

Representing Islam in Thai Young Adult Literature: Makut Onrudee and the Case of Rohim's Poem

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Abstract

*This article deals with the representation of Islam in the young adult fiction of the Thai writer Makut Onrudee, better known under the pen name Nippan. It documents an important change in Makut's narrative technique in the two years between 1976 and 1978. In the short story "Rohim's Poem" (1976) the Buddhist elementary school teacher has just arrived in a village of Songkla Province, an ethnically Malay village. The newly graduated teacher brings his cosmopolitan sensibility with him; he is a representative of modernity, a "flaneur," in the sense Baudelaire used the term. His run-in with a young Muslim boy who refuses to accept the teacher's understanding of self, nation, and religion creates a crisis which the author cannot solve until his masterpiece, *Butterflies and Flowers*, published two years later.*

Key Words: *flaneur, modernity, narrative technique, representation of Islam, Thailand, young adult literature*

Introduction

In the past few years the eyes of the world have been trained on Thailand as the near-civil war between the aristocratic bureaucracy (yellow shirts) and the rural poor (red shirts) has intensified. No less riveting is the unresolved problem of unrest in the three southern provinces that border on Malaysia, the domain of the old Pattani sultanhood which was annexed to Thailand in the early twentieth century. Sporadic violence and the rising number of deaths are stark reminders that the Thai government has yet to find a way of recognizing some degree of autonomy for the ethnic Malays whose language, culture, and religion differ from the rest of the Thai nation-state. This paper, one in a series on myth and irony in Thai children's literature, takes up the work of the writer Nippan, the pen name of Makut Onrudee.

Method

Nippan has written a series of young adult novels, but his fame at home and abroad rests on one of his earliest works, *Phisua lae Dokmai* (*Butterflies and Flowers*) 1977, made into an internationally famous film of the same name (1985) by director Euthana Mukdasanit. The novel was translated into Japanese *Chouchou to Hana*, (1981) by Tatsuo Hoshino and rendered into English in an unpublished translation by Chanavee Chaonong.

The novel depicts a world of extreme poverty on the southern Thai border with Malaysia, the troubled area of the old Pattani sultanhood which was annexed to Siam only at the beginning of the twentieth century. There is no hint of the political complexity involved in the life of the ethnic Malays following their Muslim tradition among their Buddhist Thai neighbors; the novel explores the children's consciousness as they try to eke out a living for their families by peddling ice cream or smuggling rice across the border. It is a lyrical, innocent world fraught with danger taken on in a game of chance with survival as the stakes.

My contention in a previous paper comparing works of British and Thai literature was that there is little or no irony to be found in the latter, while the former is replete with it. The young adult novels of Makut Onrudee also betray no sign of an ironic consciousness; the compassionate narrative voice characteristic of these works explores various aspects of the underprivileged in Thai life, be it the ethnic Malay children described above, orphans coming to terms with their status [*Dek chai jak dao unn*, 1989; (*The Boy from Another Planet*)] or visually impaired children longing for the school life of their friends [*Prow saeng raong*, 1987; (*The Bright Light of the Rainbow*)].

Discussion

Onrudee, writing under his early pen name, Nippan, his real name, or the later pen name Wowprae, was born in the southern Thai province of Songkla in 1950. This puts him in the idealistic group of student reformers

who were graduating from university in the early seventies and looking for ways to heal the splintered social reality of Thailand. Looking back at this passion from a vantage point thirty five years on, no one can escape the poignancy of the social concern displayed by the new graduates caught up in a social storm that urged them to “know your neighbors” and led people like Nippan to move in with local villagers. The chaos of the last few years of Thai social history, the indifference of red or yellow shirt positions to the other’s concerns make Onrudee’s passion, in the preface to the first edition of *Butterflies and Flowers*, all the more amazing in its compassion:

In an isolated village far from civilization there are lives that may not matter to you or to anyone else. Should the worth of a life be measured by its geographic location or by the education a person has received? To probe these questions more deeply, the present author lived with these villagers for a year and got to know them better . . . though much time has passed since then, their lives have not changed. They are still out of sight, and injustice is still everywhere, and sometimes it seems that even God has no mercy on them. When will there be someone to give them something? It’s just the story of one group of people attached to one religion, but there’s one fact I want to emphasize: no matter what religion is involved, there are still good people and bad people. (Preface, *Butterflies and Flowers*)

Like Martha Nussbaum in *Poetic Justice*, Nippan sees literature as a way of learning to care about people whose existence is remote from one’s own. His young adult novels extend a compassionate gaze to a multitude of corners of Thai society, all without falling into the twin traps of sentimentality and dogmatism.

The time he spent with the villagers in the south, in Songkla, Nippan divided between agriculture and teaching Thai to the ethnic Muslims, whose native language is a form of Malayu called Yawi. A story written around this time, “Bodkavi kong Rohim Mahmah” (1973) (Rohim’s Poem; translated into Japanese as “Rohimu no uta” by Tatsuo Hoshino), shows a rare instance of the writer as self-conscious observer full of the irony of his own situation. In discussing this story I would like to propose that Nippan’s central character, a young Thai teacher full of modernity, good will, and even better intentions, is a kind of flaneur, the trope of the itinerant observer made famous by Baudelaire and Benjamin on the boulevards of Paris.

Gilloch (1996) gives the most succinct definition of the poet-flaneur: For Baudelaire, the ultimate hero of modernity is the figure who seeks to give voice to its paradoxes and illusions, who participates in, while still retaining the capacity to give form to, the fragmented, fleeting experiences of the modern. This individual is the poet. (143)

Hausman’s modernization of the city of Paris in the middle of the nineteenth century created the great boulevards of the City of Light, destroying the old medieval city, displacing the poor and bringing together social classes who had previously been at a distance. Baudelaire’s prose poem, “The Eyes of the Poor” provides a good example of this destruction and reconfiguration; the well-to-do flaneur and his lady friend are enjoying themselves at a splendid new café that is still partly under construction on one of the great boulevards. As they sit outside the café a young, penniless father with his two sons appears in front of them. Their eyes take in the opulence of the café even as they project their awareness that the place will never be for them. Their appearance has quite a different effect upon the flaneur and his love:

Song writers say that pleasure ennobles the soul and softens the heart. The song was right that evening as far as I was concerned. Not only was I touched by this family of eyes but I was even a little ashamed of our glasses and decanters, too big for our thirst. I turned my eyes to look into yours, dear love, to read *my* thoughts in them; and as I plunged my eyes into your eyes, so beautiful and curiously soft, into those green eyes, home of Caprice and governed by the Moon, you said: “Those people are insufferable with their great saucer eyes. Can’t you tell the proprietor to send them away?” So you see how difficult it is to understand one another, my dear angel, how incommunicable thought is, even between two people in love.
(<http://mjae.blogspot.com/2006/01/Baudelaire-eyes-of-poor.html>).

This passage illustrates an aspect of the flaneur little remarked upon, the *ethical* side of the representative of modernity, and it is this very quality that Nippan’s protagonist displays in “Rohim’s Poem.” (As noted above, the drive that consistently shapes the Thai author’s young adult novels is compassion; the remarkable part of “Rohim’s Poem” is the *consciousness* of the narrator, another quality that binds him to Benjamin’s representative of modernity.)

Rolf Goebel (1998) has reviewed some of the more recent attempts to expand the trope of the flaneur beyond its traditional borders;

In *Physiognomik der modernen Metropole* Wille Bolle proposes that the cognitive promise of Benjamin's insights into modernity should be employed for a study of the social and historical forces of postmodernity (16-20). He draws attention to the fact that the reception of Benjamin's predominantly Europe-centered work extends far beyond that continent's cultural horizon into seemingly peripheral spheres of cultural investigation such as Latin America (19).

Goebel goes on to trace the footsteps of two European flaneurs in Tokyo, Bernard Kellermann (author of *Ein Spaziergang in Tokyo*, 1912) and Stephan Wackwitz (author of several works on modernity in the Japanese capitol). Although Goebel's efforts are praiseworthy in their distancing of issues of modernity from a Eurocentric theatre, they stop short of seeing *flanerie* as an activity or inclination native to any culture in which a certain class of people have had their view of their own culture altered by an "enlightened" education. Goebel's failure to see *flanerie* among Japanese writers is disappointing, as he indicates an awareness of such issues when he writes

In the context of Japan, Benjamin's own distinction between traveler and flaneur takes on a new meaning. In his review of Franz Hessel's *Spazieren in Berlin*, (1929), he contends that the superficial impulse for writing about cities, the pursuit of the exotic and the picturesque, are attractive only to the touristic foreigner or stranger. Approaching a city as a native, by contrast, calls for different, deeper motives, pursued only by someone—the genuine flaneur—who wishes to travel, not to distant lands but into the past, where his urban history and his own biography intersect. ("Wiederkehr" 194).

Nippan's story "Rohim's Poem" presents us with exactly such a situation. The young Thai teacher in the story, freshly graduated in some urban center distant from the rural school he has asked to be assigned to, displays a high degree of self-consciousness as the story opens, mulling over his deliberate choice:

The way I explain things to myself and my friends, I'm no liberal idealist with set views on social class, etc., but if I do have to join the workforce I'd like to be allowed to do things my own way, putting my heart into whatever I do. When I picked a school in an area in the South known for its separatist terrorism, my friends scoffed at me, gossiping behind my back, saying He's an idiot, he just wants to get in the news, he wants to be remembered as a sacrificial victim. He couldn't get a position at a school in one of the more desirable areas, so he's hiding his inferiority behind this show of altruism. I just smiled and said nothing. If someone asked me directly, I gave them the answer I thought most honest: I like kids. (33)

In the background of this passage, as mentioned above, lie the various student movements of the early and mid-seventies in Bangkok, when the long period of dictatorship was ending and the idealism and political will of students were strong. The autobiographical element is also strong, as we know from Hoshino's brief biography of Nippan in the afterword to the Japanese translation of *Butterflies and Flowers*. The young teacher in the story, however, is from the metropolitan area; he takes a long train ride to reach the South, whereas Nippan himself was from Songkla and went to work in villages not far from his home. As his father was ethnically Chinese, and his mother Thai, he was different from the ethnic Malays he lived and worked with in his idealistic attempt to "get to know one's neighbors." The important fact here is that the protagonist, as well as Nippan, has just finished a course of higher education that separates his consciousness from the largely agricultural community he will work in. Besides this, his political awareness of himself and his potential contribution to society is very keen.

The narrator defends his choice of a school in the remote separatist area to his anxious friends by claiming that "children can express their affection more openly" in the remote countryside. He wants to teach children who are not spoiled by material things like the ones in the city. And he does not realize the extent to which he has become the instrument of modernity, eager to bring his enlightened knowledge to the village children. One of the first things he wants to get across to them is the idea of nationhood; he wants to clear up any confusion they may suffer from about ethnicity, religion, and nationality. His head is full of imaginings about the "others" he will soon encounter as he takes the long train to the South. How close will the children get to him? How can he change their parents' estimate of the importance of education? And what if he should find himself rejected? Could he handle the pain?

“We are all Thai,” he announces to his Civics class one morning. But before he can go on, a voice interrupts him. “I’m a Muslim.” This is the very chance he has been waiting for. He smiles to himself and to the class and begins to explain the idea of nation:

Let Teacher explain. People who believe in Islam call themselves Muslims, or Hadj, or use other names, but we live in Thailand, so we are Thai. There are Buddhist Thais, and Hill Tribe Thais as well. You and your parents are Islamic Thais. (36-37)

The narrator gets out a map of Thailand, musing that his metropolitan Teacher’s education course has hardly prepared him for this. Why does he have to use the national map in Civics class? He points to the location of the village on the map and uses the logic he has been schooled in to illustrate the point that the people of the village, as well as the people of the province, are governed by their location within the Thai national boundaries.

But Rohim Mamat, the most articulate of his pupils, is not having any of this logic. “My father says I’m a Muslim. And he is too, and he’s been to Mecca.” The teacher’s good will and affability are as determined as his confidence in his modernity-filled education. This is the kind of student he wants, he thinks, articulate, ready to argue:

Rohim, Teacher has had a chance to talk to your father. Teacher knows what a clever man he is— after all, he’s been to Mecca, right, to pay respect to the Prophet. Teacher would like to go to Mecca someday, too, so if you decide to go, tell me and we can enjoy talking on the trip.

The narrator’s willingness to cross borders and embrace the other in order to extend the logic he believes in is boundless. But his star pupil remains unconvinced, and his response to the teacher’s overture is a hint of a greater shock to come: “But Teacher is Thai. Because he believes in Buddhism.” The teacher makes a last attempt at cementing his logic: “That’s right,” he tells Rohim, “Teacher is Thai. Just like your father, and all of you sitting here in this classroom.”

The teacher is unwittingly approaching a crisis. Poised on the edge of a history he does not fully understand, he seeks to be a participant-observer representing the bourgeois conceptions of progress, education, and the nation-state. As Goebel points out in his article on the flaneur and Japan, “Since the end of the nineteenth century . . . the bourgeois principles of reason and humanity have been criticized for masking claims of power . . .” (380). The idealistic teacher-narrator of the story wants to represent the people he teaches and wants his representation to be charged with the care he invokes at the beginning of the story, but he needs to experience the shock which, in Benjamin’s reading, characterizes the experience of flanerier. The experience of the shock will teach him how to represent the world of the people he is so attached to.

The teacher has assigned the class to write a poem to be handed in after the lunch period, in the Thai class. The assignment includes the act of observation of some object during the lunch break, for the teacher has explained to his pupils that poetry is nothing more than the simple act of observing and recording the natural objects, people, and animals around us.

The pupils hand in their poems. Rohim is the last to bring his notebook to the teacher’s desk. When the teacher cannot find the entry that should be the poem, Rohim points out the short, four-line composition he has just finished:

Teacher is kind to me,
I am kind to teacher . . .
If teacher hits me,
I will stab him. (39)

The story ends with the teacher’s confession that he lacks the courage to try to understand the meaning of the poem.

In the shock of reading Rohim’s poem various things have become apparent to him: the colonial nature of his flanerier, the superficiality of his own education, and most important of all, his own failure to follow the advice he had given his charges for writing poetry. His own observation of the world around him has not been simple. It has been polluted by the conscious self as agent of modernity, and this recognition now fills the story with irony. For Nippan himself, this story, written a year before the masterpiece *Butterflies and Flowers*, represents a contrast to that novel. In “Rohim’s Poem” we can see the lesson that to achieve a care-filled representation, the conscious self must be removed from the garden. No irony mars the beauty of *Butterflies and Flowers*, in which the world of the South is allowed a direct, simple representation.

Conclusion

Nippan young adult novels alter divergent insight of Thai society. In “Rohim’s Poem”, Nippan’s central character, a young Thai teacher, becomes the instrument of modernity, eager to bring his enlightened knowledge to the village children. He is kind of flaneur. In contrast to the later work, “Butterflies and Flowers”, “Rohim Poems” presents an irony. The central character, the narrator-teacher, observation of the world around him is polluted by the conscious self as agent of modernity.

The idea of nationhood the teacher explained to his Moslem student leads him to a crisis. The experience of the shock teaches him how to represent the world of the people he is so attached to.

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