

*Si Phaendin*¹ and the Construction of the Female Gender Role

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Abstract

Si Phaendin was composed in 1953 by Mom Rajawongse (M.R.) Kukrit Pramoj. His main characters, Phloi was composed to behave according to her gender role and status in society without being rebellious or questioning. The main character of the story, Phloi, was presented according to “the good woman” stereotype in Thai society. She enjoyed being a good daughter, good wife and good mother. These characteristics of Phloi were composed by a male writer whose imagination was framed by patriarchy. Her happiness was also presented from the male writer’s point of view which may not be a genuine happiness as a woman.

Keywords: gender, functionalism, *Si Phaendin*

บทคัดย่อ

เรื่องสี่แผ่นดินแต่งขึ้นเมื่อปี พ.ศ.2496 โดย ม.ร.ว.คึกฤทธิ์ ปราโมช ตัวละครเอกของเรื่องคือพลอยจึงถูกสร้างขึ้นให้ประพฤติตนตามบทบาททางเพศสภาพของตนและสถานะทางสังคมโดยดูชะตาจากมุมมองของนักเขียนชายในสังคมปิตาธิปไตยอย่างสังคมไทยโดยพลอยถูกนำเสนอให้มีความสุขในการได้ทำหน้าที่ของผู้หญิงตามที่สังคมกำหนดคือเป็นลูกสาวที่เชื่อฟังพ่อแม่ ภรรยาที่อ่อนหวาน

¹ One of Kukrit Pramoj’s master pieces, literally translated as Four Reigns; romanised according to the Royal Institute system.

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และเชื้อพังสามี่และเป็นแม่ที่อุทิศตนเพื่อลูก ซึ่งความสุขในชีวิตของพลอยนี้ ถูกสร้างจากมุมมองของนักเขียนชายที่สร้างตัวละครหญิงตามอุดมคติของตน และจินตนาการจากกรอบแนวคิดของสังคมแบบชายเป็นใหญ่ว่าการประพฤติตน เช่นนั้นเป็นสิ่งที่ตัวละครหญิงพอใจและมีความสุข ดังนั้นความสุขของพลอย จึงเป็นความสุขที่ถูกประกอบสร้างโดยนักเขียนชายที่ได้รับอิทธิพลจากสังคม แบบชายเป็นใหญ่หาใช่ความสุขที่แท้จริงของผู้หญิงไม่

Introduction

Si Phaendin (Four Reigns) was composed by Maj. Gen. Mom Rajawongse (M.R.) Kukrit Pramoj (April 20, 1911 -October 9, 1995). Kukrit was a Thai politician and scholar. He was Speaker of the House of Representatives of Thailand from 1973 -1974 and was the thirteenth Prime Minister of Thailand, serving in office from 1975-1976. He is considered one of the greatest statesmen of Thailand. As a scholar, he wrote many fictional and non-fictional works. His unique sense of humour offered a satirical view of his era. Most notable are his epics and many short stories portraying various aspects of life and documenting contemporary history. His *Lai Chiwit (Many Lives)* was also translated into English. He was a leading authority on traditional Thai culture and had a polymath range of interests from Thailand's classical dance to literature. He was named a National Artist of Thailand for literature in 1985 for his famous writings³.

Si Phaendin began in 1953 as a series of stories on the life and times of fictional Mae Phloi who as a young girl enters the service of a consort of King Rama V and dies the same day as King Rama VIII. These were later collected in *Si Phaendin* and translated in English as *Four Reigns* by Chancham Bunnag in 1981.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kukrit_Pramoj-16/8/2011

This article studies both the original version of *Si Phaendin* by Kukrit Pramoj and the translated version by Chancham Bunnag. This story was very well translated by Chancham. As mentioned by Kukrit Pramoj “*She has somehow brought out the Thai mentality of this book clearly, to be understood, to be appreciated and I hope to be cherished by our foreign friends.*” All the quotes in the story were, therefore, taken from the translated version.

***Si Phaendin*: The Synopsis**

Si Phaendin is a story about the life of Phloi, who was born in an elite family in the reign of King Rama V. Phloi was taken to live and learn in the Grand Palace when she was 10 because her mother decided to leave her father. The story of her life was told in first person. It started from her childhood during the reign of King Rama V and ended at the end of King Rama VIII's reign.

Phloi's father was called Chao Khun Father. He had one wife before Phloi's mother who decided to go back to live in her hometown when Chao Khun Father brought Phloi's mother to live in the same house as another wife. This caused anger to the first wife's daughter, Khun Un. Phloi felt a strange relationship between her mother and Khun Un all the time. This bad relationship led to the divorce of her parents. That was the reason that Phloi was taken to live in the court with Sadet, the former boss and a distant relative of her mother.

At the Grand Palace, she met a girl called Choi who became her close friend. When Phloi grew up, she fell in love with Choi's older brother, Nuang. Her love with Nuang was not successful because Nuang had to go to work in Nakhonsawan, a distant province. He had a relationship with a woman in Nakhonsawan and had to marry her because she was pregnant. Phloi was brokenhearted. She then met Khun Prem and got

married to him because her father and Sadet said he was a good and suitable man for her. Khun Prem had a relationship with his female servant before marrying Phloi. He had one son with that servant. Phloi was not angry with Khun Prem about that issue and even adopted the child. She named that child Prapon or On. Phloi then had her own children named Prapan or An, Prapot or Ort and Prapai, respectively.

Phloi had been through many uncertainties in life but she tried to face things logically. After her husband died, she had to look after her children despite difficult times of political changes. Prapon, her adopted son grew up to be a soldier and had to go and live outside Bangkok. Prapan was sent to study abroad and came back with a Caucasian wife. Prapai, Phloi's youngest child and her only daughter got married to Sewee, Prapan's friend.

After coming back from England, Prapan's political ideas were very liberal whereas Prapon was a loyalist. The two brothers, therefore, could not get along. This issue worried Phloi a lot. After the political revolution in Thailand, the bureaucracy was changed from an absolute monarchy to a democracy. Prapon was imprisoned in Tarutao Island as a political prisoner. After he was released, he learned that his younger brother, Ort was sick. So, he went to see Ort but could not rescue him. Ort died of malaria. In the reign of King Rama VIII, on the day the king died, Phloi died as well because she felt tired and did not have strength of mind to live any longer because the king, who was the center of love and inspiration for her, was already dead.

***Si Phaendin* and Gender Approach**

According to the Dictionary of Feminist Theory, 'gender' refers to male and female in a cultural context, whereas 'sex' refers to biological

definitions of male and female. The term 'gender' is used in specific reference to Thailand in Jackson and Cook (1999: 3) to refer to cultural and social understandings of femininity and masculinity and the way these inform other categories, including transgender (Jackson & Cook, 1999: 3). Thus, the discussion on gender could cover all aspects of men and women in society via a cultural context. In addition, the term gender could be found in any fields of study as it was stated by David Glover and Cora Kaplan (2000) as followed:

Gender is now one of the busiest, most restless terms in the English language, a word that crops up everywhere, yet whose uses seems to be forever changing, always on the move, producing new and often surprising inflection of meaning. (Glover and Kaplan, 2000: VIII)

In literary studies, gender is a determinate factor of how texts are written and read. The most common issues for discussion are the following issues:

1. the historical issue of who is free to write and who is able to get published or to be studied;
2. women are represented in ways restricted by conventional stereotypes, e.g. represented as objects, to be discussed, exchanged and evaluated by men;
3. the societies whose images of women are largely voyeuristic stereotypes, the implied addressee of images of women is a 'male' construct;
4. the way men and women use language;
5. gynocriticism which seeks to show how women feel in and about women's bodies, and to celebrate aspects of those bodies which have been excluded by convention from public discourse e.g. childbirth, menstruation, menopause;

6. psychoanalytic criticisms which charts the representation of specific psychical positions of women in the language of particular texts;

7. the institutional issues to do with the conduct of academic research, seminar interaction and presentation.

(Durant and Fabb, 1992)

The development of this field of study has now expanded to cover the issues of men and masculinities, i.e. how men feel in and about their bodies and the social expectation of the manly ideal. This international study is recognized as the sociology of masculinity (Whitehead, 2010: 2). Moreover, the issues of the gay and lesbian community have also been central in contemporary gender studies.

This article, however, focuses on the presentation of the main female character, Phloi with the implication of gender approach as simplified above in number 2) that women are represented in ways restricted by conventional stereotypes, e.g. represented as objects, to be discussed, exchanged and evaluated by men.

The Male Author and the Construction of the Female Gender Role

According to Durant and Fabb (1990), women were presented the way society wanted her to be as quoted:

“In many texts, women are represented in ways restricted by conventional stereotypes.” (Durant & Fabb, 1990: 43)

The above quotation was very true as *Si Phaendin* was among those texts. Because the author of the story was a Thai man, the image of Phloi was constructed in a way Thai men wanted Thai women to be. In Thai society, the female gender role was prescribed for women via women's stereotypes. These stereotypes derived from Thai traditional beliefs and

values which inevitably patriarchal. Women in Thai society, therefore, were expected to be a good daughter, good wife and good mother (Kaanjanaa Kaewthep, 1992: 64).

Phloi, as a portrait of a good Thai woman was constructed by Kukrit Pramoj to behave according to her female gender role, as a good girl and a good woman.

The Construction of Phloi as a Girl

When Phloi was a young girl she was presented to be an obedient daughter. When her mother had a quarrel with her father and decided to leave him, the mother did not even ask whether Phloi wanted to stay with the father or the mother. She entered into Ploy's bedroom in the middle of the night and woke Phloi up to get ready to leave. Phloi did not ask or expressed any feeling, just did what she was told to do. This scene could be illustrated as in the following quote:

And on the preceding night, it did. Mother had marched off from their quarters early in the evening, gone up to the big house to see Chao Khun Father, and Phloi had fallen asleep after hours of waiting for her. Waking up with a start, she saw Mother lighting a lamp and a sleepy Phoem standing about.

“You are coming with me, Phloi,” Mother said. “Since it's quite clear that he doesn't want me under his care and protection any more. I must go. Let the course of karma take me where it will. Better than to stay and be trampled on like a bonded slave...”

(Chancham Bunnag, 1981: 8-9)

The above quotation illustrated how Phloi's life was dictated by her mother. Phloi had no problem with that because the reason her mother gave her was as follow:

“Yes, sweetheart, I really must move on. But no matter where I go, no matter what I do, I love you most of all. You must remember that. And whatever happens to me, I do so want you to have a good life”

(Chancham Bunnag, 1981: 36-37)

It was quite common for parents and the elders in Thai traditional society to use their love and good will as a tool to control their daughters' behavior, including sexual behavior and marriage.

The Construction of Phloi as a Woman

Woman and Sexuality

A good woman in Thai society is supposed to be monogamous and sexually well-behaved (Harrison, 2000b). This is because in Thai traditional belief, 'good' women have to be modest about sex. Female students in Thailand have to study a poem called *Supaasit sorn ying* ('A code of behavior for women') by the famous Thai poet Sunthorn Poo (1786-1855), from their primary school days. The most important rhyme which most Thai women still remember long after leaving school is:

“เป็นสาวแต่แจ้วสวยสะอาด ก็หมายมาดเหมือนมณีอันมีค่า
 แม้นแต่กร้าวรานร่อยถอยราคา จะพลอยพาหอมหายจากกายนาง”
 Being a beautiful, young and clean woman is like being a precious gem. If woman, as the gemstone, is flawed or broken, the nice scent (good reputation) will disappear from her.

(Sunthorn Poo, 1986: 504).

The moral of the above teaching is interpreted as that women should keep themselves clean (virginal) in order to be valuable. Phloi, the

main female character of this story, was not acceptable. Being created by a conformist author, Phloi was presented as a completely sexual innocent. She had to be very careful about her relationship with men to prevent gossip and criticism and to keep ‘the nice scent’ about her. The illustration of this could be seen from when she started to realize her feeling for Choi’s older brother, Nuang. His feeling for her, when it changed from friends to be lovers, caused her to stop meeting him immediately. No matters how hard Choi had to try to encourage her as the following quote:

“Phi Nuang’s coming again next holy day” Choi said. “Three days from now. Why don’t you go and meet him, Phloi?”

No, not yet.

“Oh, he’ll be disappointed again. He’ll be so sad. He looked so sad the last time I saw him. Pitiful, really...By the way, Phloi, do you know that that was the first *phleng yao* he had ever attempted? He has such a hard time with the rhyming. Poor Phi Nuang, he’s no poet. At one point in that *phleng yao* which you now know by heart-oh, don’t blush, and don’t deny you’ve read it at least a thousand times-well, at one point he got stuck and had to ask a friend to help him out over the next line...All for you, Phloi... You still don’t want to see him?”

No, not yet.

“Well, if he goes and hangs himself, don’t blame me.”

(Chancham Bunnag, 1981: 84)

Phloi’s refusal to meet Nuang as above did not mean she had less feeling for him. The author of the story made Phloi to experience love for the first time with strong feelings. However, as a ‘good’ woman, she had

to repress it. Otherwise, it would make her become a 'bad' woman in Thai society. This was confirmed by Harrison (1997) that the 'good' women in Thai society are those who reserve sexual contact for their husbands for the purpose of becoming mothers and 'bad' women are those who are sexually adventurous, promiscuous and unrestrained. Phloi, as a good Thai woman, therefore, must be able to control her intimate feeling and never show it off.

Woman and Marriage

Apart from wanting a woman to be a virgin and sexually well-behaved, the author of this story also wished a woman to be a good wife by sending his message through Phloi's mentality and behaviour.

Although Phloi never mentioned any intimate feeling towards her husband, she had a very positive feeling for him as exemplified in the scene where Khun Prem asked her how much she loved him:

"What about me, Mae Phloi? I've never asked you this before-how much do you love me?" Phloi fell into silence. A simple answer of "very much" might have satisfied Khun Prem, but not herself. Finally she said, "You are so good to me. I have never in my whole life received so much kindness and consideration as I do from you. We live together and it's natural that we love each other. But over and above this I feel infinitely grateful to you. I'm in your debt. I owe you everything."

(Chancham Bunnag, 1981: 205)

Although Phloi did not fall in love with Khun Prem before marrying him, she had always been an honest and faithful wife afterwards. As mentioned earlier, Phloi fell in love with Nuang, Choi's older brother.

However, this brother of Choi had to get married with a daughter of a food vendor because he got her pregnant. Phoi was very sad about this. When she met Khun Prem, she was still mourning and not interested in him. Khun Prem had to ask for help from Phloi's older brother and approached Phloi's chaperone (Chao Khun Father and Khun Sai) instead. When she decided to get married with Khun Prem, it was not because of love. Her feeling was it was suitable for her to do whatever her father and Sadet told her to do or whatever they thought was good for her. Both the Chaokhun Father and Sadet didn't say directly that Phloi should marry Khun Prem. The following quote illustrates Sadet's suggestion on marriage for Phloi:

“...He's a very nice person of the right age, neither too young nor too old. His name is Prem, belongs to the Phraya Choduk family, immensely rich. Now are you satisfied? Do you know him at all?”

“I know who he is but have never spoken to him, Your Highness” Phloi's hands had turned icy cold, though she was not really surprised by the revelation. But did it make her feel glad, or what? This she could not answer herself. Her feelings on the subject of Khun Prem's behavior had always been difficult to define.

“And so?” Sadet was urging her to go on.

For the sake of something to say, Phloi said, “I don't love him, Your Highness”

“Of course you don't love him,” came Sadet's immediate retort. “How can you love him when you hardly know him? That's not important-as you go on living together you can grow to love each other. The important thing is that your elders, who love you and wish to see you settled and secure, have considered the match and approved it as most suitable. Do you, Phloi, consider

it your duty to do according to what they deem best for you? To marry for love is all very well. But what happens when after living together you find you don't love each other anymore. Love was the mainstay of your marriage, which falls apart when love is no more. But a marriage carefully arranged with parental love and goodwill. It's the kind of support you can depend on and will remain with you always

(Ibid.: 171)

Phloi lived her life in the way her chaperones (Mother, Chaokhun Father and Sadet) wanted it. This may sound sad for many people but the author of the story made Phloi feel good to be able to play her role as a good daughter when she was young and a good wife when she married. These feelings were, of course, given by the author of the story who was a Thai man. In addition, he delivered his message about the wrong of disobedience via the other female characters.

The example was KhunChoei, Phloi's half sister. Khun Choei did not get married at the elder's suggestions like Phloi did but she instead followed the man she loved to his house and lived with him. This controversial behavior was punished by the author of the patriarchal society, as she ended up living a hard life. The following quote is the illustration of Khun Choei's life with the man she loves:

"....But I'll tell you about that first day, Phloi, the night and day of my elopement. What a day! He took me straight to his house in back of Tanao Road. I nearly wept when I saw it. It looked so small and shabby and not at all inviting, to put it mildly. I stood in a narrow lane, a long narrow twisting muddy lane with uneven wobbly planks to walk on, and in this lane the houses were built

close together with very little space between them-so close that a chicken cannot land on the ground, as they say. So close you could hear what your neighbors were saying and when they hurled curses at one another it came over loud and clear. And there were pools of stagnant water everywhere. I almost broke down at the foot of the stairs but I didn't because I loved him and felt sorry for him and didn't want him to feel bad"

(Ibid.: 264-265)

Khun Choei was made (again, by the Thai male author) to have a hard life because she did not control her feelings for love and did according to her whims, not 'the normative standards of society' (Lee and Newby, 1984, quoted in Whitehead, 2010: 18). Therefore, she was punished by the author to live a difficult life. For Phloi, who always did what she was told; she ended up marrying a wealthy man and had a good life. Therefore, to behave according to the prescribed role benefitted her as confirmed by the following quote;

Role theorists argue that people are compelled to perform culturally prescribed roles for the benefit of both society and themselves (Komarovsky, 1950.). In so doing, individuals are seen to be engaged in a theatrical-like performance, one that requires them to learn lines, assimilate behaviors and display appropriate social behaviors in a multitude of settings (Whitehead, 2010: 19).

In Thai society, both being an obedient daughter and being an obedient wife are ideals for woman. Phloi became an obedient wife after getting married. She would always agree with her husband and did things to keep him happy. Even when she knew about his son of whom he didn't

inform her before marriage, she still did not get angry with him. Moreover, she blamed him for not letting her know earlier that she could take care of the boy long before. The following is illustration:

“Whose son is he, Khun Prem?”

Khun Prem’s answer came in a low quavering voice. He’s my son, Mae Phloi.”....“Oh Mae Phloi, I-I was so afraid you might be angry...Are you? For although there was nothing remotely resembling anger in Phloi’s demeanour, he just could not be sure. Angry? Why should I be? Because you have a son? He’s your son, and that makes him my son too. Did you think I was going to hate him or what? She turned On round, planted a kiss on his cheek, and whispered to him, “Dear little one, nobody in the world can ever hate you”

(Ibid.: 210)

The author of the story had delivered his didactic message that people should behave according to their roles prescribed by patriarchal society by many clever devices. One of the devices, in the case of Phloi, was to make other characters praised her every time she said good things or did good deeds. For instance, when Phloi was not angry with Khun Prem for having an illegitimate child and even adopted the child to be her child, Khun Prem was delighted and said “You’re an angel, Mae Phloi.”(Ibid.: 211).

In addition, the author used a literary foil by presenting the characters who did not behave as they were told by the elders and had unsuccessful lives. For example, Choi did not pay attention to Sadet and Khun Aunt Sai about housekeeping duties; she ended up having nobody to want to marry her and feared of living a lonely life at her old age. (p.260-261).

The successful life of Phloi and the unsuccessful lives of other characters who did not lived according to their gender roles confirms the didactic message from the author.

Conclusion

Si Phaendin was composed by a conformist author, Kukrit Pramroj, who had to produce somewhat didactic ideas in his work according to the form of writings accepted by the vast majority of society. His female character, Phloi, was made to fit into the stereotypes of a 'good' woman in Thai patriarchal society. He composed his characters, especially Phloi, to have a successful life because she lived according to her female gender role. He also made it clear to the readers that any anti-partriarchal ideas were wrong by making those characters who did not behave according to their prescribed gender roles to have unsuccessful lives. However, although Phloi's life was presented as fulfilled and happy after she had done everything according to her prescribed female gender role, this happiness was given by the male author who was presumably influenced by Thai patriarchal mentality. Therefore, there is no guarantee that a woman would really be happy performing according to their gender roles as prescribed by society.

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