

# ‘MIRACLE SCENE’: THE SANSKRIT FIGURE OF SPEECH ‘SAMĀSOKTI’ IN THAI LITERARY CONVENTION<sup>1</sup>

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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, glean 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.*

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## 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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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<sup>3</sup> upodharāgena vilolatāarakaj  
tathā grhītaj śaśinā niśāmukhaj  
yathā samastaj timirājsukaj  
tayā puro’pi mohād galitaj 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).

<sup>4</sup> พระพายชายพัดบุปผชาติ เกสรสาดหอมกลบคลบห้อง  
รวิรวปลิวชายสไปกรอง พระจันทร์ผันผยองอยู่ยัยยับ  
พระอาทิตย์ซึ่งดวงพระจันทร์เด่น ดาวกระเด็นไกลเดือนคาราคับ  
หึ่งห้อยพริ้วไม้ไหวะยัย แมลงทับท่องเที่ยวสะเทือนดง

(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 *Dhvanyāloka*, 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 *Kāvyaalajkāra* 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 *Dhvanyāloka*, 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** (*vilolatārahaj*): 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** (*purā*)  
[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' (*śāsin*) stands for a lover,<sup>5</sup> 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 wraparound 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

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<sup>5</sup> To take the gender of the word into consideration as defined by Viśvanātha (Ballantyne and Pramādā, 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 *śāsin* is that in masculine gender.

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, 'แมลงทับ', (*malaeng* means insect and *thap* denotes a kind of beetle). What is more is the verse preceding the excerpt narrates the action of the hero as 'อุ้มนางวางคักสะพักรับ' (embracing and holding her onto his lap,) and 'ก็กอดทับระทวยคั่งท่อนทอง' (then tenderly overlays his gold-leaf-like body upon hers). Here ทับ (*thap*) means to overlay. As a pun of double meaning (to overlay and a kind of beetle), the reader may associate the second to the first. Thus, the word *malaeng thap* (green beetle) renders a vivid image. Moreover, the word 'ดง' (wilderness) signifies a place impenetrable for anyone prior to the hero. That is why green beetles swarm there resoundingly! (แมลงทับ ท้องที่ชั่วสะเทือนดง). 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 *Litit 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

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 (นักเลงอ่านพาลขลาข้างเจ้าชู้) who love to see the copulation scene (พอใจดูสมพาสมาตุคาม), some even insist the poet to write for them the specific part of lovemaking (บ้างมากวนลี้ฉวีจะเอาที่เข้าห้อง)' 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 Ayutthya Period. In descriptions of love scenes, certain parts of the body may be directly mentioned; for example, '(his) chest pressing close to her breasts' (นมแนบนมนี้มน้อง; ลิลิตพระลอ), 'thighs winding with thighs' (อูรูอูรูพันกัน; อนิรุทธิ์คำฉันท), 'belly clinging to belly' (นาทึแนบนาทึมกล; สมุทโฆษคำฉันท). Also, metaphors are used, as in a lover's compliment to his beloved: 'The fish, enjoyed your pond, fondling a full-blooming flower' (แสนสนุกในสระน้อ ปลารื่นชมเต็มดอกไม้น้ำบาน; ลิลิตพระลอ). The descriptions are always concluded with the couple attaining their ultimate aim of sex, (สองเสวยรสกริหารมย์; สมุทโฆษคำฉันท for example).

In later works, the poets describe that amazing and wonderful experience of the lovers as a 'miracle' (อัศจรรย์). In this context, the word is not attributed to a supernatural cause as in Buddhist texts, i.e. *Vessantara*

*Jātaka*<sup>6</sup> or *Pathama sajjbodhikathā*<sup>7</sup>, where a miracle of nature occurs as a personification in acknowledgement of the Buddha's Might of Righteousness.<sup>8</sup> 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, พอร่วมหมอนก็เห็นเป็นอัศจรรย์; ขุนช้างขุนแผน). It must be noted that in the 'miracle scene' of the works in the Ratanakosin 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 (ฟ้าลั่นครื้นครื้นโถมพราย สุนีบาดพาดสายในเวหา) drizzling rain onto a flower in full bloom (ฝนฝอยพรอยพรมลงมา ต้องผกาโกเมศแบ่งบาน; อุณรุท), a turbulent sea and billows hit the shore (พระ

<sup>6</sup> The *Vessantara Jātaka* is a story of the *Bodhisatta* in his last incarnation, prior to his birth as Prince Siddhattha.

<sup>7</sup> The *Pathamasajjodhikathā* is a literary work on the biography of the Buddha.

<sup>8</sup> In the *Vessantara Jātaka*, 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 (บังเกิดโกลาหลมหามหัทศกรยาดิเรก เป็นเอกอันเดียวระดมกัน กึกก้อง สารดุจร้องรำสีลย์ โสกลแฉ; มหาวาตติกล่าวลง).

สมุทรตีฟองนงระลอก คลื่นกรระลอกซัดฝั่งกุลาหล;  
รามเกียรติ์ ร.1), or the buzzing bee rubs itself  
against the pollen of the flower (ภุมรินบินรื้อ  
เร่ร้อน แทรกใช้เกสรโกสุมสวรรค์; อิเหนา).

In Thai classical literature, the word *krīdā* (กรีกา), with or without the word *kāma* (กาม), denotes sport and amusement in sexual love, such as ในกามกรีกาทกล; กฤษณาสอนน้องคำฉันท์, ปางกรีกาการ อณรงค์ในแทนทอง; สมุทรโฆษคำฉันท์ สองท้าวเสมอกัน และควรรที่กรีกาธรรม; สมุทรโฆษคำฉันท์. 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* (คุลา) or *chulā* (จุฬา), is supposed to be male; the small diamond-shaped one, called *pakpao* (ปักเป้า), 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’ (ประกบติดคคผางลงกลางคืน; 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 *āścarya* 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 *āścarya* 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.

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