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The Art of Exclusion: Disability Discourses in Early Thai Novels

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The Art of Exclusion: Disability Discourses in Early Thai Novels

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Abstract

This article is aimed at exploring the representations of disabilities and the uses of disability discourses in selected Thai novels composed during the relatively early phase in the development of the genre, namely *Thep Thida Nai Fan* (1933) and its sequel *Wiman Nai Akat* (1944) by Asa Khochitmet, and *Ban Sai Thong* (1950) and its sequel *Photchaman Sawangwong* by Ko Surangkhanang. It argues that the representations of disability in these works tend toward the exclusionist direction in their treatments of disability, which can be seen in the ways the characters with disabilities or their disabilities are mostly written out through death or attempts at cure. In line with, and probably also serving as means of justification for those “endings,” is the mode in which these characters are usually portrayed, i.e. the helpless pitiable character. Read against the discursive contexts concerning disability around the time of composition of these works, this exclusionist tendency can be regarded as corresponding to its counterpart in the discursive forces related to disability surrounding their composition, namely the capitalist discourse on work, the medicalized norms of the body and mind, and eugenic discourse, which in turn, worked variously in the historical contexts of post-1932 class ideologies, the Phibun Songkhram project of civilizing the Thai citizens, and the pre-1981 International Year of Disabled Persons normative atmosphere.

According to Trisilpa Boonkhachorn (1999), Thai novels began to take shape and developed with the burgeoning of the Thai middle-class, with more formally educated and material-prone members and the prospering of printing technology, in the late nineteenth century. With the 1932 Revolution, it has been argued that Thai novels increasingly turned to present stories with humanist standpoints. For instance, in *Songkhram Chiwit* (1932) by Sri Burapha, which was written on the same year of the Revolution, the writer presents the problem

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of social inequality while sympathizing with the poor, whereas *Ying Khon Chua* (c.1937) by Ko Surangkhanang sympathetically features, in a way never before in Thai novels, a prostitute as the story's heroine who is wronged by society. It is very likely, as Trisilpa points out, that the novel genre in Thailand gained its inspiration from the ideologies of liberty and equality promoted by Khana Ratsadorn in the wake of the 1932 Revolution and consequently yielded more works with humanist awareness of the plight of the socially disadvantaged and victims of unjust treatment (1999: 31). However, while humanist viewpoints toward the poor or lower-class people came to be treated explicitly as major themes in several novels in the period following the Revolution, it did not happen that such concerns for justice to the wronged applied in a noticeable way to disabled people as a socially disadvantaged group when it came to the selection of major theme. This is despite the fact that there were disabled characters in many Thai novels from the beginning period of the genre development and some were presented sympathetically. It is therefore interesting to explore the positions disability occupies in Thai novels during that period seething with new aspirations for justice and equality and the socio-cultural factors that resulted in the passing over of disability as a subject for a major theme concerning social justice.

In this regard, it might be helpful to turn to some concepts developed in scholarly works in disability studies.² The potentials of literary works—as sites of cultural representations—to construct social groups' identities have been well attested in numerous studies worldwide. Of noted significance are their roles in performing cultural identities of socially marginalized people in various directions ranging from reiterating conventional cultural meanings assigned to such groups, to resisting and changing them in politically purposeful fashions. With regard to disabled people, there have also been many works by disability studies scholars concerning the relationship between literature, as well as other cultural representations, and the construction of disability. Similar to the cases of other social and cultural identities, these works

² Disability Studies, to put it briefly is an interdisciplinary subject that studies disability as socio-cultural construct as against the medically-dominated views of disability as pathologies or incompleteness or other views which see disability as having only fixed negative meanings. Important works in the field include Oliver (1990); Davis (1997); Thomson (1997); Mitchell and Snyder (1997); Stiker (1999); Mitchell and Snyder (2000); and Longmore (2003), to name only a few.

reveal the constructed nature of the meanings of disability, hitherto dominated and naturalized by medical viewpoints, and point to the possibilities for changes in those meanings as well as the power relations accompanying them by means of changes in the social and discursive relations that produce both. However, one important point brought up by disability studies critics that might be considered relatively unique to studies of disabled identities in literature is the way disability is conventionally used and perceived as literary device that naturalizes the political implications of its representations. This point has been well developed in *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourses* (2000) by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder. In this work, to put it roughly, Mitchell and Snyder argue that disabilities have traditionally been important—even essential—literary devices in works of literature. That is literary narratives always depend on aberrant, or disabled, figures of some sort to create certain literary or rhetorical effects for the sake of the interestingness, social radicalism or even the existence of such narratives themselves. A clear example of this would be the use of disabled characters or their disabilities as symbols of social ills or social transgression, be it in conservative or radical manners. This employment of literary disability usually goes in inverse direction to the recognition given, by the texts in question as well as in society in general, to the plight and welfare of disabled people as a civil rights-based group. Mitchell and Snyder term this situation, which they view as an opportunistic use of disability in literature, in an ironic pun on the medically technological “support” or “completion” for those bodies considered below the medical or social norms, as “narrative prosthesis,” that is the dependency of literary narratives on disability as if it were a kind of prosthetic or essential support for its existence as an interesting or “complete” narrative.

Taking this concept of narrative prosthesis as premise, this article undertakes to investigate the representations of disabilities and the uses of disability discourses in selected Thai novels composed during the relatively early phase in the development of the genre, which coincides with the period following the 1932 Revolution, namely *Thep Thida Nai Fan* (1933) and its sequel *Wiman Nai Akat* (1944) by Asa Khochitmet, and *Ban Sai Thong* (1950) and its sequel *Photchaman Sawangwong* by Ko Surangkhanang. It will look at how disabilities are employed as “narrative prosthetics,” to use Mitchell and Snyder’s term, for the sake of the stories’ interestingness and as useful tools for presenting social themes, i.e. how they are used “artistically” as literary devices, both deftly creating the desired emotional or symbolic effects

and also shielding the readers from recognizing such representations as political identity issues by force of their appearance as literary devices as such. It will also argue that this employment, which, viewed from a disability studies standpoint, appears in an exclusionist fashion, with disabled characters or their disabilities tending toward being erased from view, corresponds to the counterpart trend in the discursive forces related to disability surrounding their composition, namely the capitalist discourse on work, the medicalized norms of the body and mind, and eugenic discourse, which in turn, worked variously in the historical contexts of post-1932 class war, the Phibun Songkhram project of civilizing the Thai citizens, and the pre-1981 International Year of Disabled Persons normative atmosphere.

I. Disability as Sentimentalizing Device

It can be said that in these selected novels, the *Thepthida Nai Fan-Wiman Nai Akat* and the *Ban Sai Thong-Photchaman Sawangwong* story, disabled characters are variously presented in exclusionist manners, i.e. they tend to be presented as individuals that are different, isolated or in some cases even segregated from other characters in the same stories, except some “good” characters taking the charge in caring for them physically and spiritually. Exclusion does not exist only in a spatial sense but may include the way characters are barred from their rights of reproduction, either by the action of other characters or by means of the plot itself. This latter part includes more subtly death of such disabled characters, which is the utmost state of exclusion rendered by the plot. Yet another kind of exclusion, perhaps generally unperceived as such, is the eradication not of disabled characters but of their *disabilities*, both by sheer miracles and the miracles of medical advancement. Almost all these strategies are found in the novels studied here. Moreover, they variously justify, implicitly or explicitly, this exclusionist tendency, the ways in which the characters are portrayed, which seem to lead to the conclusion, at least by the logic of the stories themselves that disability is an undesirable thing that needs to be eradicated, either by means of death or by hope for cure. In this regard, it is perhaps best to divide the novels for the analysis in this section into two group: those that feature disabled characters as hero or heroine, i.e. *Thepthida Nai Fan-Wiman Nai Akat* and those in which disabled characters are minor characters, i.e. *Ban Sai Thong-Photchaman Sawangwong*.

In the first group, disabled characters are the major characters of the stories and indeed their disabilities are important narrative elements. In terms of narrative effects, disabilities of the leading characters in these two sets novels create a good effect of tragic sentimentality. It is tragic because disability is given the meaning of absolute loss that falls in an unexpected and ironic turn of events on the characters otherwise deemed to be very worthy of admiration and to a degree, identification by the readers. This plotline is used perhaps to create interestingness by force of its difference from the usual perfect happy ending typical of romantic novels, to which category these two sets of novels seem to belong. The characteristics that make one “worthy of admiration and identification,” of which these characters fall short due to their disabilities, in turn, can be viewed as part of the discursive frameworks that assign meanings and social status to disability and disabled people in society at large.

The double-part novel *Thepthida Nai Fan-Wiman Nai Akat*, enjoyed great popularity at its time of publication. *Thepthida Nai Akat* underwent four printings from 1932 through 1970 and “created an uproar when it first hit the market” and drove Asa to fame as a recognized writer and his story to an interest for film producers (Asa Khochitmet: 1970, ๙-๙๓) whereas *Wiman Nai Akat*, its sequel, underwent three printings. One of the most likely causes of this popularity may be the story’s tragicalness resulting from the hero’s transformation to become a disabled man, which must have a strong emotional impact on the readers. Such impact most probably comes from the fact that the disability which he acquires in the course of the story results in a change in the sense of self-worth in the hero himself, other characters and possibly the readers, which otherwise would be one considered worthy of being held as model by the readers.

That “self-worth” most stressed by the text seems to be the ability to work in the market-driven capitalist system. This can be seen from the very beginning of the story where the opening scene features the competition between two department stores, themselves emblems of flourishing capitalism. Against the backdrop of this atmosphere, Phong Chamnansin, the hero of the story is introduced to the reader as an employee of Sappa-aphon, one of the two stores. He is portrayed as a man trying to climb the social ladder of the capitalist society from being the son of a poor lesser-ranked policeman to becoming an efficient reliable working person in the capitalist system. Both his physical and mental characteristics are created to be very fit for the purpose of searching after career advancement in the said economic system as well as being an essential cog in the wheel that drives the system itself. He is described as:

being of a good proportion-height, having good facial features, showing the stamina to persevere in life without fail. His daily duties are accounting, writing bills and receipts, etc. In his free time, he will come out to help in the front of the store. All the salespersons and workers in the store recognize him as a good friend. Even Mr. Wanit, the shop owner once said that it is very difficult to find someone as efficient and willing in work as Phong Chamnansilp. (Asa Khochitmet: 1970, 5-6)

From the passage, it can be seen that the qualities most stressed by the text are those, be it physical or mental, that makes him a suitable worker in the capitalist system, especially the work ethics like hard work, discipline, complete attention to work, frugality, and a strong healthy body. Just as when he is about to be promoted in his career, to become an accountant with a higher salary, or in other words, while he is on his way to a higher rung in the social ladder to becoming a real member of the middle-class, disability hits him in the form of blindness brought about by his brave rescue of Nipha, the heroine of the story. With this blindness, Phong's ability to work is halted and that considerably affects Phong's sense of self-worth. As he says to Nipha:

'I would like to know . . . whether I have any chance of being useful to the world, not being a useless person as I am now . . . Or you cannot be at fault for calling me a burden to the world. Each day, I can't do anything except sitting, eating and then sleeping; worse I am a trouble for everyone, especially you.' (Asa Khochitmet: 1970, 306-7)

As "work" seems to be the most important source of Phong's self-worth, the desperation caused by his inability to work due to his disability is so great that at the interval period when he can temporarily sees, he compares his past blindness to the state of death:

'A blind person is indeed a dead man, or a dying man. It is such a hideous state of utter suffering. A blind person is a burden to the world. Thinking back on that one year of suffering [from blindness], I feel such horror. May I never have to experience it again in any future lives I would have. If I will really have to become blind again, I wish that I will be dead before I become in such a state.' (Asa Khochitmet, *Wiman Nai Akat*, 108)

And that last sentence serves as a foreshadowing for the decision the hero will make that lead to his death at the end of the novel.

While the disabled character himself painfully denies his disability, other characters' reactions are not much different. Although they praise him as a hero because of his braveness in risking his life to save a fire victim, his blindness is received with another channel expressing unwilling—at best ambiguous—acceptance: pity. Although arguably pity is a sentiment that links Nipha to Phong and finally turns their relationship into love. However, in one moment during Phong's temporary recovering, Nipha compares her feeling toward the seeing Phong with the blind one: she feels that Phong is "more elegant and adorable" as a seeing person than when he was blind during which she felt that he:

'was only pitiable. . . . During that time I pitied you as I had never done anybody—you looked so without hope in every movement. But this Phong, as I told you before, will never receive that kind of feeling from me again. I love you this time as a woman loves a man worthy of her love.' (*Wiman Nai Akat*, 566)

The above statement makes clear that "pity" is not a most commendable feeling for giving to a person that you deem worthy of some better feeling, such as love, as it involves inequality of status between the subject and the object of pity. This negative aspect of the feeling of "pity" seems to be toned down in the other set of novels written at a later time in the history of the Thai novel.

At the end of the story, the hero decides to attempt suicide, after learning that his blindness has come back and will never be cured by medical treatment. Both actions, killing and curing, are instances of the ways disability is dealt with in an exclusionist manner, not to mention how the hero is treated in his state of blindness—being helplessly and dependently taken care of in isolation from other people, without any attempt at rehabilitation to help him be able to function in everyday life again. This trend in acting toward disability—curing, isolating, eradicating—corresponds well with the capitalist work ethics which value above all else people's ability to work and serve the market system, in which disability would be viewed as obstacle for people in such a society to reach the desired goal.

II Disability as Symbol

In *Ban Sai Thong-Photchaman Sawangwong*, the theme of work and self-worth is also brought up. Although the main disabled character of the story, "Chai Noi" or MR Phanuthat Sawatdi Sawangwong is considered generally by his relatives and caretakers as a sort of

burden, the explicit attack mounted by MR Pharada Phatraphi Sawangwong, the hero and a “reliable” good character of the novel is aimed at his younger sister Phawini Charatruang and her fellow aristocrats who “kill their time uselessly without any substantial work done, eating, sleeping, fooling around” (*Ban Sai Thong* 167). The striking similarity to the self-scolding words of Phong in *Wiman Nai Akat* can be noted. The difference, it might be argued, lies in the different purposes disabilities are used in these two sets of stories. In the *Thepthida Nai Fan* stories, disability is used mainly as a sentimentalizing device, creating a sense of sadness and pity in the readers. In this latter set of novels, although that use exists, the main purpose for the employment of disabled characters seems to be the treatment of the theme of class conflict.

In *Ban Sai Thong-Photchaman Sawangeong*, pity is also portrayed as a reaction of some characters but compared to the one described in the *Thepthida Nai Fan* set, this sentiment is presented as an acceptable, even commendable one. Its function is actually to distinguish between the “good” and the “bad” characters in the different ways each camp treats people with disabilities. Specifically to the story, the distinguishing act applies to the aristocratic relatives and friends of Chai Noi and to an insignificant degree to their servants. Thus, the “good” people in the novels will be ones who love, or more exactly pity, and take care of Chai Noi, and the sick disabled grandfathers wholeheartedly, without desiring any material gains in return such as Photchaman, Pharada, Pharadi and Thip, Chai Noi’s nursemaid whereas the bad camp will include Mom Phannarai Sawangwong, Phawini and her aristocratic relatives and friends that look down on Chai Noi, Photchani, the heroine’s sister who later redeems herself and turns to be on the good side. Pity, and the willingness to help those in need, in this case, is used as an indication of a moral superiority of a group of people, which in the story is a new kind of nobility, a high-class people with more middle-class attitudes. Apart from pity or sympathy with the weak, other qualities of this new class of desirable people presented in the story include honesty, hard work and perseverance, which can be found in the male and female main characters, Photchaman and Pharada.

Not only is disability used in the service of gauging other characters with regard to pity, it is employed in another different way for the same purpose of presenting the theme of conflict of ideologies as well. In this regard, it can be seen in how the discourse of the old karma is used to explain the disability of Chai Noi and his grandfathers. As Thip tries to explain to Photchaman about the possible cause of Chai Noi: “Karmas belong to those who commit them.

. . . If the ancestors commit bad deeds, the sins will fall on their descendants, causing them to become cripples” (*Ban Sai Thong*, 97). This representation of disability as punishment for one’s past bad deeds is clearly targeted at the older kind of noble and aristocratic people, as against the newer group of nobility. As opposed to the rendering of disability as a tragic medical condition deserving pity and care, this meaning of disability as punishment for past sinful deeds create a more negative attitude toward disability as something inevitable and utterly undesirable. Yet, in this novels we see them working together in a way that presents disability as undesirable and deserving exclusion in the end.

III. Symbolic Eugenics

In *Ban Sai Thong-Photchaman Sawangwong*, the main disabled character Chai Noi also meets his death, after a long period of treatment, toward the end of the story. It is interesting to note that on this occasion, there are certain statements made by characters, surprisingly from both good and bad character camp that share the same spirit: the idea that his death is inevitable and well deserved such as Phawini, Pharadi an also the narrator who can be said to present a reliable voice of the story: “Now he has lived long enough, as long as a disabled person like him can do” (*Photchaman*, 412). Viewed against the backdrop of the disability discourses at the time of the composition, this statement can be said to voice one of the main tenets of the eugenic science, which was reported to be introduced and popularized during the Phibun regime, in his nationalist project of civilizing the Thai nation.³ According to eugenics, which the future generation of a nation can be improved by promoting those considered as carrying “good genes” to marry and produce offspring that will become the next generation of the nation’s citizens. On the other hand, those considered to possess “bad genes” will be discouraged from reproducing. These latter include those whose physical or behavioral characteristics go against the social standards of the normal body and mind, most notably disabled people. Hence, the death of disabled characters such as Chai Noi or his grandfathers,

³For more information on the Phibun’s project of civilizing the Thai citizen, please refer to Kongsakon Kawinrawikun (2001).

as well as, shall we say, a lot of disabled characters in the novels in this period or the ones that follow, or the death of their disabilities, through cure or miracles, which can be said to symbolically represent eugenics in the realm of literary imagination.

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