

วิจารณ์หนังสือ



THAI P.E.N. ANTHOLOGY

SHORT STORIES AND POEMS OF SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

P.E.N. INTERNATIONAL-THAILAND CENTER

Nitaya Masavisut, editor, **Thai P.E.N. Anthology : Short Stories and Poems of Social Consciousness.**

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For those outside Thailand who are interested in Thai literature but have limited access to it due to language limitations, the publication of the Thai P.E.N. Anthology : **Short Stories and poems of Social Consciousness** is a welcome event. Translated into English, these short stories and poems come from some of the finest writers in Thailand today, among them SEA Write Award-winners Ussiri Thammachote and Naowarat Pongpaiboon, and Lao Khamhawm whose stories have previously been translated into English. Admittedly representing only one stream of modern Thai literature, these short stories and poems nevertheless embody a major concern among Thai writers and readers who are responsive to the need for greater social awareness.

The over-all theme of the short stories is the plight of the poor and their victimization by society but the stories have been chosen to give us a balanced picture of society in rural and urban Thailand, not only through variety of subject-matter but through the wide range of styles and techniques used by

the various authors. The realistically but sensitively rendered suffering of such victims as Pin, the twelve-year old bus conductor or abused by the "boots" ("Pin"); Chalerm, the pregnant prostitute-hauled into custody by the police ("**Breath of a Flower**"); or eighteen-year old Awn, raped by a policeman, her bright-eyed innocence turned to shame and despair ("Awn") is balanced by the humor of such stories as "**The Happiness of a Village Teacher**" about an easy going teacher in a village school who takes life as it comes or "**The Postulant's Lotus**" where the superstition which preys on the poor and ignorant is lightheartedly exposed.

Variety is also achieved through point of view. The first-person point of view in "**The Happiness of a Village Teacher**" effectively shows the sense of humor with which Kru Dej views his situation as a teacher in a village school deep in a jungle "as remote-as the end of the world." Consistency of tone is maintained throughout, making us more receptive to the insights given by the author into the life of the villagers : their superstitious beliefs, their open and generous natures, their ability to live an uncomplaining and carefree life in their simple village society.

The use of a child as the center of consciousness is put to contrasting use in two of the short stories. In "**Pin**," the twelve-year old boy kicked to unconsciousness and pain by uniformed bullies likens himself to a little stray puppy whose death he once witnessed, thus intensifying the pathos of his situation. In "**Nu Waen and Tui**," the little girl draws, not on the bitterness of experience but on the vividness of her imagination to picture, in innocent but frightened awe, the big town as a monster sucking the life out of the village and the poor villagers, "the town, with its sweeping arms, which took everything away from the village to feed itself."

Some of the stories in this collection appeal rather directly to our sympathies; others hold our interest by employing a more subtle narrative technique. In "**The Grass Cutter**," descriptions of the grass cutter hard at work throughout the day alternate with snatches of overheard conversation which show the addiction to gambling of the poor, ever optimistic that, though they may lose or get cheated, they may yet win the big prize someday. At the end of his day, the grass cutter spends his hard-earned money on a cheap drink and food for his family. He doesn't have enough to pay for his purchases so he has to choose between an egg and seasoning powder. He chooses the seasoning powder and with the little money left over, buys candy for his child. The meager choices which we see the grass cutter making emphasize the more important choices which are not in his power to make.

Easily the most outstanding short story in this anthology is Ussiri Thammachote's "**Nightfall on the Waterway.**" A watermelon vendor, tired and disheartened by his inability to get a good price for his melons, is slowly paddling his way home on the canal at dark. As he makes his way on the water, he comes upon a doll and he brightens up at the thought of bringing it home to his daughter, yet not without a thought of pity for the poor child who lost the doll. Pity soon turns to horror, however,

when he sees the owner of the doll, a drowned child of about the same age as his daughter, its body bloated and rotting in the water. Again, he thinks in quick sympathy of its parents what can he do to let them know? But he sees the glint of gold on the child's wrist and immediately, visions of the happiness such a "fortune" can bring his wife and child crowd into his mind. In spite of the stench, he works at the gruesome task of cutting away the rotten flesh until the prize is in his hands. Then, with no more thought for the dead child and its parents, and throwing away the doll as bad luck, he paddles home with renewed life and vigor.

Ussiri's mastery of technique is clearly shown in this story. His use of foreshadowing, for instance, as he uses the innocent and seemingly auspicious discovery of the doll to foreshadow a parallel discovery, but one of horror that of the child's corpse, is superb. We must also marvel at the way he husband's resources, for after using the doll as foreshadowing, he economically uses it again at the end of the story for symbolic reinforcement of the man's change of attitude. Moreover, style and imagery are finely orchestrated to produce changes of mood and atmosphere. The sights and sounds of nature on the water-way anticipate, reflect and underscore the man's thoughts:

Now and then his movements startled nocturnal birds from their klong-side thickets. With harsh piercing shrieks they rose in agitated flight, flapping their wings over his head, and disappeared into the darkness of the opposite bank. Their stirring scattered airborne congregations of fireflies which flashed like intermittent sparks from a kindled fire before settling behind dark clumps of klong-side reeds like soft luminous showers. Whenever he drifted too close to the bank, the drones of myriads of waterside insects sounded to his ears like plaintive wails of human miseries; and waves of aching loneliness would sweep over him.

More than this, the author skillfully uses the nature description to smooth the transition from the inward thought to the outward event:

In a timeless moment of aloneness on the light-less klong with no passing boat to keep him company a timeless moment in which the moving water made soft sounds like the breath of a dying man he thought of death and suddenly realized that the quiet klong breeze brought with it the smell of putrefaction.

With this comes his discovery of the child's corpse.

Ussiri's versatile style, poetic in its approach to nature, can turn itself to the starkly ugly as well:

The moonlight lay like a rippled silver sheet on the moving water, and the seemingly interminable hum of the insects now resembled prayers chanted for the dead. He held his breath and, with the thin blade

of his melon-knife, cut into the soft swollen flesh of the fingers and hand of the dead child. Piece by piece the decomposing flesh fell away from the white bones and was carried away by the drifting current, gradually exposing the bright chain of gold that it had almost hidden from view by its ghastly swelling.

This passage shows the integrity of his style, able to move from the beauty of nature to the ugliness of death and decay, thus harmonizing all parts of his story to form a whole.

The impact of this story comes not alone from the author's complete control of his craft but from a perception quite as deep as his art is sensitive. The author makes no easy moral judgments but he adds a new dimension to our view of the poor and calls up in us a response more subtle and complex than mere pity and sympathy which are easily evoked but just as easily laid aside. The thoughtful response the story evokes in us cannot be easily dismissed and its effect therefore is longer lasting.

The general theme of the short stories is taken up in some of the poems. "The Old Woman Vender" and "That Hungry Feeling," for instance, describe the plight of the helpless and downtrodden in society, particularly women, old and young. "The Defiance of a Flower" also focuses on woman but takes a different direction. Challenging the conventional stereotype of woman as fragile and merely decorative, it draws a picture of a woman as a total human being—strong and free, valuable in herself.

Many of the poems in this collection are quite explicitly political, some more so than others. "Isaan" and "Wake up, Free Man" are direct calls to action, notable for their fervor and intensity. Other poems, however, are not so explicit; in them, the poet carefully uses his art to give not only intensity and force, but depth and beauty to his convictions. Such a poem is Naowarat Pongpoiboon's "Mere Movement."

The poem moves progressively from image to image to develop its theme: the first faint movements that presage life, beauty, freedom even in the midst of unawareness, inaction, decay. The poem is imbued with social and political consciousness but any explicit statement made in the poem is prepared for, and led to, by image and metaphor. The images are varied but they consistently sustain and deepen the theme. They are delicate yet powerful, giving the impression of fragility hiding potential strength:

*The mere flutter of an eagle's wing
Tempers the heat of the sun.*

*The mere trembling of a single leaf
Announces the coming of the wind.*

Opposed to these are the images of immobility and unseeing, given in quick succession: "the earthworm wrapped in earth," "the maggot blind to the filth." Image answers image, culminating in that of the lotus, the epitome of beauty arising from filth, further enriched by its religious associations:

*Decay creeps over the quiet bog,
Yet out of the rot there arise
The first faint stirrings the merest move
And a fine field of lotus awaits.*

*A promise astir of nothing evil,
But of grace and beauty taking shape.
There amid the murky stillness,
The beginning is begun.*

From here, the poem moves quietly on to the last stanza which exhorts, not so much to direct action as to full awareness:

*Listen to the temple drums.
Observe another Holy Day.
Hear the booming of the guns
Mark the people's battle cry.*

A different kind of poem but equally effective is "The Saga of Khunthong" which uses legend and traditional verse forms to give a historical perspective and a sense of continuity to the student movement. Khunthong is a legendary hero, a young man of the Ayudhya period who successfully raids a Burmese camp during the wars with the Burmese to free Thai villagers whom they hold captive, but he himself doesn't come back. He is a hero to capture the imagination and mothers through the years have told the story in lullabies to their children. In the first few stanzas, the poet narrates the story of the legendary Khunthong (the first eight lines in fact are taken verbatim from the old lullaby, as the translator tells us). Then, without shifting his focus, he moves from legendary past to present history by skillfully weaving in allusions to the contemporary situation. The emphasis is not so much on Khunthong's achievements as on his idealism, clearly the idealism and commitment of the students themselves:

*You are no warrior
With no wound nor scars.
You are small and slender
From years of book-learning.*

*Mother knows that her son
Is committed and faithful.
Father knows that his son
Is grateful to his land.*

*But who else will know this?
They aren't God-Indra.
Some mortal may have heard this,
But power blinds them*

The poem achieves a haunting beauty through the use of simple, traditional images (such as the use of flowers to symbolize long and weary waiting) and the soft, gentle rhythms of the traditional lullaby. Legend and tradition thus combine to lend dignity and nobility to the student activist and to give his cause a timeless, universal quality. In spite of its clear political commit-

ment, there is absolutely nothing strident in this poem. It does demand of us the fierce intensity of involvement but rather evokes the quiet sadness of contemplation. Because of this, it is a more deeply moving experience, at least for the general reader, than some of the poems mentioned earlier. However, in an anthology such as this, both kinds of poem have a place. Certainly, the anthology succeeds in what the editor describes as the "care.....taken to ensure that works of different hues and genres were included." But the value of the collection, as this review has tried to show, lies mainly in those works, both short stories and poems, which stand out for their complex grasp of experience and the sensitive artistry with which the writer has rendered his image of society.

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