

*An Exploration of Female Agency in an Awarded Thai Novel:
The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth*

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Abstract

The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth is Veeraporn Nitiprapha's debut novel, which won the SEA Write award in 2015. Set during the last quarter of the 20th Century in Thailand, *The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth* points out changes in cultural values and norms, especially those regarding the notion of romantic love and codes of sexual morality. Written as anti-realism and anti-romance, the writer uses a melodramatic plot to develop the latent meaning of a love triangle as social. This paper seeks to examine how the anti-romance genre is told and investigate the changes in interpersonal relationships with regards to gender relations, especially when compared to conventional romance and gender ideologies before the turn of the 21st Century. Particularly, it will analyse how the notions of romantic love and sexual morality are represented, and to what extent female characters are able to exercise agency and power in relation to social and cultural contexts. Specifically, the novel suggests that by becoming more individualistic and obsessive about their desires, characters are blinded, resulting in self-destruction and devastation in relationships. Essentially, sociocultural changes have great impacts on the characters' decisions and actions. The author's purpose in using anti-realism and anti-romance in *The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth* also intensifies the reader's engagement with the female characters, which is different from a traditional romance.

Keywords: Female Agency, Thai Novel, Anti-Romance

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Introduction

The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth was written by Veeraporn Nitiprapha who won the Southeast Asian Writers Award (S.E.A. Write Award) twice. Her first novel, *The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth*, was awarded in 2015 while *Memories of the Black Rose Cat*¹ won the S.E.A. Write Award in 2018. According to the committee of the SEA Write Award, *The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth* reflects the failure of life management in individualistic Thai culture and points out the effects of confrontation between the myth and ideal of family institutions; in addition, the committee states that the novel deserves the award for aesthetics in arts, nature, and language that have emotional effects on the readers (“SEA Write award goes to new novelist Veeraporn”, 2015).

According to Veeraporn, *The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth* is a myth about love (Pongpipat, 2015). She uses the term “myth” in relation to Roland Barthes’s notion of mythology that comments on insistence and repetition that become significant features or discourse, as in Foucault’s term, of contemporary society. Seemingly, the book is about melodramatic love because her novel portrays a love triangle between two sisters and their childhood friend with a tragic ending, unlike romance that ends up with a happy ending. However, in her introduction to the book in Thai, Veeraporn reveals that she wrote the novel from her resentment against the unrest in Thailand in 2010, which caused death and wounds in the hearts of many Thais due to their cruelty of those who killed. Feeling upset about Thai politics, she wrote *The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth* to portray how ordinary people can become cruel and selfish enough to destroy other people’s lives and trust, even with their own siblings.

As the book tells the story of the two sisters, Chalika and Chareeya, and their relationship with the same man, Pran, this paper aims to investigate female agency, and how the agency is exercised, as individuals or as collectivity within the family, and to what extent the female characters are able to exercise agency. Moreover, the notions of romantic love and desire are examined to interpret the myth of love presented in the novel in relation to sociocultural contexts.

Female characters and agency

The term ‘agency’ has been conceptualized in several ways. Feminism usually equates agency with resistance, especially to a patriarchal structure. Some scholars, particularly practice theorists, emphasize the connection with social structure (Ahearn, L., 2001). In *The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth*, however, Veeraporn does not provide sufficient details of Thai social and cultural values that may influence the main characters’ actions. With the third-person omniscient point of view, the readers can see through the characters’ actions and reasons behind each of them. The portrayal of the characters reveals that they are all overwhelmed with their own desires; thus, the analysis of agency in this paper will limit itself to the characters’ capability to act, decide, and design their lives, or exercise free will, rather than to resistance to the social structure or influences from the society and culture.

To begin with, Chareeya is the female character who exercises her agency the most when compared to her sister, Chalika. Evidently, Veeraporn provides more description of this

¹ *The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth* and *Memories of the Black Rose Cat* were translated by Kong Rithee in 2018 and 2022 respectively.

character than any other, especially her idiosyncrasies. For example, she decides to run away with a man after their eleventh date when she is sixteen years old. When she is in love, “There was just a conviction, profound and silent; the conviction that no matter what happened, regardless of where he went, she would follow him” (p. 59). Chareeya creates and directs her own life, in part because her parents die when she is about nine years old, whereas Chalika becomes trapped in a world of romantic fictions that she enjoys reading. It is observed that Chareeya’s agency is that of an individual because she makes a decision that serves her own desires while neglecting others around her. As presented in the novel, after running away from home, she does not contact her family members, Chalika, Uncle Thanit, or Pran, and leaves them feeling heartbroken and upset. Three months later, she calls home, saying that she is fine and keeps calling every couple of weeks, “But she never said where she was or showed any sign of wanting to see anyone” (p. 61). This love lasts less than a year and Chareeya goes home the day her boyfriend leaves her. After not sleeping for ten days, she takes some sleeping pills, and everyone, including Pran, understands that she has committed suicide. Once she wakes up, she leaves the house without saying goodbye and her justification for leaving them is that:

She just didn’t want to see the pain in Uncle Thanit’s eyes, didn’t want to feel guilty when she looked at Chalika, and didn’t want to feel awkward with Pran who kept his vigilant eyes on her like a guard dog. She didn’t want to see anyone or do anything, except listen to Piazzolla’s *Oblivion* every day for the rest of her life. (p. 83)

She decides to stay in Bangkok to carry out her own life and goes home after a year of leaving, letting Chalika look after their house alone in Nakhon Chai Si because soon after her leaving, her uncle starts his own journey as well.

Although it is not explicitly mentioned, Chareeya may realize the power of her sexuality and know how to manipulate it. A year after the breakup with her first boyfriend, she is shortly in love with another man, however, he is “a university student who had been incorrectly educated to believe that love and sex were two separate things” (p. 84), and thus this relationship does not last long. The third relationship is with a French man, a chef she dates when she works as a receptionist in a restaurant. Unfortunately, instead of having a warm family:

She could have owned a small cafe in a small hamlet camouflaged by the grapevines of southern Burgundy. She could have spent her later years in the warmth of her twenty-two sons, grandsons and great-grandsons, and died at seventy-eight in Andre’s embrace still as sweet and tender as his chiffon cakes. (p. 86)

She decides to break up with him. With heartbreak, Andre flies back to France, leaving a yellow Mediterranean-style house for her.

After Andre, Chareeya falls in love with Natee, approximately at the same time that she runs into Pran in a pub one Friday night. To her friends in Bangkok, Chareeya introduces Pran to them as her “best friend” (p. 39) and invites him to her house after many years of not seeing each other. She whispers to him on that night, “I miss you Pran” (p. 41) and her words keep repeating in his head because he has been yearning for her for several years. Chareeya treats Pran as a friend, a brother, and she:

always knew when Pran was within a ten-metre radius; in the same way that laundry hung on a line to dry outside retains that halo of balmy sunlight, she could sense an ethereal, tender aura, invisible but perceptible, almost like a fragrance pasteurised in the air. (p. 59)

She enjoys spending time with him every Monday, cooking, eating lunch, and listening to music together while she is madly in love with Natee who “believed he had been born to love – to love someone deeply, passionately, feverishly” (p. 119). However, Chareeya loses control of this relationship because she is stuck with this myth of love conjured by Natee.

Obviously, she has two men at about the same time. She meets Pran often and invites him to her house or to spend time outside together like a couple when Natee is away. When the two men find out about each other, they fight and Chareeya punches Pran to save Natee. This incident convinces Pran to believe that Chareeya chooses Natee, not him. Feeling lost and humiliated, Pran ignominiously goes to Nakhon Pathom. There, Chalika gently and quietly cleanses his face and consoles him. After that he has sex with her and spends his Mondays with Chalika instead of with Chareeya. Later, even though Chareeya is told that Pran is in a relationship with Chalika, she steals him from her sister by having an affair with him out of her disappointment with Natee.

Chareeya’s decision to have an affair with her sister’s lover is regarded as deception because she betrays Chalika’s love and trust. It can be interpreted that she is jealous of Chalika who takes Pran from her. However, when Pran insists that she should tell Chalika about their relationship, Chareeya refuses to do so. She is probably feeling guilty for betraying Chalika who was the only person she clung to when her mother abandoned her and the person who provided her with love and trust. Later on, when Natee returns to see her at her house while she is with Pran, she tells Pran to forget her and decides to take some sleeping pills to end her love-life complications. It is likely that her guilt over Chalika is another reason for her to commit suicide, as she whimpers to herself after taking the pills:

Dear Lika, there wasn’t any way out. We were wandering in a blackness that kept stretching out into another blackness, on and on forever. No matter how hard we tried or how much we pushed, life still betrayed us. There were no special days, no syrup, no rainbows. There was only Madame Eng and Madame Chan, the Siamese Twins of Solitude. Don’t you agree, Lika, this is the sole legacy we’ve inherited from Father? (p. 169)

It is observed that Chareeya does not blame herself or her decisions for her life’s misfortune but blames life instead. The phrase “Life betrays us” is repeated several times in the novel when Chareeya feels hopeless. Chareeya forgets that, in fact, she betrays those who love her since she ran away from home at sixteen.

Unlike Chareeya, Chalika is more like a female protagonist in a romance, both in her appearance and personality. She is portrayed as having exceptional beauty:

Of all the women living along the riverbank, Chalika was hands-down the most beautiful. Not only had she inherited her mother’s beauty and faith in love, but she glowed with the magical aura of a literary heroine, complete with fortitude, virtue and patience. Still, she lived a quiet, uneventful life and spent her days making sweets, reading novels, daydreaming and crying for men who didn’t exist in real life. (p. 126)

Her representation matches that of an ideal heroine in several aspects. She is inexperienced and innocent: she is not aware of her beauty or its effects on others. Consequently, she is not vain and does not show effort to attract men. This guarantees her virginity, the keystone of femininity. Besides, she is presented as a nurturing woman. Every time Pran feels irritated and deeply upset, Chalika can calm him down without speaking a word, as described in the scene when Chareeya humiliates Pran in front of Natee, and Pran desperately and absent-mindedly comes to Chalika and her reaction is:

She was silent, as usual, and didn't ask him anything. She unclasped his tightly balled fist and held his hand in hers, then put her other arm loosely around his shoulder and started to rock him gently, a tender consolation, before lowering her head to whisper something in his ear, a barely audible whisper. Once again, time stopped. (pp.138-139)

Her portrayal is identical to Radway's analysis of an ideal heroine who "is always portrayed as unusually compassionate, kind, and understanding" (Radway, J., 1984, p. 127). She is strong enough to manage household chores at the age of fourteen when her mother becomes insane after her father dies. She also possesses the ability to make Thai sweets and spends most of her time reading romance novels. Ironically, with these qualities, she is doomed. Obviously, as a quiet, peaceful person, she becomes passive, with no sense of agency to fight for her desire or defend herself, and she eventually succumbs to insanity.

Between Chalika and Chareeya, Chareeya is far from an ideal heroine who encompasses unusual intelligence or an exceptional disposition, but she is portrayed as a woman with her own agency. Chareeya has the ability to satisfy her desire, despite the fact that it is contradictory to conventional femininity in Thai society, which regards moral values as its pivot. As some of the evidence above shows, Chareeya demonstrates her free will and attempts to take control of her life, unlike Chalika, who is too weak to fight for herself. Chareeya elopes with a man, commences a triangular relationship with intention, and attempts to kill herself. With her portrayal, the novel suggests to the readers that Chareeya's agency is employed adversely and is not based on virtues; therefore, instead of empowering her, it results in her doom because of the demand to satisfy only herself and neglect others. This can also imply that ignorance of collectivity, especially within a familial structure, and the pursuit of only free will can cause devastation to relationships.

Narratives and desire

In this paper, narratives are acknowledged as representation that produces meanings through language and contributes to the construction of subjectivity; narratives refer to any form of literary works, such as written, spoken, or visual. Because narratives use language that creates signs that can stand for persons, events, objects, or allusions to reality, the audience might unconsciously internalize the meanings produced within narratives. According to Stuart Hall, the language of representation leads to practices (Hall, 1997, p. 28). As in the study of romance fictions, scholars have had a debate on the effects of the meanings underlying romance fictions and female subjectivity because they regard romance as a source of discursive practice. In so doing, psychoanalytic theories are taken into account to explain why women love reading romance and they tend to understand that women consume romance for pleasure gratification to escape from unpleasant situations they live within (Light, A., 1984; Radway, J., 1984). Therefore, desire is derived from dissatisfaction with reality or incompleteness in life and stimulates a person to take on a quest to fulfill what one lacks. To

begin with, Chareeya, the main protagonist, is portrayed as a person who aimlessly searches for love that she has lacked since she was born. In the first chapter of the novel, the Mother curses Chareeya as the cause of her husband's adultery, and totally neglects her. Thus, she grows up with emptiness inside. Although she is physically healthy, she:

had contracted the malady of loneliness – undetectable by any hypermodern medical equipment, an incurable disease that would condemn her to solitude for the rest of her life. (p. 15)

Her desire for “love” is in accordance with Lacan's concept of desire when he delineates that “desire is an appeal to receive from the OTHER the complement to what it lacks” (Macey, D., 2000, p. 95). As portrayed in chapter one, Chareeya had a collection of all kinds of creatures when she was young and addressed them as family members to compensate for her lack. However, when she grows up, she changes her obsession to trees and plants since they live longer than the animals and pets she used to keep. Evidently, she lacks unconditional love from her parents, and later she seeks it in a relationship with a man. However, she is caught in the myth of Western love stories, especially the stories behind classical music that her uncle told her when she was young. In the case of Chareeya, besides a lack of parental love, her subjectivity is derived from melancholic love stories she has experienced and regarded as ‘romantic.’ This can explain why she falls head over heels for Natee:

Natee's love was dizzying, obsessive. He had taken a page from *Romeo and Juliet* and peppered it with cutesy daily banter like the script of a Hollywood romcom, with classical music from the Romantic period as a private soundtrack in his head, complete with a stint of separation as a test of willpower, and with the city of lost angels as the backdrop. (pp. 120-121)

Natee's love in the above quotation entails similarities to romanticism in popular culture that becomes fantasies for most women, and Natee employs these romantic elements to attract them. Therefore, it is not surprising that this fits Chareeya's quest and desire for romantic love and that she is trapped in its illusion and is blind. It can be said that Chareeya's love has been established through unconscious fantasies, which can never be achieved, but “has a deadly aspect, in that it operates without the welfare of the individual” (Kirshner, L., 2016, p.3). She becomes blind because she cannot acknowledge Pran's love despite the fact that he is very close to her. She continually looks for romantic love from other men and realizes that she loves him after knowing that he has a relationship with Chalika, which ignites the love triangle that ends in doom.

Evidently, the novel shows that Chareeya and Chalika constitute their subjectivity through language, or narratives from the world of fantasy. Unlike Chareeya, Chalika longs for love that exists only in her imagination. She has been portrayed as a bookworm since she was barely ten. Regarding love and relationships, Chalika's desire is entirely derived from pure fantasy, as she spends most of her days, “daydreaming and crying for men who didn't exist in real life” (p. 126), and is caught in the world of narratives. She is totally trapped in her unconscious fantasy and cannot differentiate between reality and fantasy, even in her relationship with Pran, as the novel describes:

Chalika saw Pran as a man from another world and not the flesh-and-blood Pran who lived in the here and now. Her Pran was a mongrel of heartthrobs bred from a million

romance novels, though, in reality, he was nothing remotely like any one of those heroes in movies or books. (p.150)

From the quotes, it shows that Chalika takes Pran as a hero from a romance novel she has read, not a realistic man, and passively waits for his transformation like a typical heroine herself. Chalika takes representation not as an illusion, but as a reference to the real conditions of existence, as Louis Althusser's contention of ideology. Although Althusser's major analysis lies on production in a capitalist social formation, his thesis also covers other sociocultural apparatuses that stimulate imagination, such as narratives. According to Althusser, people need allusions for their real conditions of existence, and material alienation is described as the reason why people are desperate for ideology. It is evident through the portrayal of Chalika who, later "had grown into the archetype of a leading lady. She was neither demanding nor intrusive. She was reserved and she kept her feelings to herself" (p. 150). To Chalika, it is clear that the worlds of reality and fiction are intertwined. It illustrates that Chalika, as a subject, is an effect of the signifier. Essentially, she is a subject produced within discourse and cannot be outside discourse, as Foucault delineates. Unlike Chareeya, Chalika lacks agency as a stereotypical female protagonist in conventional romance. Unfortunately, unlike in romance, her heroine-like characteristics and illusion destroy her life and sanity. Similarly, unlike romance, which some argue empowers female protagonists through their inherent qualities (Claire, D. 1992; Donald, R., 1992), she is betrayed and manipulated because of her heroine-like qualities.

Like the two female characters, Pran lacks love and desires it. He was taken from his mother when he was very young because of her adultery. Because of this, all his life he yearns for maternal love and a "home," a place where he has no worries and can feel warm. He felt at home in the short time he spent as a child at Chareeya and Chalika's house with Uncle Thanit. Chalika's comfort is also similar to the maternal love that he needs. However, because of his overwhelming desire for Chareeya, it leads to destruction among them. Narratives also have an effect on Pran. Several times in the story, Pran recalls stories he learned from Uncle Thanit or Chareeya. Even though it is not clear whether his subjectivity is created from those stories or not, the novel shows that those stories are fixed in his memories and he can never forget them.

The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth suggests that narratives play a role in the constitution of subjectivity as Veeraporn portrays her characters in relation to narratives in a variety of forms, such as romance novels, blockbuster love films, or even the melodramatic stories behind classical music. Because of their emotional effects, I find Gledhill's argument convincing when she asserts that fictions "effectively become a central part of our 'real' lives on a day-to-day basis." (Gledhill, C., 1997, p.343). Although representation is a matter of interpretation, narratives can provide fantasy that matches one's desire or can supply mirror images to those who, in reality, lack emotional gratification in their lives. Specifically, narratives, in any form, contribute to our perceptions about ourselves and our lived experiences that we can acquire our subjectivity according to our desire.

A minor character, Nuan, is a counterpart Veeraporn employs to compare the sophistication of a subject in a modern society. Chareeya and Chalika's maid, Nuan, is the only person in the novel who is not hurt and who does not feel lost in the story. She has three husbands and five children. When asked if she knows which of her children belongs to which father, she says she does, but she does not tell them because they never ask her. Like Chareeya and Chalika, she becomes an orphan at a very young age, is believed to bring bad luck to her

community, and has to dislocate herself from it until she comes to work for Chareeya and Chalika's mother. Her tough experience makes her a strong, determined woman, who "vowed that she would never run away again, that she would be ready to accept anything" (p. 157). That is why she accepts and loves the three boys who come to her life equally. She focuses on surviving, not daydreaming. Unlike Chareeya, her agency is positive and empowers her as a subject because "the schooling she had received from the uncertainty of life had taught her not to expect anything" (p. 158). She does not expect much from her life. Through this character, Veeraporn might want to tell her readers that acceptance is more important than expectation. Unlike Chalika, she takes her three husbands for what they are, not as ideal figures that exist only in romance. That is how she wins her life and never encounters deep loneliness like Chareeya and Chalika, who are more educated but trapped in the world of fantasy.

Societal changes and their impacts

Essentially, sociocultural changes can be the cause of the characters' chaotic lives. The novel takes place in Thailand from 1960s to 2010. Between the 1960s and the 1970s, there were several economic and infrastructure projects launched by the Thai government in order to modernize and implement the Thai economy. This brought economic growth in 1980s, but also resulted in conflicting values in the 1990s (Kriangkraipetch, S. & Smith, L. E., 1992). Evidently, the novel signals changes in a city near Bangkok in a satirical tone:

Nakhon Chai Si by then had become a fully-fledged tourist town crawling with restless day-trippers from Bangkok. They came and bought everything and ate everything, as if cursed by an indefatigable hunger; even the children, who were usually always hungry, wonder why city people had such voracious appetites. (pp. 127-128).

The quotation connotes the perception that, as time passes, people develop insatiable cravings for consumption. The description of city people who invade the outskirts of Bangkok such as Nakhon Pathom also suggests the invasion of capitalism which focuses on massive consumption of resources. Moreover, the expansion of the city also affects the river and the people's way of life: "As the river kept changing its colour and fish continued to float like leaves, and as the pesticide-free vegetable garden could no longer fend off toxin, Uncle Thanit dedicated himself to the business of antique textiles" (p. 129).

Interpersonal relationships are another point to mention regarding the changing environment. It is observed that when the sisters grow up, they communicate with each other less. This might be a result of the fact that each has a different obsession and desire. While Chareeya is obsessed with her love and freedom in Bangkok, Chalika is infatuated with romance novels. Accordingly, Pran does not openly tell Chareeya that he likes her – not as a sister -- before Natee appears. Unlike Chareeya, who is insistent in the search of her desire, Pran never takes action and is passive like Chalika. Lacking communication because of obsession can be interpreted as the consequence of individualism, that a person is preoccupied with their own needs and desires; thus, they lack interest in those who are around them, even family members. The result is shown in the novel, as the importance of kinship bonds between Chareeya and Chalika declines.

Conclusion

Veeraporn's *Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth* implies that all characters are blind earthworms, each of whom has become "lost in a labyrinth it had dug itself" (p.22). Although Chareeya has freedom and free will to design her own life, she is trapped within narratives and her own desire. Like a blind earthworm, she never realizes the importance of those who are close to her, but inconsistently and aimlessly looks for relationships that exist from stories she has known. Chalika also makes herself blind to all predicaments in life and takes refuge in an imaginary world. Pran deals with bitterness in life by learning to accept what comes to his life, but his weakness is he is not brave enough to make a choice or solve a problem. He cannot stop his love for Chareeya, and has to relocate from one place to another until he dies. These three main characters end up with devastation in their love lives because of their lack and excessive desire for it.

Through these three main characters, the novel evokes the hostile impact of desire and obsession with one's desire, which might be regarded as a part of an individualistic society where individuals' needs and desires are of the utmost concern. For this reason, it might be said that Veeraporn's argument presented in her novel is that agency, a sign of individualism and modernization, is ambivalent or even a threat, especially to interpersonal relationships in a modern society where an individual focuses so much on their desire. Even though the novel is about a love triangle in modern society, it connotes the politics of representation and discourses that pervade society and suggests that everyone might be as blind as the characters, especially in the era of modernized society where simplicity, sufficiency, and communal relationships have been forgotten.

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