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Perspectives on violence against women in Thai film: The Eternity

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ABSTRACT

There are many forms of violence in films with regard to culturally unique factors and differences in religion, or ethnic origin, which are expected to influence attitudes towards violence against women. In line with this context, film is a good source to study violence against women. This study examined violence against women in direct, structural, and cultural ways in 'The Eternity' (Chua Fa Din Sa Lai), a Thai film by Bhandevanop Dhevakul, a prominent Thai film director. A series of in-depth interviews with respondents was conducted in Thailand. The respondents were three policymakers, five academics, three NGO leaders, two film critics, two film directors, and a newspaper editor in Thailand. The data were analyzed thematically using the NVivo 10 software. This study discovered that violence against women persisted and was embedded in the film, which contained direct violence, structural violence, and cultural violence. Direct violence appeared as raping, slapping, beating, and humiliation, while structural violence included inequality, primitive society, and power structure. Cultural violence was embedded as power acceptance, patriarchy, and marital bondage. The significance of this study is in providing a deeper understanding of the circumstances associated with violence against women in Thai films. This study may benefit the film industry and film classification by drawing attention to violence against women in films and thereafter minimizing it.

Introduction

Film is a medium with great potential as many people obtain their stories, narratives and myths from films (Kolker, 2006), and myths may come to be regarded as 'natural' or 'real' from watching films (Partridge & Hughes, 1998). From the onset, the influence of films on the audience has become an issue of attention. In this regard, Kolker (2006) and Louisyapong (2013) noted that films are not only entertainment. Moreover, there are many forms of violence in films with regard to culturally unique factors and differences in religion, or ethnic origin, which are expected to influence attitudes towards violence against women (Nayak, Byrne, Martin, & Abraham, 2003). Thus, film is a good source to study violence against women. In line with this, studies on representations of violence against women in films offer deeper analyses of the patterns or forms of violence that are found in films produced in the west or other countries (Bernard-Hoverstad, 2013).

Problem Statement To study violence against women, better information on how various types of violence against women in different cultural settings and countries is required (Bernard-Hoverstad, 2013; Kilpatrick, 2004). Based on this premise, a deep exploration of the forms of violence towards women in different cultures and countries is required to understand them. According to

Norsworthy and Khuankaew (2008), Schlein (2013), and The United Nations Children's Fund's (2000), Thailand is one of the countries that was reported to have a large number of cases of violence towards women. Therefore, this study analyzed and identified violence against women in Thai films as Thailand is a part of the world that has high levels of violence towards women.

Due to the lack of information about several important aspects of violence against women (Kilpatrick, 2004), using broad definitions of violence against women is essential. However, from previous research on violence against women in the media, researchers employed definitions of sexual violence, and intimate partner violence to identify violence against women in media content (Carlyle, Scarduzio, & Slater, 2014; Cuklanz, 2000; Malamuth & Briere, 1986). It can be seen that previous studies focused on direct violence; however, structural violence and cultural violence have not been given sufficient attention.

In order to establish a perspective on violence toward women, Galtung's triangle of violence model, which divided violence into direct violence, structural violence, and cultural violence was applied. Therefore, by studying violence against women in Thai films, using a model of Galtung's violence to define violence, this paper presents a better understanding of the categories of violence against women, and the perspectives of respondents towards violence against women in film content.

Literature Review

Power of Film

Though media consumption plays important roles in society because the media reflect cultural norms and values, in relation to violence in media, media executives disclosed that violence in the media was a reflection of the violence in society (Gentile, 2014). Similarly, it was noted that the media not only present violence in society, but also have strong powers to affect human behavior by delivering violent content and making the audience feel that it is normal and acceptable to watch it. For example, Silverblatt, Miller, Smith, and Brown (2014) stressed how watching media can affect the human mind. They said media have transformed the way people think about themselves and the world. According to Berger (2012), media are a part of society and play important roles in shaping people's identities and attitudes about race, ethics, sexuality, and many other issues. Moreover, at the societal level, pornography, media, education, and social movements are factors that shape attitudes toward violence against women (Flood & Pease, 2009).

In view of the influence of film, many countries have adopted it as a way to represent the culture and the country. For example, the United States of America uses film to present the USA as a world leader and the policeman of the world, while Korea uses film for tourism and cultural representation (Injan, 2011). Furthermore, films attract large audiences who have to pay either at the cinema or by buying DVDs. Consequently, many studies in film use total domestic and worldwide box office sales as measures of performance (Fetscherin, 2010). Worldwide, the success of films and film production also impact the economy

of countries, including Thailand. Buttressing this, Poshyanananda (2015) said that the growing, creative Thai film industry is one of the industries that continues to impact the economy positively. Thai films in the international market earned about 1,231.91 million baht (RM 123.91 million) in 2011 and was expected to yield 2,000 million baht (RM 200 million) in 2014 (Chaivoraporn, 2014). According to Oxford economics (2012), Thailand has a thriving film exhibition industry driven by the popularity of cinema. Given the social popularity and economic power of films, many scholars have shown concern about film content which portrays violence against women (Bernard-Hoverstad, 2013; Flood & Pease, 2009; Meiri, 2015; Siengsorn, 2014) and affects audience behavior. Most films also portray stereotypes of gender and attitudes that support violence (Huesmann, 2007). Sadistic and sexually violent content could serve to normalize rape and other forms of sexual violence and contribute to a distorted view of women, especially when seen by children. Thus, a system of film classification is needed (The Media Content and Technology Research Specialists, 2012). Therefore, it can be seen that film is one of the important media that portrays violence against women and which viewers can remember easily.

Violence Against Women in Thai Films

Scholars described Thailand as one of the main countries in Southeast Asia (Lewis, 2006), a country where patriarchy is deep-rooted and violence against women is high (Thailand Domestic Violence Information Center, 2013; Thailand's Gender Information Center, 2012). Thailand was mentioned as a sample or a case study on violence against women in several reports and research at the international level (Corben, 2013; Iwanaga, 2008; Niaz, 2003; World Health Organization, 2005) as well as nationally (The Planned Parenthood Association of Thailand, 2013). Therefore, many parties in Thailand are worried about the rising level of violence against woman, and they believe that the media are amongst the causes of this problem (The Canadian Women's Foundation, 2014). In Thailand, there have been studies on violence against women through the mass media based on discourse on sex and violence against women in Thai society (Khopolklang, Polnigongit, & Chamnongsri, 2014). Moreover, Patkhacha and Prangsorn (2012) argued that Thai film content can construct an illusion-of-truth, to the extent that violence against women can become a social norm or myth. Moreover, Siengsorn (2014) stated that 10 famous Thai films, which were released in theaters, had content that included physical, psychological, verbal, and sexual violence toward women. It can be seen that Thai box office films still portray violence against women.

Violence Against Women according to Galtung's Violence Triangle

The definition of violence, according to Galtung (1969), states that direct violence is a clear subject-object relation and includes killing or hurting while structural violence is less tangible, presenting things like gender inequality in the distribution of power. Moreover, Galtung (1990) indicated

that cultural violence may include religion, ideology, art, and language, which portrays direct and structural violence as being right or justified. Figure 1 shows the relations between these three types of violence as a triangle. As noted by Galtung (1996), to study violence against women, the body of knowledge should be discussed in terms of female-male; body and mind, structural, and cultural perspectives. Thus, Galtung's violence model supports this study's exploration of direct violence, structural violence, and cultural violence as a yardstick to determine and understand violence against women. Worldwide, previous studies on violence against women in films have focused on violent actions such as aggressive acts in pornographic films (Bridges, Wosnitzer, Scharrer, Sun, & Liberman, 2010), sexual violence in Japanese films (Coates, 2013), and violence on women in Thai films (Siengsorn, 2014) otherwise referred to as direct violence. Furthermore, some researchers studied the structural violence which caused violence toward women, for example patriarchy in advertising and films (Wolf, 2013), and patriarchal concepts in Thai films (Jiamtiranat, 2011). However, there is a lack of research on cultural violence in films, especially in Thai films. In view of this gap, Khopolklang et al. (2014) called for further studies of violence against women in media content on cultural dimensions in Thai society. Thus, by studying violence against women in Thai films, using Galtung's model of violence to define violence, this study could provide a better understanding of the perspectives of respondents towards the categories of violence against women in film content (see Figure 1).

Synopsis of 'The Eternity', a Thai Film

Adapted from Chua Fa Din Sa lai (literally means Till Eternity), a classic novel by Malai Chupinit, 'The Eternity' marks the comeback of Bhandevanop Devakul, a veteran director who has been working mainly in theater during the last 10 years (Ministry of Culture, 2011). The Eternity is a story set in 1933 when Thailand was facing great social and political changes. Yupadee is a fashionable and modern woman from Bangkok who marries a Burmese lord "Papo" and who lives with him in Kamphaeng Phet (a small province in Thailand), where he runs and owns a logging

empire. In the lonely village, she meets Sang Mong, Papo's handsome and smart nephew. Yapadee and Sang Mong quickly fall in love and develop an uncontrollable passion. Ma Khin, the unofficial wife of Papo who lives as housemaid tells Papo about their secret relationship. Papo handcuffs both of them together. In the beginning, they feel happy that they can stay together forever, for eternity, but later they start to feel stifled and asked Papo to release them. Papo does not give them the key to the handcuffs but a gun. Yupadee makese a decision to escape by shooting herself and leaves Sang Mong crazy with her rotting, dead body.

Methods

According to Devries et al. (2011); United Nations Headquarters (2012) stakeholders in civil society play important roles to solve the issue of violence against women. Thus, the respondents in this study were main stakeholders in civil society in Thailand. Sixteen respondents were engaged in Chiang Mai and Bangkok, Thailand for in-depth interviews in May and June 2015. Following an additional clarification call, the film ('The Eternity') was sent out to them. The respondents consisted of two film directors, two film critics, three policy makers, three NGO leaders, a newspaper editor and five academics from media studies, women studies, film studies, religion studies, and peace studies. Each respondent was asked to watch the selected film in a place of their choosing over a period of one month. Following viewing, in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant by the researcher. Interviews focused on the film and scenes in which there was direct, structural, or cultural violence against women. Table 1 presents the 16 respondents of this study, whose names have been changed into letters to protect anonymity.

From the interviews, the researchers achieved an understanding of their perspectives of the respondents at a civil society level towards violence against women in the selected Thai film, which is the research question of this study.
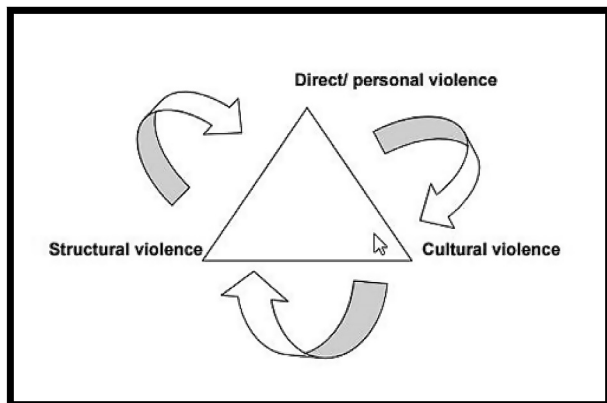

Figure 1 Galtung's violence triangle
Source: Muthien and Combrinck (2013)

Table 1
Profile of interview respondents with regard to work sector, gender, age, and length of work experience

Alias	Social role	Gender	Years working
AC1	Academic	Male	16
AC2	Academic	Female	10
AC3	Academic	Male	20
AC4	Academic	Male	40
AC5	Academic	Male	9
FC1	Film critic	Male	5
FC2	Film critic	Female	20
FD1	Film director	Male	10
FD2	Film director	Male	3
GM1	Policy maker	Male	10
GM2	Policy maker	Female	35
GM3	Policy maker	Female	20
M1	Newspaper editor	Male	20
NGO1	NGOs leader	Female	19
NGO2	NGOs leader	Female	11
NGO3	NGOs leader	Male	2

Source: Primary author's data

Results and Discussion

The data were analyzed thematically. In view of the study's research question, the following findings revealed the perspectives of respondents at a civil society level toward violence against women in the Thai film (see Figure 2).

Direct Violence

From the interviews with the respondents, the following incidents were identified as direct violence against women in 'The Eternity' as raping, slapping, beating, and humiliation (see Figure 3).

Raping, Slapping, and Beating

Respondent FC1 said the scenes in 'The Eternity' are mostly direct violence: "*the scene where the hero and heroine smack although they are lovers seems like even though you love each other, you can slap or beat each other*". In line with this, respondent NGO1 said "*I can see hit and to be hit in this movie*" and respondent NGO3 stressed that "*the direct violence for the woman is dragging her on the floor*". However, many male and female respondents stressed slapping and beating as direct violence in this film. Explicitly, only a female respondent stated rape as direct violence. It could be assumed that the rape scene was presented as the husband raped the wife, therefore it cannot be interpreted as rape.
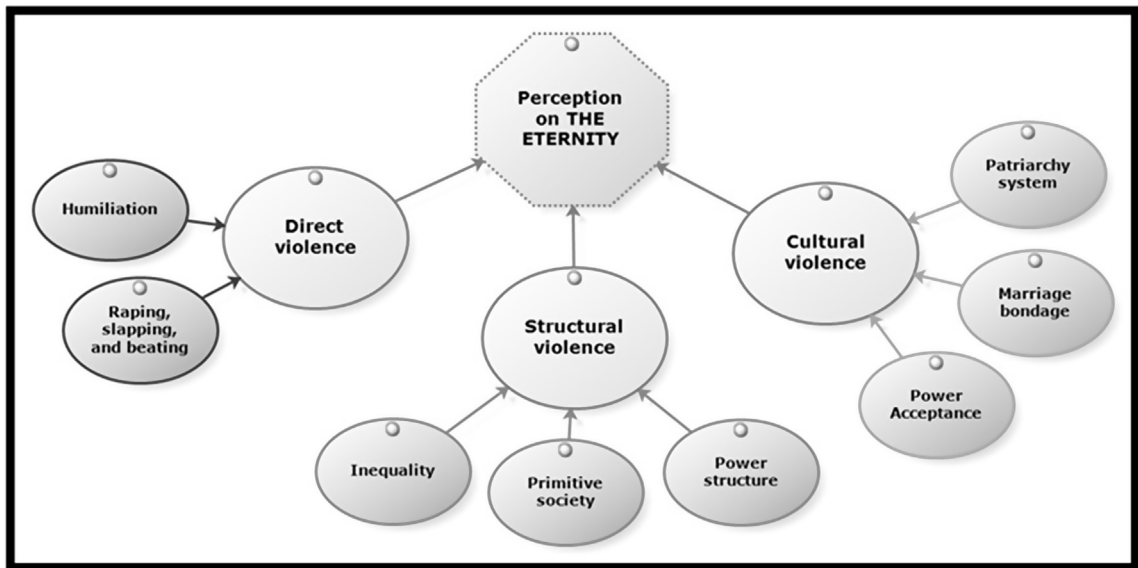

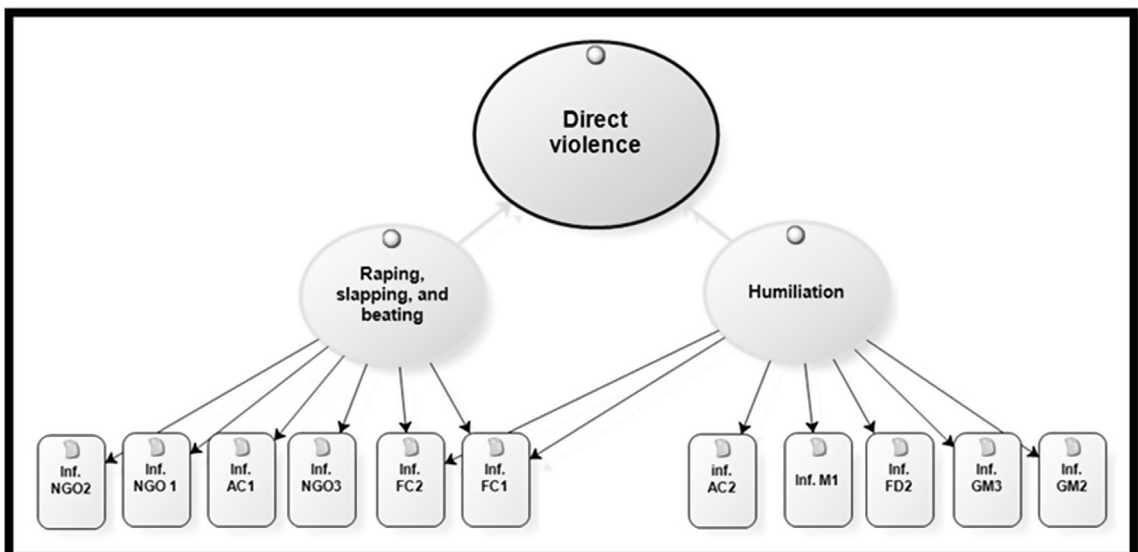**Figure 2** Perceptions on 'The Eternity'

Figure 3 Direct violence

Humiliation

From the perspective of the interviewees, another kind of direct violence that emerged in the film was humiliation. Six of the respondents (male and female) held the same perspective that handcuffing is direct violence against women in this film. For example, respondent GM3 said that "*He punished Yupadee by putting the handcuffs on his nephew until she felt the psychological effects and decided to commit suicide*".

Structural Violence

From the interviewees' perspective, structural violence against women in 'The Eternity' was in three forms: inequality, primitive society, and power structure (see Figure 4).

Inequality

Gender equality has become an issue in many countries and international organizations such as the World Health Organization since gender inequality is an underlying determinant of violence against women (Wall, 2014). In line with this, from the perspectives of interviewees, 'The Eternity' has scenes of gender inequality as noted by respondent GM2 who said that "*Although Yupadee can break cultural norms, she was being hard-pressed by the social structure*". In the same vein is the perspective toward equality of gender from Respondent AC2 who said: "*There is a scene in the movie where a guy was sitting on a stool, and the women was sitting nearby on the floor to serve him everything he needed, including sexual services. Nothing from the story indicates how society judges women, or at what level women are in society, but from this scene it clearly shows inequality between males and females*".

Therefore, one of the structural violence elements in this film is the inequality between men and women with regard to the perspectives of the male and female respondents.

Primitive Society

According to Service (2015), the primitive family is based on age and gender, and males are regarded as superior to women in most activities. In the current study, male and female respondents mentioned primitive society where polygamy is permitted and man dominates the community values. For example, respondent GM2 talked about the primitive society that is presented in 'The Eternity' film as follows: "*Structural violence is the fear that people have to live under the power of a leader. This is a so-called primitive society or male dominant or slavery society*".

Power Structure

The distribution of power between persons or society or the social system is a power structure, and sociologists debate how power structures amount to inequality (Crossman, 2016). Some respondents (four males and five females) identified power structure as structural violence in this film. For instance, respondent AC2 explained that "'*The Eternity' is a state of society at a time when Papo (the husband) is the most powerful person and controls everything*". Moreover, respondent GM3 stressed that "*The*

structural violence occurs when they got married, and the wife became the husband's asset. The husband can severely punish his wife more than his pets".

Cultural Violence

Cultural violence includes the aspects of culture, religion, and formal science that can be used to justify direct or structural violence (Galtung, 1990). Therefore, the evidence from this study's interviews showed three types of cultural violence in 'The Eternity': power acceptance, the patriarchy system, and marital bondage (see Figure 5).

Power Acceptance

According to Galtung (1990), one way cultural violence works is by shifting the ethical act from wrong to right or at least to 'acceptable'. In line with this, the power acceptance that can be found in 'The Eternity' is the acceptance of the superiority of themselves as respondent AC1 stated: "… *this is a show of the mind set of Ma Khin, that the woman must follow what the man has set. When men do not value her, she admitted that she has no value*". Only one male respondent mentioned power acceptance as the woman needs the man to confirm the value of herself, while female respondents stated that this film presents the woman as accepting the power of the man; she accepts it and does everything to satisfy him. Thus, this form of violence is prevalent in Thai society as indicated by the majority of the female respondents.

Patriarchy

Patriarchy is about social relations in which the beliefs of males, and heterosexual dominance lie at the root of gender-based violence. The traditional cultural beliefs about how to treat women is supported by patriarchy and it causes violence and gender inequality justification (Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence, 2015). The respondents of this study stated that patriarchy was presented in this film in the context of characteristic of a man who is powerful and smart. Interestingly, most of the respondents who highlighted this issue were male respondents. For example, respondent AC2 said that "*The film told us indirectly that, at the beginning, the woman may control the situation but in the end there is a man who can control her.*" The findings indicated that men have the dominant roles in society.

Marital Bondage

The earlier work of researcher Levinson (1989 as cited in Wall, 2014) showed that in societies controlled by men, divorce and remarriage is difficult for women, and polygamy is permitted. In line with this, 'The Eternity' shows scenes related to marital bondage. Both male and female respondents stated that a woman has no choice after the marriage. In line with this, Respondent FC1 said that "*When a woman gets married, it means her life has already stopped, her life will be under her husband forever even though she is unhappy*".

From the findings, there is no distinctive difference in the perspectives of the male and female respondents. As mentioned in the result sections, both female and male respondents had similar thoughts and perspectives on the
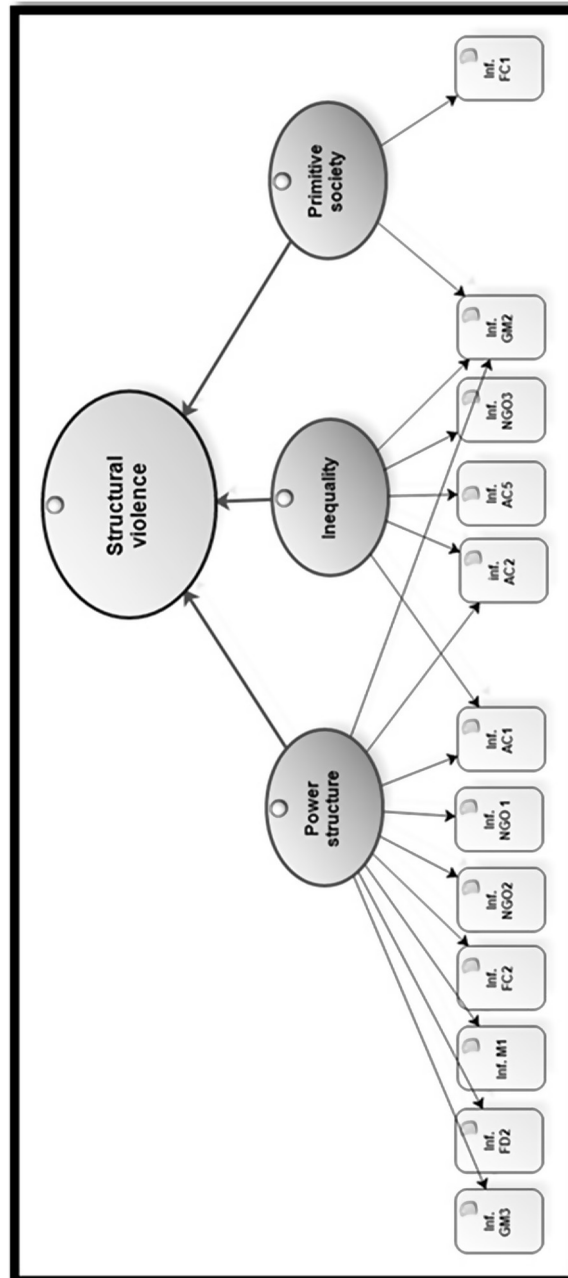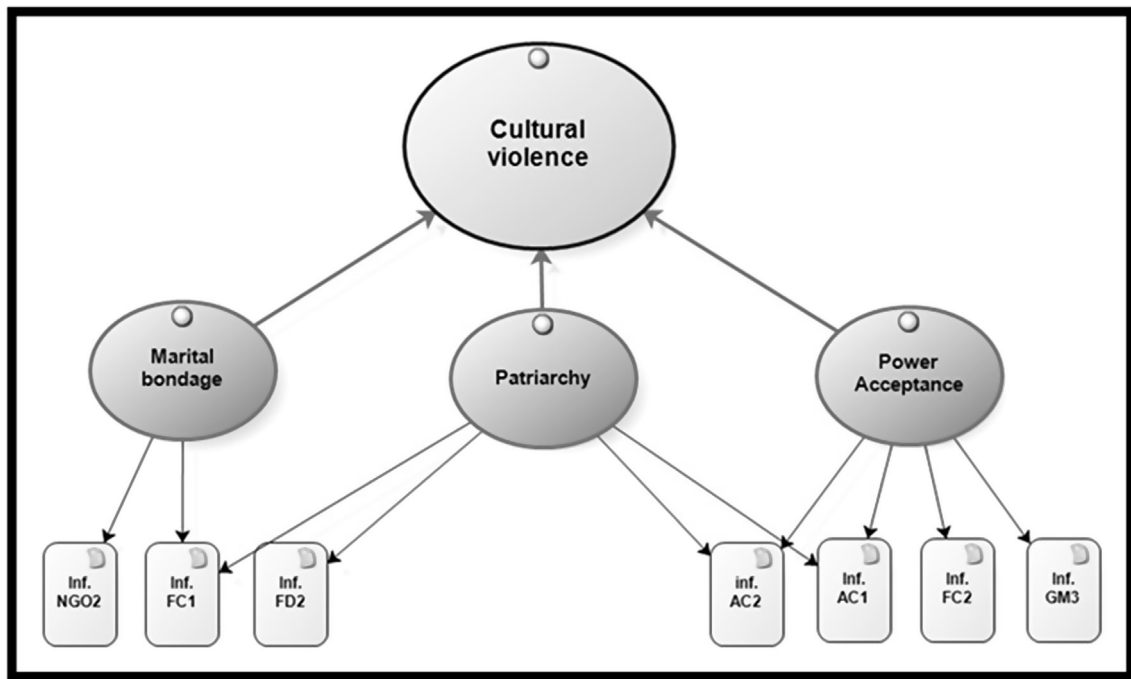
Figure 4 Structural violence

Figure 5 Cultural violence

issues that were highlighted in the study. This may be due to the fact that they share similar experiences, values, and understanding on violence towards women in Thai society.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There are numerous studies about violence against women in the media, but there is less attention to films, especially Thai films. However, the studies on violence against women in films are more about direct violence, such as sexual violence or physical violence. Correspondingly, Galtung's triangle of violence shows that direct, structural, and cultural violence support each other although cultural violence is violence which people accept, and sometimes they do not even know that the violence is happening. Therefore, this study has attempted to increase the scope of violence against women, and was the first study to track the three types of violence against women in Thai films.

In this paper, the discussion centers on perspectives of stakeholders within civil society on violence directed toward women in the selected Thai film. The available evidence seems to suggest that violence against women according to Galtung's violence model is characterized in some of the content in 'The Eternity'. More specifically, direct violence emerged in the form of rape, slapping, and beating in addition to physical humiliation. Direct violence has been categorized as the commonest form used against women, which needs to be discouraged. Interestingly, only a female respondent highlighted the rape as direct violence in this film. Moreover, one of the areas of violence which does not receive attention, but causes harm to women in

most societies is structural violence. In this study, various forms of structural violence were found to be present in 'The Eternity'. For example, the display of gender inequality could be seen to reinforce conceptions of how women should be treated and similarly, the primitive way in which women were treated as perpetual slaves who are afraid of men is a kind of structural violence. Also, the demonstration of the power structure in which one person is almighty and to be feared portrays all other people, especially women, as pets that are owned by the powerful and can be manipulated as they wish. This portrayal is what sociologists detest and is referred to as power structure. Another key point of this study is cultural violence which is the aspect of the culture which is used to justify violence against women. In 'The Eternity', power acceptance as well as patriarchy was used to establish the dominance of males over females even where the female contributes significantly to the wellbeing of the family. Significantly, the cultural violence content in this film supports structural violence and direct violence to be social norms which women and society accept and dare not challenge. These results provide confirmatory evidence that violence against women in this film is complex.

The emergence of these tools of violence against women in 'The Eternity' may go a long way to boost the impressions of dominance in view of the reach and popularity of the film. However, it is not the intention or design of the film to promote violence against women, but given its reach and popularity, there is a tendency for people to trivialize the good message of the film and hold on to the violent messages. Notably, the findings of this study contribute a deeper understanding of violence against women in Thai films. It draws attention to the cultural violence which is

hidden in the film's content. Therefore, this study can be a source of research on media violence, and can help in the rating and media regularization of films. Concerning human rights and gender equality and in view of the discoveries of this paper, further studies should focus on examining the impacts of film rating or film classification on violence against women. Though this paper has covered its stated objectives, more attention should be directed at exploring the awareness of film directors and audiences of the implications of structural and cultural violence, which is hidden in the content of films. This awareness is necessary before releasing films to box office theaters and other channels. Besides the concern about how authorities understand media violence, new studies should focus on families and schools, the teachers of the next generation in media literacy skills. This will lead to social transformation to strong media literacy and a critical thinking society.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

Acknowledgments

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