

# Strength, Dominance and Sexualities: The Presentation of Masculinities in Thai Erotic Literature <sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The topic of sexuality is taboo in many societies including Thailand. Sex issue is viewed as something dirty and embarrassing that one should not reveal. Writing such genre with taboo subject as erotic literature could only be accepted by using metaphoric style. Thus, erotic scenes or *Bot atsajan* was one of the important elements in traditional Thai literature. All of the great Thai classical literature had erotic scenes, all written by male authors and widely accepted as canonical literary works. This study examined the Thai erotic literature written by male writers from Ayuddhaya period, Lilit Pralor, though there was no clear evidence about the author and the period of writing for this classical literature, the widely-accepted assumption was that a male writer wrote it in the mid 15th century, to modern literature written in Rattanakosin period, chronologically. As these texts were composed by male authors, the presentation of masculinities through word choice combination was remarkable. This article emphasized on the contribution of word choices to masculinity construction and the empowerment of male dominance, presented by male authors through erotic scenes.

**Keywords:** Masculinity, Sexuality, Erotic Literature, Thai Literature

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## บทคัดย่อ

ในสังคมไทยเรื่องเพศเป็นเรื่องต้องห้ามเช่นเดียวกับหลายๆ สังคมในโลกนี้ เรื่องที่เกี่ยวกับเพศจึงเป็นเรื่องที่ถูกมองว่าสกปรก น่าอายและไม่น่ากล่าวถึงหรือเปิดเผยในที่สาธารณะ การเขียนถึงเรื่องเกี่ยวกับเพศจึงต้องทำในรูปแบบที่ไม่ตรงไปตรงมา เช่น การใช้อุปลักษณ์ในบทกวีของวรรณคดีไทยจึงจะเป็นที่ยอมรับ ดังนั้นบทกวีจึงเป็นสิ่งที่อยู่ในชนบในการประพันธ์ของวรรณคดีไทย วรรณคดีเอกของไทยต่างก็มีบทกวีและได้รับการยอมรับจากผู้อ่าน บทความนี้ศึกษาบทกวีในวรรณกรรมไทยจากวรรณคดีเรื่องแรกที่มีบทกวีในสมัยอยุธยาคือลิลิตพระลอ พระอภัยมณีในสมัยรัตนโกสินทร์ตอนต้น และจินดารานในสมัยปัจจุบัน เพื่อแสดงให้เห็นถึงการส่งต่อการแสดงพลังอำนาจของเพศชาย ทั้งในด้านความแข็งแกร่งของร่างกายและความมีอำนาจเหนือกว่าในการครอบงำเพศหญิง ผ่านการเลือกใช้คำในชนบการประพันธ์บทกวีของนักเขียนชายในวรรณคดีแบบฉบับของสมัยอยุธยาและรัตนโกสินทร์ตอนต้น ตลอดจนการกล่าวถึงประเด็นทางเพศผ่านการเลือกใช้คำ และกลการประพันธ์นวนิยายร่วมสมัยของอุษณา เพลิงธรรม ในเรื่องจิน ดารา

## Introduction

Thailand is one of male dominated countries where women are controlled by the patriarchal Thai society. The submissive roles of Thai women are mentioned by many academics. For instance, in her introduction of *The Lioness in Bloom*, Susan Kepner suggests that the perception of Thai women has changed from a proud and courageous one who could mount a war elephant in the early Sukhothai period to be compared to the elephant's hind legs four centuries later. The rigid class system in the Ayutthaya period extended to gender. Women, as inferiors, had to serve parents, husbands and children who were superiors. (Kepner 1996:2). The same argument is mentioned by Harrison that:

Such a response must be considered within the context of Thai cultural prescriptions for the “good” behaviour for women. Contemporary Thai society has retained many elements of the traditional views pertaining to the role of women expressed in religious, legal and literary texts alike (Harrison 2000:89).

Harrison’s quotation illustrates that the controlled roles of Thai women can be seen from every elements of the society including religion, legal and literary texts. This article, therefore, examines the dominant roles of Thai men as expressed in Thai literary texts from the Ayuddhaya period to contemporary ones. The discussion in the article illustrates how male writers try to establish the ultimate truth about male power through the love making scenes in literature and reproduce it over and over for more than four centuries. The reproduction of men’s strength and dominant role in sexual intercourse could be discussed via the sexuality approach.

According to Peter Jackson (1996), the term sexuality sometimes used to refer to sexual orientation or identity. However, sexuality also covers aspects of personal and social life which have erotic significance, not only individual erotic desires, practices and identities but also the discourse and social arrangements which construct erotic possibilities at any one time (Jackson and Scott, 1996:2). *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* defines sexuality as the social process, which creates, organises, expresses and directs desire. Feminism believes that forms of sexuality are not innate but reflect political and cultural institutions that affect the condition of individual life and consciousness. Some feminists claim that female sexuality is only really represented in lesbian relationships, while others argue that this romanticisation of a ‘pure’ form divorces sexuality from issues of power (Humm, 1999:262).

As Thai society is a patriarchal society, like many other issues, the issue of sex in Thai society is also controlled by men and cannot be divorced from the issue of power. Male sexuality is always presented to exhibit maleness or masculinities in Thai literature. This representation of masculinities can be illustrated more precise in the erotic scenes of Thai classical literature.

### Thai Erotic Literature

*The Oxford English Reference Dictionary* defines the term ‘erotic’ as ‘of or causing sexual love’. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* adds ‘esp. tending to arouse sexual desire or excitement’. *Webster’s Dictionary* adds ‘literary or artistic items having an erotic theme, esp. books treating of sexual love in a sensuous or voluptuous manner. Thus, the ‘erotic literature’ to be studied in this article include ‘literary items having an erotic theme or concerning sexual desire, whether or not it was written with the intention of arousing desire in the reader’.

In Thai society, talking or writing about sex is considered to be improper among Thai people, especially women as it is confirmed by Rachel Harrison that ‘to be considered as morally good, Thai women are not supposed to have personal sexual desires, less so act upon them or act them out. Talking or writing about sex is considered culturally and morally improper’ (Harrison, 1999).

This view about sex is an established attitude of Thai majority towards sex. Thus, writings about sex issue by Thai women writers are rare. The phenomenon of male writers is different as Thai men have more freedom to write or talk about sex issues. However, as sex issue is considered to be dirty and embarrassing, Thai author cannot present an explicit or purely erotic literature. They have to put sex issue in a form of erotic scene as a part of an ordinary literature only. This traditional composition had been relayed from Ayudhaya period to Rattanakosin period.

## Strength, Dominance and Sexualities in Thai Erotic Literature of Ayuddhaya Period

There is a vast number of Thai literature with sex issues presented in a form of erotic scene. This tradition of writing starts in Ayuddhaya period. According to Naai Tamraa Na Meuangtai, a famous Thai intellectual, the original model of erotic writing is in the famous work of classical Thai literature called *Lilit Pralor* (A poem about Prince Lor). Nothing like this appears in any other older Thai literature (Tamraa, 1999:383).<sup>3</sup>

The story is about two princesses who have heard about the beauty of the young but married prince and fall in love with him without seeing him. They then try to make him aware of them and get him to come to meet them by means of magic. After the prince hears about the beauty of the two princesses, he falls madly in love with them without seeing either. He then asks for permission from his mother and his wife to go to see them. Neither the wife nor the mother wants him to go because these princesses are the daughters of an enemy king. However, nobody can prevent the young prince and he travels a long way to meet the two princesses. When they meet, there is a very detailed description of their love-making, which constitutes the erotic part of the story. At the end, the prince and princesses are all killed together on the orders of the princesses' grandmother and the two warring kingdoms finally become friends. The following quote is an example of love-making scene, which is the erotic part of the story.

ส่วนสามกษัตริย์แก่นท้าว      กรโอบองค์โน้มน้าว  
แนบเนื้อเรียงรมย์

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<sup>3</sup> A more detailed description of the history of Thai erotic literature could be viewed from Orathai Panya (2005). *Gender and Sexuality in Thai Erotic Literature by Women Writers*. Ph.D. Thesis. University of London.

เซยชมพูปากบ้วน	แสนอมฤตรสข้อน
สวาทเคล้าคลึงสมร	
กรเกี้ยวกรกอดเกื้อ	เนื้อแนบเนื้อโอเนื้อ
อ่อนเนื้อเอาใจ	
พักตราใสใหม่ห่ม้า	หน้าแนบหน้าโอหน้า
หนุ่มหน้าสรสม	
นมแนบนมนิมน้อง	ท้องแนบท้องโอท้อง
อ่อนท้องทรงสมร	
สมเสนห์อรใหม่ห่ม้า	กลั้วรสกลั้วกลืนกลั้ว
เกลสกลั้วสงสาร	
บุษบาบานคลี่คล้อย	สร้อยแลสร้อยซ้อนสร้อย
เสียดสร้อยสระศรี	
ภูมรีคลึงคู่เกล้า	กลางกมลยรเย้า
ยั่วร้องขานกัน	
สรวงสระสรวงค์ไปเพียง	สระพระนุชเนื้อเกลี้ยง
อาบโอ้เอาใจ	
แสนสนุกในสระน้อง	ปลาชื่นชมเต้นต๋อง
ดอกไม้บัวบาน	
ตระการฝั่งสระแก้ว	หมดแผ้วผ่องแผ้ว
โคกฟ้าฤาปูน	
บุญมีมาจึงได้	ชมเต้าทองน้องไท้
พี่เอยวานชม	หนึ่งรา

The prince and the two princesses embrace each other and lean down. They feed each other with their lips. It tastes like juice from heaven. Their arms are around each other, flesh is next to flesh. The young and bright faces are next to each other. Breasts next to breasts, stomach next to stomach. The lovers are enjoying the new taste of lust, losing themselves in their cravings. The flower is opening its petal. The carpenter bee is nuzzling in the middle. They make noises together. (The prince said) “Bathing in the pond in heaven is not as good as in

your pond. Your flesh pond is so smooth. It is very enjoyable in your pond. The fish is happy and jumps to touch the lotus. The bank of the precious pond is amazing. It is nice and clean. Even the hill of heaven cannot compare with it. I am so lucky to have an opportunity to see your golden breasts” (Lilit Pralor, 1971:137).<sup>4</sup>

The displayed love making scene illustrates an explicit description of sexual intercourse between the two princesses and the prince, where the first person to have an intercourse with the prince is the older sister, Peun. Although the scene is described with beautiful language like:

เซยชมพูปากบ้วน                      แสนอมฤตรสข้อน

สวาทเคล้าลิ้นสมร

(They feed each other with their lips. It tastes like juice from heaven)

นมแนบนมนุ่มน่อง

ท้องแนบท้องโ้ท้อง

อ่อนท้องทรวงสมร

(Breasts next to breasts, stomach next to stomach.).

The women in this beautiful love making scene are passive. The younger sister, Paeng is waiting there while the other princess, Peun is having sexual intercourse with the prince. Princess Peun is presented to be passive in this lovemaking scene. The person who brings the lips to the other is the prince as the word เซยชมพู (fondle) is the verb in Thai and exhibits the action of men acting with power over women, or somebody who is more superior fondling over the inferior body. In addition, the person who brings the breasts and the stomach to the others is also the prince. Apart from being the active character in the love making scene, the prince takes the princess's body as sex object as he describes how beautiful and wonderful her pussy is by using a metaphor and lamenting that:

<sup>24</sup> Cited from Orathai Panya (2005). Gender and Sexuality in Thai Erotic Literature by Women Writers. Ph.D. Thesis. University of London.

“Bathing in the pond in heaven is not as good as in your pond. Your flesh pond is so smooth. It is very enjoyable in your pond. The fish is happy and jumps to touch the lotus. The bank of the precious pond is amazing. It is nice and clean. Even the hill of heaven cannot compare with it. I am so lucky to have an opportunity to see your golden breasts”.

The prince’s view over the princess as sex objects is also presented when the two princesses appear at his first sight:

งามยงงามยิ่งแม่	แมนมา แต่งฤา
โฉมระทวยทอดตา	แหล่งหล้า
สมนักราบนี้	สรบา นีนา
สดกว่าสดไฉ้อ้า	ข้าไฉ้อาใจ

You are as beautiful as being made by god.

The most beautiful in the world. Only me that suites you.

You are more fresh than fresh. (Lilit Pralor, 1983:133).

The term ‘fresh’ being used here contains pejorative meaning as this term is usually being used to describe ‘object’, for instance vegetable or fruit. In contemporary Thai society the term สด (fresh) only is being used with human being when an old man is craving for a young girl. That old man is obviously being judged from his use of this term as a dirty old man. The girl being referred to is being insulted, precisely.

The male character is not only being presented with a dominant role in love making scene, but also being presented as a strong man:

พระเพื่อนสมสมรแล้ว	ลอราชเขยชมแก้ว
แก่นไท่แพงทอง	
ละบองบรรพ์หลากเส้น	บ่เหนี่ยวบ่ได้เว้น
เหิมขู่สมสมร	



ดุจอัสดรเห็นหัว	แรงเร่งเริงฤทธิ์กล้า
เร่งเร้าฤาเยาว	
ดุจสารเมามันบ้า	งาไล่แทงวงคว่ำ
อยู่เค็ล้าคลุกเอา	

After Princess Peun is satisfied, Prince Lor is fondling Prince Paeng. He is not tired. He is like five lusty horses, very strong, very powerful. He is like a heating elephant, madly piercing with his tusk and holding back with his trunks. (Lilit Pralor, 1983:138).

This extract illustrates the strength of Prince Lor by comparing him with a horse, a strong animal. His strength is exaggerated by comparing with not only a horse but five horses. Moreover, these five horses are not normal horses but they are lusty horses or horses on heat. The horses are used to describe his speed in love making while the elephant is used to describe his strength in penetrating. Again, it is not strength of a normal elephant but an elephant on heat that he uses his tusk to penetrate and his trunks to grasp. While the prince is described to flourish his strength and dominate the love making scene, the two princesses are not mentioned at all.

### Strength, Dominance and Sexualities in Thai Erotic Literature of Early Rattanakosin Period

Early Rattanakosin can be considered as the golden period of Thai classical literature. Poetry and tales are composed by noble men and kings. There are many classical literatures written in early Rattanakosin period, especially in the reign of King Rama II. One of the most famous classical literatures of the time is *Pra Apaimanee*.

*Pra Apaimanee* is a story about the adventure of the two princes, Apaimanee and Seesuan. The two brothers have to leave their parents for

education. Being the princes, they are expected to learn about warrior skills. Unexpectedly, Apaimanee chooses to study flute whereas his brother chooses to learn club fighting from a priest residing in the forest. When they return home after they graduate, their father is angry and exiles them. Their adventurous life begins at this point. Pra Apaimanee is kidnapped by a water giant and becomes the giant's husband. They have one son together. Pra Apaimanee tries to escape with the help of a mermaid family. He then has a mermaid wife. He meets many other female creatures from different races and species and has many wives and children. In the end, his father is thaw and wants both of the two princes to come back and live happily together.

As Pra Apaimanee and Seesuwat travel a lot and have many wives, there are a lot of love making scenes among them and their women. There are also love-making scenes of Pra Apaimanee's children and their women as well. Sexual intercourse in Rattanasin literature is composed by metaphoric style still. The choices of words still contain power and strength to confirm masculinities of male characters as the following illustration:

ดังกำล้งมังกรลำแดงฤทธิ์	ให้มีตมิดกลางทะเลแลเวหา
ลงเล่นน้ำดำดิ่งถึงสุธา	สะท้านกระทั่งหลังปลาอนันต์นอน
ปลากะตักพลิกครีบทวิปไหว	เมรุไกรโยกยอดจะถอดถอน
มัดติมิงกลิ้งเล่นชโลธร	คงคาคลอนคลื่นคลั่งผั่งสินธุ
สลับแล่นลมหวนให้ปวนคลื่น	จะฝ่าผืนไปไม่รอดก็จอดสู้
มังกรมุดพ่นฟองขึ้นฟองฟู	ต่างร่วมรู้รักประจักษ์ใจ

Like a dragon showing off his power. To make the sea and the sky dark. To swim and dive to the earth. To reach the place where Anon fish sleeps.<sup>5</sup>  
When the fish moves its fin, the continent sways, the biggest mountain

<sup>5</sup> Anon Fish is the fish in Tripitaka. The fish is so big and its length is 5,000 miles.

quakes as if it is being withdrawn. Mattiming fish<sup>6</sup> is rolling in water. It creates a mad wave to hit the shore. A sloop is sailing against the storm. It cannot transgress anymore. It has to stop. The dragon breaks above the sea and sprays bubbling foam all over. The couple then experiences the taste of love. (Pra Apaimanee, 1974 : 133)

The author's choices of words like, dragon, the big fish, the biggest mountain, a mad wave, a sloop and the sea exhibits power. These words are used to represent male organ and male sexuality. The hero of the story's masculinity is represented through those words and such a phrase as 'Like a dragon showing off his power'. Like the presentation of sexuality in Ayudhaya period that male organ (penis) is compared with big and powerful things by using metaphoric device together with hyperbole to exaggerate the size and strength of the penis. The way Thai male authors are obsessed about the big sized penis could be interpreted as male sexual fantasy. According to Professor Theppanom Muangman, the average size of Thai men's penis is 5.2"<sup>7</sup> which is not big at all comparing with the 'dragon', Mattiming fish and Anon fish as being used as the metaphors of the penis in this extract.

According to Rosemary Jackson (1981), the subversive potential of fantasy is a literary genre whereas psychoanalytic feminists have shown an interest in relating women's fantasy to a form of oppression (Andermahr, Lovell, Wolkowitz, 2000:91). The fantasy of the Thai male authors to have an oversize penis could then be interpreted as a literary genre as well as the male writers' oppression for the size of penis.

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<sup>6</sup> Mattiming fish is another big fish from Tripitaka. This fish is bigger than Anon fish and its length is 10,000 miles.

<sup>7</sup> *Nation Sutsapda* (The Nation Weekly). (2000). Vol.404. April 28<sup>th</sup>-March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2000.

## Strength, Dominance and Sexualities in Thai Erotic Literature of Contemporary Rattanasin Period

The concern about sizes of penis and its strength are being repeated again and again in Thai erotic literature until the modern time where literature is not composed in a poetry tale form, but a western style novel.

A significant novel to be mentioned in this period is *Jan Daa-raa*, written by a male writer Utsanaa Ploengtham in 1964. It is about a boy called Jan who is brought up by his stepfather in a big private compound. His mother died on the day he was born. His step father then hates him and takes him as a child of bad luck. His stepfather is polygamous. He sleeps with all the women in the compound. He used to have sex with Jan's aunt in front of Jan in the mid of the night when Jan was still a young boy.

He always adopts young girls and keeps them in his compound for sex. Jan does the same thing with women in the house when he grows up.

The followings are extracts to illustrate the patriarchal attitudes of the narrator;

พอผมโตขึ้นได้ขนาดและรู้จักหัดกรีทอย่างเดียวกับที่เขาแสนโปรดได้

When I grew up in good size and able to learn his (the stepfather's) athletic.

(Utsana Ploengtham, 1977:6)

The term 'athletic' the narrator of the story who is a man used in the above quotation illustrates his attitude towards sexual intercourse that it is only a kind of game. It has no value to him. This is an attitude of men in patriarchal society to see women as a sex object where men can have a sexual intercourse game on. His attitude towards women as a sex object could be confirmed by the following extracts:

เธอมีถันใหญ่ละลานที่สุดเท่าที่ผมเคยเห็นเคยชอบมาตามถนนหนทาง

She has the biggest tits I've ever seen or liked on any street

(Utsana Plerngtham, 1977:65)

and

ลงนายนอนซ้าๆ กะผู้หญิงคนไหนมาตั้งสิบห้าปีแล้วยังงั้น

นายยังจะเอาผู้หญิงคนนั้นทำเมียได้ลงอีกกะหรือ

After you have been sleeping with a woman for fifteen years, you think you still want to marry her?

(Utsana Plerngtham, 1977:64)

The above extracts illustrate that this novel shows men's attitude about women as a sex object and men's power over women in terms of sex. Jan is the outcome of his mother being gang-raped and impregnated. The men who rape her use their physical power over her. Jan's stepfather uses his power as the boss to sleep with all the female servants in his compound. Jan uses his male power to rape his wife because he wants to have a child while his wife is a lesbian and hates him. It could be argued that the established male power as the ultimate truth in Ayuddhaya period has been reproduced over and over and in every different period, there is a new issue being added to the reproduction. The new issue being found in Jan daaraa, apart from men's concern about the strength of horses and the size of elephants; is sexual violence.

## Conclusion

The topic of sex is taboo Thai society. Talking or writing about sex is considered to be improper. Therefore, there are more literary works with erotic scenes written by male authors than female authors. The outcome of male made literature exhibits the issue of strength and dominance through the love-making scene in Thai literature in Ayuddhaya period and has been inherited to

contemporary Thai literature. Male sexuality has always been compared with great things in terms of sizes, power and strength. These greatness is presented via the choices of words in classical Thai literature in Ayuddhaya period and early Rattanakosin period while the devices of composition is more complicated in contemporary Thai literature. Male sexuality and masculinities in the literature of this period is illustrated via not only the word choices but also the plot of the story. Although the first Thai erotic literature was composed since the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century which is about 500 years before the story of Jan Daaraa, the presentation of male sexuality as a part of masculinities has never changed. The presentation of masculinities via erotic literature has always been a presentation of male power in patriarchal society where women have always been presented as sex objects or passive characters.

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