

To Be Possessed or to Possess: An Adoption of Lanna Myth as Female Weapon in *Sroisugandha*

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ABSTRACT

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche mentioned that the great art of woman is “the lie.” To free herself from men’s dominion, woman may employ her device—illusion. As men are believed to be the creatures of rationale, woman stirs and undermines their sphere with irrationality. In *Sroisugandha*, a Northern local color novel written by Mala Khamchan, Faikham, a desperate orphan, is adopted as a minor wife by a Landlord who is physically and mentally vulgar. Secretly invited by a sitar player who falls in love with her, she runs away with him into the jungle. There, they come across a fearless villager and a love triangle forms. Throughout the story, readers observe Faikham’s distressful life struggling in the conventional society of men. Experiencing the trauma of rape, brutality and oppression, Faikham’s psychiatric disorder is gradually exposed. The narrator claims that, with her mental instability, Faikham becomes the medium of Princess Sroi, the ghost in a local legend. However, we can read that it is not the ghost who possesses Faikham, it is Faikham herself who possesses the ghost. She adopts superstitious supremacy and manipulates men into believing what she says. After being possessed (as the narrator indicates), Faikham derives power to overcome her troubles. Men are afraid of her status and forced to follow her will.

บทคัดย่อ

นิเทศกล่าวไว้ในหนังสือ *Beyond Good and Evil* ว่าศิลปะที่ยิ่งใหญ่ของเพศหญิงคือ “การโกหก” เพื่อที่จะปลดปล่อยตนออกจากการครอบงำของเพศชายเธออาจใช้เครื่องมืออันทรงพลังซึ่งก็คือ มายา หากเพศชายขึ้นชื่อว่าเป็นเพศที่ยึดโยงอยู่กับเหตุและผล เพศหญิงอาจคุกคามและทำลายพื้นที่อำนาจของพวกเขาด้วยความไร้เหตุผล ในนวนิยายท้องถิ่นนิยมเรื่อง *สร้อยสุคันธา* มาลา คำจันทร์ฉายภาพชีวิตของฝ่ายคำ หญิงสาวกำพร้าผู้กลายมาเป็นเมียน้อยของนายบ้านผู้กักขะ ฝ่ายคำหนีตามชายดีดพิณเข้าของนายบ้านสู่ป่าและพบกับชายหนุ่มผู้กล้าของหมู่บ้านแห่งหนึ่งที่ซึ่งรักสามเส้าได้บังเกิดขึ้น ตลอดการดำเนินเรื่อง

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ผู้อ่านจะได้รับรู้ชีวิตระทมของฝ่ายคำในโลกชนบทของปีตาธิปไตย ความทุกข์จากการทารุณทางเพศ ความโหดร้ายและการกดขี่ได้เผยให้เห็นสภาวะทางจิตใจที่ผิดปกติ ผู้ประพันธ์บรรยายว่าจากสภาวะที่ไม่เสถียรของจิตใจ ฝ่ายคำจึงกลายเป็นร่างทรงของเจ้าสร้อยผู้เป็นเทพในตำนานท้องถิ่น อย่างไรก็ตาม ผู้อ่านอาจอ่านในมุมกลับกัน กล่าวคือ เจ้าสร้อยไม่ได้ใช้ร่างกายของฝ่ายคำ แต่ฝ่ายคำต่างหากที่ใช้ตัวตนและเรื่องเล่าของเจ้าสร้อยในการจัดการกับตัวละครเพศชายในนวนิยายให้อยู่ภายใต้อำนาจของตน ฝ่ายคำใช้อำนาจของสถานภาพร่างทรงแก้ไขปัญหาและควบคุมพฤติกรรมของตัวละครเพศชายให้เป็นไปตามที่ตนต้องการ

Introduction

In Northern Thailand (another name—Lanna), one hundred years ago, people's lives were intimately tied to nature and animism. Superstition had a central place in their folklore. Belief in supernatural elements was not such a nonsensical idea. From a social functional perspective, it could be understood as the norm controlling people's behavior patterns in community. Among major supernatural elements, spirit possession played a vital role in local rituals, ceremonies, and traditions and influenced villagers' ways of life. Anthropologists, psychologists, and scholars have explored the phenomenon. Recently, the story of spirit possession has featured in the works of several contemporary Thai writers.

Sroisugandha (2000) is a novel which has spirit possession as the distinctive center of the story. It is the local color novel written by Mala Khamchan, 1991 S.E.A. WRITE awardee from Thailand. The story is set back one hundred years ago in a remote part of Thailand's Northern region where patriarchal society had been strongly established. The struggling life of a 16-year-old girl is portrayed. Faikham is a newly orphaned girl who is later adopted as a minor wife of the Landlord who rules the village. There, she suffers from the trauma of rape, brutality, and detention. The experience causes her both physical and mental pain. By the direction of a female spirit, Faikham runs away with Sangchai, a sitar player who falls in love with her. They roam the jungle and are helped by Aunmueang, a courageous lad of another village. Then, a love triangle occurs. Faikham faces the dilemma of choosing between Sangchai whom she owes her life and Aunmueang whom she yearns for. Again, a female ghost comes forth and advises Faikham to choose the latter. From now on, Faikham becomes the medium of this ghost. She has to devote her life as a servant of the princess

spirit. Throughout the story, readers may have sympathy for Faikham's fate because it seems that she is governed by men in the real world and by ghost in the fantastic world. Her sense of self is gradually eroded and it is because of this that we consider Faikham as absolute victim. However, what if Faikham lies to readers or even to the author? She may not be the medium possessed by spirit in local myth. Conversely, Faikham is the one who possesses the spirit and adopts superstitious supremacy to manipulate men and resolve a crisis.

The objectives of this paper are: to study the traumatic experience of female characters; to analyze the significance of the term "Sroisugandha" in the novel; to analyze the major female character portrayed as ambiguous self; and to examine her adoption of Lanna myth and the significance of spirit possession. The center of the paper focuses on the major female character's mental state and her use of possession. Being a medium gives Faikham the opportunity to dominate men and exercise some degree of power.

Traumatic Experience in the World of Men

In *Sroisugandha*, female characters suffer from agonizing incidents. They experience the trauma of oppression and rape. Being born physically inferior to men, women are never treated with kindness and respect. Their sense of identity is swallowed up into the world of men. They whole-heartedly believe in following rules and practices established by men. This can easily lead women to be victims of the traumatic calamities.

In the novel, Lanna women are fixed as subordinates in the domestic sphere. Such status causes them oppression. In *The Politics of Reality*, Marilyn Frye (1983: 1-2) investigates the meaning of the word "oppression". She suggests three keywords which help clarify the discursive definition: Reduce, Mold, and Immobilize. The idea of these three words manifests women's states under pressure. Their sense of self is reduced. Their identities are passive and shaped by patriarchal ideal. Their bodies and minds are numb and frozen in a male atmosphere. These entire phenomena are presented in *Sroisugandha*.

In the domestic sphere, one of the miserable oppressions of women is being minor wives. Being minor wives reduces women to sex objects. According to village and domestic norms, men can have many wives afforded by their power and economic status. In contrast,

women have to keep their chastity and devote their lives to their husbands who seem to be supreme masters. In *Sroisuganda*, this observable fact is evidently depicted. Life for Lanna women is so tough. Being minor wives is not different from being slaves. They have to do all the household work. Furthermore, they are dehumanized to sex objects. They not only function as sex machines serving their husbands' excessive sexual desires, but also function as gifts and bribes to other men. Women are humiliatingly used as token to return thanks, to repay a debt of gratitude, and to give presents to benefactors of their husbands by using their bodies (Mala, 2000: 40). Their bodies are not theirs but men's properties. Men reap the benefits from women's bodies. Living in the patriarchal world, women's sense of self is unavoidably reduced.

Male society's mission is to mold women to be as men want. Women are formed corresponding with patriarchal principles. One of the characteristics of women that men want is to be silent. Whoever women are in family; mother, sister, wife, or daughter, they cannot explicitly express any opinion. Female characters are shaped as quiet sculptures. Their voices cannot be heard in the world of men. Sangda is the Landlord's older sister who has fostered the Landlord since he was 4 years old. Nevertheless, she has no right to tell her brother to live his life virtuously. Her voice is silenced. Here, silence can connote fear, repression, and the inexpressible. Not only in the domestic area are women's identities shaped but also the world outside. Lanna women cannot accomplish the ideal of religion. Only men are believed to be capable of gaining Buddhist ultimate goal—Nirvana. Mala (2000: 90) points out that, for Lanna people, being born a woman is undesirable because women cannot attain monkhood and Nirvana. Lanna women themselves wish to be born men in the next life so that they can study Dharma and to be free from sufferings.

Another kind of oppression women encounter in rigid tradition is immobilization. In *Sroisugandha*, men rule both domestic and public spheres. Women find no ease to make a move. Both their bodies and mind are incaged. For Falkham, life as a minor wife of the Landlord does not make her happy. In contrast, she suffers from being in custody. In the clan, each wife has to be available at their place waiting to serve and take care of the Landlord. Their status seems like that of prisoners. A man's house and land becomes the woman's prison detaining her from freedom.

Male characters' eyes have a lot of power over Faikham. When Faikham is gazed at, she becomes numb. She cannot move. Her body and mind are transfixed. In *Sroisugandha*, Mala Khamchan presents readers some scenes when Aunmueang stares at Faikham. The writer focuses on the situations which cause Faikham petrification. Aunmueang is the most powerful and courageous lad in the village. When he secretly desires Faikham to be his wife, he exercises power through his eyes gazing at her. Faikham is interrupted by that kind of intrusive stare. In the text, the writer mentions that Faikham moved awkwardly and felt like being interrupted all the time (Mala, 2000: 128). Other examples which the writer explores about Faikham's mind are, for instance, "his powerful, threatening eyes" (Mala, 2000: 168) and "the intrusive power of his eyes" (Mala: 2000, 179). Under the domination of Aunmueang's gaze, Faikham is unable to move.

The other traumatic experience that female characters face is the brutality of rape. After Faikham's parents died, she was forced to be the Landlord's wife. The main duty of minor wives is to satisfy the Landlord's sexual desire. As a newly orphaned girl, Faikham finds no time to relieve herself from sadness; she turns into a minor wife overnight. In *Sroisugandha*, the author describes the brutal scene when Faikham is raped violently by the Landlord.

The Landlord's silk trousers were removed. Faikham closed her eyes because of that horrible sight. The Landlord mumbled like a mad man. He bent his face down to Faikham, reeking of sour alcoholic air from his breath. The girl held her breath. Then he licked her neck. His tongue was thorny like a koy leaf² used to peel eel's skin. Everywhere he licked, she suffered and felt like her flesh was scraped and stuck to his tongue

Faikham was disgusted and afraid. She had resisted since the very first time and could not compel herself to accept him. The Landlord was very angry because the young girl disobeyed. He penetrated her body aggressively. Faikham thought she was going to die from that pain. (Mala, 2000: 24)

Not only can women as wives be raped but also women as servants. Living as women in patriarchal society is hard. Any positions they have, women are at high risk of being sexually abused. Even though they are servants in a household, they can be turned into prey of men's

² *Koy or Streblus asper (Urticaceae) is a small tree whose leaf is thorny and bark is used for making paper.*

sexual hunger. The males in house are opportunists who seek to exploit their housemaids. In the Landlord's clan, female servants do not know when they will turn to be the master's sex object. In the story, the Landlord observes Win, a 14-year-old servant by chance. He tempts the girl to give him a massage. Win realizes what will happen with her. She was raped cruelly.

Win screamed. The Landlord threatened her to be silent. He raped her. The girl hurt. Her two hands grabbed the bedspread and mattress. Her upper teeth pressed against her lower lip. She bent her body with pain and cried.

The Landlord got up from Win. She could not move. She was so pathetic with her tears. Her inner part bled. Blood flowed down along her legs. The Master grabbed her hand to stand and she burst into tears (Mala, 2000: 118).

In *Sroisugandha*, women can be raped in both domestic and public areas. Master can punish female servants by selling them to be public prostitutes of caravan tradesmen (Mala, 2000: 56). Again and again, women are dehumanized to be sex objects. They are abused unfairly. In male-dominated society, female characters in the novel have to encounter the trauma of oppression and rape. Traumatic events make women helpless and can be life-threatening

The Adoption of Spirit Possession

In *Sroisugandha*, the story of spirit possession not only accounts for much of the book's vibrancy, charm, and appeal to readers, it also plays a surpassing role. There are three main significances of Faikham's adoption of spirit possession: providing a temporary escape from crisis, creating a female sphere, and manipulating men and solving problem.

Undergoing unpleasant experience in a male-dominated society, Faikham has been burdened with agony. For her, being the medium provides a temporary escape from a critical situation. From a scholarly perspective, the status of a medium signifies psychiatric relief. Academic and scientific approaches to possessed bodies have interpreted them as repressed psychological bodies, oppressed sociological bodies, or oppressed women's bodies (Keller, 2002: vii). Consequently, suppressed Faikham may find the way out by adopting the status as medium. Being a medium transforms her to another identity which fleetingly accommodates a restful sphere.

When Faikham encounters a critical situation, her identity is transformed into one of her other personas. This can be interpreted as the main female character's mental therapy. In *Sroisugandha*, the motif which Faikham possessed in crisis is repeatedly presented. In one horrific night, after being violently attacked by a red canine beast, Sangchai loses his consciousness and leaves Faikham facing the dark and cold night alone. Mala exposes Faikham's mental state which is "frightened and alarmed. Heart and pulses beat loudly and fearfully. Being left alone in the dark jungle at night. Now, dear Sangchai is harmfully injured. Whom will I depend on?" (Mala, 2000: 105) Faikham's mental crisis rises to the topmost point and, then, she is possessed by a spirit in green clothing. Faikham falls into a hallucinatory situation escaping from the catastrophe in the real world. She sees and talks to the spirit. The female ghost promises to take care of Faikham. "Faikham's heart was overwhelmingly joyful like a bunch of cotton swelling up in sunlight. Joyfully and delightedly, she rose up and danced gracefully but unconsciously" (Mala, 2000: 105). However, Sangchai observes Faikham's strange action and hears her speak in many voices and tones. Being possessed, in other words—the escapism, helps relieve Faikham's agitation in uncomfortable condition.

In Mala's novel, the next implementation of spirit possession is to create a female sphere. Reading through the book, it can be argued that men rule the world of rationality and reality, whereas women may discover their existence and power in the world of fantasy. Generally speaking, women are associated with supernatural element easier than men. In most of the ancient cultures and traditions, the roles of women concerning superstition could be oracle, shaman, or medium. Thus, it can be assumed that women are prone to engage in superstitious practices.

In *Sroisugandha*, there is a contradiction about Princess Sroisugandha, the female spirit, between her life when she was alive and her status after she died. Whilst the Princess was alive, she was tortured and raped by her enemy. Her existence seemed to be insignificant in the world of men. Nevertheless, after her death, her status is elevated to be the sacred spirit that all the villagefolk pay respects to. The writer mentions what happens in Faikham's mind who tightly connects herself to the Princess.

The Sroisugandha flowers were blooming. The myth was still fascinating.
The Princess devoted her life to Chiang San people. So, they built the
shrine dedicated to her where she died, right here (Mala, 2000: 150).

It seems to be tremendously contradictory here in the passage, since there are two contrasting actions happening in the same space: a woman was tortured, raped and died; and the same one was sacredly worshiped. To be recognized the existence; the female figure was pushed into the world of ecstasy—the female-dominated realm. The Princess Sroisugandha, from the sex object in the real world, was transformed into a powerful spirit controlling the people's behavior and norm. This transformation also happens to the protagonist—Faikham. When she is a woman in the male sphere, she has been physically and mentally traumatized. But whenever the Princess spirit possesses her, the entire village is afraid of her. Faikham, in disguise of the medium, claims the power to command.

Lastly, the adoption of spirit possession is to manipulate men and solve a crisis. For the community that believes in magic and superstition, spirit possession is supposed to be the ritual practiced to perform a relief of villagers' problems. Once, Sangchai asks what the functions of the medium are. Faikham recalls her mother's status as a medium and replies "following the spirit's will, the medium chases away the villagers' sufferings, for example to find the lost buffaloes, or lost items, or even to silence hard-crying babies. Some patients who are terribly ill would be taken to us" (Mala, 2000: 134). Spirit possession in *Sroisugandha*, however, does not publicly serve the community. It seems that the supernatural ritual is appropriated by Faikham to stabilize her power to maneuver men and solve her private crisis.

In *Sroisugandha*, the manifestation of Princess Sroisugandha comes about to help resolve Faikham's personal hardship. Here, Faikham derives a sacred license from the spirit to break up with Sangchai and to get married to Aunmueang. It can be argued that in the rigidly patriarchal society where women have to strictly follow the male-dominated rules; Faikham breaks the impervious norm by claiming the command of the spirit. If we read the spirit of the Princess as Faikham's id, she is shrewdly tricking men and trying to achieve her desire. Readers come to the realization later that the protagonist does not love Sangchai. The relation between Faikham and Sangchai is not the kind of true love but gratitude Faikham owes him and needs to repay (Mala, 2000: 136).

Since Faikham met Aunmueang, she begins to secretly yearn for the courageous lad. On one occasion, the main female character spies Sangchai and Aunmueang. She

compares the capability of the two men. She finds that her husband is inferior to the other. Mala explores Faikham's state of mind:

Faikham looked at the muscular and huge guy and tried to turn her face in another direction. Half of her mind was fed up with him. But the other half kept asking how that man was wrong. He saved my husband and me. Without him, we might have been slaughtered.

Why am I fed up with him?

The two conflicting thoughts are arguing and waving like swaying treetop.

Faikham despised herself. What happens to me? My heart is stirring over again (Mala, 2000: 188-189).

Readers can follow the development of Faikham's feeling toward Aunmueang. Her conflicting mind comes to the agitated frenzy of desire. Since it is impossible for woman to devastate patriarchal norm, Faikham cannot initially break up with Sangchai. She employs the status as a medium and declares it is the spirit's absolute determination. In the novel, Mala recounts the critical incident when the Princess possesses Faikham and commands Sangchai to break up with the girl.

Faikham sang and danced. She carried out the traditional dance gestures swinging her hands like she was carrying swords.

Faikham performed fearful and willowy motions. She seemed like a fearless princess treading and swaying swords which flashed like the thunders. Sangchai was threatened, all his hairs standing up.

The voice isn't Faikham's. Faikham can't sing that kind of song.

"Princess Sroisugandha!"

Yes, I am Princess Sroisugandha. Go, bad enemy. You and I aren't the true couple. You took me to Prince Nor-In. I won't kill you. Just go away. If you two didn't part from each other, either of you will die. Just go. The girl doesn't love you. She loves Prince Nor-In.

"I wish to ask you, Princess." The frightened man requested. "Who is Prince Nor-In?"

"Prince Nor-In is reborn. They love each other. You don't stay in their way. You can't. In the last life, you killed Prince Nor-In. In this life, he will come to kill you. This is the karma both of you committed. For the sake of that you took me to the Prince, you go, just go away. If not, I will let Prince Nor-In kill you."

"Prince Nor-In is Aunmueang, right?"

"Yes."

"Do my wife and Aunmueang love each other?"

"Yes."

"Did they sleep together?"

"No. they love each other and stay in the norm. They haven't broken the moral yet."

Sroisugandha continued dancing and singing. Once, she trampled her foot on the floor so hard that Sangchai was startled.

"Go! Otherwise, I'll kill you."

After saying so, Faikham drowsed and yawned. The girl fell down on the floor (Mala, 2000: 240-241).

In the name of the mighty power, Faikham in the disguise of Princess Sroisugandha, dominates and commands Sangchai to follow her aspiration. Not only is the young man tempted by Faikham, all the people in the village also believe in what the medium says. Aunmueang's father who is a respectable old man of the village is convinced by the account too. After learning the story, he mentions that "I barely imagine the story can be turned back for that long, since the last life" (Mala, 2000: 250).

Another evidence which clarifies Faikham's use of spirit possession as a tool employed to supervise men and solve crisis is when the girl encounters the next predicament. After getting married to Aunmueang, Faikham learns that she is pregnant with Sangchai's baby. Because of restraint on sexual intercourse with Faikham, Aunmueang turns to stay with another young girl, Tiemta. The emergence of minor wife causes Faikham a great deal of disturbance. She recognizes her fate losing her chaste attraction and beloved husband. At this time, the adoption of the spirit possession takes place again to resolve Faikham's crisis. In Sroisugandha, one night after sleeping together in the hall of the dwelling, Aunmueang and Tiemta get into the bedroom where Faikham is staying. Both of them are frightened by a horrible sight. Faikham turns into Princess Sroisugandha who is brutally fierce.

Leading Tiemta by the hand, Aunmueang pushed the door softly. The fire in the room still blazed chasing coldness away. There was no win but the feet of

the mosquito net was waved. Faikham opened the net expressing a fierce face and hated stare.

“Princess Sroisugandha”

Aunmueang was frighteningly petrified. That never could be Faikham’s expression. Looking at the same figure, Tiemta became stunned and coldly numb.

“You, cheeky idiot”.

Her voice seemed like crushed metal. The angry Princess sat and pointed her finger at Tiemta. Becoming conscious, Aunmueang rushed to the Princess and cried out loud.

“Faikham”.

“I am not Faikham. Feeble Faikham has gone. I am Princess Sroisugandha. Listen to me, Prince Nor-In. You have to make Tiemta my servant. If you worship her equally to me, I’ll take her life”.

After saying that, Faikham drowsed and tottered to collapse. Aunmueang came to take her.

“Faikham, Faikham”.

Faikham was alright. But Tiemta was pale. She sat in a corner of the room with a trembling mouth (Mala, 2000: 315).

The supernatural phenomenon illustrated above is employed to handle Faikham’s private crisis. The motif of spirit possession, which is supposed to solve trouble in the community, occurs here to put emphasis on its function as the protagonist’s tool to control men and her own situation. In the state of possession, Princess Sroisugandha may not exercise her power through her medium—Faikham. Conversely, it may be Faikham who uses her status as a medium and utters her desire through the mouth of the make-believe Princess Sroisugandha.

As discussed above, the significance of Faikham’s adoption of spirit possession is to provide a temporary escape from crisis, create a female sphere, and manipulate men as well as solve problems. The use of a supernatural element—spirit possession—functions as an asylum nurturing and preparing Faikham for combat. It constructs the space of a battlefield where she is familiar and proficient. Then the girl ensnares men to her sphere and castigates them. From victim to victor, this can be scrutinized as Faikham’s plan—a female strategy for fighting against patriarchal power.

Concluding Remarks

In *Sroisugandha*, Mala Khamchan represents the life of Faikham, the central character, as a prey in the male-dominated realm. The girl is not only traumatized by men in the real world, but she is also ruled by a female spirit in the unreal world. Following the story narrated by the narrator and told by characters may lead us to the conclusion that Faikham is a complete victim. However, *Sroisugandha* may be not the kind of tragic story for Faikham. If we interpret the account in the view of life progress, the girl assumes ascending status. Faikham, who appears initially inactive and distressed, rises to be dominant and competent who achieves better status through the course of her life. Instead of ending up as a minor wife of the Landlord who is mentally and physically vulgar, she becomes the highly regarded medium and a wife of the courageous man who will be appointed the leader of the village.

The prominent factor that helps Faikham to effectively liberate and dominate is the adoption of spirit possession. As the oppressed character, Faikham finds her life in the world of men tough and disturbed. Her only shelter is the other world—the world of fantasy. For Faikham, the fantastic world becomes a place where her wounds can be cured, her self can exist, and her power can be exercised. Having drawn her supremacy from spirit possession, the main female character ultimately assumes the position of an influential figure as well as a manipulator of her men and community.

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