

Femininity and Masculinity in Twenty-First Century Thai Romantic Fictions

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to examine the modes of subjectivity and discourses of femininity and masculinity found in Thai romantic novels published in the 21st Century. First, I will discuss generic conventions in Thai romance. Additionally, I will seek to locate it within the socio-cultural contexts of Thai society, which influence the constitution of Thai gender relations and the transformation of gender norms. Finally, I will compare changes within narrative discourses on ideologies concerning gender operating in Thai romantic fictions written in the last century. This study suggests that Thai romance incorporate universal aspects of romance and specifically Thai conventions of romance. Apparently, Thai gender relations are complicated because there are various culturally specific aspects that influence the construction of femininity and masculinity. Transformations of gender values and norms have been discovered when compared to romantic fictions written in the 20th Century, particularly in female sexuality. Thus, the representation of gendered subjectivity in Thai romantic fictions after 2000 indicates changes in the construction of male and female subjectivity.

Keywords: Femininity, Masculinity, Romantic Fictions

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Introduction

In the West, the 1960s and 1970s saw insightful, extensive scholarships on the romance genre. Some critics claim that romance confines women to traditional roles of a wife and a mother and this relegates women to accept secondary, dependent roles. These critics further explain that the happy ending in fact ignores the heroine's freedom and abilities and imprisons the heroine in marriage (Regis 2003). However, some argue that romance facilitates female freedom and the reader of the genre has the power to decide, accept, and reject what they conceive. Regarding these points, it is my interest to study the portrayal of characters, especially females in Thai romantic fictions written in the Twenty-First Century. It is a textual analysis with the aim to explore how romance is related to society and the specificity of romance as a genre.

In particular, my presupposition is that to a certain extent the media might have some influence on the reader or the viewer. According to Stuart Hall's "The Work of Representation", representation is the production of meaning through language (Hall 1997, p.19) and in order to understand the meaning the reader or the viewer must interpret the message or decode it. Decoding is a process that needs consensual understanding. In other words, it needs what Hall calls 'shared conceptual meaning' which depends considerably on culture. The work of representation is not straightforward, but complex and political. Thus, the representation of men and women in a popular genre such as romance is related to culture to a certain degree. Social expectations of gender found in romance might reveal the politics of gender construction found in romance. Yet, the meanings taken into language such as romance might be accepted or rejected by its audience. However, this paper will focus on only the underlying meanings through the portrayal of characters to examine the construction of meanings in the studied texts only.

In this paper, I define romantic fiction as writing about love and relationships and will interchangeably use romantic fiction and romance novels to refer to these particular stories. Specifically, I regard romance as a cultural phenomenon. The texts that I have randomly selected for this textual analysis were written after 2000 by female authors: *New-Man-About-Town* (2008), *Cupid Awake* (2015), and *Fight with Love* (2016).



In this paper, I analyse the modes of subjectivity and femininity discourses to be found in Thai romance in the Twenty-First Century, placing those romances in relation to Thai discourses of gender. My theoretical assumptions are the following:

1. Meaning is both social and plural;
2. Meaning is produced within discourses that are material practices that are also relations of power;
3. Discourses produce and shape subjectivity within specific contexts;
4. Subjectivity is plural and changing.

In the Thai context, reading romance novels is typically a leisure activity of the middle class since middle-class women have more time and disposable income. Romance fiction is not cheap, so working-class women prefer watching TV series instead because several TV series are adapted from romance fiction, it can be assumed that ideological discourses in the novels are also transmitted in the television adaptation. These similar ideologies circulate in different types of media.

Conventions of Thai Romance

In the Thai language, romance novels are called *niyay-pha-fun* (novels that induce dreams); this connotes the sense of fantasy or illusion, which is linked to dreams. For this reason the meaning of romance in Thai is similar to its Western counterpart in that romance is largely fantasy and wish-fulfillment. Traditionally, Thai romance starts with the displacement of the major character(s), and love and courtship are followed by separation from the loved one, adventures, and the return to the previous realm. It

also reproduces the belief in the law of karma as in the representation of displacement of the protagonists. In Western romance, the displacement of the protagonists mostly applies to the heroine, in part, because of the influence of Greek myths like Persephone's abduction by Hades. Unlike its Western counterpart, displacement in traditional Thai romance mostly applies to the hero. It is his quest for power, love, and enlightenment. Two romantic novels in the Twenty-First Century, *New-Man-About-Town* and *Fight with Love*, present the displacement of the heroes and their quest for true love. In *Cupid Awake*, the protagonists swap bodies. In this regard, it implies the displacement of both the hero and the heroine.

Typically, the plot of *niyay-pha-fun* portrays the protagonists as faced with some difficulties in the beginning and gain happiness in the end (Theppayasuwan 1992). This reveals that one feature of Thai romance is a happy ending. According to Theppayasuwan, *niyay-pha-fun* illustrates a more beautiful life than a miserable flawed life to the reader and this is regarded as unreal or surreal. The portrayal of the protagonists is exceptionally good while the villains are portrayed negatively to the protagonists. Besides, coincidence is also essential in *niyay-pha-fun*.

Aim-on Chitasophon, a Thai scholar, defines Thai classical romance literature as unrealistic stories which are about love, adventures and loyalty to the royal family with a focus on entertainment (Chitasophon 1992). According to Chitasophon, Thai classical romance literature consistently maintains the Buddhist trilogies of impermanence, suffering, and non-identity. The principle of samsara, or the cycle of life, is also taken into account. In this regard, it can be said that to some extent Thai romance literature is similar to the Western romance in the medieval period that tells stories about chivalry and knights' adventures. Typically, traditional Thai romance usually refers to the royal tales written in poetic form with a conventional plot and the return to rule the kingdom (Kongthong 2006). Unlike Western romance, traditional Thai romance reproduces the law of karma as presented in the displacement of the protagonists, especially of the hero.

Specifically, prose has become the medium in fictional writing in the reign of Rama VI (1910-1925) (Rutnin 1988, p. 11); thus, it can be said that writing fiction in prose has been imported into the country. Previously, prose writing was found in official documents such as royal decrees, public announcements, laws, historical records, letters, and legal or business transactions (ibid). In other words, prose writing was non-fiction. Before the Twentieth Century, Thai romance was in a poetic form and those who wrote romance were poets. Rutnin, a Thai scholar in Thai literature, believes Thais are more excellent in writing poetry than prose writing. When comparing between Western prose writing and Thai prose writing, she claims that the former is far more excellent while Thai prose writing in general "lack sophistication, articulateness, and clarity of thought and expression (ibid., p. 10).

Gender Relations in Thailand

In the Thai context, an important period in the constitution of power/knowledge relations dates back to the Thirteenth Century. From the Thirteenth Century to the Eighteenth Century, the hegemonic constitution of gender draws heavily on Buddhism. The collective ideology of proper Thai womanhood, *Nang Kaew* or the Perfect Woman, was created by a monk who was a member of the royal family over

700 years ago. Crucially, the image of female ideology was transcribed to the Buddhist literary text and constructed by the sovereign, men at the top of the pyramid. In accordance with the Thai anthropologist Pranee Wongtes who contends that the patriarchal system in Southeast Asia works together with imported religious ideology to limit women's roles to supporters while leading roles belong to men (Wongtes 2006, p.97).

Thai society is hierarchical in its nature; thus Buddhism might not be a central site of gender discourses. For example, sexuality has been viewed as a part of the normal life cycle and virginity is not regarded as essential among Thai peasants (Tannenbaum 1999). In this regard, virginity seems to entail a modern intention of a desirable female image. According to a survey in 2005, both Thai men and women accept male sexual freedom and Thai women tend to tolerate extramarital commercial sexual relations of their partners (Tienthai 2005).

Specifically Thai men have practiced polygyny for centuries because it is a sign of power, virility, and wealth while the preferred qualities of Thai femininity are being proper (Riaproi), sweet (onwann), and not a loose woman (rak nuan sanguan tau) (Panitchpakdi, 34). From this basis, the definition of good and bad Thai women is inextricably linked to the family, the institution that constructs the female role of daughter, wife, and mother (Harrison, 1999).

An important issue of Thai gender relations is *mia noi* (a mistress or minor wife). It has always been a problematic issue and is depicted as a central conflict in *New-Man-About-Town*, one of the romantic fictions used in my paper. As mentioned earlier, research suggests that Thai women prefer their partner to engage in commercial extramarital relationships. That is because non-commercial extramarital relationship, or having *mia noi*, is a larger threat to wife-husband relationships. The practice can be dated back at least to the 18th Century and was normal until the first half of the 21st Century. The issue of *mia noi* reveals Thai cultural beliefs regarding male superiority. Traditionally, it signifies men's power and charisma as shown in the characteristics of heroes in Thai folklore. Because of the belief that men have stronger sexual needs, it is permitted for men to have a sexual outlet either by having a *mia noi* or paying a visit to prostitutes while women, especially middle-class women, are ideally expected not to have sex before marriage and are not allowed to have extramarital relationships at all.

Even though Thai law at present only allows a man to have one wife at a time, in actual practice many Thai men still maintain the practice of having mistresses. As presented in *New-Man-About-Town*, the issue of *mia noi* is a sensitive, serious issue for women and is a major conflict between the protagonists. The fact that a man can take a *mia noi* regardless of his wife's consent is a real threat for a woman. A wife has right to turn to the law for a divorce and ask for money from her husband for parental custody. In the case of the heroine in *New-Man-About-Town*, she asks for a divorce when she believes that the hero has an extramarital relationship with the female antagonist.

Another distinctive aspect of Thai male characteristic that can be found in Thai traditional folklore is being *jao chu* (a womanizer). The term can be applied to both men and women, but only men are permitted to be *jao chu*, not women. At present,

terms such as playboy and Casanova refer exclusively to a male womanizer. In *Cupid Awake*, The heroine understands that the hero is an arrogant superstar and a womanizer. Later, the hero changes his sexual behaviour after having an affair with the heroine. It can be read that the virgin heroine changes him and because her quality he stops being a philanderer since he has found “true love”. Both *New-Man-About-Town* and *Cupid Awake* suggests that having extramarital relationships and being *jao chu* are undesirable male characteristics according to female protagonists’ perspectives. Societal acceptance of male attributes has possibly changed. Female authors also regard these attributes as unacceptable; however, outside the world of fiction, men may still practice like their antecedents since they are not traditional consumers of romance.

Characterisation in the Selected Romance

According to George Paizis, who wrote *Love and the Novel: The Poetics and Politics of Romantic Fiction*, characters “are a focal point in the narrative, a device for setting it into motion and one of the signs contributing to the production of meaning” (Paizis 1998, p. 74) and suggests that the key element to look at in romance is the conflict because it moves the story forward. In romance it is the conflict between “power” and “quality”. As portrayed in the three selected novels, all the protagonists, male and female, must prove their qualities. By qualities I mean cultural qualities rather than universal qualities because it needs specific socio-cultural contexts for the reader to decode.

In the case of these three romantic fictions, all the protagonists have to show that they are qualified partners, both male and female. In *New-Man-About-Town*, the hero and the heroine get married in the first quarter of the story. Although he has got a PhD and works as a business consultant, the hero has to prove his masculinity to the heroine. Since he appears as a moral, shy man, the heroine suspects that he is not heterosexual. The heroine manages to prove his sexual preference before getting married by asking him to stay overnight at the seaside together. The shy, inexperienced hero is described as traditional because he believes that sex should come after marriage and tries to suppress his desire when the heroine makes sexual advances on him. This frustrates the heroine; however, after the hero understands her plan, they have an affair and it implies to the reader that both of them never had a sexual experience. Yet, they might know something about sex and are not too naïve. It suggests that virginity is regarded as important for male and female protagonists. When the hero proves himself, the heroine misunderstands that he has an extramarital relationship with one of the models in her company who is a female rival. It is the female rival and the heroine’s male relative who encourage the hero to question the heroine’s quality. At the end when truth is revealed, they recognize that things are set up and they reconcile. In fact, their qualities have been proved. The hero shows the qualities of a good husband whom the heroine can rely on. The heroine shows that she is moral, reasonable, and trustworthy.

In *Cupid Awake*, the hero has to prove that he is a qualified husband and father. The story uses flashback to show that a successful novelist, the heroine, had a car crash with the hero, an arrogant superstar. The conflict starts because the hero’s effort is in vain. He threw money in the heroine’s face. He accuses her of earning money from a car accident. Accidentally, they have an affair because the heroine gets drunk and goes

to the hero's bedroom instead of her own when both travel to the sea. Later, because of the supernatural storm, they swap bodies. The hero is displaced to the heroine's body and the heroine is in his. They start learning about each other in their displacement from their own bodies and the hero is pregnant within the heroine's body. They return to their own bodies when the hero is giving birth. Like a conventional heroine, the heroine in *Cupid Awake* does not recognize her beauty. She is described as a tomboy because her parents get divorced and she does not want to have a feminine look, which implies weaknesses. Strikingly, when the hero resides in her body, he transforms her after his style. In her body, he has refractive surgery and changes her clothes to look more feminine and attractive. He learns to apply make-up and it is the heroine's face that he applies cosmetics to. In so doing, he creates the heroine's identity to please himself. Accordingly, he has to prove that he is not a womanizer and is really willing to have a family. He exposes the female villain's lies about sexual relationships. After he returns to his body, he makes a decision to choose the heroine and his child instead of his career. This suggests his moral quality of a husband and a father. In *Cupid Awake*, not only does the hero transform into the heroine, as taken from Janice A. Radway's analysis of the ideal romance, the heroine also transforms "the hero's emotional indifferences and sexual promiscuity into expressions of love, constant displays of affection, and the promise of marital fidelity" (Radway 1984, p. 127).

Fight with Love also reveals the hero's true self as a nice, warm man. He was previously hurt because the woman he loves marries a male villain, saying that he is too good. He bitterly decides to be a 'bad' man because he does not want to be a loser anymore. This book is a comedy. The hero shows an attempt to be 'bad' by adjusting his voice, his gesture, and manners. He flees from his identity by disguising himself as an employee in a Chinese bun shop and the heroine is the sister of the business rival of that shop. However, the hero cannot successfully hide his positive qualities from the smart heroine. She gradually learns that the hero is not what he appears. Besides his physical appearance, because of his morality, he is worthy of love. In this novel, a male villain is depicted sparingly as a husband of the woman the hero loves, the negation of the hero's positivity.

New-Man-About-Town grants power to the heroine whose family owns a factory and this guarantees her financial status. She is in her early thirties, and the hero is about 10 years older. The older age of the hero signifies the hierarchy of the characters. In *Cupid Awake*, this pattern is also employed. The hero is in his thirties while the heroine is depicted to work as a novelist for a few years after she graduated from university. The difference in age can signify greater economic security too. As a superstar, the hero can earn much more than the heroine. This reinforces his top position on the social pyramid. He is socially superior to the heroine, a real object of both social and sexual desire. *Fight with Love* also depicts the hero as powerful through his financial status and his age. From these three novels, only *New-Man-About-Town* portrays the heroine whose social status is higher than the hero. However, the hero's background from the lower-middle class reveals his positivity as an ambitious person who works hard and fights for his success. His financial stability does not come from luck, but from being hard-working and this is his real power. In short, these three romantic fictions show that men with power in age and economic status are desirable.

Significantly, these three romantic fictions portray the heroines who recognize their sexuality and desire unlike the heroines in the previous century. The heroine in *New-Man-About-Town* asks the hero to spend a night together at the beach although this is not regarded as 'proper'. However, the heroine is justified because she wants to prove the hero's sexual orientation. Thus, when the heroine flirts with the hero, it is understandable. Unlike the female villain who is seductive and snake-like, the heroine seduces only the hero, her eligible husband. In *Cupid Awake*, the heroine is described as enjoying her first affair with the hero although she regards him as her enemy. In *Fight with Love*, the hero might give a kiss, but it is the heroine who expresses her stronger desire because the hero's lips are described as swollen and chapped.

Conclusion

Changes in characterisation have been found in Twenty-First Thai romance. In my previous study on Thai romantic fictions in the Twentieth Century, Thai romance reflects inferior and objectified female protagonists, particularly because they are objects of the male gaze (Khuankaew 2015). The ideal heroine appears sexually passive and virginity is a must. However, in the last decade of the Twentieth Century, I have found changes in Thai romance which can be regarded as progressive. For instance, more attention to the sexiness of the hero and his physical appearance is found in a book written in 1990s while this was not regarded as important in books written before the last decade of the Twentieth Century. Generally, the hero was depicted as being handsome with few descriptions of his appearance when compared to the heroine. The moral qualities of the heroes were emphasized, not his appearance. According to Ann Barr Snitow's study of Western romance in 1970s, there are two reasons why the heroine wins the hero: being old-fashioned (a code for no premarital sex), and performing well in her helping roles (Snitow 1979). It was found that Thai romance in the Twenty-First Century does not emphasize female helping roles in the private sphere like in the previous century because all the heroines in my current study are all career women. However, the conventional and hegemonic conception of femininity is still at work. They appear 'old-fashioned' in Snitow's term. They are allowed, to a certain extent, to express their sexuality, but only with the heroes so that they are not regarded as 'loose' women. Unlike the heroine in the Twentieth Century whose sexuality is an unexplored continent, unknown to them, the heroines in the Twenty-First Century recognize their sexuality and desire and they have opportunities to express them. These changes might reflect socio-cultural changes in Thai society as the influence of globalization affects values and norms that have been prescribed to men and women.

Regarding female sexuality, the heroines in Twenty-First Century fiction appear more active and capable of passionate sexual urges; yet, they never have any sexual contact with members of the opposite sex before their confrontation with the heroes. However, even though the heroine's sexuality is recognized, it is still limited to the heroes, the ideal guys. In the Twenty-First Thai romance the heroine is not so proper and sweet, but to have defiant heroines can engage the reader, and seems more real and creates more of a sense of identification with the characters. Accordingly, the heroine's beauty is not depicted as very stunning. Beauty is essential because it is regarded as power, especially for women from the Buddhist canon (Esterik 2000, p. 155). For this reason the heroines are all beautiful, but not too beautiful for the reader to identify with. In conclusion, some cultural attributes can be adjusted, adapted, or

reconstructed; however, sedimented discourses that are the roots of a particular culture may still persist firmly and consistently over time, especially discourses on gender and sexuality.

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