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## Nature in Service of Literature

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### Abstract

In Thai literature, the intrinsic value of nature is often overshadowed by its role of serving the literary craft and expressions of thought. This is particularly evident in the 'classical' literature prior to the transition to 'modern' Thai literature in the reign of King Rama VI in the second decade of this century. Names of flowers, plants and animals are put to poetic use for the sake of sound and rhythm, and for puns and plays on words. On another level, nature represents external objects which the poets associate with inner images in their own thoughts. Thai poets make prolific use of nature as symbols: examples range from the ingenious Thai literary convention known as "bot atsachan" (poetic episodes of love-making), to the universal use of the elements of nature in relation to human emotions and destiny. In the works of many modern Thai writers and poets, nature often takes on spiritual, sensual and philosophical tones. The result is a characteristically Thai synthesis of old and new values. This study is limited to the emotive-imaginative type of literature. "Lilit Phra Lor" and selected stories from the collection "Khunthong, You Will Return at Dawn" are used as exemplary works with special interest on the role of water.

The plenitude of flora, fauna and water has always been inherent in the Thai environment. There is a perennial presence of fruit, flowers and foliage and no noticeable absence of birds or fish in any season. The year-round greenness and warmth of the tropical climate has accustomed the Thai to the richness of the natural environment which is consequently taken for granted.

This luxuriance and predictability breeds an attitude of familiarity with nature which has a multifaceted influence on the Thai writer's approach to nature. In classical

literature, nature is abundantly employed, but scarcely for its own sake. The present change from plenty to threatening scarcity has effected certain changes of attitude in writers, but these changes are more evident in subject matter than in approach.

Of all the natural elements, water manifests the essence of change and unpredictability. For the Thai it is an unpredictability that lies within limits of reasonable expectation. There are floods and droughts, monsoons and a dry season, months of high water and months when the water level is very low: but even then, the low period is

a prelude to the coming of the first new rains. The consciousness of Thai writers and their handling of water deserves special interest beyond the scope of this paper.

While the natural environment would seem to be permanent, the Buddhist concepts of impermanence and the universal cycle of change are ever-present in the depths of Thai consciousness. This apparent contradiction of fact and philosophy results in a rarity of literary expression of purely aesthetic wonderment and ecstasy concerning nature. The role of the natural environment, especially in Thai classical works, thus differs widely from that of nature in the poetry of the English Romantics. The role of nature in classical Thai literature is one of service to literary craft creativity and expression. It must be remembered that, unlike modern Thai works, the classics belong to an age untouched by the ideas of Western writers.

There is a duality in writers which relates to the duality in Thai behaviour toward the natural environment in general. The Thai express respect and gratitude for nature in their vocabulary: rivers are Mae Nam (mother water); Mae Phra Phosop (mother spirit of grain) is an expression related to rice. Yet, they take much from nature while giving little in return. This is not due to insensitivity but rather to a familiarity as natural as that of child and mother.

Contemporary writers have developed an interesting synthesis of the ingrained and the newly acquired consciousnesses. They are primarily concerned with the plights of man and society; the environment is no longer taken for granted, since it has become clear that the plight of man stems from that of nature. But we have as yet very few writers who, like contemporary Poet

Angkarn Kalyanapongse, (1986: 22), challenge man with

Who would dare trade skies and oceans?  
Wondrous creation is this world of ours.  
These corporeal parts shall be laid  
Betwixt earth and sky in the final hours.

We are not owners of clouds or air.  
Or the heavens or any elements of earth.  
Man has made neither moon nor sun,  
Nor a single atom in a grain of sand.<sup>2</sup>

In making my statement on the role of nature in Thai literature, a partial exception must be made with regard to the four elements--and water in particular.

For this study, references to the text of *Lilit Phra Lor*, which is an early emotive-imaginative work in Thai literature, will be used as an example of a classical work. The choice is made because *Lilit Phra Lor* is exclusively Thai in origin--the legend can be traced to ancient Northern Thailand--and is regarded as a gem of classical Thai literature. It is written in poetry. Short stories from *Khunthong, You Will Return at Dawn* by Ussiri Dhammachote, poems from *The Whispering Songs of the Flute* by Nowarat Pongpaiboon, and the novel *Child of the Reed Lake* (Bung Ya Pa Yai) by Thepsiri Sooksopa will be used as examples of notable Thai mainstream works.

#### **Nature in the Service of the Literary Craft**

It would be an overgeneralization to say that familiarity with the natural environment and basic Buddhist consciousness allow the Thai people to value nature more for its usefulness than for its intrinsic value. Like all generalizations, this statement contains an element of risk because there are always significant exceptions. However, it is necessary within this paper's scope.

At this point, it must be made clear that this interest in usefulness does not equate with insensitivity to the beauties of nature. Rather, it implies that nature provides unlimited raw material and inspiration for the art of crafting. It is a Thai tradition to improve upon nature with craft. Admiration of craftsmanship overshadows that of nature. Thus, flowers are artistically arranged into imaginative forms: garlands are intricately fashioned for specific purposes: fruits are carved into flowers, animals, or even miniature replicas of themselves. By the same token, names of flowers, animals, and plants serve the craft of writing in such classical poetic conventions *chom dong* (admiring the forests) *chom suan* (admiring the gardens), *chom nok* (admiring the birds), *chom pla* (admiring the fish), and *long song* (bathing by royal characters in ponds, lakes or rivers).

Representing very clearly the utilization of nature these conventions belong in classical works, all of which are written in verse forms. Names of birds, flowers, plants and animals are used for their musical qualities and imagery in the composition of puns and alliterative plays on words, and for associations between sound and image. Poets string unlikely coincidences of nature together, frequently ignoring seasonal realities. This is not a far cry from the craft of exotic garlands and intricate floral arrangements. A short transliterated excerpt from *Lilit Phra Lor* ([1914] 1971 : 25) illustrates these techniques :

*siang* nori sarika satawa duwao  
kaektao *klao* klingklaong nok iang ong  
ku kiang

This excerpt contains the names of seven birds (in roman type), describing the sounds and sights of birds as heard and seen by two attendants of the twin princesses on their journey through a forest. The names lend themselves to prosody that demands set pattern of intonation, rhythm and internal rhymes, plus alliteration.

Puns and alliteration often reach the level of verbal acrobatics, though never at the cost of gracefulness. It is the Thai nature to handle their crafts with loving care,

*lang ling lod mai lang ling*  
*lae luk ling long ching luk mai*  
*ling lom lai lom ting ling lot ni na*  
*lae luk ling lang lai lod lieolang ling*

*Lang ling* means some monkeys and is the name of a vine; *luk ling* means young monkeys, while *luk mai* is fruit; *ling lom* is a small animal, while *lom* means wind (op. cit., 72). (The complexity of this verse is such that I shall omit needlessly lengthy explanation.)

The innate pride that man takes in his art often appears in *chom dong* episodes. In classical works, the beauty of the 'natural' is not infrequently admired for its man-made order and intricacy; in *Lilit Phra Lor* (ibid., 24), as the princesses attendants travel from the forested mountains :

They look back and see  
Tall trees growing as neatly  
As great spired palaces.

The classical poets have left masterly touches of imagery in human characters through comparison with nature, but it is the human element that matters. When the two princesses hear of the extraordinary beauty of *Phra Lor* (ibid., 7),

They recline

As supine and listless as golden vines.

It is worth noting that the vines are not ordinary green vines; befitting the beauty of the princesses, the vines are 'golden'. It is also worth noting that the poet is sensitive to the linear beauty and movement of nature.

The classical conventions of stringing together names of plants, flowers and animals for poetic effect are no longer in use, but modern writers still draw on the senses, movement and expectancy of nature to give their verse subtlety and beauty. Contemporary poet Nowarat Pongpaiboon (1983 a: 17) creates his own gentle 'nature' poems from such material, and in return he enriches nature with the beauty of his own compassionate vision.

Cold mountain  
 always swaddled in white  
 so tenderly cradled  
 to keep out the cold  
 one hand holds the moon  
 one hand moves a star  
 draw a white piece of flannel  
 to shade the flame of the sun  
 cold sea  
 also mantled in white  
 rocking loving lullabies  
 to keep loneliness away  
 wait just a while  
 the sun hasn't lit his torch  
 bear a bit with the cold  
 soon it will be dawn

Painter-novelist Tepsiri Sooksopa, known as 'a poet who does not write in verse' transforms the visual details and subtleties of nature as seen through his painter's eye into an intoxicating lyricism of words and imagery to create an unadulterated eye view of a child.

The meadows and the forest frothed up and up from the ground. Trees trunks bigger than circles made by grown men's arms grew so crowdedly by the lazy river that a little path had to curve and meander to avoid them. This morning they waited calmly for the warm sunshine, wanting to show off their brand-new leaves whose abundance had confused the insects out of their appetite.

The village land was lush... my heart danced and knocked inside my breast.

Nowarat and Thepsiri are among the few who 'give' in return for what they 'take'. Their familiarity with nature in their work is filled with tenderness.

#### Nature in the Service of the Literary Imagination

*Associations.* The association of natural surroundings with inner thoughts is universal. Thai poets of the past created a literary genre known as *nirat*, long poems in which a character, or the poet himself laments his lot when he travels away from home or his beloved. The mood is one of nostalgia, and nature plays a prominent role as a reminder of his past, or of people he has left behind. In *Lilit Phra Lor* (op. cit., 67), a description of Phra Lor's emotions during his journey to Muang Song is a precursor of the *nirat*. Here one sees how nature is the essential ingredient in the nostalgic mood:

Fragrance of wildflowers  
 Fills the air and my senses  
 With memories of your perfume.  
 Two birds perch in a pair,  
 Feeding beak to beak,  
 As loving as my sweet love.

In the fragrance of flowers and the sight of birds, nature provides material for all the senses, and the poet uses it to evoke the sensuality of his beloved.

In *Lilit Phra Lor*, passion that leads to a tragic end differs entirely from the profound love between Phra Lor and his mother, the depth and scope of which remains unrivaled in any other Thai literary masterpiece. To me, it is significant that while flowers and birds remind Phra Lor of the wife he left behind, water of the River Kalong stirs thoughts of the love between mother and son. Indeed, the richest verses depict Phra Lor on the bank of the River Kalong. Similar in concept but different in method is the association seen in *When the Wind Brings Rain*, a short story from Ussiri Dhammachote's collection, *Khunthong You Will Return at Dawn* (1981 a: 37). The story of a boy dying from a snake bite begins with

Our cart is crossing over a stream.  
I know from the whispering of the  
water. It is soft and dreamy like my  
mother's song when she sings me to  
sleep. I hear it now...drifting, drifting  
from... I wonder where...

When the wind brings rain  
the wood's fragrance  
sweetens the streams  
where bright flowers dream  
along with leaves  
of dark, deep green...

"Are you singing, Mother?" My  
eyelids are so heavy that I have to force  
them open to ask. Mother shakes her  
head and holds me even closer to her.  
The eyelids close with a will of their  
own. Tired...

Here we see the whispering of the  
water recalling memories of the mother's

song, heralding the closeness of her presence. We see the close familiarity with nature. The song itself is filled with nature's sensuousness. Like a stream, images of nature lead the song to its destination in the last line, 'our home'. The human factor always has final importance. Like Nowarat, Ussiri 'gives' to nature by expressing his sensitivity of its values.

*Stylization.* The Thai have a tendency to improve upon nature through imagination as well as through craft. Stylization, which invests the mundane with magic, can be seen in architectural adornment, art motifs, and Thai classical dances and their costumery. In poetry the depiction of Phra Lor is the stylization of a man to the extent that his beauty transcends usual possibility. Similarly, the cock that Phu Chao sends to lure Phra Lor is nature in stylized form. The description of its extraordinary beauty, bright colors and the gem-like shine of its feather, is a poetic masterpiece. The cock is chosen by Phu Chao above all other forest fowl and endowed with magic. On a deeper level, it is a symbol of vanity and temptations of the senses. In modern literature, however, one very rarely finds such stylization of nature. Technology and science have dealt traumatic blows to dreams of perfect beauty.

*Symbols.* The use of nature as a source of metaphors is universal, but there is a time-honored and uniquely Thai convention built entirely upon the imaginative use of symbols. Known as *bot atsachan* or *bot sangwat*, it is an ingenious way of describing love-making in imaginative, exciting and versatile ways without being explicit. Floods, rain, waves, wind, storms, fire, trees, flowers, bees and other natural elements and, infre-

quently, man-made objects such as boats and kites, are freely used as symbols. *Lilit Phra Lor* is so rich in such imagery and symbolic expression that the act of crossing the River Kalong has come to symbolize an irreversible decision. The two princesses in the narrative symbolize the irresistible lure of the exotic and the unknown, and the magic cock represents sensual temptation. *Lilit Phra Lor* (op. cit., 137) offers numerous examples:

Bathing in the waters of heaven  
Bears no comparison to bathing  
In my beloved's lake.  
In her lake of pleasure  
The fish frolics and leaps,  
Touching the opening lotus.

The banks of the crystal lake  
Spread, exquisite and unmarred,  
With mounds fairer than heaven's hills.

The following passage (ibid., 139) creates a climactic mood:

Thunderous skies shook to the heavens.  
Earth shuddered as though ready to burst.  
Tumultuous waves churned and foamed.  
Trees swayed and trembled in tremendous storm.

Here, participation of the elements is all important in endowing the act with grandeur. The element of water is almost always present in *bot atsachan*. Although frequently employed in classical works, this literary convention is not found in modern literature.

Throughout *The Whispering Songs of the Flute*, Nowarat Pongpaiboon (1983 b: 40) draws symbolic imagery from nature to convey his philosophy and thoughts. Here, water symbolizes the perceptual mind:

Don't ripple the water  
I want to see its infinite clarity  
seeing deep to the moving depths

as deep as the depths of the mind  
as deep as the end of the skies  
or deeper than my eyes  
on the gleam of sun-sparkling bamboo  
leaves  
the whispering flute spins soft sweet  
songs

Little insect, do not fidget  
don't ripple the water  
breeze, don't ruffle the surface  
let me drink the depth of thought  
who is disturbing the water?  
my mind, do you quiver?  
clarity disperses  
how life ripples like water

*Emotions, Life and Destiny*. Emotions are expressed with controlled intensity through ingenious touches that relate to the natural environment, especially water. When Phra Lor (op. cit., 43) leaves his kingdom on his doomed quest, his mother weeps until

Tears stream like running brooks.  
Flow upon flow,

Until her heart is parched and dry.  
And as for the populace (ibid., 60),

The kingdom grows as cold as water  
At the flows of tears.

To the Thai, water conveys a cool sense of relief from heat and exhaustion. The fact that its connotations are usually positive probably intensifies its few negative connotations in *Lilit Phra Lor* and the stories of Ussiri. In Ussiri's *Morning in Early Monsoon* (1981 b: 75), a young woman holding her baby waits for the return of her bandit husband. A policeman who has come to arrest him sits beside her with a rifle resting across his knees.

It had been raining ceaselessly...  
persistently, and as the rain-swollen  
water brimmed over the edge of the

pond in front of the hut, Buarum thought of the return of her mate with a trembling heart. Her heart... she could feel it trembling. It trembled like the ripples of light on the surface of water that was ruffled by the falling rain.

And then again,

She sank back into her own thoughts while she watched the fragile, wind-blown threads of rain swaying out there in the lonely space between the sky and the fields.

In Thai literature as in the literatures of other countries, nature is often used to describe and symbolize human life and destiny. In *Lilit Phra Lor* (op. cit., 81-82) the River Kalong flows fast and strong, rather like the hero's voluntary moves toward his own end. It divides his homeland from the hostile kingdom of the twin princesses. In effect, it foretells fate, knowledge of which is in his own heart.

May the fast flowing water  
Of this swift river named Kalong  
Circle, should my life be lost  
To flow free, should I be free to return.  
At his words the water swirls,  
Tinged with the redness of blood.  
His heart grows heavy with sorrow,  
As though weighted with a hundred trees.

In Ussiri's *It is Time to Leave This Khlong* (1981 c: 25), the dirty urban canal somehow takes the heroine into its life. Here we see once again that it is the human element that gives the water its "life." At this point, one sees the contemporary writer's consciousness of pollution of the natural environment. It is a good sign that he neither condemns nor preaches: rather, he incorporates pollution sensitively into the emotions of his character.

The night air reeked of the smell of dirty water and spread an invisible blanket of unhealthy darkness over all things. City lights seeped dimly under the bridge and made the black water gleam in the darkness...

The rhythmic dipping of a paddle in the water had a desolate sound. The boat that was passing downstream was paddled by a woman, with a man sitting in the front end. Short poles held up a low roof in the middle of the boat. There were curtains hanging from the roof.

Sound of paddle strokes was part of the essence of this *khlong* life. People came from other places and met here despite its filth and pollution. Lives that floated on it and existed along it seemed polluted, useless and incomplete...

The cigarette butt that her son threw into the water sizzled and went out. She watched it drift slowly out of sight, like the debris and refuse that the dark water carried past her hut every day and night. Discarded, unwanted things floated by on the *khlong* whose nightly sound of paddles rhythmically dipping in the water...

Ussiri also feels the inherence of destiny in nature. The following passage is from *Nightfall on the Waterway* (1981 d: 97).

The child's body was horribly bloated and, in the pallor of the fugitive moonbeam, had taken on a nauseating tinge of green. It was hard to imagine what this little girl had been like in the freshness of life, what bright innocence must have been hers before she became this festering corpse in the course of

the sad, inevitable process that would finally make her one with the ever-moving current of this *Khlong*.

After a man takes a gold chain from the putrefying body of the child,

The corpse, freed by a push from the paddle, was drifting slowly downstream, further and further away, in silent finality.

Though water serves the writer in conveying his sense of destiny and its finality, it also illustrates a point that I have already made in this paper that the role of water (and other natural elements) in Thai literature is deeper and broader than that of mere service to literature. Nevertheless, this 'service' represents the limits of the scope of this paper.

*Mysticism.* Thai literature is rich with mysticism, and so is *Lilit Phra Lor*. Nature and the elements are employed with masterly touches of surrealism to evoke the dark and the mystical. With the movement of whole forests of tall trees, wind and air, Phu Chao sends waves upon magical waves to charm Phra Lor. Phu Chao's forest spirits invade the spiritual territories of Phra Lor's kingdom to subdue resistance to the magical spell over Phra Lor (op. cit., 42), as follows:

Forest spirits create fire. Smoke chokes the skies. Mighty spells and magic. Subdue spirits of the city. They cry news to the wind. Who stirs storms in the skies. And blows with terrible speed. To the kingdom's guardian spirits. The sky turns deadly yellow. Air grows murky with smoke. Lightning splits thunderous skies. The city's heart writhes in panic. As though its breast would burst...

The foreboding of the River Kalong is an unforgettable passage of mysticism.

When the two attendants of the princesses enter the domain of Phu Chao (ibid., 20-21), the bright smiling forestscape turns fearfully ominous—a masterpiece of the poetic surreal.

They see streams swamps bogs and pools. Host of crocodiles by the banks. Their heads half submerged in water. Water elephants pierce men's reflections with their tusks. Mermaids drag men under the water. Their victims roll their eyes. Wide and round with fear. Strangled by the mermaid's hair...

Modern Thai literature inherits the ancient legacy of the mystic in nature. When Tepsiri's child-hero of the novel *Child of the Reed Lake* tells his friends about the reed lake, his imagination evokes echoes of the ancients' mystical surrealism.

But with water, we don't really see much. It's dark and cold. The deeper you get the darker and colder. Dark, dark like night. See for yourself, he said, dive down and see. He alone was awake at night by the reedy lake when people were all asleep.

"At night black birds walk and black flowers open their petals on the bank of the big lake and black winds blow through all the black reeds. Come with me if you don't believe me," he said.

### Conclusion

Thai literature, especially in its classical forms, shows both familiarity and objectivity in the Thai attitude toward nature. This attitude has its origins in the plenitude of nature and the Buddhist concepts of impermanence and cyclic change. Thai writers use nature as both means and material for their craft, and for purposes specific to their works. In the classical literary conventions of admiring nature (i.e.,



wilderness, gardens, and birds), in symbolic descriptions of love-making, and in the poetic genre of *nirat*, nature is abundantly used to lend musicality to sound, design to imagery, and associations to symbols. The natural elements, especially water, frequently portray powerful emotions and mysticism, but nature is rarely glorified for its own sake. Thus man and his emotions and destiny are the prime subject matter, and nature is its medium.

In the present change from nature's plenty to scarcity, and in the resulting hardship, the ingrained familiarity with nature has undergone a new synthesis. A product of this synthesis is an awakening to the worth of nature, but not so much to nature's intrinsic aesthetic and spiritual values as to nature's importance to the survival of man and society.

Modern writers still use the natural environment for their literary purposes and craft, but they 'give back' what they take from nature. Writers like Ussiri Dhammachote touch our conscience with the hardship of those whose lives are deprived by scarcity and pollution. Painter-novelist Tepsiri rejuvenates our senses and imagination with the freshness and vitality of his own visual and sensual perception of unadulterated nature. Poet Nowarat Pongpaiboon conveys to us the glory and subtleties of nature through his use of nature as a vernacular for his thoughts. Poet-artist Ankarn Kalayanapongse fills us with wonder at the greatness of nature. Judging from the works of these writers, there are optimistic prospects for the role of modern literature in the modern perception of nature.

## Notes

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2. All poems and excerpts of works used in this paper were translated by Chamnongsri L. Rutnin.

## The Author

Chamnongsri L. Rutnin (Khunying Chamnongsri Rutnin) was born in Bangkok. From the age of twelve she spent six years at school in England. Back in Thailand at 18, she worked as a journalist prior to spending fifteen years as a full-time housewife. She then attended Ramkhamhaeng University, graduating with a B.A. degree in Humanities (First Class Honours). She has had experiences as a writer, literary translator, broadcaster, video director, and special lecturer with interest in literature and visual art.

Though she writes prose in both English and Thai, English is her medium for poetry. In 1982, she won the John A. Eakin Foundation award for her drama script, "Sin Saen Tawan" (Where Dusk Ends). Her collection of poetry and prose tales, "On the White Empty Page", was published in 1988. Her poems and tales, together with those of Nowarat Pongpaibul, have been put to orchestral music by Composer Dnu Huntrakul and commercially recorded in 1988 under the title, "Raindrop and Lotus Leaf".

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