

A Thai Novel: From the Inside? On Veeraporn Nitiprapha, *The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth*, 2013, translation 2018

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ABSTRACT—Modern Thai literature has been given insufficient attention overseas because of a dearth of good, easily available translations and critical texts. This situation has begun to change, with the excellent translation of Veeraporn Nitiprapha’s SEA Write Award-winning novel and some other texts. An insight into this burgeoning literature can now be gained outside Thailand and beyond the Thai language. This article intends to introduce the novel, to look at some of its distinctive techniques, to indicate how this novel lives in a Thai cultural world, and to see how it can be used to understand some particular kinds of modern self.

Novels tell us a culture’s world view and also about what kinds of stories run through a particular writer’s mind. They are modelled by a given linguistic frame in order to show us the nature and extent of its world – what it covers, what it leaves out. Because they are self-observed by the writer and not as far as possible neutrally seen from outside, these world views can be tendentious and peculiar to the writer, or specific to a very culturally restricted audience. They also stand out from the world as more broadly enmeshed by the culture and its literary habits often beyond any special concerns of the writer.

The non-Thai reader wants to have the experience of seeing such a world view from inside a foreign language, even if understanding requires some effort because the Thai language may by no means be the reader’s best. Since reading uninformed views from outside Thai culture can be irritating for informed internal interpreters, an interpretation which at least seeks ideas from the Thai language source might be a way to mollify or circumvent such irritation. This reading strategy through Thai might be a way to move away from the social tendency frequently found in Thailand to bracket off what non-Thais think about Thai culture and its self-representations as misinformed, or inauthentic. Perhaps such reading brings out and exposes to intercultural discourse thoughts about one book embedded in one culture which can then be referred back to the other culture from which the book came.

Furthermore, bracketing of cultural response is not only directed by Thais at non-Thais, but may also tend to segregate Thais living overseas as being ‘no longer truly

Thai', or having 'lost their Thainess'.¹ This general situation has broader ramifications and recurs in many places when cultural boundaries are crossed by objects and people. It is not limited to asymmetrical relations between powerful and less-powerful cultures and is quite evident in attitudes to cultural 'essences' and their transgression by 'natives' or 'non-natives' in China and Japan. These 'Asian' cultures were also not directly colonised by the Western 'other', and each has their own strong internal sense of the world as being governed by hierarchy. But vertical projections on the dominating 'other' are not the exclusive preserve of the colonised resisting the coloniser, so much so that they may be embedded in the very experience of transculturality itself. That is, culture may only allow discursive handling of cultural difference in terms of dominance and being dominated. Even if this last proposition is intrinsically and unproductively hostile to anthropological humanism, it is strong and recurring.

This is an article on the original novel rather than a simple review of the translation which, in many ways, is wholly admirable. I have written it with the original in mind, which I have read to think through the issues of the text which occur to me, a rather inadequate reader of Thai. I have referred to the English translation in the notes for general content and to facilitate the understanding of non-Thai readers.²

Veeraporn Nitiprapha was born in 1962, the second of two children. Her mother taught piano and Veeraporn was used to hearing Western classical music at home from early childhood. Music, including rock and Thai folk, frequently appears in her writing as a mood-marker. After studies at high school, she spent some time at a secretarial college in Melbourne, Australia, and on return to Bangkok became a fashion magazine editor and then a copywriter, later turning to her own jewellery design business. After ten years, she closed this business and became a full-time writer of considerable distinction. She won the S.E.A. Write Award for her novel, *The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth*, in 2015,³ and went on to win the S.E.A. Write Award again in 2018 for the novel, *The Twilight of the Century and the Memory of the Memory of a Black-rose Cat*,⁴ about Chinese inter-generational experience in Thailand. She had assembled some of the material for this second prize-winning novel before *The Blind Earthworm*. As will become clear, Veeraporn was in part provoked to write *The Blind Earthworm* by the events of 2010. The 2018 prize was the first time the S.E.A. Write Award was made to

¹ As warily lamented by the former Australian ambassador to Thailand, James Wise, in his recent, clear-headed book for neophytes of Thai history, politics, and law: *Thailand: History, Politics and the Rule of Law*, Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2019, viii.

² I have been helped in my endeavours by a very patient and broadly cultured Thai person, Phaptawan Suwannakudt, and her assistance in thinking about the Thai nuances of Veeraporn's text has been invaluable. The article has further been greatly assisted through the perspectives of Thai and non-Thai scholars of Thai literature and society, some of my debts to whom I acknowledge in endnotes, and in a separate bibliography. I also wish to thank the editor of *The Journal of the Siam Society* and one anonymous reader for their very useful critical comments, and Paisarn Piemmettawat for providing the photo of Khun Veeraporn..

³ Veeraporn Nitiprapha, *Saiduan tapoot nay khaa wongkot*, Bangkok: Dichan, 2556/2013; translated by Kong Rithdee as *The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth*, Bangkok: River Books, 2018. Winner of S.E.A. Write award for fiction in 2015.

⁴ Veeraporn Nitiprapha, *Phutthasakkarat atsatong kap songjam khong songjam khong meo tam* (The Twilight of the Century and the Memory of the Memory of a Black-rose Cat), Bangkok: Dichan, 2559/2016; S.E.A. Write Award for fiction 2018.



Figure 1. (Top left) Cover of the English translation, *The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth*; (top right) cover of the 12th printing of the Thai original, *Saiduan tapoot nay khaa wongkot*; (bottom) Veeraporn Nitiprapha (photo Paisarn Piemmettawat).

a previous woman prize-winner and the English translation is now being prepared for publication in 2020.

The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth inhabits the worlds of mostly young people without parents, or of adults without firm attachments let alone spouses who wander around between the regional city of Nakhon Chai Si and Bangkok. The book is problematic to assign to a literary genre because its form is halfway between a picaresque novel of accumulating life experiences by characters projected as a series of outsiders, and a sort of magical enchantment with houses, food, gardens, and music. These are all depicted with quite perceptive if over-decorative detail, which the reader is invited to consume, often, it would seem, from a position of voyeuristic envy. These are not made the subject of a realist exploration like the elaborate tangibility of Balzac's window-sill in *Père Goriot* (1835) nor indeed does Veeraporn present an alternative, magically endowed reality as in the evocation of the earth which begins in the story of Gaspar Ilóm in Asturias' *Men of Maize* (1949), which we may take as an early example of Latin American magic realism.⁵

The plot of *The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth* is a series of interlaced hippy-outsider tales where the engine of causation is the different stages of life cycle in four main protagonists, who are all more or less gypsies in Thai society. The lives are those of Pran, a boy who later becomes a young man and who is the quasi-brother of two sisters born a year apart, Chareeya and Chalika, and their quasi-father, Uncle Thanit. At the edges of the main action are Nual, a nanny with two children by three lovers, each of whom agreeably looks after her in turns; Natee, a briefly appearing student activist and later rightist politician, who fakes being a war reporter and at the end abandons Chareeya after breaking his suicide pact with her to take a sleeping pill overdose; and another boy, Paradorn, who dies in the arms of his rock guitarist father, Patra, who has administered heroin but unwittingly overdosed him. Although these personae are each individualised, the structure is of a series of adventures, entertainments, and incomplete tragedies enacted in parallel by characters who haunt, even blend into, each other. We may thus distinguish four character-types:

The Young Man (Pran, Paradorn, Natee, Thana);

The Girl (Chalika, who for a while takes over the mother's role for her sister, Chareeya); these six principal characters are all actually or virtually orphans;

The Absent or only Virtual Father (the girls' actual father, who abandoned their mother but left thousands of letters he wrote to Rosarin after they parted; Chareeya later finds these under a floorboard and puts them back; Uncle Thanit, who abandoned the girls to go seeking after the rare textiles he collected; Patra, who lived as a professional guitarist playing either at clubs in distant Bangkok or in faraway Berlin);

⁵ Miguel Ángel Asturias, *Men of Maize* (Spanish original 1949, translated by Gerald Martin), London: Verso 1988.

The Outside Help and Benevolent 'Witch' (Nual; Aunt Pong, an old woman in the village; and even in earlier chapters, the textual vestiges of the actual but silent mother before her husband died).

In sum, the novel is structured by the device of a narrative of the interpenetrating life experiences of four archetypes, which are actually quite restricted as characters in their reciprocal relations to each other, but whose several qualities are each spread out over ten actual characters in the novel.⁶

The action takes place in Nakhon Chai Si, a city on the Tha Chin river parallel to the Chao Praya river at Bangkok, but about an hour away. Bangkok, with its CD shops, fancy restaurants, and classical music performances, forms an ancillary, off-scene narrative site. The protagonists go up and down to Bangkok, but in daily life mostly inhabit the old, and later in the story, decaying houses along the riverbank in Nakhon Chai Si. Rather like an ancient palace or an actual cabaret hall, the houses could metaphorically have been the theatrical home for a *likay* performance, a bit like Gilbert and Sullivan duets mixed with bawdy TV comedy. But *likay*, as a raucous theatrical form, also mixes references to 'literary' tales, special terms of royal address, *ratchasaap*, and simple, sometimes elegantly euphonic puns associated with 'classical' Thai literary aesthetics. *Likay* seems to be Veeraporn's implied literary comparator, but the reader is left to judge since these elements are seen through a very modern gaze, the repetitive plots and kitschy overkill of modern TV soap opera. They are also expressed by the meretricious techniques of advertising where titles are given to objects, or to the sensations they arouse, in a quasi-branding exercise for which Veeraporn may have been particularly qualified because of her prior work as a copywriter.

Veeraporn consciously uses lists as arrays of descriptors, often functioning as floating and inserted theatrical subtexts, instead of causally linked clauses.

[Natee] had been taking Pimpaka out to dinners and movies even before he had met Chareeya. And he had kept seeing her during those absence when he told Chareeya he was risking his life in a conflict zone or when he was sick with an imaginary meningococcal disease, or disappeared to relish the taste of longing, or when he calculated the balance sheet of love to decide if she loved him more than he loved her.⁷

The author follows the same procedure from early on in the book for all manner of external and house interior descriptions.

There was a vintage floor lamp with a beaded fringe and next to it a study desk

⁶ There is, by the way, no 'evil man of God' character such as played in film by Robert Mitchum in *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), whose riverine setting curiously, for me, recalls the dark trees beside the river in Nakhon Chai Si.

⁷ Veeraporn Nitiprapha, *The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth*, translated by Kong Rithee, Bangkok: River Books, 2018; hereafter, Kong translation. Hereafter paginations given as Kong translation, 123.

with piles of paper, a wooden statuette of an African woman with sagging breasts, her face glum like that of a fish, a cat doll in a blue kimono, a couple of white river stones.⁸

But Veeraporn neither shows, nor seeks, authorial distance from these lists, unlike for example, Amos Oz, the Israeli writer, who seems to ironise by the very force of his iterations. Oz also uses parallel adjectival phrases without causal linkage.⁹

The novel inhabits a fantasy space parallel to the actual world where the pleasure and the dramatic push is provided by the sensual pleasure to the Thai reader (or the interloping foreigner) of various prosodic techniques, which cannot always be apparent in the excellent English translation.

Among these techniques are euphony, the deliberate, iterated use of beautiful sound patterns which fall well on the ear and produce the sense of an inherited aural richness from ‘classic’ Thai literature (*phro* or *phairo*). The author also chooses to intervene in this well-found set of dignified associations by the reversal of compound adjective sequences, a technique which is marked very early in the book, and the reader is thus inculcated to expect them throughout. *Wewaa* is spelled in the reverse by Veeraporn from the usual *waawe* (lonely).¹⁰ *Chookchum* is the reverse of the normal sequence *chumchook* (soaking),¹¹ and *pratee pratang* is the old version of the modern *pratang pratee* (came surging down).¹²

In fact, the reader passes through a positive blizzard of visual adjectivals especially those for the surface glitter of things, such as *prakaay* (sparkling),¹³ *tarang muan khanom sali nay that*¹⁴ (a checker board pattern that resembled fluffy *sale*, a steamed pudding, in their trays),¹⁵ *tang hu ploy ruup yot naam si muang oon song prakaay weuwaaw yu trong plaay haang taa khong thoe*,¹⁶ (the light purple drop-shaped earrings shone next to her eyes so she looked like someone crying in her sleep).¹⁷ Towards the end of the book, Veeraporn provides a magnificent example of this slippage between visual and other domains, a repetition in various iterated phrases of a shimmering scintillation like *kaak phet thi song prakaay yu bon khon taa le mong hen ben wong si wupwaam*¹⁸ (diamond glitter shining from eyelashes and shimmering like a halo).¹⁹

⁸ Kong translation, 40.

⁹ See Amos Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (Hebrew original 2003, translated by Nicholas de Lange, 2004) London: Vintage Books, 2017. One such list is at the bottom of page 147.

¹⁰ Veeraporn Nitiprapha, *Saiduan tapoot nay khaa wongkot*, Khrungtheep, Samnak Phim Dichan: P.S. 2556 (2013), read in 10th printing of P.S. 2559 (2016); hereafter, Original, 11.

¹¹ Original, 22.

¹² Original, 45. Kong translation, 41.

¹³ Original, 30.

¹⁴ Original, 30.

¹⁵ Kong translation, 26.

¹⁶ Original, 45.

¹⁷ Kong translation, 41.

¹⁸ Original, 215.

¹⁹ Kong translation, 172. Veeraporn elsewhere uses an explicit scene of shimmering: He saw nothing except the shimmering, shapeless haze of sunlight filtered through the surface and illuminating a dead tree. Kong translation 50.

Perhaps this tendency towards ‘glittering’ decoration or scintillation of light with fairly clear physical denotation for sensations, and beneath them passions – or their emptiness – is part of the characterisation. That is, the dominant narrative motif of frustrated longing from which there is no heroic rage available as a means of escape, may account for the textural preoccupation with beguiling surfaces. Veeraporn does not engage with a micro-politics of the everyday as much as she completely eschews the macro-politics of class or the state. She defends her apolitical content at the cost of leaving the scope of possible tragic action undefined.

One can even think this a highly socialised technique for the circumventing of social violence by deflecting it, or boxing it up. But this deflection can become ineffective if the reader thinks of the novel along the lines of a pressure cooker, where the violence simply is too great to be held by the plot, and explodes. There are at least four deaths.

These Thai lives float between a changing material world and a set of orphaned relationships, which serve as bonding for a functional and efficient but not actually realised family. There may be a method in this surface encrustation. I am not sure if Veeraporn thinks that for actual Thais the decorative surface only works its bewitching charms because of a lack of substantial attachment to the world, or the absence of ego-driven attentions accounts for the lack of compulsive or meaningful detail inside the surface descriptions.

The poetic resonances are the accompaniment to other rich textural descriptions of a hugely cosmopolitan degustation of food, as well as an international soundscape of classical music and a repeated reference to Thai popular music and some rock. The author has supplied a play list of these musical offerings at the end of the book in Thai, and the translator has added in the English version a botanical list of Thai and English names for the plants frequently mentioned for the connotations roused by their fragrance or other smells. Indeed, the naming of plants is also a sort of rebus of sensual effects where the tree or plant name serves to mark colour, touch, fragrance, and shape, sometimes all at once.

Before him was a profusion of flowers against a background of every shade of green that existed in the world. A large *pu-jormpol* tree stood aloft in the middle of the garden, spreading an opulence of pink flowers like festival fireworks. The twisted body of the *jik-nam* rained down star-shaped flowers. The garden was filled with trees: *faikham*, *lamduan*, *asoke sapun*, *kalapruek bunnag*, *intanin*, flame and India rubber sprouting new leaves, red and glossy. There were also *kankrao* and, further in, *mok* with a few other plants he didn’t know.

...It took Pran several minutes to realize he was lost. It took him another long while of aimless wandering in that labyrinth of aromas before he found the front gate. The intoxicating feeling remained with him as he made his way back through the narrow lanes along which he had come with Chareeya the previous night.²⁰

²⁰ Kong translation, 42.

It is quite astonishing how the realia of food, botanicals and music are mixed without bracketing by an indication of their source culture. Indeed, unlike what would be the case with say, the cultural associations habitual to Japanese or Chinese languages, one is forced to conclude that Thai writers and the worlds shown through literary writing in Thai are not obsessively concerned where things come from, including music, that ostensibly universal but also most culturally bound art form. Music also marks an absent ego, distant from the world if not also nihilistically alienated from it. Pran says to Chareeya:

Don't you think music is like a diary? It records feelings that might have been lost in time. The wind ruffled her hair. Schuman's Opus 47... A love letter

*As if by reflex he looked down at the trace of lipstick on the cup. The love letter Schumann wrote to his forbidden lover. Well, when he fell in love with Clara she was just nine years old.*²¹

It is really rather difficult to see the point of these interjections of musical reference, which only position what has been heard in the melodrama, even the self-referential soap opera of relations between Pran and Chareeya, unless it is a kind of parody which adds to the reader's understanding of their shallowness: these are low-level emotions, with almost no commitment.

But the novel gives these names of flowers, food, and musical pieces such a foundational importance that they are properly deployed to the world of passions and tastes. One suspects that the attention given to these names also points to negative aesthetics where misjudgement about their combination, about the structure of Thai taste itself,²² may be a more cardinal error in this Thai world than any proper identification of cultural origin from which they are descended.

Veeraporn's naming procedure by cultural objects reinforces the visual telling of stories. Even the clichéd plots of soap operas have to deploy the visual as their principal narrative material. Stories need pictorial elements in a culture where people do not read, or the reader's absorption into the written text is not habitual. Despite the spread of literacy, the old aural/oral habits may have prevailed with the spread of the new digital media technologies.

This proposition can be put the other way around: despite the increased literacy in Thailand since the 1970s, the habit of not being absorbed into the text via the medium of written storytelling has been passed on to a populace now paradoxically highly literate. But this audience has been taken up since the 1980s into a mass-mediated consumer society, which emphasises the visual and its sacred aura, a process later augmented in the 2000s by digital images. This might be called the 're-auralization' of a society which, in the past, beyond a very small minority of priests and court nobles, used verbal recitation as the means of storytelling for Buddhist *Jātaka* and other folk tales to the illiterate. With such a background, it is likely that not merely the oral/aural reception

²¹ Kong translation, 69.

²² For a discussion in part of Thai food aesthetics and the problems of negative appraisal in a comparison of Thai and Japanese food aesthetics, see John Clark, 'Food Stories', *Gastronomica*, Spring 2004, 4, 2.

codes of the audience, but the writing codes of the author implicate the visual. There is a plethora of visual objects used in the storytelling and the way some scenes, such as those surrounding Paradorn and his father, are produced seem like segments from a psychedelic rock movie.

In his analysis of mimetic Western realism in literature, from the Greeks to Virginia Woolf, Auerbach distinguished between *parataxis* (floating parallel clauses linked only by a resonance or common subject) and *hypotaxis* (the causal linking of principal clauses to a denoted subject, in some languages by conjunctions or relative pronouns). Veeraporn's prosodic descriptions clearly veer towards parataxis many times. If we apply the above concepts of Auerbach, a tendency to insert segmented but apparently not haphazard visualisations, such as in Veeraporn's iterated descriptions of flora and the use of mostly Western classical music titles as indices of moods, may in part account for the parallel processing of adjectival qualifications by floating parallel clauses, rather than their linking into an overarching grammatical structure where principal clauses are causally linked to a denoted subject.²³

Veeraporn likes to insert sub-tales into her text, including two which take up whole Chapters: XIV 'The Dancer in the Drizzle',²⁴ and XIX 'The Eye of the Storm'²⁵ The former treats the name of an alley called after the putative lost love, 'Rosarin', and shows exactly how through rumour, innuendo and magical superstition what was the marker of a tragedy – in a broken shop sign later repurposed into a waiting bench for motorcycle taxis – becomes the name for a shrine where women come to pray for the fertility which nature or society denied them. The story revolves around the internal, personal hopelessness of a woman, Rosarin, who wastes away and dies for love, and the external, social hope inverted by the various incarnations of the shop sign as a bench, a house, a shrine under her name, but commemorated in the title Café Rosarin.

The narrative in this tale within the story suggests, for this reader, a kind of structural model for the way Thai popular history is constructed at the folk level, that is an historical accretion of material events through their iteration in popular practice or objects like the discarded sign named after Rosarin here, which transmutes from a rusty old bench into a local shrine. Over time, the transformations of objects used as names constitute the transformations of their social functions. This narrative excludes analytical or ideological confrontation with historical facts, although that does occur in other kinds of texts. 'The Dancer in the Drizzle' also slyly comments on a type of survivors' economy, by the way such folk experiences intertwine with the life and death of characters at the vernacular level – of café owners, a pregnant woman who fell down the stairs and died, another abandoned pregnant woman who hung herself, motorbike taxi riders, Aunt Linjee who is trying to sell her land, a shaman she employed, believers giving money offerings at the shrine, homeless people cleaning the shrine, the employees of Somwang Grilled Chicken built opposite the shrine, even the workers in a CD shop.

²³ Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature* [original written in Istanbul 1942-45, published Berne, 1946, translated by Willard R. Trask from New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953, 70-75, 99-121.

²⁴ Kong translation, 104-11; original, 134-142.

²⁵ Kong translation, 140-146; original, 176-184.

Rosarin was a slighted woman who became a dancer, then an isolate in her own loudly proclaimed public harangues, and died alone, unnoticed by her neighbours. Veeraporn does not write from the ‘high level’ of theory projected back down onto the everyday. Rumour and the word-of-mouth generation of the stories of place, which cumulate as a history, produce the reader’s desire for a sited focus of redemption or release which could simply be the product of narrative need. But this is a land where story-speech has not been inscribed as text, even as the now urbanised audience uses text to read these stories.

The issue hinges on matters raised some time ago in 1963 by Goody and Watt on the history and theory of script and text generation. Written literature takes insufficient account of the continuation of oral literature, which runs after, and in parallel with, the perpetuation of local myths through writing. Goody and Watt’s analysis contrasts pre-literate (i.e. oral) literature with post-literate (i.e. script written) literature.

Homeostatic organization of the cultural tradition in non-literate society wipes out its past as a historical memory. This is contrasted with a literate society which brings its past with it and is ‘inevitably committed to an every-increasing series of cultural lags.... The content of the cultural tradition grows continually, and in so far as it affects any particular individual he becomes a palimpsest composed of beliefs and attitudes belonging to different stages in historical time.’²⁶

Perhaps through her fluent control of modern *everyday* Thai diction and her understanding of the consumption of images, Veeraporn is asking the reader to see these approaches to the texts in multiple layers without privileging a central, single ‘high’ literary discourse.

What follows ‘Rosarin’ is ‘The Eye of the Storm’, which is possibly the most autonomous story in the book. It treats of the end of Uncle Thanit, who finally comes close to the goal of obtaining a rare textile but is trapped by a sandstorm in distant mountains, invited to stay with a woman whose husband is away, and after their hectic lovemaking and the storm have subsided, decides to go to live as a monk in a hermitage on a mountain where he dies thirty-one years later.

The ‘traveller lost in a storm’ device is well known across many literatures and provides a sense of real but impossible and marvellous occurrences, usually by a lone traveller in the countryside. He, she, or sometimes figures who we at the end discover were actually transgender,²⁷ will be defined through unfolding events and semi-miraculous encounters with ‘people wonders’, if not ghosts and magical beings. This story has the feel of Isak Dinesen’s *Seven Gothic Tales*.²⁸

²⁶ See Jack Goody, and Ian Watt, ‘The Consequences of Literacy’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 5, no. 3, April 1963, 234.

²⁷ See the last chapter of João Guimarães Rosa, *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands* (translated by James L. Taylor and Harriet de Onís, Brazilian Portuguese original *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, 1956) New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963, 485; first French translation, Paris: Albin Michel, 1965, second French translation, Paris: Albin Michel, 1991.

²⁸ See inter alia, Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen), ‘The roads around Pisa’, in *Seven Gothic Tales*, London: Putnam, 1934, 1948.

But Veeraporn's two stories, or tales within a story, about Rosarin and Uncle Thanit are inserted into a different and beguilingly real world of a sensuous and culture-bound poetics, which also makes one think of the 'magic' realism of Latin America.²⁹ Although neither *Men of Maize* (1949), nor *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) is referred to, one does feel the affinity of the 'marvellous real' for Veeraporn, an overly sympathetic relation from which she may be keeping an authorial distance.³⁰ Yet, unlike magic realism which frequently figures the potent male figure of a soldier or a father, or the sexually rapacious male adventurer, the distinguishing feature of Veeraporn's text is the absence or disappearance of the father. This could be a feminist stance in the Thai context.

What does it mean that all the actual or substitute fathers die or disappear? The availability of male father figures to attribute gender may mean that gendering falls into different patterns if there are not that many men to supply gendered types. Baker and Pasuk indicate there are actually complex overlapping, if not also competing, genderings in the earliest Thai secular narrative, *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, probably developed from the early 1600s onwards.³¹ This includes both 'folk' and 'court' narratives, the former privileging female roles, the latter male roles. The number of men may have been greatly depleted by wars, and in many families the producer and the household heads were effectively women. The absent father in *The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth*, apart from a literary trope, may actually implicate a deeper structural problem of Thai society inherited from earlier history.

Assuming that stories deal with a series of modelled personalities surfacing as ego-types allowed and promoted within specifically Thai society, how can the self that the author presents freely reconstitute itself as a particular person freely having gone through such a dis-coordinated series of events? Can the author compact with the reader to present a possibility of a self which is distributed across various characters, however restricted they are by genre, linguistic convention and historic placement in Thai society?

Chareeya has a fissured eye, which provides the onlooker with an illusion of seeing the other before you see them.³² This seeing-in at a distance would be voyeuristic if the subject gained sexual pleasure from the act, but that doesn't seem to be the case, and Pran finds himself by taking a room in a nondescript apartment block within sight of Chareeya's house and its garden.

²⁹ Miguel Ángel Asturias, *Men of Maize* (Spanish original 1949, translated by Gerald Martin), London: Verso 1988; Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Spanish original 1967, translated by Gregory Rabassa), London: Cape, 1970.

³⁰ On the origins of the term 'marvellous real' in Weimar Germany, see Irene Guenther, 'Magic realism, New Objectivity, and the arts during the Weimar Republic', in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Durham N.C., Duke University Press, 1995, 61.

³¹ Chris Baker, and Pasuk Phongpaichit, 'Gender, Sexuality and Family in old Siam: Women and Men in *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*', in Rachel V. Harrison, ed., *Disturbing Conventions: Decentering Thai Literary Cultures*, London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014. See *The Tale of Khun Chang, Khun Phaen: Siam's folk epic of love, war, and tragedy*, translated by Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010.

³² Kong translation, 148.

Let loneliness wrap around him like a shroud until the last days of his life. After all, it was just a bitter after taste in the mouth, just a stab of wind through the heart, just a *feeling*.

But at that moment and without warning, the sea of flowers swelled and wafted its gentle perfume. The ginger cat that had followed him out now took up a position in front of the house, and the woman was still asleep in the room that was filled with everything in the world, the room that was just a few steps away, the room he could see from where he was.... He slept for a while, without dreaming, amid a faint aroma of Mon roses carried on the breeze from Chareeya's garden.³³

(Pran only sleeps with Chareeya towards the end of the book,³⁴ and only after that does he tell Chareeya about this room.³⁵)

So Pran and other characters like being close to, but not ostensibly interacting with, the locus of their desires. They salvage fragments of memories, which seem meaningful out of a morass of disconnected events linked by different aspects of the other characters. This is especially so with Chareeya and Chalika, for both of whom Pran serves as a disinterested lover, 'who acted in accordance with his feelings, but he didn't feel that much'³⁶ Veeraporn does not analyse the disembodied separation from their feelings of her principal characters, neither does she ostensibly focus on the relation between their ego formation and the fact that they are orphans. No simple equation is made between childhood loss of self, or the incompletely formed ego, and the loss of parents. It seems like the parents are still there in the story, as residues in the letters Chareeya and Chalika's mother read from her father after he had left her, and which eventually they/she could remember by heart.

One supposes that for Veeraporn's characters the consequence of the absent parent, however acted out in later life, was that the self was already non-present before the life experiences were known from which a character could grasp meaning. The self in a sense is non-present in the world and it should not be surprising that this ghost-like self haunts places and people. Almost as a side-event to the overall plot, Veeraporn introduces the flesh-devouring *phob* ghost from which the family nurse Nual had to flee as a girl, and who in the course of her flight is also orphaned.³⁷

Some levels of Thai society identify the forces that society cannot control through the notion of a usually malevolent ghost, which can steal humans when they have entered the world of their dreams. These beliefs are well worked out in folk religion, to the extent that one can think spirit belief and worship is the Thai religion, which

³³ Kong translation, 45.

³⁴ Kong translation, 163.

³⁵ Kong translation, 166.

³⁶ Kong translation, 150.

³⁷ Kong translation 154-155. See S. J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970, 312-326, for a discussion of the 'afflictions caused by malevolent spirits', including *phob* on 318. Of course, the beliefs in spirits and participation in cults in Thailand are very complicated between regions. See Paul Cohen and Gehan Wijeyewardene, eds, 'Spirit Cults and the Position of Women in Northern Thailand', *Mankind* (published by The Anthropological Society of New South Wales) 14, 4 (August 1984).

preceded Buddhism and coexisted with it. This phenomenon is easily discerned in many public practices like casting spells, consulting shamans for propitiatory ceremonies, and by extension in the both nostalgic and proleptic use of royal images in homes, offices, and shops, which commemorate an auspicious past as well as at the same time, with the same image, anticipate a more beneficent future.

The belief in ghosts is dependent on a kind of imagining that something is there in the world visually, but not there in written words as represented in a text. This belief may amount to a separate magical practice. It may also indicate the undercurrent of popular ignorance of, and often fierce resistance to, culturally different or non-standard ways of thinking. This ‘ghosting’ of the world may even provide the original emotional energy for clashes in political ideology.

It is not Veeraporn’s task to dissect such political conflicts and whatever energy they gain from folk beliefs, she is deeply aware of political contexts. In the close to the Thai introduction in the original novel, which is not translated into English, she mentions that she started to write the first sentence of the novel on a day when Bangkok was covered with smoke and blood.³⁸ Despite there being no explicit contrast in her work between ‘red’ (Thaksin) and ‘yellow’ (royal) thinking, no Thai reader would mistake the reference to the events in April and May 2010, which left more than eighty civilians and eight soldiers killed. Veeraporn’s incidental purpose in writing the novel is to investigate for herself what mentalities allowed this to happen.

For someone used to working with mass images and their operations, belief in ghosts could be very irritating and require abrupt dismissal. Veeraporn does this at least once when she uses a movie metaphor for a change of view by Pran just as he is being overwhelmed by memory images.³⁹ But working with residual images in the minds of single characters means that the story includes no social conflict or critical analysis that recognises the structure of social inequality surrounding the freedoms of choice and the personal taste decisions in which all the characters engage. Veeraporn, with her implicit contempt for masculinist politics,⁴⁰ might think that the small interstices and gaps in social fabric are the free space of imagination or at least the means which allow unconditioned behaviour by her characters.

The hierarchies of Thai life may still leave room for spaces of toleration and autonomous action by suburban orphans living a relatively prosperous life, or for that

³⁸ Veeraporn Nitiprapha, *Saiduan tapoot nay khaa wongkot*, 4. Phaptawan Suwannakudt and I translate the last paragraph as:

I wrote the first sentence in the capital city deeply darkened with smoke and covered with blood. It was done with the sound from a sigh of relief, which covered and buried the common-sense that had passed away. I had hoped that the story would not end up in despair. However, when it arrived at the last phrase there was only a bitter-sweet love story of ‘her’ and ‘him’, without room for ‘us’ at all. This was a story about the land, which used to be tender and gentle, long, long ago.

³⁹ For example (Kong translation, 172: Cut to: the black rectangle of his window in the room cobwebbed by loneliness...

⁴⁰ Veeraporn casually (or sarcastically) mentions the great 1976 turning point of Thai political murder, almost as if the reference was in passing, and only part of a barely significant background historical landscape.

The massacre of 6th October [1976] was twelve years past and its memory had begun to fade. People were no longer even sure it had actually happened. (Kong translation, 60)

matter, and unmentioned here, diligent Isarn workers going off to the Persian Gulf to earn enough to pay for their children's education. But maybe Veeraporn's implication is that Thai society does not have to be changed by accepting and working through the self-other authorising hierarchy of the *hi-so* (upper class wealthy) and the institutional structures they control, but by going around or trying to go between them. In her story, such an absence of hierarchy may explain why there is no account of the principal characters' social rise and fall, and inadequate life chances are detailed only in the life of the servant, Nual. She significantly closes the novel with a cry to the earth, where Nual speaks of what a society has lost in its labyrinth, something other than herself:

Only when she realised that Chareeya wasn't there, wasn't anywhere did Nual collapse on the ground and cry. She sobbed and wailed loudly, desperately clawing the earth, and she kept wailing and digging until morning even though she knew she wouldn't find anything except for blind earthworms, one after another, lost in a labyrinth of their own making.⁴¹

In an interview, Veeraporn practically accepted the ego absorption between selves where Chareeya and Chalika are different aspects of one person in two bodies.⁴² Perhaps the two figures exist as the expression of anger in a psychologically maladjusted society where egos cannot connect with their real goals. They act out an indifference to what they are enabled to achieve. One of the consequences of this indifference is that the characters Veeraporn has deployed lack a strong or systematic notion of social resistance to the constraints which have shaped their lives, even if they are able to lament their consequences.

This could be Veeraporn's implicit social critique. After all, when you can happily live by making great Thai cakes and enjoy classical music from anywhere, why should you fret over the purpose of life, or about your function in the great scheme of the world?

⁴¹ Kong translation, 201.

⁴² In her scintillatingly funny interview at CMU Bookfair found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=uD7hrI1YEzQ