‘MIRACLE SCENE’: THE SANSKRIT FIGURE OF SPEECH ‘SAMAŚOKTI’ IN THAI LITERARY CONVENTION

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Abstract

In Thai classical literature there is a kind of description used in portraying love scenes. Disguised in expressions of double meaning, these passages are, on the surface, beautiful descriptions, but are, at the same time, rather risqué. The portrayal is called ‘miracle scene’ after the word ‘āścarya’ (miracle) at the beginning of each passage. The literary device in the description is somewhat similar to the Sanskrit alajkāra, ‘samāsokti’ in which a second meaning is understood because of the epithets common to both meanings.

The paper is an attempt to trace this device in Thai literary convention, gleaning insight from the passages in the masterpieces of different periods. The linkage with the Sanskrit figure of speech (alajkāra) is also analyzed on an assumption that poetry in any language shares the same purpose in literary wit: to present tasteless passion in a refined depiction.

The Denotative Meaning of Descriptive Verses

The reddening moon has so seized the face of night with her trembling stars, that all her cloak of darkness in the east falls thus unnoticed by her confusion.

Gentle breezes scenting the room with flower fragrance, undulate the fringe of her wrapround bodice.

The moon in prancing movement, overshadowed by the resplendent sun that casts away the surrounding stars. The boughs glitter with fireflies.

Green beetles swarm to the wilderness resoundingly.

The first verse concerns the moon and the night. The moon, assuming the red colour of twilight, illumined (seized) the beginning

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3 upodharāgena vilolatārakaj tathā grhītaj āśinā niśāmukkhaj yathā samastaj timirājaśuṣkaj tayā purō pi mohād galtaj na laksitam.

(Anandavardhana, The Dhvanyāloka, chapter I, kārikā 13, quoted from K. Krishnamoorthy, 1982: 20, except for the last line where Ingalls (1990:137) has taken the reading of the oldest version, mohād, in place of rāgād, which avoids the awkward repetition of rāga. (The English translation of this kārikā is given by Ingalls).

4 พระพายชายพัดบุปผชาติ เกสรสาดหอมกลบตลบหอง ริ้วริ้วปลิวชายสไบกรอง พระจันทรผันผยองอยูยับยับ พระอาทิตยชิงดวงพระจันทรเดน ดาวกระเด็นใกลเดือนดาราดับ หิ่งหอยพรอยไมไหวระยับ แมลงทับทองเที่ยวสะเทือนดง

(Khun Chang Khun Phaen, a narrative romance in verse, written in the reign of King Rama II in the Ratanakosin Period; the English translation of this verse is mine).
(the face) of the night in which the stars are trembling. The mass of darkness suddenly vanished in the east, not even noticed by people (that it was the beginning of night).

The second verse concerns a pleasant and joyful moment with fragrant breezes, moonset and sunrise. The twinkling lights of fireflies and the resound of green beetles denote a lively and exciting emotion.

These two verses belong to different sources of different poetic conventions. Still, they share a common literary nature, a concealed meaning for interpretation.

The Suggested Meaning in a Contextual Interpretation

In both verses, figures of speech are used as a means of depiction. The old Sanskrit critics, especially Anandavardhana in the ninth century A. D. (Ingalls, 1990:601), maintained that all the expressed figures of speech in poetry are generally seen to attain the highest beauty when accompanied by an element of suggestiveness. According to the traditional Indian theories of meaning, there are three sorts of semantic power: the power of direct denotation (abhidhā), the secondary power of indirect indication (laksanā) and the final power of suggestion (dhvani). Anandavardhana considered the third one the most valuable for poetic expression since it possesses a power of revelation as of a lamp that reveals the object upon which it casts its light.

The first verse is an example in Anandavardhana’s Dhvanyālokā, a literary text on Dhvani. He explained that the main purport of the verse concerns the moon and the night, while the behaviour of a lover and his lady have been superimposed upon it. Daniel H. H. Ingalls (1990:138), a translator and commentator of the text, explains that the suggested meanings furnish a sense as follows:

The lover, with aroused passion, kisses the face of his beloved whose eyes tremble, so that she drops her robe entirely before him without noticing what she has done in her confusion.

Anandavardhana called a statement with double meaning as in the first verse samāsokti. To the old Sanskrit literary theorists such as Bhāmaha, samāsokti is a kind of figure of speech (alajkāra). In Bhāmaha’s Kāvyālajkāra 2.79 (qtd. in Ingalls, 1990:138), there is a description of samāsokti: ‘where in a statement a second meaning is understood because of epithets common (to both meaning): the wise call that samāsokti, because the meaning is composite’. Abhinavagupta, a Sanskrit critic of the tenth century, gave an explanation of the double meaning of this verse in his commentary on the Dhvanyālokā, the Locana (qtd. with supplement by Ingalls, 1990:138-139) as follows:

Reddening (upodharāgena, literally possessing redness): [in the case of the moon this means] assuming the red color of twilight, and [in the case of a lover it means] assuming the feeling of love. With her trembling stars (vilolatārakaj): in which the lights of heaven are trembling and in which a portion of the eye is trembling. So (tathā): suddenly [of the moon] and with a rush of love [of a lover]. Seized (grhītaj): illumined [of the moon with respect to the night] and seized in order to kiss [of the lover with respect to his beloved]. The face of night (niśāmukhaj): the beginning [of the night] and the lotus face [of
the woman]... In the east (puras) [in connection with night] and [in connection with the woman] in front of her. Fallen (galitaj): vanished in the one case and fallen in the other [...] In the west is the woman. In the east (puras) [in connection with night] and [in connection with the woman] in front of her. "Fallen" (galitaj): vanished in the one case and fallen in the other [...]

Ingalls maintains that in the second meaning ‘night’ (niśā) stands for a woman and ‘moon’ (śaśī) stands for a lover,⁵ that is to say, both meanings — lover/beloved and moon/night — intensify each other. From an aspect of literary rasa, they are the causes (vibhāva) of the erotic flavour (srvgārarasa). The moon and the night are the setting or the scene enhancing the mood of love; the lover and the beloved are the hero and the heroine in love.

The Description of an Āścarya Moment

Let us turn to the second verse, that is a descriptive passage in a Thai romance, Khun Chang Khun Phaen. The denotative meaning of the verse gives us an image of a pleasant moment, as the one above. Curiously enough, who are in this setting then? To whom does the wrapround bodice belong? The context of this passage may give an answer.

This verse is a description of the consequence of the hero, Khun Phaen, having entered Kaewkiriya’s room. Gentle breezes with fragrance, the sun, the moon, the stars and even the glitter of fireflies may belong here since they enhance the feeling of love. But what about green beetles? Let us consider the Thai word for green beetle, malaeng thap (green beetle) renders a vivid image. Moreover, the word ‘thap’ (wilderness) signifies a place impenetrable for anyone prior to the hero. That is why green beetles swarm there resoundingly! (แมลงทับท่องเที่ยวสะเทือนดง). At this point, the image of the sun chasing the moon seems to belong to this context.

In Thai narrative literature, this sort of description is used in conventional scenes of love-in-enjoyment. The Thai traditional poets tried to portray the gestures of the lovers with refinement. Their conscious effort was to avoid vulgarity. Still, they wanted to render the fulfillment of the couple’s desire. Love scenes in Thai literature, as Nithi Iewsiwong (preface to Suwan Phansi, 2005:3) mentions in Lititt Phra Law, is no other than a concern for physical and emotional joy, unrelated to the Western concept of Pro-creation.

Closer to the Indian literary taste of love-in-enjoyment (sajbhoga) with the flavour of love (srvgārarasa), the description of love scene in traditional Thai literature has suited the taste of readers for a long time. For those with refined taste, the description

⁵ To take the gender of the word into consideration as defined by Viśvanātha (Ballantyne and Pramadā, 1994:395), Samāsokti (the modal metaphor) is when the behaviour or character of another is ascribed to the subject of description, from a sameness of 1) action 2) gender or 3) attribute. In this verse, niśā is a śabda in feminine gender and śaśī is that in masculine gender.
is a beautiful passage of metaphorical language; but for some tasteless readers, it is only a portrayal of lovemaking. King Rama II, who composed Inao, once reprimanded the latter as ‘[…] foolish and oversexed readers (นักเลงอ่านพาลเขลาข้างเจ้าชู) who love to see the copulation scene (อย่าดูสมพาสมาตุคาม), some even insist the poet to write for them the specific part of lovemaking (บางมากวนลวนจะเอาที่เข้าห้อง)’ This kind of reader mostly prefers a straightforward portrayal to a refined description.

**From Straightforward Portrayals to Refined Descriptions**

Some traces of coarser portrayals are found in the earliest works of the Ayutthaya Period. In descriptions of love scenes, certain parts of the body may be directly mentioned; for example, ‘(his) chest pressing close to her breasts’ (อกนิ่มนิ่มอันแนบ; ลิลิตพระลอ), ‘thighs winding with thighs’ (ขาอยู่กันวง; อุรุอุรุพัทธ ), ‘belly clinging to belly’ (ตัวลวนตัวลวน; สมุทรโฆษคําฉันท ). Also, metaphors are used, as in a lover’s compliment to his beloved: ‘The fish, enjoyed your pond, fondling a full-blooming flower’ (ปลาชื่นชมเต องที่สระนอง; ลิลิตพระลอ). The descriptions are always concluded with the couple attaining their ultimate aim of sex, (สองเสวยรสกรีฑารมย  for example).

In later works, the poets describe that amazing and wonderful experience of the lovers as a ‘miracle’ (อัศจรรย ). In this context, the word is not attributed to a supernatural cause as in Buddhist texts, i.e. Vessantara Jàtaka 6 or Pathama sajbodhikathâ 7, where a miracle of nature occurs as a personification in acknowledgement of the Buddha’s Might of Righteousness. 8 The miracle in a love scene is somehow related to natural phenomena; but on purpose it signifies an amazing and wonderful moment in view of the lovers (for example, พอรวมหมอนก็เห็นเปนอัศจรรย ; ขุนชางขุนแผน). It must be noted that in the ‘miracle scene’ of the works in the Ratanakonsin Period, metaphorical expressions superseded the coarser portrayals. Some vivid examples are taken from the texts of court drama (ละครใน) as well as those of folk (ละครนอก).

Curiously enough, the former, which is supposed to be more timid and concealing, contains fuller details than the latter. The imageries commonly found are associated with natural phenomena, such as thunderclaps and thunderbolts all over the sky (ฟาลั่นครั่นครื้นโพยมพรายสุนีบาตฟาดสายในเวหา) drizzling rain onto a flower in full bloom (ฝนผอยพรมลงมาตองผกาโกเมศแบงบาน; อุณรุท), a turbulent sea and billows hit the shore (พระ...

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6 The *Vessantara Jàtaka* is a story of the Bodhisatta in his last incarnation, prior to his birth as Prince Siddhattha.

7 The *Pathamasajbodhikathâ* is a literary work on the biography of the Buddha.

8 In the *Vessantara Jàtaka*, for example, at the end of the story Prince Vessantara, together with his consort Princess Madri, reunited with their two children and his parents. So grief-stricken, they fall unconscious. The mountains and the waters in the forest (surrounding the Prince’s hermitage) became agitated and confused in a tumult. Many great miracles happened simultaneously in sympathetic lament for the Prince (บังเกิดโกลาหลมหามหัศจรรยาดิเรกเปนเอกอันเดียวระดมกันกึกกองสารดุจรองร่ําศัลย; มหาชาติคําหลวง).
In Thai classical literature, the word krīdā (กรีฑา), with or without the word kāma (กาม), denotes sport and amusement in sexual love, such as ภุมรินบินรื่องแทรกใส่เกสรโกสุมสวรรค์; อิเหนา. The concept of amorous sport is distinctive in the kite game that has been a traditional sport for ages. The big pentagonal shaped kite, called kulā (กุลา) or chulā (จุฬา), is supposed to be male; the small diamond-shaped one, called pakpao (ปักป้า), is taken as female. When flying in the sky, the female will dance to and fro in a flirtatious manner, and the male tries to chase after her. With the imaginative mind of Sunthorn Phu, a prominent poet in the Ratanakosin Period, the amorous sport of kite flying was rendered in his explicit love scene of Phra Abhaj and an ogress. The exciting kite fighting ends with the phrase: ‘tightly clung to each other, they suddenly collapse onto the ground’ (ประกบติดตกผางลงกลางดิน; พระอภัยมณี).

The image of kulā and pakpao kites is an example of words with gender-related meaning in Thai figurative language. However, it is different from that of the Sanskrit in which a śabda is categorized in masculine or feminine or neuter gender and may be ascribed to the subject of description from the sameness of gender. For example, śaśin, a masculine śabda, is an image of a man and niśā, a feminine śabda, is that of a woman (see fn. 3 above). In the Thai language, words are not categorized by gender. Still, they imply the meaning of masculine and feminine by the sameness of attribute and action. Therefore, the set of images in Thai imageries, especially in an āścaryya scene, may be ascribed as a male-female couple, such as sun-moon, bee-flower, fish-water, and ship-sea.

To the modern reader of different taste, an āścaryya scene may appear overly artificial or offensive. But to those in the past, what the poet said might not appeal to them so much as how it was said. Only a poet with an exceptional ability can portray such a description of double meaning. Given the modal metaphor ‘samāsokti’ as an alajkāra, one may admit that the language is beautified with those rhetorical figures. Tasteless passion is thus presented in a refined depiction. However, taking the word krīdā into consideration, it is understandable that for some people reading is a kind of game involving enigmatic expressions. The poet poses a question with a concealed meaning and the reader tries to decipher it. The figure of speech, such as samāsokti, is the poet’s device to challenge the reader with a literary compound. Therefore, the reader is not a mere passive recipient of the message from the poet, but a participant in the literary game.

References


