

SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THAI SOAP OPERA: A CASE OF SAWAN BIENG (TWISTED HEAVEN)

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Abstract

Soap opera has been a very famous type of home entertainment in Thailand. As one of the highly successful soap operas, being produced and broadcasted several times, *Twisted Heaven* or *Sawan Bieng* presents both romance and sexual violence in its content. This study aims to examine how Thai audiences interpret the meaning of love in plot, characters' behaviors, and particularly the violent love scenes of *Sawan Bieng*. A mixed research method was conducted by using the content analysis of five Thai popular websites and in-depth interviews of eight Thai viewers. The data analyses revealed three major findings. First, TV production elements provided the

important information for audiences to accept the hero's sexual violence. Second, the sexual violence or rape in *Sawan Bieng* is one of the audiences' expectation in romance story as Radway (1984) mentioned. Third, the application of the Social Learning Theory appears to have no violent effect. The hero and heroine have been popular role models for teenagers. The audiences not only sympathized with the hero who took responsibility for his sexual violence, but also hailed the heroine as superb role model for her tolerance, forgiveness, and generosity.

Keywords: Soap opera, Sexual violence, Television production elements, Social Learning Theory, weblogs

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Introduction

Soap opera has been increasingly popular in Thailand and other developing countries. Not only it received audience high ratings, but also became social issues. *Sawan Bieng* or *Twisted Heaven*, one of the most popular Thai soap operas of all time, was absolutely successful in terms of plot, TV production, and rating (www.wtfintheworld.com/2018/03/18/16-most-rating-tv-thai/). *Sawan Bieng* is considered the suitable case to study with regard to the sexual violence in the Thai soap opera that represents not only sexually violent scenes between hero and heroine, but also the domestic violence which leads to the conflict of the story. In addition to several reruns on television, this drama was the Thai audiences' hot topic of conversations in social media. Although several rape scenes were remarkably presented in *Sawan Bieng*'s plot, the audiences' reaction to the hero's sexual violence toward the heroine seemed to be positive. Accordingly, the potential impact of *Sawan Bieng* on Thai audiences in terms of morality and violent sexual behavior was questioned.

With regard to sexual violence in the Thai soap opera, this research applied the Social Learning Theory introduced by Bandura (1971) as its theoretical framework. The theory describes that people learn from observation, imitation, and modeling. The theory encompasses both imitation and identification to clarify how people learn from observation of others. This study aims to achieve two research objectives. The first one is to examine the audiences' judgments about morality through production elements. The second one is to understand the way the audiences interpret the meaning of love and characters' behaviors, particularly the violent love scene. Accordingly, two research questions and their sub-questions are proposed:

RQ#1: How does *Sawan Bieng* invite the Thai audience to make judgments about morality?

RQ#1.1: How does *Sawan Bieng* define love for its Thai audiences?

RQ#1.2: How does *Sawan Bieng* define good and bad behaviors as manifested by the main characters?

RQ#1.3: How does *Sawan Bieng* show/characterize bad versus good love via TV production elements?

RQ#2: Audience: How do the Thai audiences interpret the meaning of love scenes in *Sawan Bieng*, particularly the violent scenes?

RQ#2.1: What is the expression of love as perceived by the Thai audiences?

RQ#2.2: How do the Thai audiences perceive the rape forced on the heroine by the hero?

RQ#2.3: How do the Thai audiences define love scenes as appropriate?

RQ#2.4: How do the Thai audiences perceive the heroine's decision to marry the hero?

Findings of this study not only enable the TV producers to improve the quality of Thai soap operas in terms of TV production techniques, but also to properly convey an important social issue such as rape to the audiences.

The Synopsis of Sawan Bieng (The Twisted Heaven)

A hero named Kavee is a well-educated, good-looking and self-confident guy who is the only child from a very rich family. As a

real playboy with bad behaviors, Kavee also represents a violent person who always forces others to do what he wants. The heroine, named Narin, has to respond to his demands. The story becomes more violent when Leela (Narin's sister) gets married to Kid (Kavee's father) and moves into Kavee's house. Full of anger at Leela who obviously shows her affection towards her step-son, Kavee rapes Narin. After being raped three times, Narin becomes pregnant, but does not want Kavee to take responsibility. She then run away from him. When Kavee finds out about her pregnancy, he transforms himself and pay her back by taking good care of her, even though she constantly refuses his offer for reunion. Eventually, Kavee can prove himself about his transformation. They finally get married at the end.

Methodology

This study used a mixed method -- content analysis and in-depth interview -- to answer the proposed two research questions.

Content Analysis: content analyses of Thai audiences' posts and comments on five popular weblogs and *Sawan Bieng*'s DVD

content were conducted by the major investigator. Soap opera elements such as characters' behaviors, costumes, soundtrack, and other elements were analyzed because blogs are “arguably the oldest, largest, most widely accessible, and most widely used network for interactive online discussion” (Baym, 1999, p.5). Besides, blogs are online spaces that allow general public to present the discussion between audiences, and particularly, soap viewers often discuss with one another more than other television genres' fans (Rubin, 1985). People post their comments on blogs in order to give, share, exchange, and gather information between members of these blogs. The members of online community have the opportunity to demonstrate their opinions about their favorite soap opera.

These five online communities -- Sanook, Kapook, Pantip, Liverpoolthail, and Thaitv3 -- were selected as the sampled weblogs since they have their own attributes and specific types of members. Sanook.com and Kapook.com are the popular websites for teenagers and young adults in Thailand, while Pantip's users are white-collar people. Websites' members are allowed to create

the topics that they want other members to discuss. Next, Liverpoolthailand represents the male website and it is the proof that *Sawan Bieng* has various groups of fans, not only female fans. Lastly, thaity3 is the website of Channel Three where *Sawan Bieng* was broadcasted. It is the specific site for only *Sawan Bieng*'s fans to chat through their community. Texts in *Sawan Bieng*'s DVD were examined and used to find out how its 12 production elements invited the audiences to interpret the meanings. Weblogs could be the site to study audiences' interpretations while visual and audio texts in *Sawan Bieng*'s DVD were the primary source to study producers' messages.

In-depth Interviews: Eight audiences who watched *Sawan Bieng* were invited for a face-to-face interview, which took about one hour. They were purposively chosen due to their different occupations, education levels, age, and gender to represent various groups of Thai drama audiences. All interviewees were encouraged to freely describe their perception about the expression of love, rape forced on the heroine by the hero, the appropriateness of love scenes and the

decision of the heroine to finally marry her rapist in light of the Social Learning Theory process, particularly attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation with an emphasis on reinforcement of reward and punishment. Focus is placed on the analysis of the violence and rape between the hero and the heroine as role models in order to examine whether and how these role models have a violent effect on the audiences. Being asked the same questions, all interviews were audio-recorded and verbally transcribed by the major investigator. The analyses of interview transcripts determine the Thai audiences' interpretation on love expression and sexual violence presented in *Sawan Bieng*.

Results

The data analyses from five websites revealed some comments about the Thai audiences' concerns on the hero's morality, which indicated that the audiences well acknowledged that the rape is not acceptable at all. It is not a good behavior of a good person, as shown in the following quote.

“Very popular soap! But very immoral story too. Because the hero seems to be mental disorder, lack of warmth. He raped the heroine many times. However, Thais really love this soap opera”. (Lavacances)

Nevertheless, *Sawan Bieng*'s fan club who completely watched the whole story of *Sawan Bieng* suggested differently in terms of Kavee's morality. If the viewers did not watch the whole story, they might not have enough information to understand about Kavee. Most audiences take side with Kavee, the hero of the story to marry Narin, the heroin. At the end of story, the responsibility of a good man was displayed by Kavee. Therefore, they perceived the reason of raping as stemming from his “real love.” Even though rape is extremely immoral, audiences still supported Kavee and Narin to be happy together at the end. The audiences suggested that Kavee does not know the way to show love and how to express the real feeling to his lover.

“The scene that shows Kavee does not know how to express love is when he met Narin and shouted at her about her sickness. While

he hugged her, his eyes showed real feeling of love and care for

Narin, but Kavee could not say anything because he does not know

the way to express how much he loves her." (Hiraikotsu)

The analyses of data from the five websites regarding TV production elements of *Sawan Bieng* revealed answers for the first research question as followings:

Cast: Most audiences agreed that Teeradetch Wongpaoupan or Ken (Kavee) as the hero and Ann Thongprasom (Narin) as the heroine are perfect actors, particularly for this soap opera. It is because Ken and Ann were the winners of the best acting award from other soaps. Their ability of acting well guarantees the quality of the soap opera. Furthermore, Ken and Ann are smart looking and the popular type of male and female as agreed upon by the Thais' beauty standards (Ken is fair skin, tall, and handsome whereas Ann is slim, fair skin, with beautiful face.) Cast also stimulated the audiences' inner when they watched this soap opera. Their acting ability enabled the audiences to understand and love its story. "All actors are

professionally chosen," viewers stated on the blogs.

Dialogue: Most audiences pointed out in the same direction on the language of dialogue. They well understood using dialogue with harsh language is suitable for its contexts. Each character has its own style in terms of dialogue, with his/her reasons and backgrounds to act differently. "Who said that Leela is bad? She just wanted to win over Kavee because he always hurt Leela's feeling." The communication style was also designed to match each character. For example, Kavee, a very aggressive guy will launch a pretty hurtful speech as questioned by one respondent, "Why Kavee is always sharp-tongued?" Even though some words are too strong, they were acceptable since they were uttered in the soap opera, not in real life. The viewers stated that "dialogues are strong but we understand that it is fiction, not real life story."

Plot: Audiences stated how they understand Kavee who raped Narin. They continually explained that the plot regarding sexual violence satisfied their emotional involvement. For example, "Love must be exchanged with love. To save other's face,

you have to be sincere, tolerant, and look after others". Narin taught Kavee to know how to love others. Furthermore, a turning point of *Sawan Bieng* at the nearly end of the story made the audience shift their support to cheer up Kavee over Narin who was earlier supported in the first part of the story because of her strength.

Staging (frame): Some audiences commented on the websites that violent scenes occurred in the inappropriate location and time. For instance, Kavee raped Narin at the swimming pool in the rain. This scene was produced to create more pressure for both Narin and Kavee. Staging of violent scenes was designed to be occurring in the uncomfortable place where it is difficult to get away. The effectiveness of this violent scene is to stimulate the soap audiences to sympathize with Narin due to this situation.

Lighting: Lighting is an important instrument to create the emotional climate. Lighting was deliberately set for brightness and shadow. For example, sharp light was used to present an aggressive action based on Kavee's emotion. The director also used light setting as a symbol to represent the hero's dark side. We can see clearly Kavee's

shadow when he raped Narin in a swimming pool. While Kavee is still a handsome guy, he could be a monster in the same scene by the result of light setting.

Soundtrack: Voice of singer, Panadda Reangwut, who sang this soundtrack, is very clear and of great quality. Her voice expressed to the audiences very well the feelings and belief of Narin who holds strongly Thai social values in terms of females' appropriate sex role.

Costume and Make-up: Violent scenes such as raping were presented with an appropriate set of costumes for each location. Casual wear such as short pants and white shirt was used in the violent scene. Narin fought with Kavee in the swimming pool and was raped at the end of this scene. The costume was set to match to the location where the characters were on vacation. Narin's cloth did not convey sexy image to the audiences as her suitable make-up was created as if there was no make-up. These elements were combined to communicate the act of violent scene rather than the sexy one. Absolutely, the feedback of this scene is the audiences' sympathy for Narin, which fulfilled the director's objective.

Behavior: Based on the violent scenes in which Kavee raped Narin, *Sawan Bieng* audiences admired this soap opera as displaying a good example for Thai girls nowadays. As Narin tried so much to save her female dignity which is considered a good social value among Thai females, she fought Kavee with all her might in all the rape scenes. Although rape scenes in *Sawan Bieng* happened in a private location, sexual behavior is forbidden among unmarried couple, extremely in the public place. Either hug or kiss is never accepted to be performed in public in terms of romantic relationship.

Environment: Environment in *Sawan Bieng* was not mentioned. However, sexual violence occurred because of Kavee's social environment where all main characters lived in the same house. In particular, Leela obviously showed her affection on Kavee while Narin tried to avoid him. Moreover, Kavee's father (Kit) not only gave higher attention and value to his stepmother (Leela) than himself, but also reacted to him with physical and verbal violence.

Camera Angles: Use of camera angles made the scenes beautiful and realistic on

television screen. The director utilized the technique of soap opera production to produce the good drama. The power of production elements can be proved by the audience comments. They complied with the story of soap and also went along with the reason of Kavee's to commit the violent scenes.

Other Changes: Audiences commented on various versions of *Sawan Bieng*. They raised the point of *Sawan Bieng*'s rating to compare the accomplishment between the Channel 3 version and the Channel 7 version. Both channels produced *Sawan Bieng* and got national success in terms of ratings. Some fans mentioned on the better production of Channel 3 when comparing to Channel 7.

In addition, the expression of love perceived by Thai audiences was presented in various forms. Care was mentioned since there are many forms of care that can be seen in many scenes. For example, Kavee took care of Narin when she was sick. His anxiety was clearly shown by his facial expressions. Audiences presumed that this reaction resulted from love. If Kavee does not fall in love with Narin, he will not rape her at all. As Kavee is a self-confident person

and a playboy, there is no other reason for him to rape Narin. In addition, at the nearly ending, *Sawan Bieng* represented Kavee's endeavor to reconcile with Narin. Audiences' sympathy is affected by Kavee's great care. As we can see from the interview's data below.

“As Kavee is the cause of Narin's sickness, so, he takes care of her.

His care for others begins from this point.” Dome, (2018, May 1). Student. Interview.

As for the second research question, based on the title of *Sawan Bieng* or “Twisted Heaven,” it is of highly emotional satisfaction and can explain how romance readers and romance soaps interpret Kavee's violent acts. In order to confirm the explanation, Radway (1984) provided the reasonable argument that the violent romance scene excites in order to serve the audiences' expectation of the meaning of patriarchy. The audiences explained well the reason of the first rape scene in *Sawan Bieng*, as shown in the following quote.

“Leela who is Narin's sister, lied to her husband, Kit (Kavee's father),

that she was slapped by Kavee. Even though Kavee tried to explain the truth that Leela slapped herself, Kit did not believe Kavee and slapped him. For me, it is important that father should trust his son, but Kit took side of Leela. So, I do understand this scene. I do not cry but I strongly feel it”. Dome, (2018, May 1). Student. Interview.

Kritsana Asoksin was a well-known author of the novel *Sawan Bieng* and many loyal readers were aware of using the rape as a tool to develop a climax that reflects her plot on Kavee's and Narin's twisted heaven. Radway (1984) argued that romance novel and romance soaps are the same fiction genre. The plots they use are created to serve the same loyal fans. Besides, Meaw (2018, April 20), Female cook, voiced her opinion that many Thai soap operas in the past that contained violent romance scenes were successful in terms of ratings. *Sawan Bieng* which has the same plot is popular too.

Sawan Bieng means the “Twisted heaven” which compares to the love of Kavee. He falls in love with Narin, the heroine. However, he treated his love very

badly. Therefore, he needs to show his true feelings for her. Misunderstanding about love between both of the protagonists led them to be hurtful and sad at the beginning. However, it became a happy ending. *Sawan Bieng*'s author compares the happy ending as the heaven as it was unhappy at the beginning but turned out to be heaven at the end for both characters. The plot clearly exhibited love and violence between the hero and the heroine.

Discussion

Most audiences viewed the romance story as immoral as stated in Buddhism's five precepts. Apart from the rape of the heroine (Narin) by the hero (Kavee), the intrigue love of the stepmother (Leela) for the hero (Kavee) is the major cause of the conflict in the family, and jealousy was cited as immoral by Buddhism's five precepts. It was Leela's jealousy that caused a series of rapes and troubles in *Sawan Bieng* as compassed as a plot by the author. Indeed, it was greed, and lust of love of a woman out of jealousy which are immoral to win the hearts and minds of the man who are not her husband.

The Social Learning Theory is particularly helpful to explain the meaning of sexual violence between the two main characters in *Sawan Bieng*. The Social Learning Theory (originally known as Social Cognitive Theory) is based on the principle that humans learn from observation. Thus, Social Learning encompasses both "imitation" and "identification" to explain how people learn through observation of others in their environments. The imitation behaviors are learned from the observation of the soap's story (Bandura, 1971). Most of the informants could recall all steps in the Social Learning Theory from attention, retention, reproduction, to motivation, and a vicarious reinforcement of reward and punishment, and that made them understand the rape scenes or sexual violence presented in the soap opera. Both characters were very popular and the audiences admire them very much. In the case of the hero, Kavee, who raped the heroine, Narin, and should be blamed or received punishment, many audiences argued that seeing him as a role model to be punished for exhibiting a "rape" would make them feel as if they were punished instead.

Thus, they did not blame or hate their male role model. At the end, Kavee showed to be the “responsible” man by proposing to marry Narin, who has well accepted to marry him. This is indeed a happy ending –a “reward reinforcement”.

In Thailand, rape is considered illegal and offenders are prosecuted as a criminal. However, among Thai lovers, it is common nowadays to see many cases of unwanted pregnancy, as shown in the following quotes:

“Sawan Bieng models may reflect what actually happens in Thai society, particularly young Thai women become pregnant before marriage.”

Took, (2018, April 25). Housewife. Interview.

In fact, unwanted pregnancy has turned out to be a major social problem in Thailand and many countries throughout the world. The female role model, Narin, performed by Ann Thongprasom, has been highly respected by teenagers and Thai audiences in real life as well as in soap operas and other performances. Many of her fans have tried to imitate her well-behaved and decent lifestyles. In *Sawan Bieng*, the heroine (Narin) became the rape victim by the hero (Kavee)

and suffered from its many consequences, both physically and psychologically. Many audiences said that Narin has set a high standard of role model for a good woman, who stands for love, justice, and equality. The heroine was hailed as a role model who champions compassion, tolerance, perseverance, forgiveness and family happiness. In view of these characters, she was perceived to have won the heart of the hero who finally proposed to marry her.

Most informants would like to see appropriate and compassionate love scenes that are relatively free from physical and mental “violence.” Referring to the Thai audiences’ opinions, the Narin’s final decision to marry Kavee was a long process involving a change in “cognitive” from negative to a positive perception or attitude. At the very beginning, the relationships between the two characters appeared to be quite hostile. They turned out to be very bad and emotionally fragile after the heroine was raped and became pregnant. Informants remarked that the heroine, Narin, was her “superb role model” to “tolerate and forgive” the hero, Kavee, who “raped” and also “loved” her. “Tolerance” and

“forgiveness” are considered by Buddhism as “Khan-ti” and “Apai” which are the qualifications of a great person devoted to social goods. Narin was raped three times by Kavee and suffered physically and psychologically, but instead of taking a revenge, she preferred to be tolerant and, most importantly, forgiving. At the same time, the heroine was regarded by the audiences as a “superb role model” in nursing a new baby born from “unwanted pregnancy”.

Conclusion

The sexual violence in *Sawan Bieng* as explained by the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) or Radway (1984)'s explanation is found to be completely different form such communication theories as Catharsis and Cultivation theory or any other persuasion theories. As a role model theory, the Social Learning Theory provides an alternative explanation to the potential effects of media violence on audiences. As we can see from the interviews, Balloon (2018, May 9) said “If you do the same thing as did Kavee, you would be bagged by the police since you started the rape”.

Audiences differentiated between the real life and the soap opera. “Audiences understand the situations such that Kavee does not really hate or get angry on Narin, but it is love actually,” stated by Jeab (April 11, 2018). However, social problems relating to such violent issues as rape, crime, poverty, and human trafficking still exist in Thailand and require concerted efforts to deal with. *Sawan Bieng* defined love to Thai audiences such that actions are more important than words. It is true that we only heard the sentence “I love you” from Kavee in the last scene. Although Kavee really loved her and tried hard to show his sincerity at the nearly end of the story, he presented his real feelings through his actions. The audiences understood him well and absolutely supported him. The hero's background was provided for the audiences, allowing them to understand the reason of his sexual violence. Kavee is the only child in a rich family. Everyone loves and spoils him. His father arranged for his studying abroad due to the early passing away of his mother since he was young. This leads him to be a self-centered person and a playboy. Lots of girls have a crush on him. Hence, he did violent

actions toward Narin as he had no idea how to deal with her as a girlfriend. Finally, he took responsibility in his actions and expressed real feelings to win Narin's heart. As a result, the plot of *Sawan Bieng* testifies that "actions speak louder than words".

The limitation of this research lies in the time lapse. The first broadcast of *Sawan Bieng* was 2008, but the interviews were conducted in 2018. However, the most current version of *Sawan Bieng* was rerun on channel 3 during the interview period (from April 3, 2018 to May 7, 2018). In addition, every time of its rerun, it was always talked about on the weblogs by its fans via popular websites such as Pantip, Mthai, or Sanook. Another limitation is the females as the majority of the informants. Male opinions were examined to a lesser extent than female ones in this study.

The future research might study further across cultures by exploring other sample groups such as foreigners who love to watch Thai drama like Chinese audiences using a Thai soap opera as a tool. The focus of studying should be on different interpretations between Thai and others about "love" and "rape". That is, the

difference in cultures might lead to the interesting findings of the study. Furthermore, according to the fact that Thai Soap opera is now exported to China and other countries in Asia, it is a good sign for Thai media producers to produce the programs that would satisfy broader markets. The future study may support Thai television production to create more emotional scenes, particularly love scenes and international symbols in Thai soap opera. Thai entertainment industry could eventually be more developed and earn more income from international markets such as India, Korea, and Japan.

According to the implications, the results are beneficial for media practitioners to appropriately present sexual violent scenes in the future soap opera. Only reasonable plot is acceptable by fans. As audiences now focus on the whole production elements, TV producers must emphasize the quality of every TV production element. Particularly, social media, nowadays, is used as the general tool for fans to communicate and exchange their opinions. For the policy makers, the right soap opera might serve as a good lesson for

new generations in order to make them appreciate the nation's morality and culture. *Sawan Bieng* is the case study to prove that soap opera is not just the entertainment, but it can be an edutainment source as well. Therefore, the government or media owners should support the good soap opera to serve as a tool for the Thai audiences to learn about important social issues in the society.

Lastly, audiences in general know how to choose between good and bad soap operas. Good soap could be supported by the fans, while others should be criticized by the public to achieve further quality improvement.

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