

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION: THE HUMAN CONDITION

Literature is able to write about things scholarly history cannot, remarks Thongchai Winichakul in an article on the October 6 massacre (Flesh and Blood 172). Thongchai is referring to ways of expressing and debating ideas and memory about the 1976 tragedy that sometimes finds a more convenient and free medium in literary means. Back in 1947, Kamol Chandrasara wrote in an article on social revolution, pointing out the constraints of scientific methods in dealing with several aspects of the human condition: “Theories in science are governed by facts [...] but ideologies are not [...] The work of ideology, whether it be in ethics, religion, metaphysics or society, is an expression of gain, necessity, desire, hope, fear, none of which include facts” (4). The ideology of science refuses what it thinks as “non-facts.” Subjectivity, emotion, trauma, however real and widely affecting the population, therefore, are not so easily valid as topics in academic historical discussions in early postwar era Thailand.

In recent research especially by Western authors, modern Thai literature is often placed under the framework of feminism or various minority studies. This is problematic for the Thai audience and any individual who do not consider Thai literature a “minority.” Thais of course do not think of themselves as particularly “ethnic” or “minority.” This particular language of racial and hegemonic consciousness carries a cultural history and resonance that are not necessarily understood in various settings in the same way. The term “minority literature” if used at all by Thai researchers in the Thai context would mean the literature of hilltribe communities or several “ethnic” communities in Thailand such as the Mon or Lao

Puan. If the study of these diverse literatures and languages in the country acquires more of the vocabulary and stance of what is assumed common knowledge in Anglo-European academia, it will perhaps be occasion for exploring another historio-cultural topic in contemporary Thailand.

Several of Nikom Rayawa's stories will also readily fit the category of trauma narratives which has become popular in the West, especially the United States.

<sup>22</sup> In suggesting that Nikom's writings may share many characteristics with African, Asian, or Jewish diaspora literatures of traumatic history, I offer a reading that the symbols in his fiction records a changing social sentiment, which is perhaps part of the trauma. Thongchai Winichakul convincingly traces such a changing of social sentiment that results in the changing meaning of symbols with regard to the October 6 revolt (Flesh and Blood 167). He points out how the evil students and loyal military forces in that event through time become heroic students and shameful military bullies. Symbolism in Nikom Rayawa's fiction sensitizes us to similar transformations.

Throughout this paper, I hope to unpack several assumptions about modern Thai history and literature as they are presented or implied in Nikom Rayawa's work. One of these is the assumption that progress is homogeneous, both in form and in meaning, throughout the country. Another is that prosperity or well being, at least the "valid" kind according to policy makers, can and should be measured by monetary or material wealth. Symbols in Nikom's stories show how both these assumptions and

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<sup>22</sup> During the 1960s civil rights movement for minorities, African American, Asian American and people of other ethnicities became more vocal about their condition in the United States (Wong). A wave of ethnic literature and concern swept through racist America and questioned long-held hierarchical structures of race. These new voices, including Holocaust literature, give another perspective on social and national history that eventually necessitated the increasing validation of subjectivity in academia. African American and Asian American literature emerged as topics for panel discussion groups at MLA conferences during this latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

the Western structural hierarchies on which they are based are being negotiated with existing local ideologies in various contexts. In doing so, they also reveal how economic and cultural models, especially those growing out of binary concepts, may discourage readings of the novels and short stories as connective or interpretive engagements with cultural history by focusing on reactionary or oppositional significance toward dominant ideologies. The reading presented in this paper hopes to offer an alternative to binary opposition frameworks. Through viewing communication, associations, and adaptations, I hope to be able to focus more on “gray areas” where many elements are present, not only two, and these not necessarily mutually exclusive or antagonistic. Rather than focusing on opposition, I choose to examine connections.

The division or compartmentalization of this paper into chapters, subheadings, and sub-subheadings, therefore, is more for practical purposes than for indicating that the topics can be separated clearly from each other. Elephants, lizards, farmers, cities, villages, corpses, or scars are related to one another in ways that confuse clear categories of concrete and abstract, subjective and objective, self and other, past, present and future. From the elephant to the tricolor flag to the constitution to the tiger, symbols of Thailand have undergone much change. The meaning of each of the symbols has also shifted and grown over time as viewers approach them with colonialist, neo-colonialist, postcolonial, feminist, Marxist, or capitalist paradigms. In an attempt to become modern and international, Thai governments have given the country, among other things, a new New Year (from April 14 to January 1) and a new name (from Siam to Thailand). Yet these symbolic sheddings of the past cannot sever unseen links of time, relevance, and simple cause and effect.

The death of the monitor lizard in The Lizard and the Rotten Branch is not the end of Somkid's struggle with his own or with society's ideology: "C'mon, let's go," Prawing said to Somkid who still sat with his face down. He did not answer, only shook his head" (347). Walking away from or turning one's back on problems does not end them. Nor is killing the scapegoat, or lizard, or elephant, or many, many lives. These actions do not leave one *free* to go on. Somkid still has his struggles, plus he has to live with the scene and guilt, creating an additional burden and baggage. Nikom's symbols call to attention this—another dimension of history, the unseen, psychological, and subjective aspect of cultural history. Klausner calls some manifestations of it "felt needs" (Progress Report 2). Khamsing calls it "internal conditions." Whatever the name and whether we will eventually agree on a few for it or not, it exists, as one journalist, calling himself "the literary reporter," observes after the October 6 incident:

... what we cannot see but can feel such as the atmosphere and attitude of the people both in political and social terms became more liberal. But at the same time, one thing that happened later is conflict in different groups of people regarding several issues, making common folk confused and uncertain about what is happening and how it will be in the future. ("Literary Circles" 116)

Unseen but nevertheless perceivable aspects of society are presented as powerful factors in shaping and understanding the country and its future. Economic frames, as with any other frame of understanding of modern Thai cultural history, are political in that they usually acknowledge one set of criteria for efficiency, legitimacy, and survival, and empower the group of people operating and gaining by them. Nikom's comments, through his symbols, on the changes in Thai society in the name of science, progress, or humanity are part of a new skepticism, growing out of political disillusionment and coinciding with postmodern sensibilities, that sees ideological problems in wholesale acceptance of imported cultures.

The naturalization and legitimization of Western constructions in Thai mentality as illustrated in Nikom Rayawa's works are conveyed through various local and even traditional images. But, as symbols with Western significance, they enter a discourse of power relationships and are read for their meaning on a hierarchical scale. Nikom's symbols too are part of a narrative of progress. They describe modern Thailand as a network of ideologies. They depict temporal modernization where time folds on top of itself rather than stretching upward and forward into a linear future. They map a cultural history not necessarily seen but, as "the literary reporter" describes, readily perceived and daily lived.

Therefore, Nikom Rayawa's symbols, as mentioned in the introduction, are a familiarization or *refamiliarization* rather than a *defamiliarization*. Their eventual effect is not to estrange but to make *familiar*, to make *known* in closer detail and with deeper understanding aspects of the modern Thai environment seen in daily life and heard about in various media. The shock value, the poetry, and the seeming newness of Nikom's metaphors and images make us hesitate, not to exoticize, but to acclimatize. Their innovative quality, if one chooses to look in these generally common images for such an element, is in their creation of modern myths. Out of elephants, lizards, farmers, etc. Nikom weaves an elaborate network of meanings that shows evolving significance growing out of the old, responding to new contexts and demands. The result is not unlike a suggestion given by Charles Murray 23 years earlier: "In assessing its village heritage, a developing country should consider whether it is seeing only its society as it has been or also a latent image of what its society might wish to become" (106). Though Nikom's project is nowhere near being a utopian vision, its literary engagement does look at the old, does anticipate the new,

and, when all is said and done, does develop stories that deny neither in the process of creation.