



การเคลื่อนไหวทางการเมืองและพื้นที่ของความสัมพันธ์ในภาพยนตร์อเมริกันและนวนิยาย ชายรักชายของไทย: การวิเคราะห์เชิงวิพากษ์

Political movements and relationship spaces in an American film and a Thai boy's love novel: A critical analysis

ภาร ชุมสาย ณ อุยธยา*

Patra Jumsai Na Ayudhya*

ภาควิชาภาษา คณะศิลปศาสตร์และวิทยาการจัดการ มหาวิทยาลัยเกษตรศาสตร์

Department of Languages, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Management Science, Kasetsart University.

*Corresponding author, e-mail: patra.jumsai@gmail.com

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บทคัดย่อ

การเคลื่อนไหวของชุมชนผู้ที่มีความหลากหลายทางเพศ (LGBTQ+) เข้ามายึดส่วนหนึ่งของกิจกรรมทางการเมือง ระดับนานาชาตินับตั้งแต่เหตุการณ์จลาจลสโตโนวอลล์ในปี พ.ศ. 2512 ณ 月中旬นี้ในประเทศไทย นับตั้งแต่การเคลื่อนไหวทางการเมืองของกลุ่มผู้ที่มีความหลากหลายทางเพศผ่านการศึกษาภาพยนตร์อเมริกัน เรื่อง Milk (2008) และนวนิยายชายรักชายของไทย เรื่อง เมื่อไหร่จะเลิกเป็นสิ่ง (2013) โดยใช้การอ่านแบบละเอียดเพื่อวิเคราะห์และเปรียบเทียบว่าทิศทางการเมืองที่ใช้ในการปลุกระดมมวลชน เพื่อการเคลื่อนไหวทางการเมือง บทความนี้ยังใช้การอ่านแบบละเอียดเพื่อตีความประดิษฐ์เรื่องพื้นที่ส่วนตัว พื้นที่ความสัมพันธ์ และพื้นที่ทางการเมืองที่เกิดขึ้นในตัวบท จากการวิเคราะห์พบว่า ตัวบททั้งสองมีการใช้ทักษิลป์ทางการเมืองที่คล้ายคลึงกัน แต่อยู่ในระดับที่ต่างกัน อีกทั้งพื้นที่ทางการเมืองที่ทับซ้อนกันนั้นทำหน้าที่ทั้งการตอบรับและผลักไสพื้นที่ส่วนตัว และพื้นที่ความสัมพันธ์ไปพร้อม ๆ กัน อีกทั้งบทความนี้ต้องการนำเสนอประโยชน์ของการอ่านอย่างละเอียดในการวิเคราะห์ ตัวบทที่มีความแตกต่างกันทางวัฒนธรรมที่เผยแพร่ให้เห็นนัยทางการเมืองที่ซ่อนอยู่ภายในตัวบท

คำสำคัญ: ผู้ที่มีความหลากหลายทางเพศ; การเคลื่อนไหวทางการเมือง; ภาพยนตร์; นวนิยายชายรักชายของไทย; การอ่านอย่างละเอียด

Abstract

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and other (LGBTQ+) community movements have been part of international political activity since the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City. Whereas, since the 2014 Military Coup in Thailand, the LGBTQ+ movement has grown alongside democratic and human rights movements. This article focuses on an analysis of LGBTQ+ socio-political movements by studying the film *Milk* (2008), an American biographical film based on the life of gay rights activist and politician Harvey Milk, distributed by Focus Features and directed by Gus Van Sant, and the Thai boy's love novel *Mue Rai Ja Lerk Pen Salim* (When Will You Stop Being Salim; 2020), by Monsicha Suachon. The close reading analysis was used to analyze and compare political rhetoric in persuading the mass to instigate political activism. The article also further interprets and evaluates personal, romantic, and political spaces intertwining within the texts. The results were that both texts use similar rhetorical discourse to influence political dissent but at different levels. Overlapping political spaces that emerge in both texts function differently by simultaneously embracing and relegating personal and romantic spaces. This study also suggests the use of close reading in studying texts from different cultures revealing political implications nested within the texts.

Keywords: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and Other (LGBTQIA+); Political Movements; Film; Thai Boy's Love Novel; Close Reading

Introduction

The LGBTQ+ Movements in the U.S. and Harvey Milk

The LGBTQ+ movements were recognised for half of the century after The Stonewall Riots in 1969 in the United States of America. This incident sparked the movement for the LGBTQ+ community to call out for their freedom and rights and seek recognition. From the incident, many social and political organisations support this matter, for instance, the National LGBTQ Task Force in the states, the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association in the UK, and many others all around the states and European countries.

One of the significant and recognised LGBTQ+ activists is Harvey Milk. His life and social works have been presented in a documentary film, *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984), directed by Rob Epstein [1] and was premiered in 1984. Two decades later a biographical film *Milk* (2008) directed by Gus Van Sant [2] was aired in 2008. Villa [3] pointed out that the two films, *The Times of Harvey Milk* and *Milk*, though represented the same protagonist, were purposely made twice to grasp two different historical movements for the LGBTQ+ community in the states. She argued that while *The Times of Harvey Milk* served as a political movement during the anti-gay HIV backlash and national homophobic phenomena in the 80s, *Milk*, on the other hand, was aimed at grasping the debate over gay marriage legislation in the 2000s.

The film starts with Milk's love life with Scott Smith in New York City in 1970. Then, two years later, the couple moved to San Francisco and established a camera store at Castrol Street (*Milk* in italics refers

to the film while Milk in normal refers to the character's name). Milk started his new role as a gay activist who promoted and fought to achieve fundamental gay rights and found the LGBTQ+ community of Castrol. However, Milk and Smith's relationship ended because Milk had dedicated too much of his time to politics. Milk, then, decided to move on to a relationship with Jack Lyra. Unfortunately, due to Milk's over-commitment towards promoting LGBTQ+ rights and other political campaigns to the public, Jack decided to commit suicide. Apart from Milk's painful romantic relationships, the film represents Milk as an outstanding politician who advocates the gay rights movement. Milk held distinctive skills in persuading and encouraging Americans to be involved in and support his political agendas and street demonstrations against all violence toward gay people. Moreover, after being chosen as the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, he continued working as an LGBTQ+ activist. The film exposes the complicated process of passing the law to protect LGBTQ+ rights against some politicians who stand on the conservative side. At the end of the film, Milk is assassinated by his ex-colleague inside the city hall with a gunshot. His career path and ambitions may come to an end, but his immense contributions have always been reminisced. His legacy is still be seen in later generations.

The Different Poles of the Thai Political Spectrum

Compared to the United States of America, it is noticeable that the LGBTQ+ movement in Thailand has only been arising in the last few decades – within the first few years of the twenty-first century. The movement itself does not stand alone by itself but follows along several pro-democratic protests, since the major coup in 2014 [4]. Additionally, the year 2020 marked an important milestone in Thai democracy since the public opinions toward monarchy changed after King Rama IX ascended in 2016 and after General Prayut Jan-o-cha served in the prime minister’s office in 2019.

In 2020, the novel *Mue Rai Ja Lerk Pen Salim* (When Will You Stop Being Salim; Thai: เมื่อไรจะเลิกเป็นสลิม) written by Cyanweek (the pen name of Monsicha Suachon) [5] gained substantial public attention as it served a unique function as a historical record of that specific year. Published online at ReadAWrite (www.readawrite.com), the novel is a boy's love novel consisting of 20 chapters and written 3,500 – 4,500 words per chapter and is categorised as "Literature Drama and Satire" on the website. The novel was first published on 22 March 2020 and finished on 22 April of the same year. It was later self-published as an electronic book on mebmarket.com in 2020. The story contextually reflects Thai society under the junta government administration; as well as the clash between pro-democratic protesters and the government and royal family supporters whose identity was labelled by the pro-democracy as "salim" (Thai: สลิม). The story in the novel echoes the political movements occurring in Thailand from the period it was written. Teepagorn Wuttipitayamongkol [6] argued that *Mue Rai Ja Lerk Pen Salim* is a production of the oppressed; the writer who is not only a female writer but a citizen of Thailand under the junta government.

Mue Rai Ja Lerk Pen Salim focuses on a relationship between a political science student 'Leo' and a resident physician 'Shin' who lives opposite Leo's room in the same university flat in Bangkok. Shin is Leo's love at first sight; however, Leo is disappointed after discovering that Shin supports the Junta government and possesses different opinions on the political spectrum. As such, Leo tries hard to change

Shin's political points of view to pro-democracy. The novel criticises and condemns the dictatorial junta government through the protagonist's voice. The story's obstacles are the contradiction of political standpoints and individual opinions on COVID-19 coping strategies. It also includes the contemporary issue of gender identity in the twenty-first century.

Objectives

Different mediums often cater to diverse audiences and cultural contexts. Even if the two texts are presented in different mediums, one as a film and another as a novel, analysing the film and the novel from different cultural backgrounds provides an opportunity to explore how storytelling styles and themes vary across cultures, reflecting cultural norms, values, and societal nuances [7]. Comparing film and literature encourages an interdisciplinary approach. It enables insights from the fields of literature, visual arts, and even psychology (in terms of audience perception and engagement) to intersect, creating a more holistic understanding of storytelling and narrative construction [8]. As the theme of *Milk and Mue Rai Ja Lerk Pen Salim* focuses on politics and homosexual relationships, studying them together will not only offer insights into the political situations but broaden the perspective of the LGBTQ+ cultures.

Though there are some prior discussions and articles about the two texts, both the film and the novel were read and discussed merely and inevitably through their political events and agendas. Therefore, two intriguing and overlapping aspects of *Milk and Mue Rai Ja Lerk Pen Salim* can be considered as research gaps: the rhetorical analysis and the analysis of space. The first part of this paper, thus, will analyse and discuss some persuasive techniques for political agendas in both texts, which are used to raise awareness and engage people in the movements. I shall propose that the same techniques function differently; at the micro level in *Mue Rai Ja Lerk Pen Salim* and the macro level in *Milk*. The next part is a close-reading analysis of the intersection of different spaces, namely, personal, political, and romantic spaces. Lastly, the notion of homosexuality and its complications within these spaces are discussed. This paper aims to make valuable contributions to the close reading analysis of two culturally different texts by examining the intersection of LGBTQ+ socio-political movements of the two nations.

Methods

Close reading is a fundamental technique in literary analysis, which has evolved as a potent method for understanding the deeper layers of textual meaning [9]. This approach involves a meticulous examination of a text's language, structure, and themes to extract nuanced interpretations, often transcending the boundaries of specific literary genres or eras [10]. Emerging in the early twentieth century with the New Critics, this method gained prominence for its focus on the inherent complexities of a text, advocating an analysis that delves into the minutiae of language, metaphor, and form [11]. Its application led to a renaissance in literary interpretation, prioritizing the text itself rather than external contexts or authorial intent.

This method, which is frequently connected to Western literary traditions, is becoming more and more cross-cultural, enabling perceptive readings of a wide range of artistic manifestations. By closely examining *Milk*, an American film, and *Mue Rai Ja Lerk Pen Salim*, a Thai novel, this study aims to explore the efficacy and versatility of close reading in unraveling the nuances within distinct cultural texts. The application of close reading in these many cultural contexts emphasises the analytical method's cultural distinctiveness as well as its general applicability. Although the techniques of close reading stay the same for analysing the details found in texts, the perspectives drawn from an American movie and a Thai novel are very different because of the different socio-cultural backgrounds. This contrast highlights how close reading may be tailored to explore different cultural nuances while also emphasising how understanding cultural contexts is essential for a thorough interpretation.

Results

Addressing Problems

Upon political, and ideological beliefs, the similar characteristics between Harvey Milk and Leo are their persuasive skills. They can convince people and insist on their liberal standpoint in politics. Milk and Leo highlight and declaim current undetermined socio-political issues. In the film, Milk officially declares his candidacy in the Board of Supervisors election in San Francisco. Milk starts by introducing violence and cruel and unusual punishments from the superior authority to the marginalised:

"A week ago, police officer came into our area [...] They sent 14 of our people to hospitals and to jail.

The charges, blocking the sidewalk." [2], (18:46).

Along with other prejudice, unfairness, and unjustness faced by the LGBTQ+, he then mentioned the real matter of the speech:

"My fellow degenerates, I would like to announce my candidacy for San Francisco City Supervisor!" [2],
(19:25).

Milk also applies the same rhetoric to convince Clift Jones of his support.

"What was it like to be a little queer in Phoenix? Did all the jocks beat you up in gym class?" [2], (21:05).

Milk's persuasive technique is to address ongoing problems and draw upon personal issues to recruit more supporters.

The persuasive technique that happened during the early of *Milk* can also be observed in *Mue Rai Ja Lerk Pen Salim*. The first-person narrative technique has been used in the novel to portray the democratic ideology, perceptions, and beliefs of the protagonist. It should be noted here that the writer refers to Thailand as a 'non-existent country' and indirectly names the actual figures. It should also be noted that

the novel was originally written in Thai; the English translation that appeared in this article was done solely by the researcher. In Chapter 4, Leo convinces Shin by mentioning the scandalous unfairness of the general election in 2019. He said:

"Did you know that many people were threatened [...] more than a thousand cases just because they expressed undesirable opinions about the authority and Thailand's regime? The dissenters were sent to camps for military 'attitude adjustment' sessions or seized for a short period. Some cases were handled by the court" [5], (pp. 51-52).

In Chapter 6, Leo also criticised the Deputy Prime Minister of Legal Affairs' performance:

"At first, the Uncle Too gang submitted their asset declaration after they had seized power and taken control of the government. However, after being elected as a candidate and serving in the office in 2019, he refused to disclose his income and assets. Mr Krishna, then, said that was fine. It was not fine at all! [...] in the past, some prime ministers who served the second term had to submit their asset declaration twice" [5], (p. 79).

In Chapter 7, Leo tries to persuade Shin by stating the downside of authoritarianism:

"The autocracy regime means the country's supreme power is held by a single person or a tiny group of people who hold absolute power that allows them to do anything. People in the country cannot are not allowed to think, ask, or criticise the transparency of the government" [5], (p. 87).

In the same chapter, Leo also mentions the monopoly between the government and many significant capitalists:

"[...] let the money of the capitalists flow toward the white and blue collars [...] small businesses are now dying" [5], (p. 89).

In Chapter 8, Leo mentions structural problems with the example of mass production of frozen chicken basil which is cheaper when compared to the freshly cooked one from a food stall. The capitalists can order a ton of ingredients so that the net cost is lower, which is preferable by the consumer and enlarges the lower classes' wealth gap.

The repetitive use of this persuasive technique and discourses in *Milk* and *Mue Rai Ja Lerk Pen Salim* allows the protagonists to further in-depth conversations to achieve both their political and personal goals.

Inclusive Pronouns

Another rhetoric represented in *Milk* and *Mue Rai Ja Lerk Pen Salim* is the use of pronouns that touch and embrace listeners. To illustrate, Milk as the protest leader, after Anita Brian called for gays' employment rights cancellation, used the pronoun 'our':

"Let's march the streets of San Francisco and share our anger!" [2], (41:47).

Furthermore, he referred to himself as 'we' when promoting his movements towards listeners from other marginalised communities, for example, the "blue collar" [2] (44:36). That was to include people as this was the heart of strengthening his movements for policy-changing purposes. After Milk had been elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, his next goal was to emphasise the overlooked issues of gender identity to the public. During the speech in a gay parade and the cancellation of the discrimination bill against LGBTQ+, the collective rhetoric had been applied as Milk referred to the listeners:

"**Brothers and sisters**, you must come out! Come out to your parents, to your friends" [2], (1:31:05).

"Tonight, **we** are clear that there is a place for **us**. **My brothers and sisters**, we can come home again."

[2], (1:46:15).

Milk's collective rhetoric (= (my) brothers and sisters) engages the audience to the same inclusively in activism and encourages public awareness of human rights.

Whose Voice is Talking?

In *Mue Rai Ja Lerk Pen Salim*, Leo also applies the same collective rhetoric as Milk did to his beloved listener in the novel. Additionally, after a close attention to the text, it is noticeable that there are three voices in story narratives for persuasive achievements. These voices include: 1). Leo's voice to Shin, 2). Leo's voice to the reader and, 3). The author's voice to the reader directly. The first voice, Leo's criticism of the government to Shin, has been discussed in the previous section, while the second and the third arguments are astonishing because of their ambiguity and intersection. This possibly is the answer to the question I left in the previous section considering why Leo uses such a huge political discourse to convince the individual.

In Chapter 2, the story narrates Leo's opinion about the facemask hoarding and over-charging during the COVID-19 pandemic by using the pronoun "you":

"**You** know, this country is so fucking hopeless. So hopeless that a hypercritical person like me have no idea how to rant more about this shit" [5], (p. 23).

"I think I don't need to mention again that this story takes place in an imaginary country. **You guys** already know which country that has such a ridiculous and sucks regime like this" [5], (p. 26).

"I believe that politics is all around in every moment of our life. **You** may think that I am so obsessed with it, but can **you** disagree that the government failure administration is not the sort of problem?" [5],
(p. 29).

The use of the pronoun "you", on one hand, seems to be reflecting the purpose of inclusiveness as it shortens the distance between the speaker and the listener. On the other hand, the pronoun is also used for addressing national problems the implied reader. One thing that needs to be considered here is the novel was written and regularly updated on the website during the political turbulences in Thailand. While reading the novel, it is, therefore, as if the reader is reading the writer's voice that conveys political opinion directly to them, instead of Leo's.

The purpose of Milk's and Leo's collective rhetoric usage is different even though they address the same national-level issues. The sharing of painful feelings and experiences – for Milk – is one way of embracing people to strive for change in society and enable him to be elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. On the other hand, this was an initial way for Leo to achieve his personal, romantic relationship with Shin, not to raise awareness to society. It is, indeed, the text and the writer's voice that speak to the reader through Leo's narratives exerting influence on political movements. The novel is a prime example of the author's attempt to break the fourth wall.

When Politics Transgresses Personal Space

In closely reading the two texts, home, a word that connotes warmth, security, and positive feelings, is the prime example of a physical space that is being transgressed. The political-homosexual relationships at home represented in *Milk* and *Mue Rai Ja Lerk Pen Salim* are another intriguing point as they reflect the opposite polarisation. In both texts, politics and romantic relationships are intertwined; the film represents Milk as a successful politician, and the failure and pain in his love life are also caused by politics. In the novel, these aspects harmonise with one another.

The relationship between Milk and Scott started at a subway station in New York City. For a while, the couple lived together before deciding to move to San Francisco due to the greater freedom of expressing their gender identity. At first, the film portrays Milk's stable and happy relationship with his political breakthrough assisted by Scott as his election campaign manager. As they work so hard and do not have enough time to communicate or strengthen their relationship, Milk's political activities begin to invade their personal, intimate space. This is shown in the scene where Scott asks everyone to leave their apartment after Milk has led his team to strategise the elections at the apartment until late at night [2], (29:05). In this scene, the house which is supposed to be a place for couples and family has been sternly invaded and violated by work and political ideology. The invasion sparks Scott's dissatisfaction that he has to express his displeasure during dinner:

"If you say anything about politics or the campaign, or what speech you have to give or anything, I swear to God I'm gonna stab you with this fork." [2], (29:48).

Later, after Milk has lost in his first election, Scott begins to feel that their relationship is changing; Milk devotes too much of himself to politics.

Not only was Milk's ambition violating their personal relationship space, but he was also doing the same violations against time. The film depicts Scott's displeasure after Milk has decided to lead an LGBTQ+ protest movement, as Anita Bryant overturned the gay rights defense law in Florida [2], (41:04). This incident occurs in the evenings -- the time for resting after a tiring day of work and spending time with family or couples. The violation of space and time diminishes their relationships. After several consecutive electoral defeats, Scott feels that his efforts are wasted and decides to walk out of Milk's life:

"Sorry. I can't do another one [of the election campaign]." [2], (46:08)

On the other hand, Milk still chose politics over his relationship.

Then Milk met Jack. The couple began their relationship together shortly before Milk finally won the election. The same problem arises in this relationship as Jack has invaded Milk's personal space several times, whether it is the space in the house:

"Jack, did you break into [my apartment]?" [2], (1:00: 59)

or space of his professional life when his colleagues visited him:

"The Latino has locked himself in the closet upstairs." [2], (1:07:31).

The events illustrated above reflect the clash of Milk's personal space – where home serves as both personal and professional spaces. Therefore, the line between these two spaces is blurred causing unexpected consequences and emphasising the incompatibility of these two spaces. During Milk's success, their romantic space, the apartment, is devalued causing Jack to finally commit suicide, leaving the last saying:

"You always loved the circus, Harley. How do you like my last ACT?" [2], (1:40:21).

Jack's last, fatal decision implies that he is also ignoring his own neglected space.

When Personal Space Embraces Politics

Although the spatial aspect of the home in *Mue Rai Ja Lerk Pen Salim* was also blurred similarly to *Milk*, their function has the opposite result. Spaces in *Mue Rai Ja Lerk Pen Salim* are important and have been mentioned several times. The settings in the text mostly are the dormitory and bedrooms. Their bedrooms have functioned as a private space, and a place for exercising different political views within the same world – the dormitory. Even if the political space – inextricably attached to personal space – has been subjected to numerous clashes, twists, and violations, the novel is not a tragic story at all.

The first collision is a personal space clash. In Chapter 2, Leo decides to give Shin a facemask, who lives in the opposite room. In return, Shin gives a cough remedy to Leo. In Chapter 3, their political conflicts

are subjugated by the third emotional polarity that has undermined the political barriers. A third emotional polarity, or what could be referred to as a romantic space, brings dialogues and gradually demolishes their political conflicts. At the same time, it creates an intimate space for both of them. Leo's and Shin's personal spaces are violated by political and romantic spaces several times. For example, Chapter 4 is marked as the first time Leo enters Shin's bedroom to explain to him about critical political corruption issues in Thailand:

"And I walked into his room. I don't think I need to explain much about it. It's just a cheap dorm room with the same decoration as mine – Just swapped from left and right" [5], (p. 47).

This is a space where the complex collision takes place:

"I think I am very good at aggressively ranting about the government administration [...] but whenever I see him face to face, I always turn calmer than normal. [But] this time, I must not soften! I have to enlighten him!".

The conversation goes:

"So ... you wanted to tell me that Uncle Too was a bad person?"
"Uncle Too is the dictator," said Leo [5], (p. 49).

This scene in Shin's Bedroom implies that there is a transgression of different political standpoints. Leo invades Shin's physical space several more times (Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, and 12) to argue on the topic of politics based on real events. At the end of Chapter 12, Shin's personal and political spaces have finally collapsed from the countless invasions of Leo commencing the growth of their romantic spaces as they confess their feelings toward each other:

"My first confession was not romantic at all, neither my first kiss" [5], (p. 165).

Later on, in Chapter 13:

"I'm going back to my room."
"Okay", he replies softly. I compressed my lips.
"Would ... would you like to come?" [5], (p. 167)

It suggests that the act of Leo's invitation to Shin to his bedroom in this chapter symbolises the successful invasion of Leo into both the personal and political spaces of Shin. The latter act of Shin entering Leo's bedroom, then, can be analysed as the conformity of political ideology – the act of accepting each other's political identities and the embarkment of their romantic journey.

According to the film, it is obvious that personal, political, and romantic spaces have significantly different mechanisms compared to the novel. Milk, Scott, and Jack's intimate personal spaces are ruined

by political space leading to the failures of their romantic relationships. Milk's political space has been colliding with the romantic space all the time, and the political space becomes superior to the romantic space at the end. However, the political space of *Mue Rai Ja Lerk Pen Salim* functions and coheres well with the personal space prospering their romantic spaces. It is worth noticing that even though *Milk* and *Mue Rai Ja Lerk Pen Salim* portray both painful and joyful affections respectively, Milk and Leo still successfully achieve their political goals.

Conclusions and Discussion

In reading these texts together, while the film focuses on Milk as a protagonist who uses a wide variety of theatrical rhetoric for the mass's engagement to bring about changes to society, the theatrical rhetoric in the novel, on the other hand, is used for changing the individual perception. It is the novel itself that has a political deconstructive function and persuades the reader. This can be stated that similar forms, structures, and language content performed in different places and contexts can be perceived and interpreted at different levels. The meanings are fabricated for specific purposes.

Another representation of the texts is the attachment of a homosexual relationship to personal and political spaces. Both texts illustrate how these spaces crash and perform different functions toward both tragically and joyfully affecting accomplishments highlighted in Wilkinson's political concept of love [12]. To pursue and succeed in political movements, toxic and painful affection cannot be ignored as it can also be a drive for political achievements. This is not to say that joyful love is just a fantasy; the two texts successfully portray Wilkinson's concepts as both joyful and painful loves can lead to lucrative, successful political movements.

Additionally, it can be implied from the close reading that the human rights movement, including the rights of LGBTQ+ people in Thailand, is still a topic to be discussed in a small group of people or even merely between individuals. Thailand is still far behind from achieving basic human rights as what the country is facing now has occurred in the American movie a decade ago. The rights of the people of Thailand cannot be accomplished if talking about them can only be debated in a bedroom and cannot be publicly discussed. In summary, even though the two texts contain similar themes of politics and homosexuality, the story of *Mue Rai Ja Lerk Pen Salim* is considered only the product of governmental censorship, unlike the tragic yet inspirational, fight-for-the-public-good story of *Milk*.

Additional Suggestion: Gender and Politics in Thai Boy's Love Novels

The novel, however, is a positive sign of a societal change. When it comes to homosexual relationships in Thailand, it can be seen that these representations are prevalent in many mediums, for example, TV dramas, series, and novels (both hardcopy and online editions). However, the Thai perspective towards LGBTQ+ is still "tolerable but unacceptable" as the main actors in gay men series are generally referred to as "straight" due to the tradition, or in digital media, i.e., male-male novels published online often set up the protagonists as a "straight". To clarify, the main characters have no interest in any other male character except another main character who, incidentally, is also straight. This tradition of

novel composition distorts and disregards the existence of the LGBTQ+ and also emphasises the idealistic romance, ignoring the discrimination among the LGBTQ+ community in society [13]. However, the issues about family, gender identity, and the 'coming out' process of the two protagonists in *Mue Rai Ja Lerk Pen Salim* challenge this statement regarding the representative of gay identity in boy's love novels as "[Boy's love novels] have no gay culture as its core, [the] writing does not present or criticise sexual hook-up culture, [...] the acknowledgement of gender identity leading to a coming out, [...] or other relevant issues in gay culture." [14], (p. 22). The novel also challenges a statement on gender role distance; how protagonists in boy's love novels are always assigned heteronormative roles as "male" or "female" [13]. The writer of *Mue Rai Ja Lerk Pen Salim* does not traditionally fix the role of Leo and Shin to "top" or "bottom"; on the contrary; represents the particular gender identity of gay people against the relationship norms of heteronormativity. *Mue Rai Ja Lerk Pen Salim* paves the way for future boy's love novels, reflecting the political aspects and views toward the government, representing gender issues, and reaffirming gay identity. Compared to other boy's love novels that ignore and disregard gender discrimination and political matters, including these issues in a novel should be considered part of social movements and, therefore, encourage further investigation.

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