jek pon lao [Chinese mixed with Lao]* (Bangkok: Silpa Watthanatham, 1987), which suggested that modern Thai identity is a hybrid of Chinese and Laotian cultures. Recently, a friend told me that the Cambodians see the modern Thai as someone who 'looks Chinese, acts like a *farang*, and speaks Thai laced with Khmer'.

86 On the subject of mimicry, see Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse', in *The location of culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994). The pitfalls of mimicry and imitation are not new to the Thai. These concerns were voiced by King Vajiravudh (1910–1925) in his short article *Lathi ao yang [Imitation cult]*, where he warned the Thai people about how to retain their own Thai culture in the face of encroaching Westernisation. He wrote that for the Thai to appear European was comparable to a dog learning to sit. The human owner may think that the dog was cute because it exhibited human qualities, but yet it was still a dog. Similarly, a Thai who emulated the Englishman may gain the empathy of the English but that only emphasised the superiority of Europeans. King Vajiravudh urged the Thai to appropriate only what was only needed to modernise Thailand and not to try to become an Englishman. See *Lathi ao yang*, n.d. in the *Cremation volume of Khanet Rueksaphailin*, Wat Somanatwiharn, 3 December 1975. I am indebted to Craig J. Reynolds for suggesting this reference.

readers that if they were looking for the original *farang* novel ostensibly written by a good *farang* novelist, they will not find him or her. Instead, they are left with only that novel and Khru Liam who is just as good, if not better than the *farang*. Thongchai and I agree that Thailand's semi-colonial status allowed the Thai more freedom to be among the earliest to express postcolonial sentiments and to exercise postcolonial resistance.⁸⁷

In Khru Liam's case, his hybridity, that is, his outward appearance and his ability to mimic a *farang* or a *farang* author, could be accepted as 'clever'. The foreign-educated Thai, even those who shamelessly emulate the lifestyle of the *farang* today, are still accepted as a valued and privileged class. Returning *nakrian nok* (students educated abroad) continue to be the stars of Thai society. They are not considered 'hybrids', but 'bicultural'—Thais who are comfortable in both Thai and Western culture.

Postcolonial theorists who seek the precolonial condition tend to treat colonisation negatively and to view translation as an instrument of empire. Others like Rafael, who celebrate hybridity, tend to see translation as a 'highly supple and creative channel of mutual and self-transformation'.⁸⁸ In the Thai case, its semi-coloniality allowed for a lesser disruption and a less distinctive demarcation of precolonial, colonial and postcolonial conditions. The Thai elite was able to engage in a domestic project of translation (vernacularisation) that turned translation and imitation into anti-hegemonic instruments of self-affirmation, self-interpellation, and resistance against empire.

To conclude, the Thai literary engagement in translation, composition, and imitation of Western novels during the height of Western colonialism in Southeast Asia is a strategy for the semi-colonial subaltern Thai to speak or talk back against Western hegemony.⁸⁹ The three novels identified in

87 Thongchai Winichakul observed that if we were to employ a postcolonial lens to look at *Nang neramit*, then Khru Liam's tactic of engaging the West would be an elaborate dance of deception by a subaltern to declare postcolonial independence from Western domination. Remarks made by Thongchai Winichakul, Council of Thai Studies Conference, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1 December 2007. Thailand's semi-coloniality was a subject of 'The Ambiguous Allure of the West' conference held at Cornell University, 5–7 November 2004. Peter Jackson's conference paper 'Semi-coloniality and duality in Siam's relations with the West', raised important questions about the place of Thailand and Thai studies in postcolonial studies; Rachel Harrison and Peter A. Jackson, eds, *The ambiguous allure of the West: Traces of the colonial in Thailand* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press and Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2010).

88 Douglas Robinson, *Translation and empire* (Manchester: St Jerome Publishing, 1997), 84.

89 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?' in *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

this essay, no less than the three canonical ones, have appropriated the *rupatham* of the Western literary form, and by inserting Thai *namatham* their authors have made their novels Thai. Mae Wan's *Khvam phayabat*, and Khru Liam's *Khvam mai phayabat* and *Nang neramit* should be included in the canon of Thai literature as exemplary examples of the translated or vernacularised novel, the overlooked original Thai novel, and the dismissed imitative novel. A full accounting of the early novels predating 1929 will help us better understand the importance of the novel in preparing Thailand for modernity and for resistance against the negative effects of Western culture. And, more importantly, unlike elsewhere in Southeast Asia where many indigenous novels are written in the imperial language, the Thai novel is written in the vernacular and consumed locally. The Thai resistance against bad Western cultural influence and hegemony is exercised without the full knowledge of the West because vernacular Thai novels are not generally accessible to Westerners.⁹⁰

90 The first Anglicised Filipino novel, Zoilo M. Galang's *A child of sorrow* appeared in 1921. By 1966, production of Filipino English novels exceeded those written in India, Singapore and Malaya. See Abdul Majid Bin Babi Baksh, *The Filipino novel in English* (Quezon City: The University of the Philippines, 1970), 3. Anglicised novels were not exclusively consumed by the indigenous, but they were more or less open to the world, very much in the tradition of Jose Rizal's *Noli me tangere* and *El filibusterismo*, which were written in Spanish for fellow Filipino intellectuals but were also accessible to the Spanish authorities. It should also be noted that vernacular novels in Tagalog appeared soon after the defeat of Spain by the United States. These novels were written by journalists and typesetters who combined local literary forms with the novel introduced by Rizal. Resil Mojares believes that the defeat of a repressive colonial Spanish regime freed the Tagalog mentally to allow them to write novels in the vernacular. However, those novels found limited circulation because Tagalog was a language limited to speakers around Manila. It is more recently that Filipinos have embraced Tagalog as their national language. Resil B. Mojares, *Origins and rise of the Filipino novel: A generic study of the novel until 1940* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1998) cited in Shirlita A. Espinosa, 'Ethnicity and kinship in Filipino centennial novels', *Kyoto review of Southeast Asia*, 8 (March 2008), no pagination.

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