

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Indian Myth, Korean Wave, and ‘Thainess’: Politics of Hybridity in Thai Literature in the 21st Century

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Abstract

‘Thainess’ [*khwam-pen-Thai*] or Thai identity has long been a state-constructed ideology linked to nationalist sentiment. However, in the 21st century, internal politics and globalisation have come to challenge its monopoly. Against this backdrop, reinventing classical literature and folklore has emerged as a way to reimagine and rethink ‘Thainess’ in Thai literature. This holds particular relevance since transnational cultures, ranging from classical Indian mythology to the contemporary Korean wave, continue to be hybridised and reconstructed. This paper examines the hybridity of Thainess in contemporary Thai literature, focusing on two different genres: fantasy and fanfiction. Firstly, I explore the fantasy novel series ‘*Nawa Himmaphan*’ [New Himmaphan] (2013–2018), depicting an apocalypse and creating a new world inspired by the Indian mythical forest named Himavanta. The novel adapts and reinterprets the roles and meanings of Deva (the god) and Asura (the demon) in an upside-down future. Secondly, I examine an adaptation of the *Ramakien*, the Thai version of the Indian *Ramayana*, published on the internet and transformed into Boys Love (BL) fanfiction referencing Korean idols called ‘*Huachai Thotsakan KAIHUN*’ [The Heart of Thotsakan KAIHUN] (2016–2017). It reconstructs the *Ramakien*, challenging its traditional meaning while asserting the aesthetics of K-pop fans. Through the lens of the hybridity framework, this paper argues that these texts not only illustrate cross-regional cultural hybridisation but also challenge the top-down construction of Thainess. Hybridity creates a ‘liminal space’ for Thainess, establishing a new power structure that highlights the significance of marginalised voices against the backdrop of political polarisation and the influence of transnational flows.

Keywords: Thainess; Thai Literature; Korean Wave; Indian Myth; Hybridity; Boys Love

Introduction

In September 2021, the music video (MV) for ‘LALISA’ by Lisa, a Thai singer who achieved international recognition as part of the Korean girl group BLACKPINK, gained millions of views immediately upon its release. By showcasing ‘Thainess’ [ความเป็นไทย; *khwam-pen-Thai*], the music video became a sensation in Thailand, evoking national pride as it showcased Thai culture on the international stage, albeit within the K-Pop genre. However, a scene where Lisa wears a traditional headdress resembling a Chada, the coronet of Thai royals, sparked controversy. Nonetheless, the explanation offered was that it is different from a Chada.

I begin the discussion with this topic, as it serves as a perfect springboard for debates surrounding how national identity intertwines with global trends, leading to a dynamic interplay of internal and external contexts. Evidently, the MV demonstrates a sense of ‘hybridity,’ resulting in contestation and negotiation of meanings. Similar to Lisa’s MV, Thai literature in the 21st century embodies another sphere marked by several cultural hybridisations, drawing from Indian myth, the Korean Wave, and Thainess. Indian culture is deeply intertwined with Thainess; pre-modern Indian cultural influences have profoundly

shaped the Southeast Asian region for centuries and have become part of Thai identity, such as Buddhism, which is considered a pillar of the Thai nation. Moreover, these cultural elements undergo evolution and adaptation in their interpretations to serve specific domestic needs. A notable example is the Hindu god and the narrative of the *Ramayana*, known as the *Ramakien* [รามเกียรติ์] in Thai, which is deeply embedded in the Thai monarchy's preservation of power and legitimacy.

In addition, since the early 2000s, globalisation and the influence of transnational flows have come to shape Thai culture. The 'Korean Wave' [한류; *Hallyu*] has been particularly influential, mixing with Thai cultures in various ways. The fervent fandom of K-Pop idols, for instance, has significantly fuelled the popularity of fanfiction and Boys Love (hereafter BL) stories. The trend of embracing and consuming Korean aesthetics and beauty standards through cosmetics or plastic surgery has become commonplace in Thai daily life. Juxtaposing global trends, Thailand has struggled with political conflict since the mid-2000s, marked by tensions between conservative and progressive forces, culminating in coups, violence, and protests. Consequently, the concept of Thainess becomes challenging to monopolise, as these dynamics are also embedded within literary works.

Against those backdrops, reinventing classical literature and folklore has been one way to (re)imagine and (re)think 'Thainess'. Writers do not only connect and hybridise traditional elements in new contexts but also challenge them in different ways, especially in the genres of fantasy and fanfiction. One example is *Nawa Himmaphan* [นาวะหิมพานต์] or *New Himmaphan*, a fantasy fiction series about an apocalypse and the recreation of a new world in the mythical forest 'Himmaphan' [หิมพานต์]. Derived from Indian folklore and embedded in Thai culture, this work reimagines mythical characters from Thai beliefs, wherein the god and demon shift their roles. Similarly, *Huachai Thotsakan KAIHUN* [หัวใจทศกัณฐ์ KAIHUN] or *The Heart of Thotsakan KAIHUN* is internet-based fanfiction catering to fans of the K-Pop idol, Kai-Hun. Interestingly, this story also reconstructs the *Ramakien*, presenting a challenging narrative where the demon king is the protagonist in a BL storyline. Indeed, hybridity in these texts becomes a site of negotiation regarding the essence of Thainess. The interpretation of its meaning and the process of mixing warrant further exploration.

Therefore, this paper aims to examine these two texts by analysing them within the socio-cultural context of Thailand during the mid-2010s. The primary questions revolve around the reconstruction of 'Thainess' from classical literature and folklore as they are adapted into new texts. How does the political and social context, both internal and influenced by transnational cultures of the 21st century, intertwine with these texts? I argue that these works not only illustrate cultural hybridisation across regions but also challenge top-down notions of Thainess. The hybridity in these texts creates a 'liminal space' of Thainess, where different features merge to decentralise long-established power-based relationships. It also creates a new power structure in which dominant ideologies are contested and negotiated while peripheral perspectives gain prominence. The politics of 'hybridising Thainess', therefore, highlights the significance of these marginal voices against the backdrop of political polarisation and the influence of transnational flows. Against this backdrop, I will briefly discuss the key framework of 'hybridity' and situate it within the context of Thainess, Thai literature, and 21st century Thailand before analysing both texts.

Hybridity, Globalisation, Popular Culture, and Thai Literature

Hybridity is the process and outcome of blending cultural domains, resulting in new cultural forms. Homi Bhabha (2004) theorises this concept as a source of tension between colonisers and the colonised, as it challenges the claims of cultural authenticity and purity. When cultures undergo hybridisation, colonisers experience anxiety as the perceived superiority and purity of their culture are called into question. Bhabha calls this 'the Third Space' or 'a liminal space,' representing an in-between space that blurs the boundaries between binaries. Building upon this, Marwan Kraidy (2002: 317) underlines that the Third Space is not merely a site of cultural mixing but is also a space where several forms of power are negotiated. In short, cultural hybridisation has a political function as a subversive process of authenticity against the status quo of the dominant culture while engendering new forms of power.

Hybridity has emerged as a key phenomenon in the era of globalisation, facilitating cultural exchanges beyond national boundaries. In contrast to the notion of global homogenisation driven by the influence of Western culture, especially Americanisation, Arjun Appadurai (2010 [1996]: 17–19) argues that globalisation involves mixing cultures beyond the singularity of one culture or nation, giving rise to new forms

of cultures. This perspective acknowledges the diverse poles of cultural hybridisation. In the 21st century, Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2020 [2003]) notes that the gradual shift in the global balance of power towards Asia has resulted in cultural flows from East Asia, with China assuming a dominant role in global cultural hybridisation. Within Southeast Asia, Japan and Korea have been major cultural exporters, with the Korean Wave emerging as a pivotal trend that has significantly shaped Southeast Asian cultures since the early 2000s (see Ainslie and Lim 2015; Ryoo 2009; Ubonrat and Shin 2007).

Similar to the colonial context, navigating the politics of hybridity in the globalised age continues to challenge notions of purity and authenticity, particularly concerning nationalism and national identity. Pieterse claims that globalisation means ‘we are all migrants’ because of the ease of connection between transportation and communication across borders. Consequently, hybridity “subverts nationalism because it privileges border crossing. It subverts identity politics such as ethnicity or other claims to purity and authenticity” (Pieterse 2020: 58). As a result, the fixed nature of national identity, often constructed during the nation-building process, becomes contested and subject to negotiation.

In Thailand, popular culture serves as a prime example of cultural hybridity influenced by globalisation. This phenomenon is evident in Thai films, particularly following the 1997 economic crisis, when Hollywood films began mixing with elements of Thai royalty and folk culture. Amporn Jirattikorn (2003) notes that the so-called ‘national film’ *Suriyothai* (สุริโยทัย; 2001, dir. M.C. Chatrichalerm Yukol) reflects this economic crisis-driven hybridity and the commodification of Thainess. Similarly, Krittaya Na Nongkhai and Siriporn Phakdeephassook (2017) illustrate that protagonists in Thai action-adventure films made between 1997 and 2010 embody what they term ‘hybrid heroes,’ elements of both Thai and Western heroic traits.

Although cultural hybridity is evident in later periods and is also present in Thai literary works, there has been limited discourse on hybridity in Thai literature, especially in the 21st century. Some studies have explored the hybridity of Thai literature along with the colonial influence and hybridity of Western literature in early Thai prose writing during the early 20th century. Examples include *Nithan Thong-In* [นิทานทองอิน] by King Rama VI, which was adapted from *Sherlock Holmes*, and the fantasy fiction work *Nang Neramit* [นางนเรมิต] by Khru Liam (see Harrison 2009, 2014b). Apart from this, there are some studies of cultural hybridisation of the adaptation of Thai literature through other media in the 21st century. For instance, the hybridity of Disney, Japanese cartoons, and Thai classical literature is evident in a TV animation adaptation of the *Ramakien* titled *Hanuman Chansamon* [หนุมานชาญสมร] (Siriporn 2005). Moreover, ‘edutainment’ cartoon books demonstrate cultural hybridisation, blending Thai literature and folktales, which serve educational competitiveness and the desire for ‘bilingual’ or ‘inter’ children (Siriporn 2015). Yet, the study of Thai literary texts through the lens of hybridity is still rare.

In fact, what is referred to as ‘Thai’ literature¹ has been subject to a process of hybridisation for ages. Classical Thai literature predominantly draws its origins from foreign stories, such as the *Ramakien* from India or *Inao* [อินทนา] from Javanese tales. These stories have been transmitted orally, blending with local cultures with a long history of adaptation. Besides the influence of Western literary styles, many Thai writers continue to draw from old traditions, hybridising them with new forms (Harrison 2001). In modern literary works, revisiting classical literature often entails hybridising old elements with new contexts. A key example is *Lilit Phra Lor* [ลิลิตพระลอ], a story that has been adapted across centuries from Ayutthaya to Bangkok poetry and reconstructed as contemporary novels (see Soison 2003). In the sphere of novel writing, Kaewkao [แก้วแก้ว] emerged as a popular author during the 1980s who adapted and hybridised classical literature and folklore such as *Sangthong* [สังข์ทอง] and *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* [ขุนช้างขุนแผน] in her novels (see Jeeranat 2007). In the 21st century, authors such as Pongsakorn [พงศกร] and Prapt [ปรารถ], among others, continue this tradition of hybridising classical stories and folklore with new elements to cater to contemporary readers. Nonetheless, despite common recognition of cultural hybridisation (see

¹It should be noted here that the word literature in Thai has two terms: *wannakhadi* [วรรณคดี] and *wannakam* [วรรณกรรม]. There is a lot of debate around the definition and differences between both terms since *wannakhadi*, coined in 1914, is originally reserved for a ‘good’ book, whereas *wannakam* attempts to include all kinds of writings. In fact, *wannakhadi* has been used in general to refer to ancient works and forms, while *wannakam* refers to modern works like novels and short stories. This paper does not intend to discuss this definition and separate the classic from the modern. I use literature here in the broadest sense of literary works.

Nittaya 2023; Ruenruthai 2017), comprehensive studies on hybridity in 21st-century Thai literary texts are scarce

I argue that this lack of scholarly discourse on hybridity stems from two reasons. The first reason is the strong influence of nationalism in the Thai literary field. This is due to the fact that since the launch of the nation-building project, Thai literature, especially classical works, has been revered as ‘national literature’ and a key component of Thai identity. Consequently, a paradigm was established wherein literature was perceived to include only works deemed national treasures and of high cultural value. This perception fosters a belief among Thais to ‘protect’ literature as an integral part of Thainess (see Jackson 1991; Manas 1995; Smyth 2000). Rachel Harrison (2014a) emphasises that criticism of Thai literature is often discouraged. In the Thai literary sphere, there has been a strong emphasis on close readings of poetic aesthetics; meanwhile, ‘Western theories’ are often viewed as ‘the beast’ while ‘the beauty’ lies in an aesthetic reading.

Secondly, the conventional reading of adapted classical works is regarded as a Thai literary convention [ખન; *khanop*]. Based on the assumption of the continuity of Thainess, terms like transmission or continuity [การสืบทอด; *kan suepthot*] and creativity [การสร้างสรรค์; *kan sangsan*] or creative perpetuation [การสืบสรรค; *kan suepsan*] can commonly be found in the main literary studies in the Thai language. Arguably, this tradition is rooted in the customary approach to creating Thai literary works, where poets often draw inspiration from earlier poets as a form of homage, akin to paying respect to a teacher [ครู; *khru*] (Trisilpa 2000). Although this practice demonstrates the ‘hybrid nature’ of Thai literature through the fusion of prior convention and new creation, it is also intertwined with nationalist ideas discussed earlier, reaffirming the long-standing status of Thai literature over time. Cultural hybridisation thus emerges as a phenomenon within the process of the creative perpetuation of Thai literary cultures, which have adapted to the globalised world (Nittaya 2023). In my view, this perspective leaves room for exploring relationships among the hybrid features that have become increasingly diversified in the age of globalisation.

I argue that the hybridity framework offers a valuable conceptual tool for understanding and challenging the dynamics and politics inherent in literature beyond a nationalist perspective, as it allows for the exploration of the complex entanglement of transnational cultures and the reconstruction of Thainess in the 21st century. This is because Thai literature in this century is intricately intertwined with global trends. As Suradech Chotiudompant (2009, 2014) notes, diverse genres like postmodern and magical realism have become an integral part of Thai literature after 2000, with several stories reflecting connections to cosmopolitanism, globalisation, capitalism, and urbanisation that extend beyond national boundaries. Natthanai Prasannam (2019) also highlights that the BL trend, originating in Japan, became a dominant genre in Thailand as well. Therefore, hybridity proves to be a valuable framework to unpack these complicated issues, relationships, and social contexts more thoroughly, revealing the nuanced politics of hybridity.

Politics of ‘Thainess’ in the 21st Century: Voices from the Periphery, Transnational Cultures, and Political Polarisation

‘Thainess’ is an abstract idea that remains subject to varying interpretations and revisions, commonly characterised by a top-down approach that emphasises Thai identity as a means of asserting authority and independent nationhood. Thainess can be traced back to the (semi)colonial period, when Siamese monarchs modernised the country in order to establish an independent state (Anderson 2016 [1983]: 99–100). King Rama VI (r. 1910–1925) advocated that Thainess is associated with ‘nation, religion, and monarchy.’ After the abolition of the Absolute Monarchy, Phibun’s government during WWII redefined Thainess with a chauvinistic view that emphasised the ‘purity’ of the Thai ethnicity (Reynolds 2006). However, Thainess underwent further redefinition during the Cold War period, as anxieties surrounding Communism prompted a return to royalist ideologies. This trend was further reinforced during King Rama IX’s reign (r.1946–2016). Although the idea of Thainess promoted by Bangkok elites has been successfully integrated into a nationalist narrative, the notion of the ‘Other within’, as Thongchai (2000) argues, remains prevalent, as certain groups fail to align with this definition. This can be seen in the case of the Overseas Chinese, a minority ethnic group that has at times been perceived as a national threat, leading to attempts at their assimilation under the umbrella of Thainess.

In the 21st century, the static and top-down definition of Thainess has been challenged by peripheral voices, transnational cultures, and political divisions. Firstly, there has been a noticeable amplification of

voices from the periphery. Following the end of the Cold War, a decline in anti-communism sentiment enabled greater space for ethnic pluralism and discourse on the ‘ASEAN community’. This allowed ethnic groups to preserve their distinct identities rather than assimilate into a singular Thai identity (Saichol 2020). Meanwhile, local knowledge and regional identities began to play a significant role on the national stage, especially in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis, where they were framed as a counterbalance to globalisation (Reynolds 2002). This related to the second point in that widespread globalisation and digitalisation further challenged established notions of Thainess. The rise of transnational cultures, such as human rights and LGBTQ+ movements, has played a critical role in disrupting the monopoly of Thainess and promoting a greater acceptance of the ‘cultural diversity’ paradigm. The rise of the internet and new media empowered diverse groups to express their identities rather than being forced to suppress them under a monopolised identity (Baker and Pasuk 2022: 330).

A prominent illustration of this phenomenon is evident in the influence of Korean popular culture, or K-Pop, in Thailand. South Korea’s 1997 ‘IMF Crisis’ triggered a strategic economic shift towards exporting Korean popular culture—the ‘Korean Wave’. China and Southeast Asia emerged as strategic locations for this policy, with its success reverberating throughout the Southeast Asian region (Ubonrat and Shin 2007). In Thailand, K-dramas became part of Thai free TV in the early 2000s, and the national success of the historical drama *Dae Jang Geum*, or *Jewel of the Palace*, aired in 2005–2006 marked a key milestone for K-pop culture in Thai society. Moreover, the immense popularity of K-music as well as individual K-idols such as Rain and Se7en and boy/girl groups like SHINee, TVXQ, and Girl Generation, among others, has contributed to the shaping of new cultural trends among Thai audiences from the 2000s to the 2010s. To this day, the success of K-pop in Thailand continues to exert a significant influence on aesthetic values and tourism levels.

The Korean Wave phenomenon interacts with Thainess, creating a new space for the negotiation between transnational cultures and Thainess. As highlighted by Ubonrat Siriyuvasak and Shin Hyunjoon (2007: 125), the Korean Wave projects positive images of the Korean culture and the nation as an appealing space, leading Thai audiences, comprising mainly middle-class youths, to engage in transnational activities such as fan meetings. Furthermore, given that K-Pop represents a new form of modernity distinct from the West and is a modernising project by Bangkok’s elites, Koreanness has become a significant reference point for negotiating identity with Thainess. Mary J. Ainslie (2016: 12) notes that Thai K-Pop audiences, across both urban and rural areas, freely imagine their identities beyond the official hierarchical definition of Thainess, embracing hybridity with transnational culture.

Lastly, political polarisation since the late 2000s stands as the most significant challenge to a unified sense of Thainess. As Prime Minister between 2001 and 2006, Thaksin Shinawatra advocated for progressive and populist policies that challenged not only conservative and bureaucratic structures but also traditional notions of Thai cultural identity (Ruth 2021: 277). This ignited conservative protests in 2005–2006, led by the ‘Yellow Shirt’ demonstrators, with the yellow symbolising the auspicious colour of King Rama IX. They accused Thaksin’s government of alleged corruption and disloyalty. In response, a pro-Thaksin group emerged, pledging their allegiance to the colour red, before a coup d’état led by the military took place on 19 September 2006. Subsequently, polarisation among Thais became deeply entrenched, evident in the Yellow Shirt protests that attempted to overthrow Thaksin’s party following the 2008 election. Political turmoil resurfaced with the emergence of the Red Shirt movement from 2009–2010. This was followed by the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) mobilising the middle class and conservative protesters against Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin’s sister, in 2013–2014, culminating in another coup in 2014.

Accordingly, polarisation has affected the idea of Thainess by showcasing different definitions of identity for each group. I argue that this contestation reflects a broader anxiety regarding the ‘loss of the nation.’ Given that Thailand was never colonised by the West, the discourse surrounding the ‘loss of territories’ emerges as a primary source of anxiety for Thais during national crises (Strate 2015; Thongchai, 1994, 2016). Unity [ความสามัคคี; *khwam samakkhi*] is perceived as the goal and is often invoked as a means to overcome the national crisis, as evidenced by patriotic songs and movies of that time. These notions are also embodied in the specific texts that I will demonstrate using *Nawa Himmaphan*, followed by *Huachai Thotsakan KAIHUN*.

Nawa Himmaphan: (Re) imagining Myth in a Fantastical Future World

Nawa Himmaphan (herein referred to as *NH*) is a six-volume fantasy novel series (2013–2018)—comprising *Trineththip* [ตรีเนตรทิพย์], *Thutiya-asun* [ทุติยอสูร], *Ekathep* [เอกเทพ], *Ninnakhin* [นิลนาทินทร], *Phet-raksot* [เพชรรากษต], and *Wiwa-phitthayathon* [วิวาพิทยาทอน] (figure 1)—by the female writer Alina [อลิณา]. This is another penname for Kingchat [กิงฉัตร], a renowned author of romance and detective fiction from the early 1990s. Alina is her recent pen name, which is used for fantasy and cozy detective fiction. In *NH*, Alina presents a reimagined future following the purported end of the world in 2012 as per the Mayan prophecy. In this narrative, the world is destroyed, and the mythical forest ‘Himmaphan’, located upside down, replaces the human world. To avert a great fire, the god—*deva* in Sanskrit and *Thep* [เทพ] in Thai—and a demon—*asura* in Sanskrit and *Asun* [อสูร] in Thai—set aside their enmity to create a magic wall. Thus, the New Himmaphan or Nawa Himmaphan society (herein the Nawa) emerges, ruled over equally by both the Thep and Asun, along with other creatures from the old Himmaphan.

The mythical forest of Himmaphan, as mentioned in *NH*, is derived from the Indian myth of Himavanta and has been a recurring theme in Thai folktales and literature for centuries. Phraya Anuman Rajadhon (1965: 54–55) describes it as a northern mountain in traditional cosmology, which is the Himalayas in its original context. However, the Thai version describes Himmaphan as a green space surrounded by spectacular vistas and featuring magical creatures, akin to its depiction in the 14th Buddhist literary text, *Traiphum Phra Ruang* [ไตรภูมิพระร่วง] (figure 2). The forest serves as a backdrop for various magical creatures, such as the ‘Kinnari’, a half-bird and half-human, and the ‘Norasing’, a half-lion and half-human. Himmaphan serves as a site for referencing magical creatures circulating in Thai literature, myth, and the arts. For example, it is the primary setting of the *Vessantara Jataka* [เวสสันดรชาดก], and is specifically referenced in the title of the second chapter, *Kan Himmaphan* [ก้นหิมพานต์]. This chapter narrates the early life of the prince Vessantara and ends with his exile in the Himmaphan forest with his family (see more examples in So Plainoi 1991).

Himmaphan continues to serve as a source of imagination for contemporary authors. Nittaya Kaewkallana (2023: 137–140) highlights how it is not only used as a setting in novels by referencing *Traiphum Phra Ruang*, but several authors reimagine the forest, transforming it into a realist forest, a modern forest, or even a destructive land, depending on the thematic elements and messages they want to convey. The forest is thus not a site that is confined to its original mythological context. Instead, it emerges as an open space and source, inviting contemporary authors to define and redefine this site and its meaning. Interestingly, the forest in *NH* becomes a space where myths are upended and traditional characters and beliefs are reconstructed.

Myths in an upside down world and voices from the margin

NH narrates the existence of the Nawa after 770 years of great destruction, and progress is embodied by both modernity and tradition. The Nawa is urbanised, yet retains the inherited magic of Himmaphan. Nonetheless, the Nawa is not depicted as a utopia due to distrust and divisions, particularly between the Thep and Asun. Interestingly, Alina avoids using the Thep as a symbol of goodness. Rather, she equalises the roles of the Asun with the Thep and narrates mostly through the perspective of the Asun.

NH portrays the Thep as an arrogant group that clings to their sacred status, with many of the antagonists in each volume belonging to this race. This portrayal reflects Alina’s attempt to challenge stereotypes surrounding suppressed groups and traditional notions of inherent goodness. My interview with her revealed her belief that the “Asun are unjustly blamed while the Thep can be untrustworthy and exploitative of the Asun” (Interview with Alina 2022). Alina’s view can be traced back to a widely known Hindu myth in Thailand called ‘Kuan Kasian Samut’ [กวนเกษียรสมุทร] or ‘The churning of the ocean of milk.’ In brief, this myth talks about how devas lost their power and sought to regain it by churning the ocean milk to produce the magical water, or ‘Amarita.’ However, unable to achieve this on their own, they invite asuras to help with the promise of sharing the precious objects from this ritual (figure 3). However, the devas ultimately exploit all the rewards for themselves.

NH challenges this norm by depicting the Asun as the virtuous side, narrated through the perspectives of other races and vice versa. In the first volume, *Trineththip* [hereafter *Trinet*], the story gradually



Figure 1. Cover photos of NH series. Photo by Look-a-ngoong Publisher (2018)



Figure 2. Illustration of Himmaphan in contemporary art. Photo by Ministry of Culture of Thailand (2012: 206-207)



Figure 3. The art of Kuan Kasian Samut at Suvarnabhumi Airport, Thailand. Photo by the author.

challenges the perception of the Asun race from the perspective of a mixed-race heroine, starting with the statement that “she is like most people who admire Thep. It is caused by the traditional belief that an individual will be reborn in heaven or Himmaphan as it is a given that Thep are good people, whereas

Asun are the opposite” (Alina 2014: 36–37)². After she is mysteriously attacked (later revealed to be done by the Thep), the leader of the Asun comes to her help, leading to a romantic relationship between them, which changes her perception. Unlike the Thep, cruelty is portrayed through the main antagonist, a senior Thep, attempting to kill his own offspring for personal gain. This prompts the heroine to question, “What kind of Thep! Isn’t it the race of goodness? I think it is the opposite” (Alina 2014: 389).

In addition to the Asun, *NH* also engages in the act of ‘decentring’ the traditional role and status of the Thep while empowering varied marginalised groups, including women and people with disabilities. In my interview with Alina, she revealed that, as a woman writer, she deliberately uses a female protagonist to give voice to marginalised women within patriarchal structures (Interview with Alina 2022). For example, the second volume, *Thutiya Asun*, illustrates the oppression faced by both women and disabled people. The story revolves around the plight of the queen of Kinnari’s kingdom, who, despite being the rightful heir, cannot rule since she is a woman, forcing her to remain in her husband’s shadow. Moreover, her son is born with a physical disability, setting off a debate about the fate of their land and the ensuing conflict. Finally, the novel demonstrates that the disabled son emerges more powerful than anyone, and the queen overcomes patriarchal norms to claim her rightful place as ruler.

The decentralisation and empowerment of marginal voices within political struggles resonate with the current scenario in Thai society, even though the story’s futuristic setting. Theoretically, the future is constructed in space and time, shaped by the hopes and fears of both the past and present (Rosenberg and Harding 2005). Thus, the future becomes a site for criticism of the past and present, as well as a space for exploring possibilities beyond contemporary conditions. Additionally, in fantasy fiction, the portrayal of the future serves as a reflection of societal limitations and desires. As Atterbery (2022: 9) claims, “[f]antasy is the lie that speaks truth.” This is because fantasy narratives address these unspoken cultural desires that are otherwise difficult to articulate directly and are therefore expressed through fantastical narratives (Jackson 1981). In doing this, fantasy fiction draws upon folklore to make sense of the new world and use its meanings in new contexts (see Attebery 2022; Matthews 2011; Sullivan 2001).

Subsequently, in *NH*, the depiction of the future can be perceived as reflecting the hopes and fears of contemporary Thai society, while the use of fantastical elements drawn from folklore reveals an expression of cultural desires aimed at addressing present-day limitations. Referencing folklore serves not only to reinterpret the past within a new framework but also to challenge established norms of folk belief. In this regard, I argue that the meaning of myths is upended as *NH* creates a new world order that transcends present-day circumstances and elevates marginalised perspectives to prominence. This is evident in the Nawa, which resembles a polarised Thailand where races serve as metaphors for competing ideologies, each vying for societal dominance and leading to conflict. This is evident through embodiment, which I will analyse in *Trinet*.

Embodiment, polarisation, and the hope for reconciliation

Race is a key factor that fuels division in the Nawa. As the dominant races, Thep and Asun hold deep-rooted pride and prejudice, largely centred around the notion of the ‘pure body.’ *Trinet* highlights the conflict stemming from this notion by narrating the tragic tale of ‘Thip-apha’ [ทิพย์อาภา], a mixed-race Thep, Asun, and human being. The story unfolds with the revelation of her identity, marking her as a threat due to her unique powers. She thus becomes the target of someone seeking to destroy her, plunging the Nawa into chaos. Eventually, she is taken care of by the leader of the Asun, who guides her on a journey to the old Himmaphan. Along the journey, Thip-apha reunites with her missing father, Nakhin [นาคินทร์], who has lost his legs. This stems from a prophecy received by Phokhin [โชคหินท์], a senior Thep and Nakhin’s father and Thip-apha’s grandfather. Fearing a prophecy that foretells his demise by one of his own offspring, Phokhin, a fervent believer in racial purity, views his son Nakhin’s marriage to a woman of another race and having a mixed-race child a transgression. Phokhin thus severs Nakhin’s legs and exiles him to the old Himmaphan while keeping a watchful eye on Thip-apha. In the end, Phokhin’s schemes are exposed, leading to his arrest and subsequent sentencing to death by his secret son.

Arguably, *Trinet* critiques the discourse of the ‘pure body’ as espoused by Thep Phokhin by unmasking a ‘bad mind’ into a ‘good body.’ This implies that, as a high-class Thep, his body is expected to

²All quotations from both novels were written in Thai, and translations throughout the paper are mine.

embody 'goodness' in contrast to the taboo he engages in. The text introduces Phokhin as arrogant and excessively proud of his lineage, holding fast to notions of racial purity and a glorious past. He believes that "when the world destructs [...] Thep has no way but to migrate from their land which will be contaminated by Asun and humans ... Thep has to submit to equal power with the ignoble Asun" (Alina 2014: 52). Moreover, Phokhin experiences 'profound shame' at the prospect of Thep leaders collaborating with the Asun since he believes that the leader of Thep "must downgrade himself to work with Asun... Why doesn't he think about his superior status?" (Alina 2014: 253). This mindset emboldens him to engage in reprehensible acts, viewing his mixed-race grandchild as the epitome of disgrace. Consequently, Phokhin epitomises the attitude of the 'superior us' looking down on the 'inferior other.' This discourse not only obstructs prospects for reconciliation and causes polarisation, but also incites violence and societal unrest.

Nakhin's disabled body serves as a powerful symbol of how the discourse of purity ruins society, even at its most fundamental level. His body represents a site of both physical and ideological conflict. Unlike his father, Nakhin rejects the discourse of purity by marrying a person who is not a Thep. Moreover, his disability, inflicted by his father's violence, reflects the destructive consequences of such purity-driven beliefs. Despite his exile in the old Himmaphan forest and the loss of his legs, his power remains. Despite his disability, *Trinet* shows that he can improve, grow, and reunite the old Himmaphan: "creatures from different races here live separately without trust. He spent around ten years with his prophetic Thep power to gather all races to live together" (Alina 2014: 402). He then rises to a position of power and leadership and garners respect in the old Himmaphan, stating, "I am like the leader of the Thep in Himmaphan. I have power and everything. On the other hand, I am only a poor no-leg Thep in the Nawa. I have no power. I cannot think about the leader of the Thep, as I might be homeless" (Alina 2014: 456). In other words, the old Himmaphan, where the notion of a pure and perfect body is irrelevant, empowers this marginalised figure of the Nawa, placing him at the forefront. Nakhin's embodiment, therefore, challenges the purist discourse and negotiates the meaning of marginalised individuals.

Given that the obsession with purity is the central issue, *Trinet* hopes for reconciliation through the 'hybrid body' of Thip-apha. Her embodiment epitomises an ideal future, as she represents an 'in-between' figure of all races. The text highlights her uniqueness stemming from her hybrid body, "which is perfectly beautiful [...] The female... is not human, Asun, and Thep. Yet she is a mixture of all" (Alina 2014: 22–23). More importantly, while her grandfather and father embody the struggle against purity discourse, Thip-apha's body symbolises a brighter future in two ways. Firstly, she is clairvoyant, a special gift from her mixed races, earning her the title of 'netthip' [เนตรทิพย์] or a person with magical eyes. This ability transforms her life because "even though the Thep and Asun seem to be the most powerful, you [Thip-apha] are actually more powerful" (Alina 2014: 433–434). As Bhabha argues, hybridity opens up new possibilities by challenging and negotiating power structures in the liminal space, and the embodiment of Thip-apha exemplifies how hybridity comes to challenge purity with unique power. Secondly, her mixed-race body symbolises a better future where society is reconciled rather than divided. The story demonstrates that she harbours no ambitions to control the Nawa; rather, she desires a united society, and she is uniquely positioned to achieve this, as her father asserts, "you are the one who can make it happen" (Alina 2014: 434). Therefore, Thip-apha embodies the 'Third Space', contesting rigid binaries.

The emphasis on hybridity in the novel elucidates the complex politics of Thainess in the 21st century. As seen in *Trinet*, traditional Indian myths are reinterpreted to forge new relationships. The fantastical futuristic setting of the Nawa 'decentralises' the Thep while empowering marginalised characters such as the Asun. Moreover, this story illustrates how hybridity resists purity-based discourse, offering a path towards a more promising future. *Trinet* mirrors contemporary Thainess, where top-down discourse is viewed as the suppression of 'the Other'; meanwhile, it shows how marginal groups come to negotiate their place in society. In essence, *NH* contests Indian myth and Thainess by amplifying marginalised voices, thereby opening up new possibilities for an inclusive society.

This can be interpreted within the context of Thailand's polarised climate in the mid-2010s through two perspectives: anxieties about loss and hope for reconciliation. Initially, the prevalent anxiety about loss stemming from polarisation is evident in the portrayal of Phokhin and Nakhin. The novel identifies traditional beliefs that promote the superiority of one group over another as the root cause of social separation, potentially leading to societal collapse. Second, hope for reconciliation emerges through the

embodiment of the hybrid body. The construction of Thip-apha aligns with the concept of negotiation, where opposing ideologies can converge and create an ideal outcome. Her remarkable influence over both Thap and Asun illustrates the positive impacts of abandoning extreme ideologies and embracing a more inclusive approach. This notion mirrors Thai society's emphasis on unity as a catalyst for transcending past conflict. While Phokhin, representing purity and a destructive past, symbolises the first generation, Nakhin, the product of that conflict, embodies the present. Thus, the embodiment of Thip-apha encapsulates the idea of a departure from entrenched conflicts fueled by monopolistic discourses, symbolising the future of a united society.

Huachai Thotsakan KAIHUN: (Re) constructing the Ramakien in K-Pop Boys Love Fanfiction

Huachai Thotsakan KAIHUN (hereafter *HT*) reconstructs the *Ramakien* in a contemporary setting. This internet novel transcends a simple adaptation of Indian myth and Thainess, instead combining elements from several transnational cultures. Departing from the traditional depiction of characters in the *Ramakien*, *HT* transforms the narrative into a BL story, altering the dynamics of relationships in this fictional work from a heterosexual love triangle involving Phra Ram [พระราม], Sida [สีดา], and Thotsakan [ทศกัณฐ์] to a homosexual one. Similar to *NH*, this narrative challenges the centrality of Phra Ram by giving voice to the story from Thotsakan's perspective, with him becoming Sida's partner instead of Phra Ram. This hybridity highlights the complex interplay between the politics of Thainess and transnational cultures in several aspects.

The Ramakien meeting K-Pop and the meaning of Thainess

The Thai *Ramakien* is a literary adaptation of the Indian epic *Ramayana*, which spread throughout Southeast Asia. The *Ramayana* narrates the war between the avatar god Rama and the demon king Ravana, who abducts Rama's wife, Sita. Thai adaptations of the *Ramakien*, found in various forms of media across different time periods, have diversified the original plot. Fundamentally, the *Ramakien* is intertwined with the Thai kingship. *Ramakien* means 'the honour of Rama', with 'Phra Ram' being the Thai rendition. Given the belief among Thais that the king is the avatar of Narai, the protector of peace and order, Phra Ram becomes a symbolic representation of Thai kings. Hence, the *Ramakien* is a key text traditionally patronised by the Thai royal court. For example, King Rama I (r. 1782–1809) collected and edited the *Ramakien*, a version lost during wartime, along with the new Bangkok kingdom. This version, known as the *Ramakien of King Rama I*, remains the most comprehensive. Since then, the royal patronage of the *Ramakien* has assumed a crucial role for all subsequent 'King Rama' figures. Hence, the *Ramakien* is not treated as an Indian epic but is regarded as an essential component of Thainess and is revered as 'national Thai literature.'

In fact, the influence of the *Ramakien* extends far beyond the royal court, permeating deeply into Thai life and folk culture through many versions of folktales about the story, folk rituals, and performances (see Srisurang 2006). Today, the *Ramakien* has found new expressions in popular culture through a range of adaptations, including children's literature, animated films, comics, and computer games (see Ruenruthai 2017; Siriporn 2005, 2015). Furthermore, the internet has propelled the diversification of the story, catering to new tastes and reaching diverse audiences. This trend has led to the development of Thai internet literature since the early 2000s. 'Dek-D' [เด็กดี], for instance, is a popular website established over two decades ago that provides a platform for young and amateur writers to share their stories. Many writers have achieved recognition through this website. Since the late 2010s, platforms such as Joylada [จอยสดา], Tunwalai [ตูนวัลย์], and An-owl [อานอว] have emerged, featuring a plethora of online stories that reconstruct classical literature, often blending genres like BL and fanfiction. Among these, the *Ramakien* remains the most popular story adapted to these genres. According to Jackkrit Duangpattra (2023: 113), in 2022 alone, 177 stories on the internet were adapted from the *Ramakien* within the 'same-gender literature'³, far exceeding similar adaptations of other classical literature works from the same era.

HT, created by 'Holyspace' and composed between 2016 and 2017 (some editions appeared until 2018) on www.dek-d.com, is one such successful story. The work has garnered almost 80,000 views, more than

³In this study, Jackkrit uses this term to include all homosexual relationships, of which BL is a subset. Yet most of these findings are dominated by BL, and female-female relationships are rarely adapted from classical literature.

3,000 followers, and 1,700 comments (as of July 2022). *HT* reimagines key characters from the *Ramakien*, like Thotsakan, Sida (or Sita), and Phra Ram, in a contemporary setting. At the same time, ‘KAIHUN’ in the title references two members of the Korean boy band ‘Exo’ – ‘Kai’ or Kim Jong-in [김종인] and ‘Sehun’ or Oh Se-hun [오세훈] - who are depicted as the ‘imagined couple’ [คู่จิ้น; *khu jin*]. Writers use them as references for characters in *HT*. However, when the story reappeared as an e-book on www.meb.com, one of Thailand’s largest e-book shops, the story only used Huachai Thotsakan, omitting KAIHUN (figure 4).

HT narrates the lives of Thotsakan and Phra Ram, who are eternally bound to the past, while Sida undergoes numerous reincarnations. The story revolves around the competition between Thotsakan and Phra Ram for Sida’s affection, with Phra Ram consistently emerging victorious. In this life, Sida is reborn as a young man named Prem [เปรม]. He is invited to become a *khon* [โขน] dancer playing Sida in the play entitled ‘The Heart of Thotsakan’ at the behest of Asuren [อสุเรนทร์] or Thot [ทศ], the owner of the performance. He is actually Thotsakan in disguise, hoping to use the performance to express his true love for Sida. While Thot becomes the protagonist, the story portrays Phra Ram or Ramen [รามนรินทร์] as an antagonist. Though the main plot maintains the rivalry between these traditional characters, Thot emerges victorious this time, bringing an end to the conflict between Thotsakan and Phra Ram.

HT undergoes hybridisation through various transnational influences, while the meaning of Thainess is both contested and negotiated. Firstly, *khon*, a traditional masked dance performance, serves as a crucial connection between *HT* and the *Ramakien*. Once reserved exclusively for the king and only played in the court, *khon* later gained wider exposure and became associated with key occasions related to kingship. *HT* draws strong connections to *khon*, revisiting key characters and events while reuniting the central figures from the *Ramakien*. At the same time, in *HT*, the interpretation of *khon* evolves, moving away from its association solely with Phra Ram and instead focusing on Thotsakan, challenging the conventional understandings of the character.

Secondly, *HT* reconstructs the *Ramakien* to align with fanfiction and BL romance. Fanfiction refers to amateur writing, which involves creatively rewriting existing works (Hellekson and Busse, 2014: 5-6). It intersects with BL as fans build new stories with their favourite character pairs. In Thai, BL is called ‘Y fiction’ [นิยายชาย; *niyai wai*], a term adopted from the Japanese ‘Yaoi’ convention, which gained popularity in Thailand in the mid-2010s (Baudinette 2019; Natthanai 2019). BL stories typically revolve around romantic relationships between young men, often envisioned by female writers ‘imagining’ their idol’s romantic relationships. These adaptations often significantly alter the original stories, recasting characters, relationships, and roles. According to Sirinthon Jiragoon’s analysis (2018: 68), BL fanfictions derived from the *Ramakien* commonly focus on characters like Thotsakan and Phra Ram. While Thotsakan is typically depicted as a masculine hero, Phra Ram is portrayed as either a feminine hero or antagonist who ultimately undergoes a transformation into a good person. Furthermore, characters traditionally associated with Phra Ram, such as Phra Lak [พระลักยมณี] and Sida, are often portrayed as feminine, while those from Thotsakan’s side are depicted as antithesis (Sirinthon 2018: 78).

On the one hand, the tropes of fanfiction and BL allow for the integration of diverse cultural elements such as Indian myth, the Korean wave, and hybridised Thainess. On the other hand, this process challenges the status of ‘high culture’ by transforming traditional norms and sacred characters. For instance, the heterosexual relationships in the *Ramakien* are reimagined as homosexual, with Thotsakan and Sida portrayed in reference to two boy idols. Unlike the polygamous relationships found in the *Ramakien*, *HT* caters to fans by foregrounding monogamic romance as the main plot, emphasising the concept of true love. In addition, *HT* diverges from the aesthetics sense of the *Ramakien* by incorporating references to K-idols (figure 5), thereby portraying all characters as equal. This embodiment negotiates the meaning of marginal groups, especially the character of Thotsakan.

Reconstructing the body and mind, and voice from the margin

HT hybridises the traditional Thai heroes’ bodies with fan pleasure, resulting in new iterations of marginalised characters like Thotsakan. Typically, heroes in Thai classical literature are depicted as warriors [นักรบ; *nak-rop*] and lovers [นักรัก; *nak-rak*], possessing martial skills, supernatural powers, and a reputation as womanisers. In *HT*, these warriors are portrayed as individuals with extraordinary powers and wealth,



Figure 4. Cover Photos of the novel on Dek-D (left) and selling as e-book on www.meb.com (right). Photo by Holyspace on Dek-D and Holyspace (n.d)



Figure 5. The portrayal of Prem (left) and Thot (right) compared to KAIHUN on the online text. Photo by Holyspace on Dek-D

embodying a capitalist ideal. Both Thot and Ramen are depicted as successful businessmen and high-class celebrities, yet they retain traces of their magical past lives.

Moreover, these traditional characters are reimagined in accordance with Korean idol beauty standards. Arguably, this hybridity of Korean aesthetics goes beyond creating a new look for characters; it also reflects complex identity politics. Building on the arguments of Megan Sinnott (2012) and Dredge Byung'chu Kang (2014), the consumption of K-pop among Thai queer people offers a space for challenging and renegotiating their new status and identity. This entails that the soft-masculinity and the gender ambiguity associated with K-Pop aesthetics create a new category and identity for queer females, or *tom/dee* [ตอม/ดี้] (Sinnott 2012: 471). Analysed the Thai gay cover dance of the Korean 'Girl Generation', Kang (2014: 567) argues that this transnational phenomenon opens new avenues for Thai gay individuals to reimagine and embody themselves rather than be strict with Western modernity and traditional norms. Overall, K-Pop aesthetics contribute to shaping the 'liminal space' where gendered bodies and identities exist, reshaping power dynamics.

Accordingly, K-Pop aesthetics not only change the representation of all the characters in *HT* but also contest traditional perceptions of good and bad, as well as the notion of power. The bodies of Thai protagonists, especially those of royalty, are depicted as having perfect shapes and distinctive beauty. Meanwhile, antagonistic characters are depicted with abnormal appearances and ugliness. These body representations symbolise concepts of good and evil, as well as power [บารมี; *barami*] and merit [บุญ; *bun*], under Buddhist principles. The *Ramakien* embodies this dichotomy, with Phra Ram's godlike body contrasting with Thotsakan's demonic form. However, *HT* aligns itself with fan preferences, blurring the lines between good and bad appearance. For example, *HT* describes Thot, aged 37, as a successful businessman, celebrity, and fascinating figure to all women. Similarly, Ramen, Thot's rival, is depicted with equal handsomeness. Through this representation, their physical appearances no longer reflect their roles as they did in the *Ramakien*.

Instead, the role of the 'mind' significantly influences the definition of morality in *HT*. The story consistently emphasises that the internal mindset holds more importance than the external appearance. In this regard, *HT* draws a parallel with the *Ramakien* by incorporating the concept of reincarnation, suggesting that the characters' past minds are manifested in contemporary bodies. At the same time, *HT* underlines the transformation of Thotsakan's 'bad mind' and portrays his true love as Prem, the reincarnation of Sida. Interestingly, *HT* also explores the idea that the mind is more essential than gender. Throughout the text, the male characters who vie for the affection of other men repeatedly stress that their love transcends gender boundaries; they simply love another person. This narrative approach aligns with the BL genre's emphasis on monogamic romantic relationships between men based on 'pure love' rather than gender and societal constraints (Natthanai 2020).

Here, Thotsakan takes on the role of the protagonist rather than Phra Ram. The text describes the transformation of Thot as "the giant king Thotsakan, who was brutal, violent, savage, self-centric, and unreasonable with a hardened heart, is now miraculously transformed. Why has this happened to him? Why has he become a soft person, merciful, and reasonable ... Is it because of love?" (Holyspace n.d. [Vol 1]: 337). *HT* showcases his true love through several difficulties faced by Prem, which ultimately lead to Prem reciprocating his feelings, despite Thot's true identity as Thotsakan – "I know everything, you don't need to hide it from me ... though your body is either Asuren, a celeb business man or Thotsakan, the giant king of Lonka. I do love you and all of what you are" (Holyspace n.d. [Vol 2]: 8). At the story's climax, Thot saves Prem's life by sacrificing his own. Although *HT* ends with a happy ending as Thot survives, this act serves as the ultimate testament to his love for Prem. Therefore, Thot's mind links to the concept of being a good person and dismisses his promiscuous past.

On the other hand, *HT* reconstructs Ramen from a moral figure into a self-centred character willing to resort to unethical means to benefit himself. The text illustrates Ramen's shift towards amorality, evident in his plans, such as using Thot's former wife, Montho [มณฑิลา], to blackmail and separate Thot and Prem. His transformation is also observed through the lens of people around him, such as Phiphek [พิภก]. In the *Ramakien*, Phiphek is the younger brother of Thotsakan, exiled from Lonka, who ultimately sides with Phra Ram. However, *HT* rewrites the role of Phiphek, or his new name, Chinnakrit [ชินนาคฤ] as someone who returns to Thot's side. He voices his disillusionment with Ramen, stating that he "had never thought that Ramen, who was Phra Ram and the man he respected for his goodness and justice, would become immoral. Oh love! Can one turn a somersault like this? Such a pity, a real pity" (Holyspace n.d. [Vol 1]: 176). Consequently, *HT* portrays Ramen's character as embodying dishonesty and self-interest, a change driven by his love for Prem.

HT changes the traditional narrative by shifting the point of view from Phra Ram to Thotsakan, offering a fresh angle that alters readers' perceptions. In the story, Thot is interviewed about why he set the *khon* performance from Thotsakan's perspective. He explains, "Thotsakan is for me, although he is a villain and brutal to enemies and a cold-blood killer, he is only a man when with Sida, and can do everything for her happiness, even shameful things that men won't do. If you watch this performance, I am sure that you will love Thotsakan more than Phra Ram" (Holyspace n.d. [Vol 1]: 10). Indeed, the novel delves into the development of Thot's character, portraying him in a positive light and prompting readers to 'love Thotsakan more than Phra Ram', as Thot says.

This reconstruction aligns with what Harrison (ed.) (2014) calls a 'disturbing convention' where the narrative shifts its focus from the traditional centre to the margins and vice versa. The *Ramakien*

traditionally revolves around Phra Ram, with Thotsakan serving as the antagonist. The *Ramakien* depicts the triumph of good over evil (e.g., Anuman Rajadhon 1973; Ruenruthai 2020; Srisurang 2006), with Phra Ram representing the epitome of goodness. This perception has long shaped societal notions of morality in Thai society for centuries, even influencing Thai politics, often linking goodness with service to Phra Ram (Duangmon 2019; Saowanit, 2016). In contrast, *HT* decentralises this traditional paradigm, elevating the voice of the marginalised to become the story's core. This transformation is achieved through the hybridity of transnational cultural influences stemming from K-Pop and BL fanfiction conventions. It then subverts not only the central and peripheral characters of the original Indian epic but also challenges a long-held aspect of Thainess.

From love and forgiveness to reconciliation and unity

HT not only establishes new power dynamics in contrast to the *Ramakien* but also transforms the perpetual conflict between Phra Ram and Thotsakan into a theme of unity. The novel emphasises the power of forgiveness stemming from love, as Thot's self-sacrifice for Prem prompts Ramen to realise his own wrongdoings. In the end, Ramen renounces his past actions and becomes a Buddhist monk, and the narrative ends with the thought that "whatever the past was, friend or enemy, the present is more important for letting go and stopping with the dhamma of forgiveness" (Holyspace n.d. [Vol 2]: 277). Furthermore, the closing scene reinforces this message, emphasising reconciliation, love, and forgiveness as replacements for conflict: "The tragic love story of Phra Ram, Thotsakan, and Sida fades as a soft memory like morning fog. Neither revenge nor envy and no attachment remain. The only existing thing is the pure heart of Asuren for Prem, forever" (Holyspace n.d. [Vol 2]: 283).

Similar to *NH*, *HT* begins with a traditional conflict derived from the past, separating the main characters into two main groups. While the war between Phra Ram and Thotsakan symbolises a struggle for morality to uphold world peace and order, *HT* adapts this conflict by shifting the focus to a love triangle relationship. More importantly, the narrative departs from the traditional ending of victory for one side, instead promoting reconciliation between the characters. This shift reflects the broader social context of Thailand during the 2010s. Arguably, the traditional conflict embedded in the *Ramakien* and adopted by *HT* can be viewed as a metaphor for political polarisation, while the new resolution strategy avoids perpetuating the war and instead seeks peace by uniting through 'samakkhi' [สามัคคี]. References to the notion of national unity are frequent in both official media and popular culture, given the pervasive polarisation within Thai society. Interestingly, several intertextual animated films referencing the *Ramakien*, such as *The Giant King* or *Yak* (ยักษ์; 2012, dir. Prapas Cholsaranon) and *The Legend of Muay Thai: 9 Satra* (๙ ศาสตรา; 2018, dir. Nat Yoswatananont), embrace the theme of reconciliation rather than repeating traditional scenes of war (see Jaturada *et al.* 2023; Saranpat 2014).

In *HT*, the conflict stems from two opposing groups competing over Prem's affection, while Prem's portrayal signifies both polarisation and the potential for reconciliation in society. This duality arises from the relationship between representations of the female body and the nation. Although *HT* transforms the main characters into male figures, the portrayal of women is embodied through feminine protagonists like Prem. As Edward Said (1979) argues, the nation is engendered, exemplified by the representation of East and West as male and female. In Thailand, representations of the female body are closely tied to nationalist sentiment. "Good" Thai women are depicted as desexualised and appropriately attired, thereby contributing to an image of a stable and peaceful nation. Conversely, "bad" women are sexualised and deviant and are associated with destabilisation and social disorder, necessitating control (see Chutima 2020; Harrison 2017; Jirathon 2019).

In BL stories, this notion is exemplified through the embodiment of feminine male characters. According to Natthanai Prasannam (2020), BL is primarily created by and for female writers and audiences rather than promoting gay life. Consequently, many feminine characters are imagined as queer, blending the norms of both heterosexual and homosexual men, a phenomenon he terms 'gender distancing.' The character of Prem embodies the archetype of good women in heterosexual relationships, albeit in a male form. The text consistently portrays Prem as akin to a beautiful woman rather than a man. For instance, Prem is chosen to play Sida in *khon* for his "sharp and sweet face like a woman with charming slender eyes and fingers" (Holyspace n.d. [Vol 1]: 17), making him a perfect fit for the role. Even Prem's grandfather reinforces this, stating, "Look! do any women want to be in a couple

with this kind of man who has this beautiful face? It is prettier than them. He will not be a wife in this or next life. Who dares to be his wife? He should have a same-sex partner” (Holyspace n.d. [Vol 1]: 62-63). This description positions Prem as an embodiment of ideal female beauty to make sense of homosexuality. Crucially, *HT*'s happy ending features Prem and Thot having children, with Prem carrying the babies in his male body. Thus, Prem fulfils the role of an ideal woman within a heterosexual relationship, albeit in a male guise.

The portrayal of both masculine and feminine males in BL romance mirrors broader nationalist sentiments. Natthanai (2021) analyses the trope of the military masculine male in BL, arguing that the strong bodies of masculine protagonists symbolise the nation, duty-bound to protect the feminine protagonists who embody loyalty to the nation. In *HT*, I argue that the character of Prem can be compared to that of a 'good' woman representing the nation, necessitating Thot and Ramen as masculine protagonists to express their true love, make sacrifices, and provide protection. Consequently, the battle between Thot and Ramen mirrors a struggle between two opposing forces within the nation, emphasising and redefining their notions of 'love.' The nation, symbolised as the tender and vulnerable body of Prem, requires protection, leading the two rivals to act as protectors. This tragic love affair can be linked to the confrontation of two sides, with the Thai nation at the heart of the conflict. Interestingly, the story diverges from the traditional pattern of perpetual conflict by turning enemies into allies. This parallels the polarised era during which the discourse of unity pervaded Thai society from the late 2000s to the 2010s. In this regard, *HT* demonstrates the politics of hybridity, which not only decentralises hegemonic power structures by amplifying marginalised voices and incorporating transnational cultural elements but also by establishing new relationships that transcend the limitations of the traditional version of the *Ramakien*, thereby catering to the specific internal context of the period.

Conclusion

The reimagining of the *Ramakien*, the Himmaphan forest, and its creatures, Thep and Asun, into contemporary Thai literature, creates a 'liminal space' to 'hybridise Thainess', blurring the boundaries of old Indian myths embedded as part of Thainess. These narratives are reconstructed into new realms, such as the fantastical future worlds, K-Pop, and BL fanfiction conventions, challenging long-standing Thai traditions associated with Thainess in unconventional ways. Both *NH* and *HT* utilise hybridity to construct new power structures, contesting dominant ideologies while allowing peripheral perspectives to negotiate their roles and occupy the central stage. These texts serve as a means of emancipation for marginalised groups previously suppressed under the hegemonic discourse of Thai society's state-constructed Thainess. At the same time, they provide a means to 'democratise' the hybrid cultures of Thainess, enabling authors to redefine relationships based on existing traditions in the imaginary world. This literature, therefore, is a source of agency to resist top-down definitions of Thainess, redesigning it from a bottom-up perspective within the upside-down world.

Moreover, hybridity in these texts highlights the notion of reconciliation. This aligns with Bhabha's view that hybridity can blur the lines between binaries, creating new forms of power. In other words, hybridity in these texts offers alternatives to the strict binaries that perpetuate long-lasting conflicts to be solved within 'the Third Space' where compromise and reconciliation become possible. This is evident in the embodiment of hybridity, such as the blending of various races in Thip-apha in *Trinet* and the incorporation of K-Pop aesthetics in the characters of *Ramakien*, which serve as a means to resolve conflicts. In short, hybridity functions here as a resistance against dominant power and as a mechanism for resolution by opening up new possibilities.

Furthermore, the politics of hybridity in literary works directly reflect the political landscape of Thai society in the 21st century. Against this backdrop, *NH* and *HT* represent two opposing poles that mirror the tension between the dominant centre and voices from the margins. This parallels the rise of social movements focused on gender politics, ethnicities, disability, or human rights, challenging the established societal norms. This division also reflects the polarisation between 'us' and 'other', mirroring the political climate marked by ideological clashes. Meanwhile, both *NH* and *HT* utilise feminine protagonists as integral to achieving an ideal resolution, transitioning from recurrent confrontation to eventual reconciliation. Therefore, hybridity suggests that past struggles cannot be resolved through the divisive discourse

of purity. Rather, embracing the ‘in-between’ features created by the mixing and remaking of old values with new contexts offers a pathway towards a move promising future.

In summary, reading Thainess in Thai literature through the lens of hybridity unpacks not only the complex cultural entanglements that extend beyond national borders but also demonstrates the changing and challenging definitions of the nation and its identity. New possibilities emerge within the liminal space, allowing the flow of cultures and fostering the emergence of new power dynamics. This empowers individuals to reimagine and rewrite their ideal worlds, with literature serving as a medium for such creative exploration.

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