

Femmes Fatales of Lanka: Uncovering Discourses on Female Identity in Thai soap operas

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Abstract

This practice-oriented research investigates how writing a play can examine some contemporary discourses on gender that significantly affect the identity of women in current Thai society, especially those tied to the construction of femininity found in Thai soap operas. While writing the play *Femmes Fatales of Lanka*, the researcher has also sought to determine effective ways to introduce to audiences to an awareness of the myth of femininity in Thailand's patriarchal society. Female characters from Thailand's national epic, the *Ramakien*, along with various popular Thai soap operas have been used as sources for this investigation. Although soap operas make it seem as though modern Thai women possess the rights and capacities to fight for and maintain their independence, in practical terms women regularly, and often unconsciously, conform to traditional social expectations, complying with men's wishes, just as in the past. The confusion of Thai women whose lives are bound with contradictory values between traditional norms and a modernized life style are illuminated in the play in order to question Thai women's identity and their position in the society. Whereas soap operas seem to portray images of strong modernized Thai women, this article argues that soap operas fail to represent real Thai women, ignoring their lives and ambitions, to focus

on the proper Thai women or it opposite in apatriarchal society.

Keyword: Femmes Fatales of Lanka, Thai soap operas

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยสร้างสรรค์นี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาการใช้การเขียนบทละครในการอภิปรายวิถีทางกรรมในสังคมปัจจุบันว่าด้วยเรื่องอัตลักษณ์ความเป็นหญิง ตลอดจนรูปแบบและกระบวนการการกรากรำนำเสนออัตลักษณ์ของนางเอกในละคร โทรทัศน์ไทยในปัจจุบัน ผู้วิจัยใช้การเขียนบทละครเรื่อง นางร้ายในลงกา เป็นเครื่องมือในการหาวิธีที่จะสามารถทำให้ผู้ชมตระหนักรถึงการสร้างมายาคติของสังคมชายเป็นใหญ่ผ่านทางละครโทรทัศน์ไทย โดยเชื่อมโยงและเบริ่งเทียบกับตัวละครผู้หญิงสามตัวในรามเกียรตี ได้แก่ มนโข สุวรรณกันยุมา และเบญญา ละครโทรทัศน์ไทยถูกใช้เป็นวัตถุดิบในการสร้างเนื้อหาและรูปแบบการนำเสนอ งานวิจัยนี้มุ่งเน้นไปที่การรื้อถอนวิถีทางกรรมความเป็นหญิงของผู้หญิงไทยชนชั้นกลางในสังคมปัจจุบัน และแต่งตั้งคำถามกับความลักษณ์ของผู้หญิงไทยเหล่านี้ ผู้ซึ่งมีชีวิตอยู่กับความขัดแย้งระหว่างค่านิยมแบบอนุรักษนิยมดั้งเดิมกับค่านิยมแบบตะวันตกที่สังคมกำหนดให้ใหม่ ในขณะที่ละครโทรทัศน์นำเสนอภาพของนางเอกสมัยใหม่ที่เข้มแข็ง ฉลาด และพึงพาตันคงได้ แท้จริงแล้วอาจถูกใช้เป็นเครื่องมือที่มีประสิทธิภาพในการผลิตชั้นภาพที่สังคมต้องการให้ผู้หญิงอย่างจะเป็น เพื่อปลูกฝังและส่งสอนให้ผู้หญิงไทยลงบเนียบอยู่กับตำแหน่งและหน้าที่ที่สังคมทุนนิยมกำหนดไว้ให้ เพื่อให้คำน้าจและผลประโยชน์ยังคงอยู่ในมือของเพศชายอย่างที่เคยเป็นมา

คำสำคัญ: นางร้ายในลงกา, ละครโทรทัศน์ไทย, บทละคร

Introduction

This paper focuses on the myth and reality of Thai women in the contemporary society. In particular, it centres on the images in the gender

discourse of “the ideal woman” found in the features of the contemporary heroine in today’s Thai soap operas. This research stems from my writing “*Femmes Fatales of Lanka: Femininity and Moral Ambiguity*” which I presented at the research forum of *Our Roots-Right Now: Ramayana* by Department of Dramatic Arts, under the Research Forum for Humanities in Thailand Project, supported by Thailand Research Fund.

As a playwright, I aimed to create a play to increase the awareness of illusionism in Thai soap operas. Moreover, as a researcher, I sought to discover how the play *Femmes Fatales of Lanka* deconstructed Thai soap operas and uncovered the process of constructing the myth of “the ideal woman” in Thai contemporary society.

The script plays with the link between heroines in today’s soap operas and comparable female characters from the *Ramakien*, the Thai version of *Ramayana*, seen as a hallmark of Thai literature. I relied on Michel Foucault’s discourse theory (1969) to deconstruct the illusionism given in Thai soap operas and applied Roland Barthes’ theory of semiotics (1972) to demystify some of the gender mythology seen in Thai soap operas, where discursive practices obscure power relations. The essay focuses on both what and how Thai soap operas frame and articulate myths of femininity that affect the identities of Thai women.

Myths of femininity in Thai soap operas

Many in Thai society view soap operas as a feminine and inferior cultural form, perhaps because many women write the scripts and many women watch the shows on television, and therefore the shows lack genuine aesthetic merit. Many such shows concentrate on domestic events and relationship issues. However, I believe that this view is a form of stereotyping. Blumenthal (1997) writes:

'Soap operas are considered non aesthetic because they offer a popular, woman-centered aesthetic, defying the dominant masculinist, elitist definitions of what "good" art is. ...Soap operas are devalued not only because they are "a lesser art", but also because women like them. The devaluation takes place in a larger, intra-national and cross-national milieu in which women's general and representational cultures are actively subordinated' (1997: 87).

Because a soap opera is often seen an entertaining medium that people willingly watch, it can become an effective means of conveying a dominant social ideology to the audience. Many Thai soap operas do not show female characters as equals with their male counterparts. Although female characters are now portrayed in a stronger and more capable way than previously, men still typically are in superior dramatic positions, with most soap opera heroines seeking to be the wife of a hero.

Almost all Thai soap operas have the same combination of predictable plots, stock characters and simple didactic themes. In the past fifteen years, the images of heroines of soap operas have become more confident, and they are presented as professional workingwomen who are highly educated and smart. This makes it seem as if the status of female characters in soap operas has improved; however, throughout most every soap opera story, we do not see a heroine really do her professional work, suggesting it is not important. Characters who are successful and good-looking have background roles, hinting at their social status. Every heroine still focuses on finding a hero as "Mr. Right" and hopes to be chosen by him at the end. This situation suggests that Thai audiences still identify women by their marriage status, not by their professions. It further means that a woman's self-worth derives from whom she is married to, and is not based on whom she really is.

People watching soap operas tend to identify themselves with a character and, for a while, they are taken away from real life to an in-between space where the boundaries between reality and fantasy worlds blur. I view Thai soap operas not as a reflection of Thai society, but as constructions made from diverse social discourses, presenting versions of reality that are, at bottom, ideological. Soap operas lack a process of unaware mythification on a deep level. Whereas any audience should be able to tell that the happy ending of a soap opera is illusory, at the level of social ideology, things are not that simple. The process of mythification, that is '*what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which is hidden there' (Barthes, 1972: II), shows that the current discourse of femininity in Thailand is more complicated than it was in the past. Whereas the discourse gives a new definition for the gender identity of Thai women, it simultaneously reinforces and reproduces the traditional definition of Thai women situated and shaped by patriarchal structures.

Most of the heroines in early soap operas were patient and submissive, using their virtue to defeat evil. Nowadays, by contrast, modern heroines have changed as they fight for themselves, rather than just crying and waiting. Still, I would argue that soap operas today create a distorted image of the heroine's fight by hiding her real enemy. Most soap operas present the enemy as another villainous female. A key motif in Thai soap operas is for two women to fight against one another for a hero, while the hero floats above and beyond any and all conflicts. This implies that the actual problem is that society does not allow women independence apart from a man, showing that the real enemy is patriarchy.

Moreover, I was struck by the divergence between the basic static sameness of heroes in Thai soap operas through decades and the significant changes in heroines. Now the heroine who was previously

admire — one who is submissive, passive, and virtuous — is considered flat, typical, and not believable. Producers of soap operas have created well-rounded heroine characters who are no longer submissive victim who wait for a hero to rescue her. Today's heroine has to be strong, intelligent, and highly educated to win the hero at the end and the earlier submissive heroine is passé. Nonetheless, the new heroine with her new features of a heroine — strength, confidence, determination — still appears as submissive to patriarchy. In Thai soap opera, it is usually not possible for a female protagonist to be independent without having or wanting a hero. Therefore, no matter how smart and strong she might be, the heroine must complete herself with her hero to find an acceptable place in Thai patriarchy. Although the features of the heroine now value intelligence and strength, suggesting a possible path toward her equality with and independence from the hero, in the last instance the heroine still needs to have a man in charge of her life. This suggests that for Thai social norms, Thai women cannot be on their own no matter how strong they are.

Interestingly, nowadays many Thai soap operas include another type of female character, one who is weak and submissive in comparison with the heroine. This character may have been created to make the heroine look stronger and more intelligent and able to wield her own power. This female character is always inferior to the heroine in every aspect; she is bullied by others, and does not have a happy life. Moreover, it is impossible for her to marry a perfect man, like the hero, at the end. To show this, I briefly discuss the characters in *Rang Ngao*, a popular prime-time soap opera that broadcast from October to December in 2012.

The protagonist is named Munin and she is an intelligent and strong woman who is an executive in a western computer firm. Her twin sister, Muta, (a weak and submissive female character) is very innocent

about men, and is deceived by her superior, Janepob (a villain), who already has a wife and children. Janepob makes Muta love him and she loses her virginity to him. Muta finds herself pregnant. Nopnapa, Janepob's wife, finds out about their affair. Overcome by hurt and shame, Muta kills herself. When Munin discovers this, she is angry and begins to plan revenge for her twin sister's death. She disguises herself as Muta and tries every way she can to destroy Janepob's family. Weekit (the hero), who is Muta's colleague, tries to stop Munin, but she does not listen to him. Weekit loves Munin although he thinks that she is Muta. Munin loves him too, but she needs to first destroy Janepob. One night, Weekit becomes very jealous about Munin going with Janepob, so he rapes her. Finally, Munin succeeds with her plan, revealing to all that she is not Muta. Weekit feels guilty and then tries to tell Munin that he did all he did out of love. Munin loves Weekit too, so she forgives him. Finally, Munin and Weekit understand each other and get married.

This summary of this soap opera suggests that a heroine like Munin has a strong, modern personality traits that enable her to have a happy life and marry a perfect man; whereas Muta, who is the submissive Thai woman, becomes a victim of the selfishness of a man, all because of her weakness. In the plot, rape serves to resolve the conflict between the hero and the heroine, a situation that is usually found in Thai soap operas. Although Weekit rapes Munin, Munin is not seen as a victim and Weekit is not seen as the villain, since in this case, rape is legitimised in the audience's eyes because Weekit is the hero who does what he does for the right reasons. Since Munin fits the categories of a modern Thai heroine by being beautiful, smart, independent and strong, she is rewarded by getting the hero, even though he raped her. On the other hand, Muta loses her virginity to the wrong man and so is punished by not getting the man and therefore has a tragic life.

This analysis suggests that this soap opera shows the audience that a Thai woman needs to be intelligent, strong and confident if she wants to be a heroine. It also says that being strong and intelligent will keep a Thai woman from being victimised by men, and that losing her virginity is not a big deal for a Thai woman if she is a heroine, since, despite losing her virginity, she still marries the hero. Although she loses her virginity from a rape, Thai soap operas legitimise her violation due to the fact that he is the hero who does things for the right reasons. The message seems to be that a woman who is no longer a virgin deserves pity, not love, from the perfect man, like in the case of Muta. It is also interesting that Muta and Munin are twin sisters, suggesting that although they are alike in many deep ways, they came to very different ends. Like in any Thai soap opera, a woman who loses her virginity will never get a hero unless it is to him that she loses it. It can be said that a hero in Thai soap opera embodies modernised patriarchal society, suggesting to Thai women that in order to be accepted and succeed, they must follow society's expectations.

Femmes Fatales of Lanka: Uncovering the myth of “an ideal woman”

Throughout the researched one while writing and staging *Femmes Fatales of Lanka*, Thai soap operas remained a major source of material for me to explore the discourses of reality and illusion, specifically the illusions of gender identity Thai women face in the wake of contemporary forms of patriarchy and capitalism. A heroine is often a protagonist in a soap opera, and as a protagonist, the audience naturally takes her side throughout the story. Audiences naturally empathize with her, and want her to pass all difficulties to reach her goal, which usually is marrying the soap opera's hero.

As a playwright, I used the structure of “a play within a play” to question “who owns the power of telling the story”. Some female characters

from the *Ramakien* came to refer to present day female characters and to represent the myth of a heroine as “ideal woman” as presented in Thai television today. The play consists of two story lines of women characters, one taking place in the mythical time of the *Ramakien* and another taking place in contemporary Thailand, with links between them. In one story line, female characters from the *Ramakien* seek ways to perform their identity and be selected by the implied hero of the piece, Hanuman, who is expected to return shortly. In the other story line, another set of characters in contemporary Thai society show ways of thinking shaped by what is presented in television soap operas, and they are in fact asked to create a new soap opera based on the *Ramakien*.

Ramakien is the core literary text in Thailand that has paralleled Thai people’s lives for a long time and which still affects their thinking and beliefs. Elements or features of the *Ramakien* have often been employed as norms for Thai society, marking the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate and between appropriate and inappropriate. Although most of *Ramakien*’s characters were male and the main theme usually involved clashes between these male characters, their female counterparts also possess various roles. A character such as Sita is a clear example and reference of “an ideal woman” who was strong, intelligent, with a strong moral sense, while a character like Surpanakha is a clear example of female villain whose immoral behavior stemmed from her desire and lust. The *Ramakien* says that because Surpanaka was angry at Rama and Laksamana, and envious of Sita, she sought revenge by convincing Ravana to abduct Sita, therefore causing the great war between Rama’s army and that of Lanka–Ravana’s kingdom. Surpanaka committed bad actions out of bad intentions, so she ends up not getting the man she wanted, a result that marks her out as a female villain.

Besides these two characters, there are also other interesting female characters in the *Ramakien*. Some seem to be submissive female characters like Mandodari, while others seem strong and intelligent, like Benyakai and Suwankunyuma. However, I argue that these three female characters use their femininity to suit their best interests like heroines in current Thai television soap operas.

The plot of my play developed as two parallel lines, one for the fictional literary characters, and the other for the more realistic characters of the present. Female characters fill both story lines, with both their objectives and dramatic actions designed to question the image of “an ideal woman” in today’s society and the way this image has been constructed by, and is reflected in, Thai soap operas. In the story line of literary characters from *Ramakien*, Suwankunyuma, Benyakai and Mandodari are preparing a dance to welcome Hanuman on his visit to Lanka. All three women strive to be seen as the heroine in the dance, so each has a claim to her legitimacy. Mandodari claimed that even though she was Pipek’s wife, the ruler of Lanka at the moment, she was condemned since Pinasuriyavongse, her youngest son, had just rebelled and had been recently executed. She was trying to regain her reputation and hoped Hanuman would be her savior. Suwankunyuma, ex-wife of Indrachitra—the beloved son and the heir of Ravana—considered herself as deserving this precious title since she was once at a high social status and the first wife of the great viceroy. She was in a difficult situation right now, so even if she was one of Hanuman’s wives, she had no rights whatsoever. She had born two sons with Indrachitra and she did not allow them to join the battle. She taught them to solely take side with whoever won. At the same time, she tried to win her reputation back and decided that Hanuman was her best way out. On the other hand, Benyakai thought she most deserved to be the heroine since she was more exalted

in every way than the other two. She claimed that a heroine must be loyal only to a hero. Since Hanuman was her only husband, not like the other two women, she deserved to be the heroine of the dance. However, in the end, the dance was not held since Hanuman cancelled his visit to Lanka to deal with matters concerning Sita, who is an undisputed heroine whom none of these three women could not match in any aspect.

In the other story line, four women had just set up their own company to pursue their dream of their making their careers in drama and theatre. Their first project sought to produce a soap opera about female characters of Lanka based on the *Ramakien*. They were arguing about which character should be a heroine. The protagonist of this story line, a playwright, tried to compromise her standpoint with what the others wanted. The other three characters consist of a determined and ambitious producer who used her femininity to manipulate others to get what she wanted, a director who saw herself a feminist, trying to take revenge against the man who had dumped her, and a once-famous actress who lived in her own world where she could not see anyone but herself in it, and took side with whoever could benefit her. All four characters thought of themselves as a “strong aggressive modernised heroine” of their real lives. At the end, the playwright eventually gave up and accepted a job of writing a commercial soap opera, because she wanted to earn money to have breast implants in order to get the guy she had fallen in love with for so long.

Using the structure of “a play within a play” helped to raise a question for the audience of “who is the real narrator of the other side?” This helped to question the power of the “narrator”, especially how mass media narrates capitalist and patriarchal myths in today’s society. Throughout the play, no male character appeared onstage, although it regularly refers to men throughout. The actions of female characters in both story

lines always focused on men: some wanted to please men to win them, some manipulated men for their own benefit, and some tried to use men before later realising they were the ones actually being used. In these ways, I have argued that these female characters have agency and are not submissive. They decided from options and made choices. When they were under men's power, it is because they chose to be in order to make themselves "a heroine", so-called "an ideal woman".

Conclusion

This research aimed to deconstruct the illusions that manipulate Thai women's identity to serve a capitalist patriarchal society. I sought this aim by writing a play that tied female characters from the *Ramakien* to female characters from contemporary society to show how Thai women were affected by the myth of femininity embodied in Thai soap operas. To investigate women's identity, I used playwriting to comment on Thai soap operas, the ways that Thai society views soap operas, and how soap opera positions women within them. This research aims to benefit Thai play writing by showing how it can be used to investigate gender discourses that significantly affect the identity of Thai women in today's society, and how the myth of femininity has been constructed from classical literature to today's soap operas.

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