



# Gender and Sexuality in ASEAN Literature: Thai, Lao and Vietnamese Contexts

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative research aimed to study the sexuality of male and female characters presenting in the ASEAN Literature by Thai, Lao and Vietnamese authors. Data were collected from the short stories composed by the authors of the three nations. The focus was on the SEA Write Awarded Literature with the themes of gender and sexualities. The selected literature was analyzed by gender and sexuality theoretical frameworks. The study found that all of the selected stories reflected the different sexual attitudes of men and women in contemporary societies. The analysis revealed that despite the different political ideologies and social contexts, Thai, Lao and Vietnamese societies share the similarities value of monogamy on the aspect of female sexuality. Although the modern societies were found to be more open about sexual issues, polygamy and sexual promiscuous were still not being presented as acceptable value in Thai, Lao and Vietnamese societies. Female Sexualities were presented with conventional ideologies. On the aspect of male sexuality, 'good men' were expected to have control over their sexual desire whilst 'bad men' spoiled themselves and treated sexual activity as a power game..

**Keywords:** Sexuality, Thai, Lao, Vietnamese, Literature, ASEAN, SEA write award.

## 1. Introduction

Reading Southeast Asian Literature was one of various channels to understand the region (Milton Osborne (1979) cited in Em-on Chittasopon, 2002:12). Although the countries in this region were unique on the aspect of culture, they do share some similarities. The uniqueness, differences and similarities could be examined via the literature of each country. One of the activities on the aspect of literature these countries held together was the S.E.A. Write Award, or Southeast Asian Writers Award competition. This award is presented annually since 1979 to poets and writers of Southeast Asia. The awards are given to the writers from each of the countries that comprise the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, though not all countries in ASEAN are represented every year. The award is sometimes given for a specific work by an author, or it could be awarded for lifetime achievement. The types of works that are honored vary, and have included poetry, short stories, novels, plays, folklore and scholarly and religious works (Wikipedia,14/05/2014). In Thailand, the S.E.A. Write Awarded literature are praised and highly accepted by academic institutions and literati. Such literature are seen as the best reflection of real Thai society as well as the illumination of the authors' talents like the quote of M.H.Abrams (1971) that "until the Romantics, literature was usually understood as a mirror, reflecting the real world, in some kind of mimesis; but for the Romantics, writing was more like a lamp: the light of the writer's inner soul spilled out to illuminate the world" (M.H.Abrams ,1971:3). Thus, the S.E.A. Write Awarded literature, to Thai academics, is like Abrams's, both before and after the Romantic period, that talent of the writers influence readers and societies as well as reflecting them. The phenomena are identical in Vietnam and Laos as it is confirmed by Thanya Sangkhapanthanon, a famous Thai academic and writer, that "although it is almost outdate to say that literature and society are the reflection of each other, it is still true in the case of Thai and Lao literature" (Thanya Sangkhapanthanon,2013:213). In addition, Montira Rato, a Thai academic on Vietnamese Studies generalized that literature was used as a tool to propagated Socialist Realism in

Vietnam as Andrey Zhdanov (1934) claimed that ‘writers were the engineers of human souls’ (Montira Rato, 2010:19).

From the mentioned significant of literature, this article, therefore aimed to understand gender and sexuality in the three nations of Southeast Asia via their literature. The selected literature were *Staying Overnight in the Jungle*, the S.E.A. Write Awarded Lao literature written in 1999 by Chanthi Deuanesavanh, *The End of a Season of Beauty*, the SEA Write Awarded Vietnamese literature written by Nguyen Ngoc Tu in 2008 and *Unscratched Pot*, the SEA Write Awarded Thai literature written in 1990 by Anchan.

## **2. The Synopsis**

### **2.1. The selected Thai Literature**

*Unscratched Pot*, the SEA Write Awarded Thai literature written in 1990 by Anchan.

The story was about a woman who suffered a married life. She was the narrator of the story. She came from a middle class family but her husband came from a poor family. Her husband worked in a bank and was the only person who earned the living for the family. The narrator stayed home and did all the housework. Her husband always bullied her. One day he hurt her badly when he found out that she burnt the pot accidentally. She was hurt and upset. After the fight, he had sex with her and she hated herself for enjoying sex with him.

### **2.2. The selected Lao Literature**

*Staying Overnight in the Jungle*: Lao literature written in 1999 by Chanthi Deuanesavanh.

The story was about a woman named Maaijai who was assigned to walk from Vientiane head office to Parwaai area to organize the ‘Lao Women Love the Nation’ Club. The walking distance was one day and the chaperone for this journey was a male soldier called Yiajer. There was heavy rain during the journey which made the two travelers unable to carry on with their journey and had to stay overnight in the jungle. Yiajer took care of Maaijai and there was no sexual encounter between them. The writer revealed at the end that the two characters admired each other but had to hide their feeling because they had to concern about the nation and their duties first. After that night Maaijai and Yiajer had to part to complete their assignments. The story ended with the death of the male character, Yiajer, in the battle field. His death was praised because it was considered as a great sacrifice for the nation. The female character had to hide her sorrow and love for him.

### **2.3. The selected Vietnamese Literature**

*The End of a Season of Beauty* was a SEA Write Awarded Vietnamese literature written by Nguyen Ngoc Tu in 2008.

The story was about the elderly society in Vietnam. The focus was on the group of Buo Chieu House where old people got together to perform Vietnamese classical theatre. The narrator of the story was Chin, an old man who had true love for Hong, the heroine. The story was told through Chin’s main stream of conscious that he came from a rich family but decided to abandon everything to follow the wandering Vietnamese opera troupe everywhere after he fell in love with the most beautiful actress, Hong. He gave her support for everything. Unfortunately, Hong did not love him because she was engaged with the actor, Thuong Khanh, who was a Viet Cong and arrested by the military police. Chin was also arrested but freed after ten days as the police could not find any evidence against him. However, after his freedom, he found that the troupe did not wait for him. Hong could not wait for him because she was afraid that the police might use her and her child’s safety as leverage against her lover. Chin spent half his life time looking for Hong and found her wandering on the street selling sweets. She was in her seventies and all her beauty was faded. Thuong Khanh heard about Hong and visited her at the Buo Chieu House. He was well dressed and came in a nice car. He seemed disappointed to find that Hong was not beautiful anymore. He left and never returned. Hong was upset and became sick. Chin looked after her until the last day of her life.

## **3. Male Sexuality**

### **3.1. Sex as Power**

In the *Unscratched Pot*, the SEA Write Awarded Thai literature written in 1990, the main male character was introduced as a husband of the narrator. He was presented as a bad man who was selfish

and tight. He liked to violent his wife, verbally and physically. He was a kind of man who enjoyed his power. The following extract was the example of violent scene.

She felt that she was dragged to the window. Then there was a loud noise when her body was thrown to hit the edge of the window. She could hear the sound of the mosquito blind being opened and then her head was pushed; her upper body was outside the window. Her eyes were widely open with frighten. (Anchan, 2009: 20)

The above quotation illustrated the use of violent against woman in the story. However, the woman did not plan to escape or take any action against the man. Moreover, after he bullied her and went into the bathroom, the wife looked at his naked back and felt a sexual desire for him. The husband noticed that and had a smile at the corner of his mouth and said, insultingly, to her “Hungry, right?”(p.22). Then he started sexual intercourse with her. The way he asked implied that he felt more powerful. He was more superior that if his wife had a desire for him, she had to beg for it.

### **3.2. Sex and Oppression**

In contrast to male sexuality in Thai literature, the male character in Lao literature was gentle to a woman and had to hide his desire. This could be because of the nature of Lao literature written after 1975 or ‘revolution literature’ as it was influenced by political ideology that good citizens had to act according to their prescribed gender roles to serve the nation and to conserve Lao tradition. Janthee Duangsawan, a S.E.A. Write Awarded writer composed his short stories according to the tradition of writing in Socialist society. The male character in this short story, Staying Overnight in the Jungle, was composed to agree that the roles of men and women were naturally different but complimentary. Yiajer, the main male character in the story performed every aspect of their lives including sexualities according to Socialist value. He had to stay overnight in the jungle with a woman he fancied but could not express his desire to her at all. He was presented as a calm person and showed no sign of uncomfortable to be alone in the jungle with the woman. He built a shelter for the woman, Maaijai, when it rained while he himself stood in the rain and prepared the food for her while he ate nothing. When Maaijai was frightened by the sound of the animals, he said “Go to sleep and fear of nothing. As long as I am alive, you will be safe (Janthee Duangsawan (1999) in Weerapong Meesathan (ed.), 2005:8).”

The same thing happened to Chin, the main male character in Vietnamese literature. He had loved Hong since she was beautiful until her beauty was faded and never show his desire to her. He, actually, was an ideal man who had a long lasting love or a so called ‘true love’ for one woman. Although it was her beauty that attracted him, he still loved her when she was old and her beauty faded away. He kept a secret about Hong’s lover and devoted himself for Hong and her son. Throughout the story, Chin did not show his sexual desire for her. It seemed as if he had love without desire. A man like Chin did not seem to exist in reality. However, he was an ideal man that many women wish to meet.

## **4. Female Sexuality**

### **4.1. Sex and Convention**

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

The above quotation was the best description for the representation of Hong, the main female character in the selected story The End of a Season of Beauty. Hong was a monogamous. She had sexual intercourse with her lover, Thuong Khanh and became pregnant. She refused to reveal the name of her child’s father in order to protect her lover. When they were apart, she never had a new relationship. She kept herself for only one man in her life. For a beautiful lady like her, it was easy to find some other men but she chose not to do so. She was an ideal woman in patriarchal society as her sexuality was controlled by the ‘good woman’ ideology. It could be said that her life was destroyed by this ideology. If Hong did not keep her vow and strong belief of ‘one body for one man’, she might live a better life.

Another ‘good woman’ qualification Hong possessed was being a sacrifice woman. Hong devoted all her life for her lover and son. When she was pregnant she refused to reveal the name of her child’s father because she wanted to keep her lover’s reputation. She dared to be a pregnant lady without the father of her child. To view Hong from a Thai perspective, women were supposed to meet the following stereotypes to be accepted as ‘good’ women within Thai patriarchal society:

- be an honest wife, agreeable, sweet and prepared to do anything to please the husband.
- be a sacrificial mother who would do anything for her children.
- be a hardworking housewife who always keeps the house tidy.
- be religious and follow social norms without question.

(Kaanjanaa Kaewthep, 1992:64)

The 'good woman' stereotype was very much the same in Vietnamese phenomena as it was considered a patriarchal society like Thai society as indicated in Yannawut Sang-ngern (2008) as follow:

"The attitude about the importance of male leads to the insult of female. Thus, the relationship between a husband and a wife in traditional Vietnamese family were not equal. Women's Rights were limited. A wife must be obedient...The most important duty of a wife is to give birth to a son. If a wife cannot bare a son, she must allow her husband to have another wife".

(Yannawut Sang-ngern, 2008:1)

As *The End of a Season of Beauty* was a short story, the description of the characters was limited. In addition, Hong did not have an opportunity to live as a wife with her lover. Thus, her image was not being presented as a wife but as a lover who was honest and faithful to her lover as well as a sacrificial mother who had great love to her child. From these two aspects, Hong completed the roles of a good woman in conventional belief.

However, in Asian societies, women's sexual practice could only be respected within a marriage. This could be confirmed by the quote from Harrison (2004) as follow:

Female sexuality only has a place within the safe confines of a permanent and honourable relationship, i.e. marriage.

(Harrison, 2004)

Therefore, Hong was absolutely became a loose woman in other people's views for becoming pregnant without a husband. However, she was always a nice and beautiful woman for Chin. Chin could not tolerant perceiving people's negative reactions towards Hong, he decided to tell everyone that he was the father of her child. He took care of Hong and the baby as if they were his wife and child.

Apart from being a faithful lover and good mother, Hong was also a beautiful woman. It was her beauty that changed Chin's life. Chin left his wealthy family to follow Hong's opera trope because he fell in love with her after seeing her beautiful face. Hong was proud of her own beauty and she did not feel that her beautiful body was exploited by men or felt bad about being a sex object. It was her beauty that kept her pride. When Hong grew old and lost her beauty, she lost her self confidence. She liked a dull mirror and denied a new one because she could not stand seeing herself in a clear mirror. She was very angry when Chin offered her a new mirror as exemplified:

"Don't be so clever. I don't need a new mirror"...I like it, in spite of its dullness.(Nguyen Ngoc Tu, 2008:46-47)

Hong, therefore, was a conventional woman who was proud of having 'the body' to attract men. She was completely innocent about the constraints of patriarchy and its objectification of women's bodies (Kath Woodward, 2008:79).

## **4.2. Sex and Guilt**

The female characters from both Thai and Vietnamese literature seemed to feel guilty about their sexual behavior. In *The End of a Season of Beauty* Hong, in her last breath, she was hoping for her parents to forgive her for being a bad daughter. In the same way, the narrator of the *Unscratched Pot* hated herself for enjoying sex with her husband after he bullied her badly. She blamed herself for being a shameless woman who supposed to run away from a violent husband and not supposed to have a sexual desire for him as she did.

## **5. Conclusion**

Although Thailand, Lao and Vietnam were different in the ruling systems and some other aspects, the countries shared the similarities in the roles of gender and sexual values. Women in both Socialist and Democratic societies were submissive and had to be sexually behaved. The significant finding in this study was that men had to be sexually behaved, too, in order to be considered as 'good men'.

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