TO SEE OR NOT TO SEE: SOCIAL INVISIBILITIES IN RATTAWUT LAPCHAROENSAP'S *SIGHTSEEING*

ภาวะล่องหนทางสังคมในผลงานรวบรวมเรื่องสั้น *Sightseeing* ของรัฐวุฒิ ลาภเจริญทรัพย์

ดริณทิพย์ จันทร์สิทธิ์ (Darintip Chansit)[1]
บัญชา รัตนมธุวงศ์ (Bancha Rattanamathuwong)[2]

Abstract

This paper discusses how the issues of social invisibility are explored in Rattawut Lapcharoensap's collection of short stories: *Sightseeing*. While the criticisms of Lapcharoensap's stories often focus on the cross-cultural encounters in his works, this paper will mainly examine how two stories in his collection reveal the internal problems within Thailand. Thailand as portrayed in the two short stories is rife with classism and blatant corruptions. Our analysis of the short stories is informed by the concept of social invisibility, which addresses the problems faced by the marginal exemplified by the main characters. Focusing on 'Priscilla the Cambodian' and 'Draft Day,' we shall argue that the two stories thematise the problems of injustice and inequalities in Thailand by juxtaposing what can be seen with what is invisible or is rendered invisible. In 'Priscilla the Cambodian,' both immigrants and Thais are subject to social invisibilisation. 'Draft Day,' on the other hand, thematises a different form of invisibility and reveals that the state of invisibility can be manipulated and exploited by those who are more

[1] *Lecturer, English Department, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University*
[2] *Lecturer, English Department, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University*

socially advantaged. Apart from the analysis of the stories themselves, this article should also contribute to the discussions on the portrayals of Thailand in Western literary circles.

Keyword: Thai-American writers, *Sightseeing*, Rattawut Lapcharoensap, Asian American fiction, social invisibility

บทคัดย่อ

บทความฉบับนี้ศึกษาประเด็นเรื่องภาวะล่องหนทางสังคมในผลงานรวบรวมเรื่องสั้นชื่อ *ไซท์ซีอิง* (*Sightseeing*) ของรัฐวุฒิ ลาภเจริญทรัพย์ (Rattawut Lapcharoensap) บทวิจารณ์เรื่องสั้นของลาภเจริญทรัพย์มักจะมุ่งเน้นไปที่ประเด็นการปะทะสังสรรค์ทางวัฒนธรรมที่พบเห็นได้ในตัวบท แต่บทความฉบับนี้มุ่งศึกษาการแสดงถึงปัญหาภายในประเทศไทยจากเรื่องสั้นสองเรื่องในชุดรวมเรื่องสั้นดังกล่าว โดยประเทศไทยดังที่แสดงให้เห็นในเรื่องสั้นสองเรื่องนี้มีปัญหาด้านชนชั้นและการทุจริตอย่างโจ่งแจ้งให้เห็นอยู่โดยทั่วไป บทวิเคราะห์นี้อ้างอิงแนวคิดเรื่องภาวะล่องหนทางสังคม ซึ่งกล่าวถึงปัญหาต่าง ๆ ที่กลุ่มคนชายขอบดังเช่นตัวละครหลักต้องเผชิญ ในการวิเคราะห์เรื่องสั้นสองเรื่องอันได้แก่ ‘พริสซิลลา เดอะ แคมโบเดียน’ (Priscilla the Cambodian) และ ‘ดราฟต์ เดย์’ (Draft Day) ผู้วิจัยเสนอว่าเรื่องสั้นทั้งสองเรื่องนี้ได้แสดงแก่นประเด็นปัญหาความอยุติธรรมและความไม่เท่าเทียมในสังคมโดยการเทียบเคียงสิ่งที่สามารถมองเห็นและสิ่งที่ไม่สามารถมองเห็นหรือถูกทำให้มองไม่เห็น ใน ‘พริสซิลลา เดอะ แคมโบเดียน’ ทั้งกลุ่มผู้อพยพและชาวไทยต่างตกเป็นเหยื่อของการทำให้ล่องหนทางสังคม ในขณะที่ ‘ดราฟต์ เดย์’ แสดงภาวะการล่องหนในอีกรูปแบบหนึ่ง ภาวะล่องหนในบริบทนี้เป็นสภาวะที่ผู้ที่มีความได้เปรียบมากกว่าทางสังคมสามารถควบคุมและใช้ประโยชน์ได้ นอกเหนือไปจากการวิเคราะห์เรื่องสั้นดังกล่าวแล้ว บทความฉบับนี้ยังมุ่งต่อยอดการอภิปรายการแสดงภาพของประเทศไทยในแวดวงวรรณคดีในโลกตะวันตกอีกด้วย

คำสำคัญ: นักเขียนไทย-อเมริกัน, เรื่องสั้น *Sightseeing*, รัฐวุฒิ ลาภเจริญทรัพย์, นิยายเอเชียนอเมริกัน, ภาวะล่องหนทางสังคม

1. Introduction

When asked in an interview about his opinions on the relationship between tourists and Thai people, Rattawut Lapcharoensap, a Thai-American writer, states, "[Tourism] can be a ritualized way of sharpening people's awareness of vast incongruities and inequalities. When this happens—as it does in so many places in the world, in so many other industries as well—one is filled with a curious mixture of envy and rage, and any form of ambivalence is always interesting for a fiction writer" (Lapcharoensap, "Interview with Rattawut," n.d.). Lapcharoensap's remark highlights the often-overlooked aspect of tourism. Tourism does not merely entail recreational indulgence but can also be edifying. It offers both hosts and visitors an awareness of the discrepancy between their lives and those of the others. As suggested in the title of his book, *Sightseeing*, the author himself assumes the role of a tour guide, accompanying his reader to different places in Thailand. However, in lieu of recreational sightseeing, what is to be seen by the reader is the sinister facets that visitors to Thailand tend not to see or voluntarily turn a blind eye on. With this atypical literary sightseeing, this article will examine the interplay between what is seen and what is unseen in this literary excursion. Our argument is that the thematisation of social injustice, an issue also prevalent in the author's home country, is mainly enacted through the opposition between visibility and invisibility.

2. Literature review

The scholarly criticisms of *Sightseeing* often focus on the cross-cultural encounters in the stories. For instance, Ingo Peters analyses the island motifs in the stories in relation to the concept of *shima* in order to shed

lights on the author's attempt to ridicule the tourist gaze. Peters argues that the author's depiction of islands counters the image of an island as a subsidiary site and thereby reverses the role of the visitors and the visited. Visitors from the mainlands, especially Westerners, are the object of the protagonist's gaze to be observed as the other for the purpose of self-actualisation (Peters, 2010). Similarly, Małgorzata Rutkowska examines three short stories in the collection by paying particular attention to the transition each adolescent character goes through. Rutkowska points out that Lapcharoensap's stories illustrate native people "negotiating their position with reference to foreign visitors and the cultural luggage they bring" (2011, p. 95). Apart from these two scholarly works, in her dissertation entitled *Languages of Self: American Immigrant Writers and the New Global Literature*, Roula Kogos (2014) also discusses the stories in *Sightseeing* with regard to the characters' identity formation and the global politics. Investigating how the character's experience of differences shapes the development of their identity, Kogos's discussion is centered on the influences of global forces that lead to new formations and representations of identity.

These scholarly works mainly investigate the stories in *Sightseeing* through the issues of cultural clashes. Even though these issues will be inevitably touched upon in this article, the focus of this article will differ from the aforementioned works. In fact, how the stories in *Sightseeing* reveal the social problems in the author's native country also merits a closer scrutiny because the collection also offers rich depictions of class issues within the Thai society. As King-kok Cheung states in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, "[w]ith the rise of global corporatism in which Asia plays a significant role, Asians and Asian Americans are seen as occupying not just exploited but exploiting positions" (1996,

p. 14). Apart from the destabilising encounter with the racial other, Lapcharoensap's short stories also offer pregnant depictions of inequality, social injustice, and structural violence in Thailand. The Thais in *Sightseeing* are both the agents and the recipients of exploitation. While Pratyusha Tummala-Narra states that immigrants have "fantasies of visiting the home country post-immigration" as a way to nostalgically reconnect with their cultural environment which they know and idealise (qtd. in Ancheta, 2017, p. 44), in Lapcharoensap's short stories, the depictions of Thailand offered by the author are far from idealistic. Just as the stories in this collection highlight an invasive global influence on Thai people's life, so do they insightfully disclose Thailand's unsightly problems.

3. Methodology

This paper discusses the stories in *Sightseeing* in tandem with the theoretical concept of social invisibility elaborated by Françoise Král in *Social Invisibility and Diasporas in Anglophone Literature and Culture.* As discussed by Král, social invisibility can involve both economic invisibility and political invisibility. People who are not seen, cannot be seen, or do not wish to be seen economically tend to be those who "lack an actual location for their work" or those who "work within structures that do not officially exist and are not officially recorded as hosting some form of economic activity" (2014, p. 23). Those whose existence can be deemed economically invisible may range from people working in a family business, child labour, and illegal immigrants who do not want to be seen or recognised, both individually and statistically. Very often, the issue of economic invisibility underscores the disparity between the invisible subjects' social observability and their actual socio-economic impact on society (Král, 2014, p. 23). In addition to

economic invisibility, marginalised subjects can also be politically invisible too. Political invisibility can happen to people "whose status or rather lack of a status makes them half-citizens excluded from the mainstream of society" (Král, 2014, p. 28). This form of invisibility is applicable to both illegal immigrants and even immigrants who may live legally in a country but are deprived of political rights, usually the rights to vote. As a consequence, those whose existence is not acknowledged in the realm of politics often find themselves in vulnerable and precarious situations, having no means to make the authorities listen to and cater to their needs.

It is worth noting that, according to Král, there are a lot of factors that cause invisibility and invisibilisation:

> Invisibility and invisibilization take various forms and have various origins. Sometimes the migrant chooses to be invisible for his/her own convenience -- this is the case with illegal immigrants for example -- sometimes s/he becomes invisible despite his/her efforts to be socially or politically visible. And very often the deliberate invisibility triggers a long-term unwanted invisibility as the migrant finds himself/herself caught in a vicious circle of marginalized second-class citizenship, doomed to exist on the outskirts of society, without a right to health care or any form of social welfare. (Král, 2014, p. 53).

Simply put, invisibility can be either willful or unintentional. However, even in the context where the invisible choose to remain unseen, their willfulness by no means indicates freedom or empowering agency but rather emphasises even more their vulnerability with regards to legal

protection. One's state of visibility is also mutable as much as it is contingent upon a number of other factors of which the marginalised and the invisible are not in control.

Informed by scholarly works such as *L'Invisibilité Sociale* by Guillaume Le Blanc, *Precarious Life* by Judith Butler, and "Can the Subaltern Speak?" by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Král's book also points out that invisibility or the failure to *see* a human being is a "political gesture"; the failure to acknowledge someone's existence happens on purpose and usually involves a "numbing" or "hijacking" of the voice of those individuals who are ignored or not taken seriously (Král, 2014, p. 57). As he poignantly states, "The question of the subaltern's ability to speak is not sufficient and if we were to paraphrase Spivak, the real issue is no longer 'Can the subaltern speak?' but 'can he be heard?' (Král , 2014, p. 57)." As shown in the selected short stories in *Sightseeing*, the characters try to raise their voice, but they are eventually silenced, forgotten, and rendered invisible. To examine social invisibility hence is not a mere investigation of a marginalised subject but rather an exploration of the social milieu that gives rise to the precarious state of being unseen. Invisibility faced by the characters who encapsulate subalternity sheds light on the hierarchical social structure which proves to be both oppressive and divisive.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Site unseen: urbanity and violence of invisibility in "Priscilla the Cambodian"

The first story to be analysed in this paper is "Priscilla the Cambodian," in which a group of Cambodian refugees squatting space in a housing development project that has been abandoned by the construction

company and inhabited by a small number of Thai families, some of whose children befriend a Cambodian girl named Priscilla. The portions of the story involving adult characters are, as can be expected, decidedly less friendly and more violent. Drawing on the concept of social invisibility outlined in the previous section of the paper, "Priscilla the Cambodian" therefore portrays two distinct types of invisible figures—those who are predictably invisible and those whose invisibility is contextually unexpected.

The titular character, Priscilla, and her fellow Cambodian refugees undoubtedly fall into the first category of characters who are, in context, supposed to be invisible. The simple reason for this is because they are foreigners—a status that decidedly determines them to be different and thus not belonging in the community into which they insert themselves. Their situation is exacerbated by their being illegal immigrants, which also complicates their identity and their situation in the story. Despite near constant or frequent coverage by the press, immigrants seem to bear an existence that straddles a line between visibility and invisibility. On one hand, they are inevitably in the spotlight—their actions closely monitored and their illicitness, whether acknowledged or not, confirming their otherness, but on the other hand, their lives as members of society are generally downplayed or even overlooked. In the story, the refugees are regarded as intruders into the community, squatting "in a tin shack compound by the train tracks bordering the development", which predictably vexes the Thai inhabitants in the area (Lapcharoensap, 2015, p. 96). The narrator's mother opines that they are "a bad sign" and his father says that having refugees nearby means that they would "be living in the middle of a slum soon" (Lapcharoensap, 2015, pp. 96-97). Almost accurately, the Cambodian shanty grew, starting with four shacks until there are approximately thirty Cambodians living in the area. Ironically, they remain socially and politically

invisible as these immigrants are not protected by the system and do not attain any sense of acknowledgement of rights:

> Every morning a white pickup truck would arrive to take some of the Cambodians to work at a road construction site. They'd pile in back, bunched together so close there wasn't any room to sit. [...] Their quiet anxious expressions said they weren't sure they were coming back. They looked at their dilapidated little world by the railroad tracks as if for the very last time. The truck would drop them off in the early evening and they would all be there, of course. (Lapcharoensap, 2015, p. 106)

This illustrates a kind of invisibility which Král explains as being "part and parcel of the fate of migrants" (2014, p. 28). Every day, these Cambodians leave their temporary home to work at a road construction site where their presence is supposed to be highly noticeable. Their work does contribute to the public, not to mention the fact that normally road construction is often commissioned by governmental agencies. This condition resonates well with Král's explanation about invisibility in urban settings. According to Král, cities are "sites of programmatic visibility" where certain features are made visible while some elements are erased from people's sights (2014, p. 153). Despite the observability of these immigrants, their existence and their significance are conveniently ignored by the authorities and those benefiting from their work. They are only regarded as an omen or a herald of urban deterioration.

Their unacknowledged presence is accompanied by the sense of itinerancy, as shown by the small amount of baggage they travel with. When the narrator and Dong set foot inside Priscilla's shanty, they notice that

"[o]ne of the few possessions her mother brought with her was an LP showing Elvis's" face, but they do not "own a record player," and there is "a small picture of Priscilla's father taped above the moth-eaten pallet she shared with her mother every night" (Lapcharoensap, 2015, p. 105). Coupled with their near indifference when forced to reroot to a different location, this implies their lack of attachment to the place. As pointed out by Král, the motifs of luggage in diasporic fictions often symbolise diasporisation as migrants' belongings are often suggestive of "the centrality of baggage rather than home to migrant life" (2014, p. 147). The less they own, the more the precarious situation of these immigrants are emphasised. They are aware that having a permanent home is highly impossible, and, as the story unfolds, Priscilla and the other Cambodians have to relocate because of the bigotry rampant in the narrator's community. After a drunken night, when the Thai men decide to burn the compound in which the Cambodians reside, the narrator goes to the site and sees that it is "as if the Cambodians' shanty had never existed. There wasn't a shack left standing" (Lapcharoensap, 2015, p. 111). Yet, as "all the Cambodians stood around picking through the rubble," the narrator observes, "[n]obody looked particularly panicked. Nobody seemed particularly sad. It was as if they'd expected the fire" (Lapcharoensap, 2015, p. 112). To them, being discriminated against to the point of physical violence seems more like an eventuality than a crime. Priscilla also tells the narrator that "the same thing had happened at the last place they'd squatted" and that "it was only a matter of time" (Lapcharoensap, 2015, pp. 112-113). Accompanying this quiet acceptance is also a recognition that they are not in the position to report the crime committed against them to the authorities. Thus, after their shanties are burnt down, all the Cambodian refugees can do is to gather "their belongings, getting ready to leave," while the narrator and Dong can only stand "by their

ruined shantytown and watched them walk away, their figures getting smaller and smaller by the minute" (Lapcharoensap, 2015, pp. 114-115). What this incident reveals is that the lives of these immigrants are imbued with various forms of invisibility. Not only are their existence invisible, but their pain, their misery, and their struggles are not recognised. In fact, the invisibility of these immigrants is also enacted on a narrative level too as the narrative focus in the last portion of the story shifts back to the life of the narrator. Priscilla eventually will be forgotten, a fate that resonates well with the itinerancy associated with immigrants' lives.

In addition to the lives of Cambodian refugees and their families who are subject to dehumanising invisibilisation, the story also sheds light on another group of characters who appear to be invisible in the eyes of society at large as well. Such characters are the narrator, his friend, Dong, and their families, who, as the story suggests, belong to the lower middle class demographic. To be specific, the narrator's father, suffering from factories moving to the Philippines and Malaysia, is stuck "carr[ying] concrete beams at a construction site for minimum wages" and the mother is "reduced to sewing panty hose out of a Chinese woman's house" (Lapcharoensap, 2015, p. 97). In spite of their economic struggle, they should be clearly *seen*; they are Thai citizens working legal jobs and living in legally bought houses, and the children are educated formally in school. However, it turns out that they are invisible still to the system and to the other Thais who are more privileged and economically fortunate than them.

One element that reflects this invisibility is their residence. It is established early on in the story that their housing development has been abandoned. While it is through no fault of their own, the families receive no compensation from the company and they are left with unfinished construction that in no way matches the image that was sold to them. In a

joke bitterly made by the mother, she points out that there will not be "a health club or a community garden or a playground or a pool or any of those other things you suckers thought you were getting when you first came to the development" (Lapcharoensap, 2015, p. 96). As time goes by, "the development company didn't bother to fill the gaping potholes created by the wet-season floods. There were so many craters in the roads Mother said she was beginning to think we lived on the moon" (Lapcharoensap, 2015, p. 108). While many families have sold their houses and left the development, some residents, like the narrator's family, did not sell the house in time for the price to be acceptable and they are left with the company realtor's comment that they will be "living like savages" (Lapcharoensap, 2015, p. 97). Such condescending remarks however are similar to the way the narrator's parents talk about Cambodian immigrants. What is revealed in this short story hence is a hierarchical discriminatory relations where the working class becomes both the instigator and the recipient of social injustice. Moreover, the Thai characters are still faced with condescension from other Thais who deem themselves superior to the working class represented by the narrator. In fact, they have already been subject to certain forms of discrimination even before the arrival of the immigrants. One obvious example of this is the treatment that the narrator and Dong get from their schoolmates. The male schoolmates—the "Thicknecks" who live in a more upscale housing development down the street and have the luxury to frolick "in their Olympics-sized community pool"—give the narrator and Dong the monikers of "Black Wheezy" and "Pregnant Duck" and teasingly call them such to embarrass them, especially around girls (Lapcharoensap, 2015, p. 104, p. 98). Even when taken out of the geographical context of their neighbourhood and situated in a new, unknown location, the response from complete strangers is still relatively the same, if not worse. In anger

and frustration after the fire incident, the narrator takes Dong's bike and rides "farther from [his] house that morning than [he]'d ever been" to where he finds "men and women in business suits look[ing] at [him] sternly as they walked by," at which point he decides to go into a noodle shop to use a bathroom (Lapcharoensap, 2015, p. 116). The owner of the noodle shop confronts him when he comes out, gripping him hard until he feels his "hands getting numb from his grip. I tried to write away but the more I struggled, the harder his hands held me in place, his thick fingernails digging into my skin." (Lapcharoensap, 2015, p. 117). This is followed by a steely threat through gritted teeth:

> '...I'm gonna let you go and I'm gonna count to three. By the time I get to three, you're gonna be gone. You're gonna go back to wherever the hell you just came from. [...]
> 'I'm not running a goddamn orphanage here, kid,' he continued, still gripping me. 'I'm not running a public restroom, either. I'm running a business, you understand me?' (Lapcharoensap, 2015, p. 117)

The narrator, unsuspecting of the possible treatment that he might receive, gets chased away without sympathy or understanding because he looks disheveled and does not buy anything from the place, thus inviting harsh judgment from the shop owner. As such, the narrator is intentionally rendered invisible to the eyes of other city-dwellers in that he is not regarded as being on the same level as them and hence not worth the same decent treatment as they would give those they view as socially equal or superior to them. The action of the noodle-shop owner toward the narrator reflects what Král suggests regarding social invisibility of the marginal living

in cities, "In the city we are taught to see the sights and marvel at new development areas whilst other areas have become run down and derelict, and are irremediably sinking into invisibility" (2014, p. 154). For people living in a high end business district of Bangkok, the narrator's presence, which embodies the unappealing side of urban life, is nothing but an anomaly. It is not surprising hence that they choose to push the narrator back to where he belongs and continues their days pretending that he and people like him do not exist. Different from the implication of the social and political invisibility sustained by the Cambodian immigrants, the invisibility of these Thai characters reflects the social gap within the Thai society itself. Discrimination exists not only against foreigners like the refugees, but also against Thai people who appear to be from different socioeconomic segments. These people who are considered to be the other, most often the poor, are both looked down on and overlooked by people of the same nationality. Furthermore, the system, be it social, economic, or political, is evidently not designed for the less privileged in society, resulting in them carrying no bargaining power for their own rights and benefits. This lack of power is most pronounced in the last exchange between the narrator and the noodle shop owner. Asked by the indifferent shop owner to leave, the narrator can only respond by saying "Yes, sir...I understand you, sir" (Lapcharoensap, 2015, p. 117). His defeatist and subservient response encapsulates well the social entrapment faced by people who share the narrator's social background. As the narrator starts to realise that his position does not differ much from that of Priscilla, he has no means to escape from his unfavorable situation. Like the Cambodian refugees, the existence of the working class in Bangkok is meant to be forgotten. All in all, the situation of these two groups of characters parallel each other in a way that, while they are pitted against each other in the story with one group, the Cambodians, being the

decidedly disadvantaged, they are, in fact, both invisible and suffer violence in various forms. They do not really belong in their place, and they are treated with hostility by others who consider them unworthy. The depiction of invisibilisation in "Priscilla the Cambodians" offers examples of what Král regards as "the precariousness of human visibility [which is] entangled in a more complex power struggle which directly impacts on the individual to the point of posing a threat to his integrity as a human being" (Král, 2014, p. 22). From this discussion, it is evident that having their status rendered invisible, whether socially, politically, or economically, negatively impacts the characters' sense of identity and forces them to succumb to their plight of being unseen and the recognition of their insignificance in society.

4.2 Unseeing sight: manipulated invisibility in "Draft Day"

Unlike in "Priscilla the Cambodia" where otherness, both racial and socio-economic, results in invisibilisation, the situation in "Draft Day" epitomises a different kind of invisibility. As pointed out by Král that sometimes invisibility can prove convenient for illegal immigrants (Král, 2014), we shall argue that the convenience caused by invisibility can also be exploited by those endowed with social privilege too. In "Draft Day," invisibility in some social domains is not a condition imposed upon the marginal but a manipulable status which further perpetuates the disparity between the marginal and those who are socially advantaged.

The story in "Draft Day" starts in a morning in April. The narrator and Wichu, his best friend, are going to a local temple in which the annual district draft lottery will be held. Normally, all Thai men at the age of 21 are required to report for conscription. Some may be exempted from conscription on the ground of poor health, and Thai men who have already completed a three-year military training called ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corp) are also given exemption from conscription. Those who have

not, including the narrator and Wichu, are required to take part in an annual lottery held in all districts across Thailand to decide whether they have to serve in the military or not. In the lottery, each man will draw lots. Those who draw out black cards do not need to serve in the military while those who pick up red cards will be obliged to join the army for two years. As the event in "Draft Days" unfolds, the process of lottery can be manipulated in favor of people who are resourceful or influential enough to pull a few strings. The conflict of the story lies in the fact that the narrator's well-to-do parents have already bribed the officers in charge of the local lottery. In contrast, Wichu, who comes from a poor family, must really count on his fortune to escape the military service.

While waiting for the lottery to commence, an officer escorts the narrator out of the venue to sit with a small group of boys. The people at the scene understand well the meaning of this special treatment. The place is reserved for those who have paid their way out of the lottery. They are the last group of people to be called out to draw the lots, and each of them manages to miraculously pick up the black cards without fail. Wichu, on the other hand, is not as "fortunate" as his friend. The situation in the story presents the process of the lottery drawing as a highly corrupted bureaucratic practice. Bribery is ubiquitous and accepted as a despicable but common practice:

> I didn't tell him [Wichu] that my father's boss's older brother -- a retired navy lieutenant -- had recently received two crates of Johny Walker Blue and a certificate for his wife to be a famous goldsmith in Pomprasattruphai District. I didn't tell Wichu that the lieutenant, in turn, had called my father to thank him. He told my father that he'd recommended me to the draft board as

> upstanding young citizen, so upstanding that I didn't need the benefits of marching drills and mess hall duty and combat training to improve my character in any way. I was a fully formed patriot, he'd told the draft board. (Lapcharoensap, 2015, p. 54)

The corruption and the absurdity described in this passage may appear too conspicuous to readers. Being an "upstanding citizen" allows a person to be exempted from fulfilling their duty as a citizen. What is ironic in this situation is that it is the people who claim to have this moral superiority themselves who violate the law. The absurd reasons provided for the narrator's exemption also highlight sheer inequality between people from well-to-do backgrounds and those like Wichu. According to the lieutenant's statement, people can be categorised in accordance with their moral character. In reality, however, it is purely wealth that separates them. Wealth allows the narrator to be temporarily invisible in the conscription process. It appears as if the state temporarily forgets his existence as the officials turn a blind eye on this citizen's failure to fulfill his national duty. This surreptitious, self-imposed invisibility also leads to the structural violence affecting people like Wichu too. As shown in the scene where the narrator is summoned to join some other men in the separate area who are "smiling," "laughing," and "talking exuberantly" (Lapcharoensap, 2015, p. 63). All the processes have been witnessed. People at the scene are aware of the briberies and try to voice their dismay. However, their complaints are ignored by the officers at the lottery. The more brazen the corruption is, the more one will realise the power of wealth, which can induce favoritism. Not only can it make the rich "disappear" in the eyes of law, but it also silences the criticism against any heinous actions committed by those with power too.

By pretending not to know the corruption and loopholes in the lottery process, the officials in the story concomitantly invisibilise those who are socially less advantaged even more. Similar to "Priscilla the Cambodian," two groups of invisible people are juxtaposed in "Draft day." However, in this story, one is wilful whereas the other is made invisible when their needs, their anger, and misery are not acknowledged by the state. This problem of social inequality is not just noticeable only on the draft day. In fact, the wealth gap is a deeply rooted problem that can manifest itself in many circumstances, and the author does not offer any hope that the situation will improve either. This is suggested in the opening paragraph of the story in which the narrator describes the setting of his hometown but ends with revelation that eventually the neighbourhood will sink into the marsh ground. His family and those who can afford relocation decide to leave (Lapcharoensap, 2015, p. 55). Wichu's family, on the other hand, represent those who are forgotten and left behind like the narrator's family in "Priscilla the Cambodian."

"Draft Day" by no means suggests that Wichu and his mother stay resigned and passive. Both try their best to escape their fate, yet they lack the means by which they can negotiate with the authorities to change their future. All Wichu's mother can do is to have Wichu dress like a rich man, believing that "the less Wichu looks like a day-labourer's son [...], the less the draft board will be inclined to put a red ticket in his hand when he reaches into the lottery urn" (Lapcharoensap, 2015, p. 55). Wichu's mother knows well that their financial status has its hand in the lot-drawing of her son. Having lost Wichu's elder brother to the military conscription, Wichu's mother desperately tries every single way to save her son from the two-year military service. She even tells Wichu to present some documents to the officers, including letters of recommendation from the owners of the house

where she works as a maid, his brother's honourable discharge document, and the certificate of Wichu's father's death. However, as the story reveals, these documents do not help. The only thing that Wichu earns is the disdainful look from the officer. Wichu may appear nonchalant with his mother's approach at first, yet it is worth noting that he still follows his mother's instruction regardless of how ridiculous it may seem. This action underscores even more Wichu's limiting circumstances. He is willing to employ whatever method there is. Unfortunately, the only way Wichu can fight against the social injustice in the story is to appeal to the conscience of those who are in a better situation than his. When Wichu asks the narrator whether he will be okay, he is referring to the narrator's sense of right or wrong: "I understand then that he is not really asking about my-welling being. He's asking for penitence (Lapcharoensap, 2015, p. 63)." Wichu's plea may sound naive, yet his gesture illustrates that to fix a problem of social injustice always requires a good conscience of those in power. The narrator nevertheless reacts in the manner that is not different from that of the officers. He ignores his friend, despite the degree of shame he has been harboring throughout the whole process. At one point, the narrator even needs to convince himself that he is not the man who takes advantage of his wealth and betrays his friend: "I walk on stage, though it seems they are calling somebody else. For the first time, that name does not sound like my own. So I stand there for a moment before reaching into the urn to receive that generous fate which is mine and mine alone" (Lapcharoensap, 2015, p. 68). To a certain extent, one can claim too that the narrator himself is also a victim of the system. He finds himself in the predicament in which it is impossible to make the choice that is both right for him and his friend, oscillating between his guilty conscience and his cowardice. On one hand, he is in denial of what he is doing. He tries to

psychologically dissociate himself from the betrayal he is doing to Wichu. On the other hand, he still wants to escape the military service. This explains the wording that the narrator employs to describe his lot-drawing. By claiming that the black card is his own "generous fate," he avoids admitting to the fact that he buys his own freedom from the military service. He may try to convince himself that it is his fate that he was born rich, and he is not solely responsible for his own act of cowardice. However, as Wichu points out, wealth alone does not lead to corruption. It is the absence of morality that brings about the end of his friendship with Wichu. Just as the narrator refuses to look at Wichu when he is escorted out of the lottery area, so too does Wichu refuse to stay and watch his friend drawing out the black card. At the end of the story, both men end up being invisible to each other. The story ends with a sense of separation and divisiveness, which also encapsulates the relationship between the two classes the two men represent.

5. Conclusion

Lapcharoensap's exploration of invisibilities in the two short stories sheds light on the resentful state of impotency the marginal have to endure. All of the main characters in "Priscilla the Cambodian" suffer invisibilisation because of their social status. Their presence is ghostly, existing yet disregarded and deemed anomalous. Moreover, invisibility can be onerous and deleterious too. As when Wichu draws out the red card from in the lottery, the narrator remarks that he can see Wichu's shoulders "slump from some invisible weight" (Lapcharoensap, 2015, p. 67). This invisible weight does not just suggest Wichu's disappointment but also accentuates the cumulative effects of corruption of which Wichu and those sharing his

situation are on the receiving end. Although, for the narrator of "Draft Day," his attempt to be invisible temporarily may benefit him, this self-serving invisibilisation eventually jeopardises social fairness in the whole social structure and thereby inflicts more invisibility to people who are already in an unfavorable situation. It is not surprising hence that the two stories discussed here share similar endings in which the less fortunate members of the society are forced to disappear from the narrative. Lapcharoensap, as a tour guide, provides a very realistic view of his native country, which counters the image of an exoticised paradise commonly featured in tourist brochures.

6. References

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