

Siamese King and the Composition of Patriarchal Victim Re-Reading King Rama V's Play

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Abstract—Pra Bat Somdet Pra Poramintharamaha Chulalongkorn Pra Chunla Chom Klao Chao Yu Hua or King Rama V (1853–1910) was the fifth monarch of Siam under the House of Chakri. Apart from being honored as the great ruler, King Rama V was also praised for his literary talent. This study aimed to illustrate the talent of King Rama V as well as the influence of Victorianism and patriarchy through one of his remarkable plays, *Ngaw Par*. *Ngaw Par* is about the tragic love of three young Sagais; Lamhap, Sompla and Hanao.

The literary talent of King Rama V was expressed through the composition of *Ngaw Par* by his excellent language skills together with his experiences of living in England and the palace. His female protagonist, Lamhap, was invented to serve the patriarchal ideal.

Keywords—King Rama V; patriarchal society; gender inequality

I. INTRODUCTION

Pra Bat Somdet Pra Poramintharamaha Chulalongkorn Pra Chunla Chom Klao Chao Yu Hua or King Rama V (1853–1910) was the fifth monarch of Siam under the House of Chakri. He was known to the Siamese of his time as Pra Puttha Chao Luang (The Royal Buddha). He is considered one of the greatest kings of Siam. His reign was characterized by the modernization of Siam, immense government and social reforms, and territorial cessions to the British Empire and French Indochina. As Siam was threatened by Western expansionism, Chulalongkorn, through his policies and acts, managed to save Siam from being colonized. All his reforms were dedicated to Siam's assurance of survival in the midst of Western colonialism, so that Chulalongkorn earned the epithet Pra Piya Maharat (The Great Beloved King)¹.

Apart from being honored as the great ruler, King Rama V was also praised for his literary talent. He composed a great number of literary works. His works covered all areas of literary genres, including fiction, non-fiction, prose and poetry.

King Rama V was also famous for composing theatrical plays. One of his remarkable plays was *Ngaw Par*. This play

was composed in 1906, when King Rama V visited Pattalung province in the Southern part of Thailand. King Rama V was inspired by the story of a group of an ethnic minority called Sagai of Negrito ethnic. Sagai people had been wandering around Asia for 15,000 years and scattered all over the islands of the Philippines, Luzon and Mindanao. At this point, they had moved to Malaya and the South of Thailand. Sagais liked living near the rivers and the foot of the hills. They were small. Their height usually did not exceed 5 feet. They had curly hair, round and dark faces, dark brown skin and lots of hair. Sagais had good memories but were not very brave people. Female Sagais usually had many children. (Thaweesak Yanpratheep, 1989:258) Those who were living in the south of Thailand were colloquially called Ngaw or Ngaw Par (literally, jungle Ngaw). In other words, Ngaw or Ngaw Par was another name for the Sagai ethnic.

The King was interested in this ethnic minority and asked the governor of Pattalung province to bring him a Sagai. The governor brought a Sagai called Khanang to the King during his visit in Pattalung. The king learned the language and culture of Sagai from Khanang and composed the play entitled *Ngaw Par* during his eight days of illness in Pattalung (Ibid.)

II. NGAW PAR: THE SYNOPSIS

The story composed by King Rama V entitled *Ngaw Par* is about the tragic love of three young Sagais; Lamhap, Sompla and Hanao.

Lamhap is a beautiful young girl and who is greatly admired by young men in the community. A young man, Hanao falls in love with Lamhap and asks his parents to ask Lamhap's parents to arrange the marriage. Lamhap's parents agree and plan the wedding. Before the wedding is going to take place, Lamhap goes to pick flowers in the garden and is constricted by a snake. Lamhap is frightened and faints. Sompla had snuck into the area to watch Lamhap picking a flower and he reached out for the snake and killed it. He then helped bring Lamhap back to consciousness. Lamhap was embarrassed to be in his arms. For the Sagai tradition, women are not supposed to allow opportunities for any men to touch their bodies except their husbands. So, when Sompla touches her body by trying to help her from fainting and saves her life from the snake, she feels obliged to be his wife and love him until the end of her life. Lamhap then meets a dilemma where she has to marry Hanao to please her parents and be Sompla's wife because he saved her life.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chulalongkorn>. Visited on September 8, 2010 at 8.45 am

Sompla plans to kidnap Lamhap on her wedding day and brings her to live with him in the cave. Hanao gets very upset and angry. He tries to find the couple in the jungle. When he meets Sompla, they have a fight. Hanao's friend kills Sompla with a poison arrow. Lamhap grows very sad and commits suicide. Hanao is sad to know that Lamhap loved Sompla and mourns that he was the cause of the couple's death. So, he, too, decides to commit suicide. Their corpses are finally buried together.

III. LAMHAP: THE BODY

Strangely, the conflict of this story derived from the body. Like all well composed fiction, the story must contain a conflict as the literary element (Ampai Kiatchai, 2002:13). The major conflict of the story started when Lamhap's body was touched by Sompla and she felt obliged to be his wife whereas her parents had already arranged her marriage to the other man, Hanao. According to Kath Woodward, the body is a significant issue in gender and women's studies. Bodies have also been central to activists' campaigns, especially those associated with identity politics, many of which have focused on claiming rights over one's own body. People sought to take control over their own sexuality, reproductive rights and to gain freedom from harassment and acts of racism and aggression (Kath Woodward, 2008:75). However, one usually cannot possess complete control over one's body. The disciplining of bodies involves varying degrees of control and constraint (ibid: 77). Bodies are regulated through the subtle wishes of government as well as through legislation, whereby strategies operate to construct good citizens who conform to norms of sexuality, appropriate behavior, good health and self-discipline (Rose, 1996).

Lamhap was a portrayal of a woman in patriarchal society who could not take control over her own body. She was attacked by the snake and went unconscious. Sompla, the hero of the story rescued her and she felt that she had to be his wife because Sompla had touched her body. It was the Sagai's tradition that a woman could only allow one man to touch her body. Lamhap, as a member of that society, felt that her body was controlled by the patriarchal tradition of her society.

IV. LAMHAP: THE VICTIM OF PATRIARCHAL TRADITION

Although Lamhap is a Sagai, not a traditional Thai woman, she was composed to be living in the South of Thailand or Siam at that time. The way she was treated by her parents and people in her society was the same treatment Thai women would get from Thai society at that time. For instance, she was a victim of an arranged marriage. This could be because the writer or the composer was a Thai man. King Rama V, as a Thai man, a member of patriarchal society, had invented Lamhap from the perspectives and experiences of being Thai. As the king is not an ordinary Thai and did not live an ordinary Thai life, his views about women is not that of an ordinary woman but of a court woman who is supposed to be more graceful and more behaved than ordinary Thai women.

As the author of this story is the king of Siam who has been living in the court for his entire life and is familiar with

the characteristics of the court women, it is unavoidable for the author to invent the female character from the characteristics of his familiarity. In addition, King Rama V was a graduate from England. His reign was influenced by Queen Victoria of England, socially and politically. It was rather possible that his female protagonist, Lamhap, was imagined through the influence of Victorian morals. Therefore, Lamhap's characteristics were likely those of a woman in the Victorian period who had to be strictly monogamous and keep her body for only one man. So, when Sompla touches her body, even in the intention to rescue her from the danger of the snake, her strong Victorian morals made her feel obliged to marry Sompla. The following quote is an illustration of her feeling towards the incident:

Struggling...I never wish to have a husband.
I had never been closed to Hanao.
I have no idea whether he is good or bad.
Even you (Sompla), I did not fancy you.
When Maipai tried to tell me about you, I was not interested.

It was destiny to make the snake attack me and you come to help.

I feel grateful and obliged to be faithful to you until the last day of my life.

(Ngaw Par,1964:42-43)

Apart from the monogamous moral of Victorianism, arranged marriage was another thing being practiced at that time. The author of the story, King Rama V expressed his influence of Victorian practice through the Sagai community by making Lamhap, the heroine of the story, a victim of this tradition.

Lamhap disagreed with the arranged marriage and was very upset about it. The following extract exemplified her feeling:

Oh dear me...
I don't know how to get away from this situation.
Why should I want to keep this embarrassing life?
The life that had already allowed the man to be near
I cannot wait until the wedding is over.
If I die today, I shall be able to save myself from this flaw.

(Ngaw Par,1964:57)

The above extract illustrated Lamhap's anti-marriage reaction. She was embarrassed that her body has already been touched by Sompla but she has to marry another man who is not Sompla. This is considered to be bad behavior that she wishes not to do. This bad feeling is so strong that she wants to commit suicide.

Lamhap not only wished not to join the arranged marriage, but also wished not to marry at all. This could be seen from the following extract:

I have never felt in love with anyone.
Now, I would have to feel the feeling I don't like.
I would no longer be able to wear beautiful earrings.
It would be disappointing that my face
would not be seen nicely with a flower anymore.

(Ngaw Par,1964:49)

The above extract shows Lamhap's feeling towards marriage that she did not love the man she was marrying and

she felt disappointed for the loss of her single woman's life. The way she was concerned about her beauty as a young woman and did not want to get married was a heart breaking thing to see. There must be quite a number of women of patriarchal societies at that time who had to experience that painful feeling of abandoning their precious single lives for men who meant nothing to them; she acts for her parents' happiness, in order to be accepted by the society as a good daughter and a 'good' woman.

V. CONCLUSION

The literary talent of King Rama V was expressed through the composition of *Ngaw Par* by his excellent language skills together with his experiences of living in England and the palace. His female protagonist, Lamhap, was invented to serve the patriarchal ideal by being a beautiful woman who wishes to keep her beautiful body for only one man, no matter if she loves that man or not. This attitude of hers leads to a tragic ending of the story when she decides to run away from her fiancé with the man who touches her body while she was uncertain about her feelings about him. To conclude, Lamhap was another woman living in patriarchal society and a victim of patriarchal tradition.

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