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Adventures of a dangerous Thai woman: *Huang rak haew luk* (1949)

Luang Wichit Wathakan's bestselling novel, *Huang rak haew luk* [*Sea of love, chasm of death*], addresses three major themes: modernity, nationalism and gender.¹ Prior to the novel's publication in 1949, Luang Wichit was well-known both as the architect of modern Thai nationalism and, perhaps equally important, as the dramatist who popularised militant feminism. In his plays (1936–40), upper-class Thai women took up arms to fight alongside their men in wars of liberation.² Luang Wichit even made these women instigators of uprisings against foreign enemies

1 Luang Wichit Wathakan, *Huang rak haew luk* [*Sea of love, chasm of death*] (Bangkok: Sangsan Press, 1999). In the foreword of the first edition (Phloenchit Press, 1949), written on 7 February 1949, Luang Wichit writes:

I compare a *haew luk* or deep chasm to the *huang rak* or sea of love because everyone is ready to jump into the sea of love even though it is dangerous. Water flows clear in the sea but one can die if one drinks it. Likewise, love entices us to taste and to drink from it. But in fact, to indulge in the sea of love is no different from descending into a deep chasm where a hasty fall will prove deadly. One should descend carefully because once in the chasm and danger rears its head, it is too late to climb out.

The novel was originally published in 26 instalments totalling 3,229 pages. The reprint cited here comes in four volumes and uses finer print, totalling 1,461 pages. The entire novel was written in less than five months. The first printing sold an average of 15,026 copies per instalment, which translates to about 390,000 books sold. The author boasts that there is insufficient space in the National Library to shelve the number of books sold. Luang Wichit also claims in the preface of the second edition that the novel was mentioned in parliamentary speeches, university debates, exhibitions, etc. He claims that because of the novel's popularity the public must surely accept the novel's leading character, Praphimphan, as the exemplar of the modern Thai woman.

2 See Scot Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the creation of a Thai identity* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), especially pages 119–31.

who had subjugated the Thai. With *Huang rak haew luk*, however, Luang Wichit went beyond the notion of nationalistic militant feminism to break new ground: common and lower-class women offer a new, exciting and international model of the modern militant Thai woman.

But before examining this important novel, it is useful to review briefly Luang Wichit's long career as a government official, diplomat, educator and writer. Born as Kimliang Watthanaparuda to a poor family in Uthaihani Province in 1898, Luang Wichit received a Buddhist education as a novice but was only briefly a monk.³ He exhibited early promise as a writer and thinker as a student at Wat Mahathat in Bangkok when he topped the nation in the fifth level Parian Pali examinations. Luang Wichit taught himself English and French, a feat that alarmed his superiors because monks were prohibited from learning foreign languages for fear that they would be exposed to insidious foreign ideas. After spending only two months as a monk, he left to join the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1918. Two years later, he won, through examination, a post to the Thai legation in France. There he continued his law and political science studies but he was transferred to London before he was able to finish them. During his six years in Europe, Luang Wichit became friendly with Pridi and Luang Phibun, the two leaders of the People's Party that overthrew the absolute monarchy in 1932. He also married a French woman with whom he had two children, a fact that is not widely circulated.⁴ Prior to 1932, Luang Wichit carefully navigated a career in the bureaucracy and was somewhat neutral and apolitical. He did not join the People's Party but later became the ideological architect for nation-building, especially in the Phibun

3 For a detailed biography, see Luang Wichit's cremation volume, *Khana Ratthamontri, Wichitwathakan Anusorn*, 16 September 1962. When asked about his own racial background, Luang Wichit denied that he was part Chinese. He insisted that his Chinese first name was a popular convention at the time. This may be plausible because I know of several relatives whose names began with the Chinese 'Kim', which means 'gold'. They, too, deny any ties with the Chinese. Of course, another explanation is that the pressure to be accepted as Thai was so intense that most local-born ethnic Chinese, or those who have lived for generations in Thailand, do not want to identify themselves with the Chinese. More recently, of course, ethnic Chinese who are called 'jek' insist that they are not really Chinese 'jin' but a new hybrid of Thai and Chinese that is really 'Thai'. See Chapter 5 in this volume for further discussion. Is it plausible that Luang Wichit's fixation with race and pure blood lines reflect his own insecurities?

4 Luang Wichit married his French teacher with whom he had two children. They were divorced in 1933. This little-known fact may explain his gender bias when it came to the consideration of Thai conversion. Women can become Thai when married to a Thai man, but a foreign male can never become Thai; Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan*, 43.

and Sarit governments. He took his role as teacher and nation-builder seriously: all of his writing, including his plays and his novels, is overtly didactic.⁵

Although he was fascinated by modern ideas, Luang Wichit was able to promote the construction of the modern Thai state by exploiting its past. In spite of accusations that he took many liberties when writing Thai history, it is undeniable that Luang Wichit Wathakan left a lasting imprint on how Thais view their past and how that view has influenced their self-understanding. Luang Wichit was the ideologue behind the post-1932 nationalism campaign under the Phibun regime. He wrote academic texts, essays, speeches, plays, songs and official state proclamations that established new values for Thai society. Luang Wichit's imaginative mind helped to promote a belief in the primacy of the state, the immutability of the Thai race, the necessity of militarism and the worship of historical personalities as national heroes and heroines. He was one of the first to insist that the word 'Thai' means 'to be free' or 'independent', and made sure that Thai heroes and heroines were only those who gave up their lives for the nation.

Luang Wichit was, however, selective in his choice of examples of the heroic deeds of past kings and the royals—the good royals such as Ramkhamhaeng and Naresuan who fought against foreign enemies to protect Thai independence. He believed that Sukhothai embodied the essence of 'Thai', an essence that became diluted and then polluted during the Ayuthaya period when the kings adopted Khmer forms of architecture and rituals. His didactic plays relied on national crises during the wars between Ayuthaya and Burma as settings. Because of his fascination with international politics, he also used his plays not just to promote

5 Luang Wichit's first books focused on world history, biographies of great men, Thai history, and on self-improvement. He authored 49 books that can be classified under these categories. Later, during the height of the nation-building campaign in the early 1930s, he turned to writing semi-historical plays, which were successful in providing a 'foundational' knowledge of popular history for his Thai audience. All in all, he penned about 24 plays. Luang Wichit also lectured on law and history at both Chulalongkorn and Thammasat universities. He prided himself as an intellectual and academic, and published no less than 24 volumes of his lecture notes. Incredibly, Luang Wichit also found the time to write 84 short stories and novels. Most of his novels focused on how people can struggle against all odds and win. One of his later novels, *Sang chiwit* [*Building a life*], which was published posthumously in 1971, chronicled the struggle of a peasant girl against the injustices of society. In that novel, Luang Wichit addresses the controversial issue of class exploitation and the urban-rural divide.

nationalism, but to highlight other causes as well.⁶ He deviated from the example of Prince Damrong, the acknowledged father of Thai history, when he reinterpreted Thai history to include heroic deeds of the common folk. Perhaps most importantly, Luang Wichit concluded that common Thai men *and women* played important roles in protecting the nation.

As a playwright, Luang Wichit wrote 10 plays between 1936 and 1940. His efforts coincided with the intense promotion of Thai nationalism. What Wichit did was to emulate Rama VI's attempt to use performance and theatre to establish a more cultured citizenry.⁷ As a concept, culture or *watthanatham* had been only introduced into the Thai discourse on modernity or *khwam than samai* in the 1930s. This discourse was also central to the fascist ideas of state and racial supremacy that were rampant in Europe. The refinement of culture was important to the Thai leadership. To escape the fate of its neighbours, the Thai should be seen by Western powers as a 'civilised/modern' people.⁸ Wichit's early

6 Of his 24 major plays, the most influential were the nine that he wrote from 1936 to 1940. *Lueat suphan* [*The blood of Suphan*] (1936) promoted Japan's policy of Pan-Asianism; *Ratchamanu* (1937) asserted that the Thai and the Khmer were the same people to support irredentist claims; *Jaoying Saen Wi* (1938) claimed that the Thai and Shan in Burma should unite supported Pan-Thai claims. The play also reflected his fascination with Nazi Germany's policy of creating a new political entity based on race; *Phrajao Krungthon* [*The king of Thonburi*] (1937) claimed that the Thai and Chinese were brothers. He wrote another 10 plays between 1947 and 1949 in an attempt to make a living. He even formed his own theatre company in 1947 to perform the 10 plays that he wrote after being forced out of government service after returning to Thailand from Japan, where he had served as the Thai ambassador during the war. He was accused of war crimes and tried in court but was acquitted. Luang Wichit wrote four last plays, known as the *Anuphab* series, lauding the prowess of Thai leaders. These last plays were written at the request of Phibun in his last-ditch attempt to revitalise his political leadership (1954–57). His successor, Sarit Thanarat, reaped the benefits of Luang Wichit's last works as a playwright. For more detail see Pisanu Suntharakas, 'Luang Wichit Wathakan: Hegemony and literature', PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1986; Charnvit Kasetsiri, 'Latthi chatniyom latthi thahan [Nationalism and militarism]', in *Chomphon P. kap kannmueang thai samai mai* [*Field Marshal Phibun and modern Thai politics*], ed. Charnvit Kasetsiri et al., (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 1999), especially 389–92; Jiraporn Wiriyasakpan, 'Nationalism and the transformation of aesthetic concepts: Theatre in Thailand during the Phibun period', PhD thesis, Cornell University, 1992. Jiraporn outlines Luang Wichit's role in redefining Thai performances according to Western categories.

7 See Thamora Fishel, 'Romances of the sixth reign: Gender, sexuality, and Siamese nationalism', in *Genders and sexualities in modern Thailand*, ed. Peter A. Jackson and Nerida M. Cook (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 1999), 154–67. Fishel demonstrates that the use of plays to promote modern ideas and nationalism can be traced to Rama VI. She also makes a very good point about how nationalistic ideas are promoted through 'performance'.

8 See 'Dialogue between Nai Mun Chuchart and Nai Khong Rakthai broadcast over the radio between 1941–1942', in Thak Chaloemtiarana, ed., *Thai Politics, 1932–1947: Extracts and documents*, volume 1 (Bangkok: Social Science Association of Thailand, 1978), 270–3. The rationale put forth to the listening public is that colonial powers are interested in a civilising mission. Therefore, to escape colonialism, the Thai should become civilised in the eyes of the West. To be civilised is to be modern, and the West represents both. Interestingly, one device that Luang Wichit used to show that Thai

writings focused on ‘great men’, mostly Europeans, and how they became prominent as a way to demonstrate to his Thai readers how they could improve themselves: a civilised nation (*prathet siwilai*) could not be great unless its peoples were civilised. Nevertheless, the discourse here is not whether the Thai should emulate the West, but that certain achievements in science, technology, and culture, even though Western in form, are in fact indicators of modernity and high culture.

Luang Wichit’s first play was called *Luk ratthathammanun* [*Children of the constitution*]. The play was a box office disaster.⁹ Sensing, perhaps, that his audience was not ready for theatre based solely on modern, abstract themes, he wrote his first semi-historical drama, *Lueat suphan* [*The blood of Suphan*]. The play *Lueat suphan* boldly pairs a Burmese military officer with a local Thai woman as unlikely lovers. Tragically, both are killed during the Burmese occupation of Ayuthaya. The heroic deeds of Duangchan, the play’s heroine, also acknowledge the martial spirit of all Thai women. In the play, Duangchan in fact instigates the uprising against the Burmese invaders. Luang Wichit’s second play became an instant hit. Ticket sales allowed him to build a theatre and to buy sets and musical equipment. Recognising the importance of culture, Luang Wichit had accepted the directorship of the newly created department of culture. He also founded the School for Performing Arts. It taught the usual subjects but included music and theatre on top of regular schoolwork. Conveniently, students from the school performed Luang Wichit’s plays.¹⁰

women were the equal of others was the promotion of a national beauty pageant. The first Miss Siam contest was held in 1936 as part of the Constitution Day Celebrations. Contestants came from all over the kingdom, representing their provinces. Provincial beauty queens discard their traditional *chongkrabaen*-style dress for the modern *phasin* at the national competition. Thai beauty queens became the model of the sophisticated modern Thai woman. See Suphatra Kohkitsuksakun, *Tamnan kanprakuat nangsao thai* [*History of the Thai beauty pageant*] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Dokbia, 1993).

9 During this period, other writers also wrote stories about valour and how citizens made sacrifices to protect the new state that was defined by its constitution. For example, Kulab Saipradit wrote a short story about a recently married young man who died trying to protect the new state from the Boworadet royalist forces that tried to re-establish the authority of the Crown in 1933. Si Burapha, *Lakon ratthathammanun* [*Farewell dear constitution*] (Bangkok: Withawat Press, 1979). This short story was first published in *Thoet ratthathammanun 2476* [*Honour the 1933 constitution*].

10 Wichitra Rangsiyanon, *Riang thoy roy chiwit wichitwathakan* [*The life of Wichitwathakan*] (Bangkok: Sangsan Books, 2000), especially Chapters 3 and 4. This book, written by his daughter, gives an inside look at Luang Wichit’s life and work habits. In particular, she describes the struggle her father had to go through to find funds to build Thailand’s first national theatre. His first musical play was staged in what could be described as a tent. Its success brought badly needed revenues that helped build a proper theatre. Luang Wichit was convinced that Rama VI was right to think that culture would change the Thai people. To find competent actors and musicians, he founded the School for Performing Arts.

Luang Wichit was also instrumental in influencing Thai historiography: female historical figures became accepted as national heroines. An obvious example is the somewhat controversial credit given to Thao Suranari.¹¹ He also wrote numerous nationalistic songs played over the radio, even though he did not know much about music. His plays and songs gave special emphasis to the heroism of common people, especially women, and the public readily embraced their ideas as historical truths.

Between 1939 and 1942, at the height of the nationalistic campaign, Luang Wichit chaired a committee that drafted the famous State Convention proclamations known as *Ratthaniyom*.¹² These proclamations changed the country's name from 'Siam', which was based on Chinese, to the more modern 'Thailand'; forced the public to salute the flag at eight o'clock every morning; to dress properly; to eat and exercise properly; and generally to behave as civilised people. The *Ratthaniyom* focused on ways to make Thailand a 'modern' state, one that must galvanise its citizens for war and colonial resistance. The *Ratthaniyom* campaign was reinforced by Luang Wichit's plays emphasising the ideal characteristics necessary to build the modern nation. Many of these characteristics—daringness and bravery, compassion, love of honour, love of duty, self-control, and perseverance—were, in fact, borrowed from Inazo Nitobe's *Bushido*, the Japanese code of the warrior.¹³

11 Thao Suranari was the wife of the deputy governor of Khorat at the time of the Jao Anuwong rebellion in 1827. She was credited with helping to defeat the Laotian forces at the battle of Thung Samrit. Laotian historiography questions the accuracy of the story. For more on this subject see Charles Keyes, 'National heroine or local spirit?' paper presented to the 6th Annual Conference on Thai Studies, 14–17 October 1996. Also, Thak Chaloehtiarana, 'Towards a more inclusive national narrative', in *Luem khotngao ko phao phaendin [Forget the past, torch the earth]*, ed. Kanchanee La-onsi and Thanet Aphornsuwan (Bangkok: Matichon Press, 2000), 76–82. Chetana Nagavajara argues that in order to promote gender equality in democratic Thailand, women's historical status was re-examined. Some scholars contend that Thai women were quite powerful and held high status during the Sukhothai period, where historical evidence shows that the Queen was required to follow the King out to battle. In something of a parody of this ancient practice, Phibun's wife also took to dressing up in a military uniform and was in fact granted a commission. And, during the 1940s when the National Culture Council was established, an active Woman's Department was also created. See Chetana Nagavajara, *Comparative literature from a Thai perspective* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1996), 185–7.

12 For English translations of the *Ratthaniyom* documents, see Thak, *Thai politics*, 245–54.

13 Barmé, *Luang Wichit Watthakan*, 87.

When the popularity of his plays declined in the late 1940s, Luang Wichit turned to writing novels as a way to reach the public.¹⁴ After becoming established as a novelist with *Morasum haeng chiuwit* [*A stormy life*], he wrote his epic novel *Huang rak haew luk*.¹⁵ Here he projects his view of Thai women to a higher level. From being actors on the national and regional stage, Thai women are given new roles as important *international actors*. In this novel, Luang Wichit also blurs the lines of gender by showing how a Thai woman can be like a man and yet retain her femininity. As in his plays glorifying an imagined past, *Huang rak haew luk* allowed the Thai to imagine new categories of roles that they could dream about fulfilling some day.

Such possibilities are suggested by what Benedict Anderson has identified as ‘unbounded seriality’. Parochial and insular thinking could be replaced by new understanding of possible roles to play in real life that are open to the world and universal in application. For example, through exposure to modern print and performance media, people can begin to imagine that it is possible to assume new roles such as a Hollywood or local movie star, a national hero, a national heroine, a gun runner, a guerrilla fighter, a queen, or even a sophisticated international adventuress.¹⁶

14 Wichitra tells us that after Hollywood movies became popular and displaced live drama performances after the end of the Second World War, her father turned to writing novels instead. For a brief history of the Thai cinema, see Dome Sukwong and Sawasdi Suwannapak, *A century of Thai cinema*, trans. David Smyth (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2001). So why did Luang Wichit finish his writing career as a ‘lowly’ novelist? In the Thai book market, novels are sometimes referred to as *nangsue an len* (a book to read for fun), meaning that they are not serious creative literary works. Although his daughter Wichitra tells us that Luang Wichit was able to make more money from his novels than from his salary as a cabinet minister, her father did not write novels just to make money. More importantly, he told her that people should not look down on this lowly form of writing. In fact, novelists remain famous for eternity, unlike academic authors whose texts must undergo constant revisions to remain useful. New texts also make older texts obsolete. But writers such as Shakespeare and Molière remain current and are still taught in schools. Luang Wichit believed that the novel is a very potent form of teaching because people are influenced without realising it. He went on to cite how history has been changed by the use of novels and plays that affected people’s thinking and actions. Luang Wichit was convinced that literature is a powerful weapon for social engineering. Wichitra, *The life of Wichitwathakan*, 40–1.

15 It should be noted that even though Luang Wichit was most proud of *Huang rak haew luk* because it covered all of his favourite themes, recent scholars have picked his less lengthy novels as the best of his work. For example, the committee that wrote *Nangsue di 100 lem* [*One hundred good books*] (Bangkok: Samnakngan Kongthun Sanapsanun Kanwichai, 1999) did not select Luang Wichit’s most famous novel, *Huang rak haew luk*, nor was he cited for his popular plays. Instead, they picked *Sang chiuwit*, a later and much shorter novel. In Pratheep Muannil, *100 nak praphan thai* [*One hundred Thai writers*] (Bangkok: Suweeriyasan, 1999), Luang Wichit is cited for his voluminous production. Pratheep acknowledges that *Huang rak haew luk* was one of Luang Wichit’s most popular novels.

16 Benedict Anderson, *The spectre of comparisons*, (London: Verso Press, 1998), Chapter 1.

Not surprisingly, Luang Wichit's model of the modern Thai woman differs radically from previous role models. Traditionally, the possibilities for a Thai woman could be said to derive from traditional literary models: Sita in the Indian epic, the *Ramayana* (*Ramakian*), Nang Wanthong in *Khun chang khun phaen*, or Queen Jamathewi in *Jamathewiwong*. Surely, the idea of a traditional Thai woman as *pha phap wai* or a 'neatly folded piece of cloth', presumably to be unfolded by whoever becomes her husband, must come from aristocratic ideas based on Hindu Buddhist beliefs embodied, for example, by Sita, Rama's consort in the Thai *Ramakian*. Scot Barmé has also argued that modern model of the Thai woman is found in the proto-feminist discourse around the mystical figure Nang Noppamas, a fictional character dating back to 13th-century Sukhothai. This *yot ying* or supreme woman, he concludes:

was said to have possessed a rare combination of qualities: an agreeable disposition, a lustrous golden complexion (to which her name refers), and above all a keen intelligence and an outstanding ability as both a scholar and poet.¹⁷

And, again according to Barmé, in 1905, Thianwan, a controversial Thai thinker, became the first Thai intellectual to dare to write about the role of women in modern Thailand.¹⁸ Thianwan argued that women should

17 Scot Barmé, 'Proto-feminist discourse in early twentieth century Siam', in Jackson and Cook, *Genders and sexualities*, 140–2.

18 Scot Barmé, 'Proto-feminist discourse', 140–2. Luang Wichit also acknowledges a sense of gratitude for the bravery of Thianwan to speak his mind. He wrote a short preface in 1951 for a book about Thianwan by Sangob Suriyin: *Thianwan* (Bangkok: Ruansan Press, 2000). This version is the third edition of a book published in 1951. In Scot Barmé's book, *Woman, man, Bangkok* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), the national debate regarding the social position of Thai women during the 1920s and beyond was discussed in great detail. Keeping this background in mind, Luang Wichit's literary production, especially his focus on women engaged in dangerous activities, must have been tempered by his exposure to the various exciting new 'models' of Thai feminism that were being publicly tested. For example, several years before Luang Wichit wrote his nationalistic plays and novels celebrating Thai feminism, a startling short story entitled *Jon jori* [*The female bandit leader*] appeared in the weekly *Suphap nari* [*Genteel lady*] in 1931. The story portrays a young Thai woman as a notorious gang leader who planned and staged daring robberies. A picture of this masked female bandit (looking like the Lone Ranger) riding a horse and chasing a speeding car appears on page 200 of Barmé's book. Barmé asserts that this early story is an attempt to challenge the traditional model of the Thai female and to replace it with character that negates feminism as the weaker sex. During this same period, the magazine also serialised historical accounts of the exploits of Queen Suriyothai, who died in elephant combat trying to save her husband in a war between Ayutthaya and Burma in the 16th century. Interestingly, the exploits of Queen Suriyothai has been made into a multi-million dollar movie in 2001, funded by the Thai royal court. The movie took great liberties with historical accuracy and clearly conveyed the message that Thai women, albeit the aristocracy—both good and bad—played a pivotal role in statecraft and the many deadly struggles for political power. The film had its gala showing in the United States in October 2002 with the Thai Queen in attendance.

be allowed to get an education equal to men, and that they should be allowed to work and contribute to the economic wellbeing of the country. He concludes that the modern Thai woman is one who is educated, graceful, civilised, progressive and Western in orientation. Unfortunately, this view is incomplete.

Although space will not permit any discussion of the relevance of traditional and classic literature in a debate on gender, it may be most helpful to say that the construction of the modern Thai female identity is a contestation and amalgamation of several ideal types and ‘possibilities’ suggested in popular plays, religious beliefs, traditional practices, lived experiences and works of fiction. Due to its popularity, Luang Wichit’s epic *Huang rak haew luk* figures prominently among the mid-20th-century literary works that focus on gender issues. And, although more studies will have to be conducted to fully assess its impact, there can be no doubt that this novel played a major role in helping construct a new and more modern model of Thai feminism.¹⁹

Observers of Thai society have marvelled at how the Thai female is such a multi-faceted being. She is described as the de facto head of the family, a businesswoman, a sweet, caring mother and wife (whose public demeanour downplays her sexuality), a day labourer, a beauty queen, a whore, a masseuse, a murderer, a nun, etc. In a recent study, the contemporary public image of Thai women has been essentialised to represent two opposite models that Rachel Harrison has called the ‘Madonna and the Whore’: whether a woman is good or bad depends on her relationship to the family as an institution.²⁰ One problem, of course,

19 As gender is a cultural construct, understanding literature can be one avenue that can give us a window into that culture. Literature not only reflects and expresses features of culture, but it can also contest old values and propose new ones. See Thelma Kintanar, ‘Notes on tradition and the construction of gender in Southeast Asian literary texts’, in *Texts and contexts: Interactions between literature and culture in Southeast Asia*, ed. Luisa J. Mallari-Hall (Quezon City: Department of English and Comparative Literature, University of the Philippines, 1999), 17. Gender is defined partly by social relations—the Asian female gender is traditionally represented as wives, lovers, mothers, cooks, etc. Women are expected to be gentle, nurturing, faithful, pragmatic and not necessarily romantic.

20 Rachel Harrison, ‘The Madonna and the Whore: Self/Other tensions in the characterization of the prostitute by Thai female authors’, in Jackson and Cook, *Genders and sexualities*, 168–90. To be fair, Harrison was focusing mainly on sexuality and sexual mores of Thai women. Most current research and writing is focused on traditional feminine roles as it relates to the family, the role of women in the economy, and/or the commodification of the female body in the sex trade. Much of the literature on the last topic explains feminism and sex in economic terms. For example, Virada Somsawasdi and Sally Theobald, eds, *Women, gender relations and development in Thai society* (Chaingmai: Women’s Studies Center, Chaingmai University, 1997); Ryan Bishop and Lillian Robinson, *Night market* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Andrea Whittaker, *Intimate knowledge* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2000);

with dividing things into two is that it slights the undistributed middle. In this case, a glance at Thai tabloids will reveal yet another possibility, one we may call the 'dangerous woman'.

Thai newspapers consistently exploit those who have lost their lives through love. Many of the headlines and front-page pictures show murder scenes where the victim is a male lover who has been shot. Other times, the reading public is treated to a picture of two lovers, dead by gunshot wounds, laying naked or semi-naked in bed. Another famous story that has been circulating among Thai males for several decades is the report of a woman who cut off her philandering husband's genitals and fed them to her ducks. The story is still discussed with much nervous humour among young men, but there is also a warning side to that story. Thai women do in fact commit such acts, but theirs seem not to be merely crimes of passion, but crimes calculated to punish. Therefore, not only are Thai women represented as the mysterious exotic beauty found on tourism posters, or as sexual objects advertised in sex tour brochures in Europe and Japan, they are also represented in the popular press as dangerous lovers.

The evidence is clear that Luang Wichit deliberately set out to create this new role for Thai women. In his preface to the second printing, Luang Wichit asserts that the novel's heroine Praphimphan represents the new Thai woman: her imaginary life of love, lust and murder provides lessons to the reading public about how women can overcome their adversaries.²¹ Indeed, the very structure of the novel divides neatly into three parts, each defined by Praphimphan's age and the location of the plot. The first part is devoted to Praphimphan's early adult life in Thailand, and her studying and vacationing in Europe. The middle is devoted to Praphimphan's returning to Thailand, but with a twist: she remains on the periphery on the Malay border and, after committing still more crime, goes into exile

Jeremy Seabrook, *Travels in the skin trade* (London: Pluto Press, 1996); Cleo Odzer, *Patpong sisters* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1994); *Kambha ying [Trade in women]* (Report of the Thai Women's Foundation, 1997); Suleeman Wongsuphab, *Nang ngam tu krajok [The beauty behind the glass case]* (Bangkok: Khlet Thai Press, 1987). More research is still needed on the effects of the media, popular culture, music and popular literature on our understandings of what is feminine.

21 Wichitra tells us that the wives of soldiers stationed at the military camp in Prachinburi routinely ambushed the weekly shipments of the individual volumes that came by rail. To make sure that they would not miss an instalment, they would hijack the books before they reached the book stores. Wichitra, *The life of Wichitwathakan*, 39. Luang Wichit also tells his readers in the preface of the second edition that he has heard from his many students now stationed as district officers throughout Thailand that *Huang rak haew luk* was read by people of all walks of life, from the governor down to the literate farmer.

to Africa and Arabia. The last part concerns her recovery from insanity, her homecoming and her death. Each of these three parts, moreover, has its own distinctive themes. What follows is a necessarily brief summary of the way Luang Wichit has interwoven these themes with the three narrative stages of Praphimphan's life.

I

The story of Praphimphan's early adult life prepares her for a future of international adventure and militant feminism. As the dutiful daughter of a retired, minor government employee whose wealth is dwindling fast, Praphimphan first leads a traditional life. She soon shows her independence, however, by secretly learning how to shoot her father's pistol and then, wanting to revenge a prank played on her father, by challenging Thongthet, the son of a local notable, to a duel. He does not accept, but does fall in love with this daring woman. Throughout the novel, men fall for her female charms and her physical beauty. And, amidst these feminine characteristics, Praphimphan also exhibits masculine identification marks—she likes to shoot, to challenge her tormentors to duels; she enjoys drinking coffee (not done by Thai women at that time); and is unforgiving of those who have wronged her. She can be a nurturing woman with her friends, but a vengeful executioner of her enemies.

Refusing Thongthet's suit, she then moves away from home and takes a job in a factory. Like her becoming a legal aide later, this is a new opportunity for her generation of women. After Thongthet again dupes her father, he visits her to ask her to marry him. Pretending to fall for him, Praphimphan lures him into her bedroom and shoots him three times. She then convinces the police that he tried to rape her. In a Hobbesian twist, the weaker sex can kill the stronger when the man is blinded by love or lust.

Once more working as a housekeeper, Praphimphan must look after a family friend, Manote, who is recovering his health. While studying herbal medicine with Dr Gautier, a French doctor in Vietnam, Manote had fallen in love with Waenfa, the lovely daughter of another French doctor and his Laotian wife. Unfortunately for their love affair, Waenfa had ingested so much poison during her father's medical experiments that she could not be his wife. When Manote kisses her anyway, he promptly falls into a coma. Here, Luang Wichit has created a female figure that

is in all senses ‘poisonous’. The story of Manote and Waenfa describes the tension between love and passion, beauty and poison, modern and traditional medicine, and even Thailand and colonialism. Underlining this theme of the novel, Dr Gautier warns Manote about women:

All women are poisonous ... They only differ in the kinds of poison they possess. Some are so poisonous that they kill us; some make us bankrupt; others make us their love slaves who can never be redeemed. Don't forget that the sea of love is the deep chasm of death. If you slip and fall you will not survive.²²

One can equally argue that Waenfa is an expression of a longstanding misogynistic view of women as polluting and negating man's inner strength. The Buddhist legend of Queen Jamathewi, written in 1570, telling the story of the founding of Lamphun in the 11th century is a good case in point. Queen Jamathewi promised to marry a powerful suitor if he succeeded in throwing his spear from a mountain top into her city. In one version of the story, the Queen tricked her suitor into wearing a hat she had given him smeared with her menstrual blood. The unclean blood drained the prince's power and his spear fell short of its target. Menstrual blood is seen as unclean and debilitating by Thai men, even in modern Thailand.

Praphimphan promptly extends this theme by telling Manote that she is more dangerous than the poisonous Waenfa because she was willing to kill—and, indeed, she already had killed a man. It would be easy to kill someone she loves if that person betrays her love, she warns him:

Because I have never loved, love is sacred to me and must be worshipped.
 Before I admit to loving someone, I must think and rethink carefully.
 If I utter my love, I want that person to know that this is a grave matter.
 And the person whose love I accept will be courting danger.²³

In a concession to tradition, however, Luang Wichit has their respective parents forbid their marriage and arrange a marriage for each of them. Defiantly, the two lovers vow to keep loving each other despite their spouses: status and ‘face’, while still dominant in modern, democratic Thailand, can be ignored and subverted. However, Manote would become

22 Luang Wichit, *Huang rak haew luk*, 123.

23 Luang Wichit, *Huang rak haew luk*, 145.

Praphimphan's second victim. After luring him into her bedroom while her husband was away, she shoots him for not upholding his end of their bargain.²⁴

In a reverie later in the novel, we learn that just before Praphimphan decides to move with her father to live in the southern part of Thailand, a backwater, she disguises herself, lures her husband into a dark alley and executes him with her pistol. By the age of 22, Praphimphan has become a dangerous woman: of the four men who have loved her, she has killed three. She even confesses humorously to her lawyer, Atthapphet, one of the four men who is in love with her, that she has learned to be economical and not use more than two shots to kill her latest victim. She had emptied her gun when she shot her lover, Manote.

Instead of staying in the south of Thailand, her father tells her that he has received a large sum of money from Thiamchan and is taking Praphimphan to Europe to continue her studies.²⁵ In Singapore, Praphimphan encounters a 19-year-old Thai woman, Waewta, who asks to become her servant. Telling Praphimphan her life story, Waewta reveals that she is a poor villager who made a living selling seaweed, and that she, too, has been involved in a murder. Waewta is thus a younger version of Praphimphan. Together, they go off to explore Europe as a pair of kindred souls.²⁶

24 The novel actually begins with a meeting between Praphimphan's husband and her attorney, Atthapphet. The latter is defending her in a case of manslaughter. Praphimphan at first denied that she had indeed planned to murder her lover, Manote. And, in a twist of logic, Praphimphan says that her real husband was in fact Manote and her relationship with her legal husband was an adulterous affair. But even after Atthapphet finds evidence that his client was indeed guilty, instead of pulling out of the case, he continues and wins her acquittal. Instead of condemning her, Atthapphet praises Praphimphan for being true to her love, a 'one hearted woman' (*phuying jai diaw*), and falls in love with her.

25 In another twist of morality, Praphimphan's financial benefactor is Thiamchan, a woman who was having an affair with Atthapphet. Thiamchan poisoned Atthapphet's wife and tried to pin the crime on Praphimphan. Perhaps recognising another kindred soul in the ruthless Thiamchan, who murdered for love, Praphimphan destroys evidence that would have incriminated Thiamchan. In fact, she wishes Thiamchan and Atthapphet well as she leaves Bangkok, intent upon living a life in the countryside.

26 Waewta was a village girl who, for dubious reasons, strangled the sick father of her future husband, Khwan. She wanted to help him inherit his father's fortunes, which would have gone to his stepmother. In the beginning, she had no interest in Khwan and only agreed to marry him many years later after returning from Europe, and at the insistence of Praphimphan. In a way, the murder was senseless at the time.

The two women go off to study in Europe, something that had been nearly exclusively the prerogative of Thai men. That tradition continues, for their male friend Songwut accompanies them, but their journey clearly represents modern female emancipation. What this emancipation consists of is rather less clear, however: Luang Wichit is vague about their course of study. It is almost as though the Thai women are in Europe to learn English and to see the world. The experience was a kind of 'finishing school' for them.

Songwut's role is also representative: he shows that the Thai are the equal of Europeans. Far from being unmistakably Thai, he is assumed to be a Persian prince! He is tall, smart, plays tennis well and is a superb dancer. Most importantly, he is a good speaker of English. He even has a brief affair with an older woman, a wayward Countess.

Perhaps because this 'prince' is so *sympathique*, the Countess unburdens herself on the nature of women, suggesting that pronouncements about gender are universal and not just Thai or European. The Countess makes a series of observations about the nature of women and their relationship to men, especially husbands. She says emphatically that women are by nature verbal beings who need to have a good and sympathetic listener. Women do not want to be alone but want to be loved and appreciated. At one point she says:

Women do not want anything more than to be considered human beings.
 Women do not want equal rights to men. All they ask is to be allowed
 to have a life and the right to think for themselves.²⁷

She laments the fact that women are treated like pets and that men think that all they have to do is to provide women with a nice house, with food, money and clothing. Women are expected to act like song birds in a gilded cage and never to escape into the wider world to enjoy themselves. But most women end up sacrificing their bodies out of duty to their husbands, which is no different than being raped. Men should not be so cruel. Husbands and wives should be friends and equal partners, and it is the duty of husbands to listen to what their wives have to say. If not, wives would seek friendship elsewhere. It is important to listen to women who are, by nature, worriers. Men think logically in terms of cause and effect, but women act on instinct without concern for consequences. Women

²⁷ Luang Wichit, *Huang rak haew luk*, 563.

are not rational beings but emotional ones. However, it is most important for men to forgive women for what appears to be irrational.²⁸ Traditional (if not, perhaps, universal) as these assertions are, they have almost nothing to do with the way Praphimphan acts in this novel. They instead serve as a muted counterpoint, implicitly contrasting the traditionally passive role of Thai women with the far more compelling actions of Praphimphan.

This first part of the novel ends with a transition that frees Songwut from his sworn obligation to Praphimphan. After failing to win Praphimphan, Songwut falls in love with a half-German Gypsy, Salome, who is soon given a new Thai name, Khomkham ('Sharp and witty'). In short order, she finds a Thai-language text in Rome and learns the language. Luang Wichit's Thai readers, of course, had no idea that this is preposterous; they presumably believed that Thailand must be an important country and that foreigners would want to study Thai. By this device, Luang Wichit raised Thai to the level of French, Spanish, German and English. By learning the language of her new lover, Khomkham leaves behind her identity of Salome and becomes Thai. Believing that her husband still loved Praphimphan, she runs away, becomes sick and dies. Her 'death'—by leaping into a gorge in the mountains—and 'resurrection'—once she knows that Songwut loves her, she comes back to life—is symbolic: she dies a Gypsy and is reborn a Thai.²⁹ Later, she even teaches her son Thai, a point the more telling because there is no real need to do so: she has left her Thai husband and has been reunited with her German father and they are living in South Africa. A woman can become Thai, but, as we shall notice later, a man cannot.

28 The Countess had an affair with her husband's younger brother, which led to their divorce. During that divorce, she fell prey to her employer's sexual advances. But, together with the employer's wife, the two plotted his murder, which was ruled a suicide. In spite of her indiscretion and complicity in a murder, the Countess pleads innocent. She acted the way she did because she was a woman who needed attention from her husband. This is not the only instance in the novel where a woman is allowed to have affairs just like men. However, the main differences are that they want to be forgiven if caught and, if their lovers cross them, then they will be killed. The Countess also flirted with Songwut and there is a suggestion that the two had a brief affair. According to Rachel Harrison, it seems that falling in love with European countesses is a common theme found among Thai *bua nork* (foreign and outward-looking) young men. A similar theme also appears in one of the earliest Thai novels, namely, M.C. Akatdamkoeng Raphiphat's *Lakhon haeng chiwit* [*Circus of life*], first published in 1929 (author's correspondence with Rachel Harrison, 26 July 2002).

29 In fact, what her husband witnessed was a mirage. She had already 'died' but her spirit was still out roaming about. When her husband found her, he only met her spiritual body or *kayathip* that ran up the mountain to commit suicide by jumping into the 'chasm of death' (*haew luk*).

II

The middle of the novel concerns Praphimphan's returning to Thailand to live in a village near the Malay border and, after she commits still more crimes, her going into exile to Africa and Arabia. While living in the south in Waewta's village and learning to become a writer, her father tries to make her marry her first cousin, Chuwong, who had recently divorced. Instead of doing so, Praphimphan befriends his ex-wife, Phuagrak, and they become good friends. Their friendship confirms the idea of female solidarity, especially among Thai women. When Phuagrak asks her if she can tell Praphimphan her life story when they first met, for example, Praphimphan answers:

Thais do not have to stand on ceremony like the *farang* Westerners, we are friends belonging to the same race and same nation [*phuen ruam chat ruam prathet*]. Also as friends of the same gender [*phuen ruam phet*], we can easily get to know each other.³⁰

This particular episode confirms Luang Wichit's intention of creating gender solidarity among Thai women, and that this new solidarity should liberate women from the traditional self-identity that is tied to the family and to the male; now she can, as a separate entity, bond with other females.

Being liberated, however, does not mean that the traditional concern for the family is altered. As Songwut had earlier reconciled the estranged Countess and Count, so here Praphimphan reconciles Phuagrak with her divorced husband. Luang Wichit still believed that the family is important and should be kept together, even in the face of the new tensions created by modernity.³¹

30 Luang Wichit, *Huang rak haew luk*, 777.

31 Phuagrak and Chuwong's divorce was the result of a senseless disagreement about how to treat a servant who had helped Chuwong when he was younger. Phuagrak wanted the maid to be more respectful and subservient, but her husband did not agree. It is not that he felt some obligation to show gratefulness, but he believes that if 'democratic' Thailand was to survive, equality and dignity should be accorded to all citizens. Because if not, there was the danger of class warfare. Chuwong explains to his wife that:

revolutions and mass unrest where poor people take over the mansions of the rich and kill their owners resulted from minor incidents such as this ... All classes of people should be friends.

There is still some confusion about how to treat lower status people in the new democratic Thailand.

Set off against this reconciliation is the adultery of Waewta, married now to Khwan, the local farmer whose father she murdered before setting off to study in Europe. Despite being warned by Praphimphan, Waewta begins an affair with Sirisin, a friend of Songwut's who has just returned from Europe, where he had received a doctorate in economics. Six days later, Sirisin is dead, killed by the jealous husband. Reprimanding Khwan for spying on his wife (but not, incidentally, for murdering her lover), Praphimphan reunites Khwan and Waewta, persuading them to promise that they will remain faithful to each other. This is the third time in the novel that a family is kept together or brought back together.

Unfortunately, the police correctly suspect that Praphimphan has murdered Khwan's chauffeur, his accomplice in the murder of Sirisin, so Praphimphan must flee Thailand yet again. Sailing solo east towards the Nicobar Islands, she encounters a storm. Lashing herself to the mast as the storms engulf her small sailboat, she loses consciousness.

When she comes to, she finds herself in a large ship owned and captained by a nationalist, Supharat, a Mon-Malay gun runner from Tavoy, once claimed by Thailand. He told her he had seen her in Europe but was unable to introduce himself: he felt that, as a British colonial subject, he would be shunned by Asians who came from independent countries.³² Praphimphan, of course, promptly replies that this distinction means nothing to her. Fellow Asians and nationalists are natural friends to the Thai whose country has never been colonised.

When they go ashore in Tavoy after the weapons are unloaded, Praphimphan and Supharat are quickly spotted by the police. Rather than surrender, they fire back as they make their escape by boat. This action resonates with Luang Wichit's earlier plays in which Thai women take up the sword to fight against foreign oppressors. Here, of course, swords are replaced by pistols, a modern weapon. Although Supharat is a 'good' nationalist, he is not Thai, a factor that weighs with Praphimphan when he too falls in love with her. In contrast to Khomkham, a woman who became 'Thai' because she learned to speak Thai and her son spoke Thai, the best that Supharat can be is someone who can *act* like a Thai. As a man, he cannot become Thai.³³

32 Luang Wichit, *Huang rak haew luk*, 914.

33 Luang Wichit's concept of race is defined as the 'blood' of a people, as demonstrated by the title of his most famous play *Lueat suphan* [*The blood of Suphan*]. It is the concept of a common blood line that binds people together. He seems to conflate race, ethnicity and nationality. In this

Praphimphan and Supharat make good their escape, landing in Africa, where they are greeted by Songwut and Khomkham, now reunited.³⁴ After Supharat departs for Lorenzo Marguez, Praphimphan meets a good friend of Songwut, an Arab named Muni (a word similar to the Thai for 'sage' or 'monk'). He, too, is a nationalist fighting the authorities. After the (predictable) running gun battle, Praphimphan and Muni escape to a hidden valley, where they take control of the tiny kingdom of Senabad. The new queen of this kingdom is none other than Waenfa, the poisonous woman (in a wonderful moment, Waenfa's worthiness is revealed during the coronation ceremony when a poisonous snake bites her, and it dies). Praphimphan, the poisonous woman by choice, and Waenfa, the poisonous woman by nature, soon become good friends.

Praphimphan is in her element in this part of the novel: she not only is still the dangerous pistolera but the power behind the throne. The monarchy is indeed benevolent. The new rulers proceed to find ways to systematically exploit the valley's natural resources, such as gold and diamonds. New houses and roads are built for the people. To help with the mining and the extraction of gold and diamond, Praphimphan brings in Songwut, Khomkham and her father, who is an expert on diamond mines. They are soon joined by Supharat. Praphimphan also learns that her protégé Waewta had divorced her jealous husband Khwan. She, too, shows up in Senabad. In effect, Praphimphan has her whole 'gang' with her for this adventure. Waewta shows up with a writer by the name of Niphon. Niphon was educated in France and England. He had heard of Praphimphan and wanted to write about her adventures. No sooner has he met her than he, too, falls under her spell.

In this section, Luang Wichit's imagination takes flight. He writes about how a new dynasty is formed—rituals, myths and violence. It is not clear whether he is a royalist or a democrat. Although Luang Wichit has just created a new state from scratch, this state is a monarchy in which everyone

instance, he privileges the male who, upon marrying women with 'foreign blood', can make them Thai. This conversion appears throughout the novel, both symbolically and in real life. Luang Wichit reinforces this idea by making Praphimphan reject the offers of love from foreigners because they can never become Thai. But she readily accepts other women such as Khomkham, a German-Gypsy, and Waenfa, a French-Laotian as Thai. See footnote 4.

34 Luang Wichit uses a description of Africa and African culture to correct previous racist sentiments against the African popularised during the height of the nationalism campaign. 'Negroes' were posed as the uncivilised 'Other'. The author appears to have over-corrected his misguided prejudices by concluding that certain roof forms of Thai royal architecture are not Indian but really African in origin. Luang Wichit, *Huang rak haew luk*, 972–3.

speaks to the queen in the Thai sacred royal language. But Waewta is not even Thai; she is half Lao and half French. Nevertheless, this section also shows Luang Wichit's progressive thinking: a woman can be queen, which thereby questions whether gender should be an issue in Thai palatine law governing succession to the throne. The author also justifies exploitation by the state and its new rulers. He suggests that no new dynasty or regime can function if it does not engage in some sort of plunder that would fill the coffers of the new regime; he also suggests the ruler should also keep some of the new-found wealth. Money is needed for government or for the consolidation of a new leadership.

Such pragmatism seems to have been carried out by Thai political leaders like Police General Phao Sriyanon and Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat in the mid-1950s. The former traded in opium, while his rival skimmed money from the Lottery Bureau.³⁵ Luang Wichit also writes about different forms of succession in this section—usurpation of the throne through force, coup d'état by a military group, and the assumption of political leadership through the invocation of god's will. Each new dynasty must amass as much wealth as possible not just for itself, but so that its friends and family will also be rich so that they can help the people. In the mythical kingdom of Senabad, Waewta was at first reluctant to do this, but Praphimphan insisted that it was fine because, unlike other dynasties, the new ruler did not make the people slaves, and thus what they were doing was for the good of the people. Such ideas reflect the paternalism so common in many of Luang Wichit's political writings.

Luang Wichit also includes international politics in the novel. Implausible as it may seem, Praphimphan and Muni travel to Geneva to a meeting of the League of Nations to lobby for recognition of the small kingdom and its new queen. This attempt, of course, fails because, with only 300 people, their principality was much smaller than others such as Luxembourg, Monaco or Liechtenstein. More importantly, the proposed kingdom is located in the territory of a major colonial power. To make his readers think that Thailand was an important international player, Luang Wichit gives the Thai ambassador more international clout than is plausible. But the story highlights the author's fascination with diplomacy and Thailand's role in international politics.

35 Legitimising the use of force, Luang Wichit describes how Praphimphan personally trained a small army not only to protect the small kingdom, but to kill her political rivals. For the struggle between Phao and Sarit, see Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The politics of despotic paternalism* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2007; revised edition), Chapter 2.

Muni eventually convinces Praphimphan to love him, but she cannot agree to marry him: he is not Thai, and, as a male, he could never become Thai. Only the male blood line is important to the determination of race. The female can be Thai because she will give birth to children who are Thai through the blood of their father (*jus sanguini*). Always the dangerous woman, Praphimphan unintentionally kills Muni while she is asleep: dreaming she was being assaulted by Thongthet, the first man she shot, she takes out her pistol and shoots him in the chest, only to awaken and find that she has shot Muni instead.

This deadly accident is soon followed by the apparition of her father's spirit, a sign to her that he has died, and Praphimphan suffers a nervous breakdown.

III

When Praphimphan returns to consciousness, it is four years later, and she is in Austria. She, too, has been reborn: during her sleep, none other than Dr Freud has administered a drug to her; she tells him all, and she wakes up cured from her mental agony. Interestingly, her behaviour does not alter: a nurse who has been cruel to her is found dead in a bathtub, and the circumstances strongly suggest that Praphimphan drowned her. She is also still eager to help others in illegal and even immoral acts that mete out justice to those who have wronged her or those close to her.³⁶

She finally decides to marry, but her choice falls not on a virile male like Supharat or Muni but on a struggling writer, Niphon. The pen may well be mightier than the sword, but Niphon's proposal is not even romantic: he wants to be a great writer and make the world recognise the beauty of Thai literature, and since every man must have a good woman behind him, he asks her to be this woman. A good union, he says, would be the union of two good friends.

Characteristically, Praphimphan responds to Niphon's letter by asking practical questions, as well. She wonders why he would want to marry a middle-aged woman who is 33 years old, a woman who has been with

36 Praphimphan helps her landlord beat up an old Jew who raped his (the landlord's) daughter. The badly crippled old man suffered for many years before succumbing to his injuries.

two men, whose name is on the lips of tens and hundreds of thousands of people, and someone who has once lost her mind. She warns Niphon that at 33, it may be difficult for her to give him children, and that perhaps her insanity could be passed on to their children.

Again, in an inversion of conventional right and wrong, the author makes Niphon praise Praphimphan for setting a good example for other women, for representing the model woman. Niphon tells Praphimphan that:

on face value, your life may appear to be difficult and soiled as you say. But if we were to examine it closely, having had two husbands is not that unusual for women. And after your divorce these past ten years, you have preserved your dignity and have not strayed. The other things that you did, even though they were evil, were acts that were to seek justice for yourself and for others. Your life is a life of struggle worthy of praise. Praphimphan is a name that is on the lips of tens and hundreds of thousands of people. But they do not speak of your name in negative ways. They see Praphimphan as the model woman. Heaven has created you to become a model for all women, an example of how women should face life.³⁷

Luang Wichit's aim to present a radical model of the modern Thai woman could scarcely be more explicit.

After their wedding, Praphimphan allows Niphon to embrace her. She even turns her cheek to let him kiss her and allows him to kiss her passionately on the lips. She feels the 'venom of love' (*phit rak*) enter her body and thinks about the venom of death that coursed through Waenfa's veins. Love can be so sweet and so deadly. In the end, succumbing to the occasion, she implores Niphon:

kiss me, make love to me. Your kiss will erase the fact that I have been kissed before. Embrace me tightly so I can forget past embraces. Caress me all over so I can cleanse my body of past blemishes. What remains is my pure self that belongs only to you.³⁸

37 Luang Wichit, *Huang rak haew luk*, 1271.

38 Luang Wichit, *Huang rak haew luk*, 1285.

What Freud could not do, the writer-lover-husband Niphon can: she is now purified, cleansed by transcendent love.³⁹

But, in almost karmic retribution, her husband comes down with incurable tuberculosis and, tragically, their daughter is born deaf. Niphon hangs himself out of grief. Praphimphan soon sinks into another depression. She laments that the life of a girl or woman is represented by the dismissive saying *di mueankan* or ‘that’s alright’—an acknowledgement that is really a sign of resignation or acceptance of one’s fate. The birth of a deaf daughter was only *di mueankan*. This remark was what Rama VI said on his death bed when he was shown his only child. His only words after learning that he had sired a daughter was *di mueankan*. Such is the fate of traditional girls and of women.

In an effort to find the blossom of the *toey* plant to cure her daughter’s deafness, Praphimphan and Waenfa embark on a *Thelma and Louise* adventure. The two women proceed to paddle a small canoe down the Danube in an expedition to search for the elusive plant.⁴⁰ There, some men also prospecting for medicinal plants make the mistake of trying to scare them away. Praphimphan promptly shoots two of them in the leg, after which the men tell her where the plant can be found. Their adventurous trip is exhilarating, liberating and empowering.

When the two women reach Hungary, immigration officers ask about their nationality. Waenfa endears herself to Praphimphan when she tells the officers that she is ‘Thai’ and not ‘Laotian’. This assertion reflects the author’s Pan-Thai aspirations that emerged prior to the Second World War. It also emphasises the author’s jingoism: being Thai is better than

39 Luang Wichit arranges to clean the blood on Praphimphan’s hands through two devices. The first is through ritual cleansing or *sadok khro*. During the gun battle with the police in one of her adventures, Praphimphan receives a superficial wound in her side. In her mind, this is a good thing because she had shot other people but had never known what it felt like to be shot. After this ritual cleansing, she believes that her luck will become better. The second cleansing involves transcendence through love when she submits to Niphon.

40 *Thelma and Louise* refers to the Hollywood film starring Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis that established the female bonding film genre. The *toey* plant grows along the banks of a river, pond or lake: it is used as flavouring for dessert. The Thai variety does not flower and propagates through a root system. A popular Thai proverb about unfulfilled love compares the hopelessness of pursuit with attempts to make the *toey* plant blossom. The comparison here is that of Praphimphan’s unfulfilled love life now epitomised by its flawed progeny—her deaf daughter. However, redemption would come in the form of a European variety of the plant. Once again, modern civilisation is represented by Western science and medicine. But the emphasis is not really on the superiority of the white man, but on their science and technology that could be mastered by the Thai—in this case, Waenfa, the Laotian-French woman who identifies herself as Thai.

being Laotian, an inferior people and nation. It is also interesting that the author asserts that Hungarians consider themselves Asian—pushing the scope of Pan-Asianism rather dramatically. Luang Wichit describes how happy the immigration officers were to meet the two Thai women who were fellow ‘Asians’.

After discovering the herb and curing her daughter’s deafness, Praphimphan decides to return to Thailand to make peace with her enemies and to cremate her father—very Buddhist motivations. She cremates her father, but she fails to placate the nephew of her godparents and his greedy wife. They betray her to the authorities who come to arrest her for the murder of Khwan’s chauffeur. Instead of giving up, or allowing Khwan to take the blame for the murder, Praphimphan becomes once more the dangerous woman: she sneaks out of her hideout and murders her two tormentors. In the ensuing gun battle, she is taken out in the style of Bonnie and Clyde, Khwan dead at her side.

So, in the end, Praphimphan cannot escape punishment from the law and dies a violent death. But before the final shootout, it is still unclear whether she will surrender or resist. Her fate is finally sealed when she becomes wounded. Praphimphan reacts in an uncharacteristically non-feminine way. She calls out to Khwan, probably loud enough for the police to hear, that, as a wounded *sua* (literally ‘tiger’, but in this usage it refers to men who are hardened bandits or outlaws), (s)he must fight to the death. Two questions are raised here: ‘Why must a woman be militant and dangerous in modern society?’ and ‘why is she breaking the law often and with impunity?’

Given the framework of Thai nationalism and its wars of liberation, Luang Wichit was able to justify the militant feminism that was incorporated into his nationalistic dramas. In those plays, he portrayed Thai women as wives whose loyalty extended beyond domesticity to serving their husbands in war by fighting alongside them. A popular reference to Thai women as the rear legs to the man’s front legs of the elephant evokes images of elephants in war time, and the secondary role of women. Nevertheless, Thai historiography, and especially that of Luang Wichit, makes ‘space’ for women in the national narrative. But in *Huang rak haew luk*, the martial characteristic of Thai women takes on a different trajectory. Leaving Thailand, both voluntarily and involuntarily, symbolises a separation from the state, a liberation of women from traditional roles. Praphimphan, like other Thai heroines before her, fights alongside freedom fighters but, in

this case, without explicitly defining that fight in the framework of Thai nationalism. The modern Thai woman has become a free agent who can fight for her own causes.

Luang Wichit also seems to suggest that, in entering the modern society, women have to be vigilant in protecting themselves, even if it meant breaking the law. In the novel, Praphimphan and the other women (and here the author includes Western women to emphasise the universality of their cause) take the law into their own hands to punish predatory men, men who have humiliated them, and men who have not honoured their words. It is as if to say modern society lacks the mechanisms to protect women after the erosion of traditional norms of gender relations that afforded more respect to women as idealised mothers, sisters and wives.

The author's disdain or distrust of the legal system pervades this novel. From the first episode to the last, Luang Wichit depicts the law in a bad light. The story begins with the revelation that Atthapphet had concealed incriminating evidence that would have convicted Praphimphan for murder. The novel also describes how Songwut, also another lawyer, used blackmail against his own client to help his father-in-law win back a diamond mine in South Africa. In another example, Praphimphan advises her landlord not to trust the law and lawyers but that they should mete out their own punishment for the man who had raped the landlord's daughter. And finally, on her last trip to Thailand, Praphimphan accidentally bumps into the district officer, now a provincial governor, who, many years ago, had led the police to apprehend her for killing Khwan's driver. Instead of informing the police, the governor carries on a friendly chat with Praphimphan and even light-heartedly asks her not to commit murder again. As a man, he, too, admires the dangerous woman. But the law does not make room for personal admiration or judgements of morality. This negative opinion of the legal system is most likely the result of Luang Wichit's own experience with the legal system. Perhaps he was still smarting from what, to him, must have been an unjust trial for war crimes. His only mistake was that he had picked the wrong side to win the Second World War.

Therefore, instead of treating Praphimphan like a dangerous criminal finally brought to justice, Luang Wichit uses her eulogy to valorise her as a woman of the people, a woman who was compassionate but was dealt a bad hand. Recalling Niphon's characterisation of Praphimphan as the model woman, Atthapphet's eulogy embeds within the novel itself the unbounded seriality of the dangerous woman:

Praphimphan belongs to you. She served you and the public by being the exemplar of a person who struggled with life. Her fight began when she took her first step and she fought until her last breath. Praphimphan is not a mean-spirited woman. In fact, she is a person with a good heart who is always ready to make sacrifices for her friends. She is loyal and grateful to those who helped her, but she is vengeful when she is crossed. She stood for justice and would not harm anyone who did not strike at her first. Even though the curtain that falls on the drama of her life is black, the color of mourning and grief, her shining name will remain forever on the lips of tens of thousands of people. And if one were to write about her life, it would take thousands of pages to do it justice.⁴¹

Of course, Luang Wichit has indeed taken over 1,000 pages to do her life justice. Praphimphan is the model of the modern Thai female who, while assenting to the traditional view of the female as one that must be protected and forgiven by the male, is also ready to punish those who are unkind to her or who do not keep their promises of love. She values the family, male fidelity, female friendship, and bravery. She is a leader, a world traveller, a freedom fighter, a founder of a nation, a soldier, an obedient daughter, a passionate lover, a wife, a loyal friend, a patron, a feminist and an executioner. Interweaving the themes of modernity, femininity, violence and nationalism on an international scale, Luang Wichit Wathakan glorifies in *Huang rak haew luk* a new role for the modern Thai woman. Neither good nor bad, Madonna nor whore, hers is a role of nearly boundless possibilities: the dangerous woman.

41 Luang Wichit, *Huang rak haew luk*, 1461.

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