

# THE REPRESENTATION OF CONSUMERISM AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN CONTEMPORARY THAI LITERATURE<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*As contemporary Thai society has become deeply enmeshed in consumerism and capitalism, with consumption now having been integrated as a way of life, Thai literature, especially those short stories written in the past decade, has touched upon the issue of consumerism in various degrees and aspects. This essay aims to investigate two major issues. Firstly, it aims to analyze how these short stories represent consumerism, especially its mechanisms that affect the daily lives of Thai people and their relationships. Secondly, it aims to shed light on the relationship between consumerism and identity politics as it appears in these short stories, and especially how consumerism both contradictorily liberates and constrains identity formation.*

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<sup>1</sup> This study is part of the research project titled "Consumer Culture in Contemporary Thai Fiction, funded by the Thailand Research Fund (TRF), the Office of the Higher Education Commission, and Chulalongkorn University

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## Introduction

Consumerism is a crucial issue nowadays because we need to consume not only to meet our basic needs but also to satisfy our wants, which are increasingly complex and hard to distinguish from the former. We need to consume, for example, to create our identity, to state our political standpoint or to quench our insatiable desires. We tend to use the word 'consumerism' in a negative sense to criticize those who purchase unnecessary products to satisfy their transient wants. However, in sociological terms, consumerism is by no means a negative concept since it denotes the mechanisms of consumption and how they are related to our everyday life.

A study of consumerism needs an interdisciplinary approach because we need knowledge from such fields as economics, sociology and the humanities to help us understand the wide-ranging implications of its mechanisms. For example, in order to make a choice, consumers use various means to justify their decisions, including the product's utility, its price and packaging, as well as the fantasy element that consumers invest in the product. We need to distinguish consumption from consumerism. While consumption means an activity or an act of purchasing and using a commodity, consumerism has a deeper implication: it focuses on the political, social and cultural dimensions of consumption as well as addressing how consumption is related to our everyday lives.

This essay uses Thai short stories, especially those written by such contemporary writers as Anusorn Tipayanonda, Prachakhom Lunachai, and Kittiwat Tantanand, as a platform to

analyze how consumerism is represented. It goes without saying that contemporary Thai society has a proclivity to be on the receiving end of the global flow so consumerism is strongly shaped by the interaction of diverse cultural forces and trends. It is my argument that contemporary Thai literature, especially short stories written over the past twenty years, has strongly detected the complexity hidden in acts of consumption and has subtly discussed their ramifications in various dimensions, especially in the representation of consumer mechanisms and identity formation.

### **The Representation of Consumerism: Narratives of Consumer Mechanisms**

Steven Miles (1998: 5) defines consumerism as an interaction between an individual and the social structure in terms of consumption. A consuming act may have psychosocial implications and may indeed be contradictory. That is, whilst consumption may enable an individual to mold her or his identity, such a creative act is, to a certain extent, determined and mediated by various factors, including predominant ideologies that are circulating in the society at the time and interventions by the mass media, themselves underpinned by the capitalist regime. Consumerism itself is not transparent but operates as an act that, coupled with capitalism, encourages people to be addicted to consumption and to use it for various motives, such as marking social status or displaying political ideology.

The mechanisms of consumerism operate on many levels. One of the main mechanisms is the creation of desire in the consumer, which may either lead to a

particular object or an ideal condition. In consumer society, this desire supersedes the age-old distinction between basic physical needs and secondary psychological wants, as both needs and wants are influenced and mediated by symbolic representations (Stavrakakis, 2006: 89). Furthermore, consumerist desire is akin to sexual drive in the sense that both of them, at first seemingly instinctual, are highly naturalized but heavily mediated by gender, class and ethnic orientation through media exposure and social learning. Consumer mechanisms are also related to capitalism in the way that the production of desire often involves exploitation on the part of the consumer in order to ensure increasing profit for business entrepreneurs. Various strategies are implemented to disguise this exploitation and they include the engineering of a drive that persuades the consumer to spend more to gain social acceptance and prestige. This invariably entails a sense of distinction, as bigger spenders are likely to distinguish themselves from the crowd through their conspicuous consumption. Thus, consumption is not at all a solitary act, but a social one that goes beyond the limits of the personal.

A number of Thai literary works make manifest such mechanisms of consumerism through their imaginative portrayals of daily consumption. An interesting case is 'A Frisky Fridge' by Anusorn Tipayanonda (2007), in which the protagonist finds out that his newly bought refrigerator emits sexual moans whenever he opens the door. He rushes back to the department store only to be calmed down by the sale assistant, who says that this strange phenomenon will persist for only another three days at most. However, the moans continue, even after his girlfriend, who works as a stewardess, returns from

abroad. In spite of being initially exhausted and refusing to have sex with him, she becomes sexually aroused when she hears the moans. The fridge, one can argue, revivifies their jaded relationship. However, subsequently when his girlfriend gives the fridge to her father and buys a bigger one to replace it, he resents the act and rushes to her father's to get the fridge back.

The author here makes use of the magical realist genre through mixing an irrational, surreal element – the refrigerator that emits sexual moans – with a mundane domestic setting that could happen in any urban setting in Thailand. Even though this story may sound anything but realistic, the fridge can be interpreted as a machine that generates desire. It is a classic symbol of consumerism having once been considered a luxurious object available only to wealthy people but now having become an ordinary commodity that exists in almost every household. The fact that the fridge is used to store food for future consumption also reflects an act of excessive consumption. In addition, the girlfriend's decision to replace the fridge with a bigger one may also reflect human desire aroused by consumerism for something bigger, better and newer.

In this light, it can be argued that the author wishes to compare unquenchable desire generated by consumerism to insatiable sexual libido, especially in the sense that the former becomes naturalized and transformed into an undeniable bodily instinct like the latter. Like the sexual libido, which prods people to seek constant sexual arousal to the extent that, if not carefully contained, it may lead to sexual addiction, consumerism similarly drives people to continually consume commodities and to become addicted to the act of consumption in the process.

However, neither sexual libido nor consumerist desire is natural but are constructed and mediated through culture. They are made natural so that people unquestioningly relinquish their bodies to their operative powers. The image of the 'frisky fridge' reflects this complex connection between sexual and consumerist drives, reinforcing the naturalized aspect of consumerism that goads people constantly and increasingly to consume commodities without questioning the basis of this act.

Whereas 'A Frisky Fridge' portrays the mechanism of consumerism in which people are symbolically aroused in sexual terms in their consumerist drive, Prachakhom Lunachai's (2008) 'Heavenly Cruise' displays how consumerism is intertwined with capitalism. Considering himself to be a wealthy customer worthy of a first-class lifestyle and service, the protagonist buys a ticket on a luxurious liner. However, when he embarks, he discovers that something devious has been going on. For instance, his meal is overpriced and his cash stashed in the safe in his room is stolen. Some customers become suspicious of the liner's owners and refuse to use the company's services for fear of being fleeced. Some live on cheaper choices of food available on the liner, such as water and bread. However, as the return date is approaching, the company decides to extend the journey. As the spokesman announces:

Distinguished Guests and First-Class Travelers. We are pleased to give you a special gift – the extension of the trip from five to ten days without your need to pay extra for room charges. We will have entertainment programs, singers and performances, to keep you entertained

as usual. But we need to increase the prices of food and drinks by fifty percent. (Prachakhom Lunachai, 2008: 74)

If any customer wishes to disembark prior to their set date, s/he needs to pay a fine of 50,000 baht and a disembarkation fee of 200,000 baht. However, when a lawyer threatens to sue the company, the manager refers him to their contract, in which the following clause appears: 'the company reserves the right to change the conditions and agreements without prior notice' (Prachakhom Lunachai, 2008: 75).

The exploitation committed of the customers can be related to consumerism nowadays where people are tricked to pay extravagantly to maintain their 'first-class' status. As customers of the liner want to be regarded as wealthy and first-class by others consumption here is related to the creation of identity. Ironically, though, most customers are not rich and some have only received a lump sum from an inheritance. Sia Jerd is a case in point. Even though he may appear wealthy and look like 'Ah Sia' (a wealthy Chinese merchant), the reality is otherwise. He says:

I have never been regarded as high-class before. I had a shrimp business. One day I saw a liner cruising by and I hoped that some day I would be there. So I sold all my shrimp farms and have since spent money lavishly as a bachelor. My dream is realized. I am here, as a first-class customer. But now if they really kick us off the liner, I will probably need to borrow some money from the lawyer to pay for a ride home. (Prachakhom Lunachai, 2008: 8: 76)

Similarly, the narrator does not fare much better. Although he appears to be a successful author in the eyes of the other customers on the cruise, he confesses that:

[I am] more destitute than you ever thought. The book I have finished has a print run of 2,000 copies. Five years have gone by and some still remain on the shelves like rubbish that no reader wants to read. If measured against each other with money in our pockets, I am not that 'first-class' to compete with anyone. I wouldn't have had the right to take this cruise, had my father not passed away and left a cremation fund of two million baht. (Prachakhom Lunachai, 2008: 76)

The contrast between the appearance and reality of these customers reflects how we tend to use appearance to judge people in society and how consumerism plays a significant role in generating that appearance, as is made evident in the way that these characters choose to take the cruise to have their 'first-class' identity recognized.

At the end of the story, when the customers cannot endure exploitation any longer, they gather together and demand that the liner let them alight at the nearest port. Their decision to stop in the middle of the trip is analogous to their defeat: they no longer have enough money to maintain their first-class identity. When they reach the port, they submit themselves to the grinning of the manager and his entourage. In this light, the whole story can be read as an allegory with the journey on the liner representing an engagement with the consumerist game, in which consumers are encouraged to spend money, consume commodities, and formulate their identity accordingly. Whoever does not have

enough money must leave the game. The ending of 'Heavenly Cruise' does not offer a positive exit but begs the pertinent question of whether or not we can indeed escape from this trap, as the narrator says:

Even with the shore that we're approaching, or the city that we're going to, I can't fathom whether their welcome will be more intense or cunning than what we have received from the heavenly cruise. (Prachakhom Lunachai, 2008: 78)

The mechanisms of consumerism will not stop their cogs and wheels when the journey finishes, but will probably continue to operate even when they are on land. This signals that consumerism is an integral part of our daily life and, as it is highly intertwined with the profit-seeking capitalist regime, we need to accept that exploitation is part and parcel of the game.

Consumerism also influences the human relationship, as is evident in 'What Happens to Both of Them', a short story by Uthis Haemamool (2008). The story centers around two lovers, Pete and Praew, who live together in an apartment and find it difficult to enjoy peace and quiet because their neighbors often organize parties. This puts a strain on their relationship and, one day, Pete decides to buy some sound-absorbing foam with which to wallpaper his room. Even though the foam works, another neighbor criticizes him, believing that the noise is coming from his room. Out of anger and desperation, he throws a water sprayer at the bathroom mirror. In order to calm down, Pete goes out to see his girlfriend and both of them decide to hang around in the shopping center. Praew goes into a gift shop and decides to buy a bathroom suction hook, which she picks up from a

sale counter. However, as she is about to pay the cashier, she discovers that the hook is not on sale. With a number of customers waiting in line impatiently staring at her for taking so long, she has no choice but, grudgingly, to purchase the hook at its original price. Her embarrassment is caused by the self-imposed thought that the people in the line are impatiently glaring at her because she does not have enough money to pay for the hook. Upon arriving home, Praew rushes to the bathroom wishing to try the suction hook on the bathroom mirror, only to realize that it has already been shattered.

The irony of the whole situation to a certain extent, reflects the impact of consumerism. Neither Pete nor Praew can draw themselves apart from the people around them: Pete cannot live solitarily without the intrusion of noise from the neighbors and Praew has to buy something that she does not need simply because she is embarrassed by other people's reaction. From these two incidents, the author sheds light on how individualism is only a myth in contemporary urban conditions. Consumerism plays a significant part in this: people consume, not because they want to on their own terms, but because they are influenced by what other people think of them. In this story, Praew represents an individual whose decision to consume commodities does not arise from her own free will, but from the surveillance and gaze of others around her.

Juxtaposing the three stories, I argue that, even though the mechanisms of consumerism are differently represented, these depictions are interconnected in the sense that consumerism influences our everyday life on different levels. 'A Frisky Fridge' tells how consumerism affects our body, generating insatiable desire, not dissimilar

to sexual libido. 'Heavenly Cruise' signals how the consumerist mechanism influences us at the level of selfhood because it shows how we need to consume to create our distinct, exclusive personality and status. Lastly but not least, 'What Happens to Both of Them' displays how consumerism has an impact on human relationships and how our act of consumption is not solely ours. The three authors make use of different techniques to portray the conditions of consumerism in everyday life. In 'A Frisky Fridge', Tipayanonda uses the genre of magical realism to highlight the magical quality of consumerism in generating desire in the rather drab setting of urban domesticity. Prachakhom Lunachai, on the other hand, in 'Heavenly Cruise', makes use of allegory, as the cruise itself is comparable to a journey into the consumerist trap. Uthis Haemanmool chooses simple coincidences that befall the young lovers to portray the complexity and subtlety of consumerist logic.

### **Consumerism and Identity Formation: Narratives of Self Creation and Determination**

Consumption and identity formation are closely related. In Jean Baudrillard's (2001) opinion, we no longer consume commodities for their use value but rather for their symbolic value to signal to others how we are different from them both in terms of class and wealth. This is closely related to what Thorstein Veblen terms 'conspicuous consumption', in which the purpose of consumption is to create one's own distinctiveness and superiority. Veblen (1994: 53) is particularly interested in the notion of waste as a discerning matter, especially when the upper and middle classes manage to consume

commodities in a wasteful way to distinguish them from the working class. Zygmunt Bauman (2007) also theorizes along this line when he distinguishes between a society of producers and a society of consumers. The first type of society puts emphasis on social stability and consumption is geared toward commodities that produce long-term stability, not goods that temporarily arouse the senses. Therefore, this type of society encourages the consumption of durable goods that are time-resistant and time-immune (Bauman, 2007: 29-30). It is not surprising that people in the society of producers use products for longer and their value increases with time. On the other hand, in the society of consumers, happiness does not derive from the satisfaction of need but from the quenching of ever-increasing desire. People tend to change their possessions much faster than before and there appear to be new commodities to satisfy new wants. These products do not last as long as those in the society of producers. In addition, one significant aspect of the society of consumers is that consumers are persuaded to believe that happiness is here and now:

The value most characteristic of the society of consumers, indeed its supreme value in relation to which all the other values are called on to justify their worth, is a happy life; indeed, the society of consumers is perhaps the only society in human history to promise happiness in *earthly life*, and happiness *here and now* and in *every* successive 'now'; in short, an *instant* and *perpetual* happiness. (Bauman, 2007: 44, emphasis mine)

For Bauman, in the society of consumers people pay more attention to temporary happiness and the quick recourse to its satisfaction because people are encouraged to consume in the present, which is interpreted as a series of present moments that occur continually. In addition, the continual need to quench the ever-increasing desire would not be possible if the society of consumers did not coerce people into being dissatisfied with themselves. In this light, dissatisfaction and lack of self-confidence can be a potent source of endless consumption.

The transition from the society of producers to that of the consumers has a significant impact on how consumerism affects identity formation. In the society of consumers people become another type of commodity, as Bauman states:

The crucial, perhaps the decisive purpose of consumption in the society of consumers [...] is not the satisfaction of needs, desires and wants, but the commoditization or recommodification of the consumer: *raising the status of consumers to that of sellable commodities* (Bauman, 2007: 57).

Goods in the society of consumers will eventually be used to create a person's identity, which becomes the prime purpose of consumption. Consumers in turn become commodities in the society of consumers, ready to be judged and categorized in the eyes of others. Identity in this sense is not only closely related to, but is engendered by, commodification. This is especially because the purchase of commodities now has a new *raison d'être* which is directly to aid the amelioration of a person's identity project. In this light, consumers are enticed to spend more on

commodities, as they will eventually help increase the social status of the consumers themselves. Bauman (2007: 57) argues that eventually the goal of consumer society is the commodification of consumers, in which consumers themselves are distinguished by what they consume.

Contemporary Thai literature especially that set in such urban spaces as Bangkok and Chiang Mai, where people increasingly and consciously consume commodities to create their desired personality also links consumerism with identity formation. 'Duang Damnern Fashion', written by Chetawan Tueapraphon (2008), discusses how identity is connected with consumerism through its portrayal of how modern-day people use fashion to create a trendy personality. The narrator, Tang, is the owner of Koon Tang, a women's clothes shop in a shopping mall in the city center. His shop is popular and frequented by a well-off, jet-set clientele because his sister, who works as the fashion editor of a famous magazine, has managed to have well-known models wear his clothes for the magazine's fashion sets. However, later, he discovers that more and more customers are choosing to patronize his rival's shop. It occurs to him that most of the customers who read his sister's magazine are also drawn toward the horoscope column, in which the fortuneteller suggests appropriate dresses and accessories to go well with their zodiac sign. Of course, these dresses and accessories are in his rival's shop and there is also an advert for his rival next to the horoscope column to make sure that the readers know where to buy these products.

'Duang Damnern Fashion' shows how Thai people consume fashion and use it to build their personality both in Tang's case,

when people buy his clothes to possess a 'star-like' status, and in his rival's case, when people buy the clothes to make sure they will be lucky. In this case, consumption is no longer a simple act, as people no longer buy clothes purely for their utility, that is, to protect themselves from the elements, but also for the enhancement of their identity project.

Another short story that discusses the relationship between consumerism and identity formation is 'Nong May Goes to a New Year Party' by Panu Triwej (2008). Set in the future, the protagonist of this story is May, a young spoiled woman who is clearly influenced by consumerism. In this futuristic society, people can freely choose to change parts of their body simply by looking at various catalogs on-line. The story begins thus:

Clothes already made, perfume already chosen, hair already done, I only need to order a face. Nong May flips through a catalog and she is not satisfied with any models. Model 1203 looks too young. Model 1704 has eyes that are too fierce that [if I put them on] Phi Kong wouldn't dare do anything to me. Model 4543 looks beautifully Western. Had I known this, I would've dyed my hair blonde and my eyes light blue. Model 2323 looks too familiar and clearly overused. If I used it, I would end up looking like half of the people at the party. Model 6667 belongs to a film star but her look is too old-fashioned, not suitable for a New Year party. Or should I buy a mouth and a nose to mix and match myself. No, that'd be too much. If it turned out bad, I'd look out of fashion. (Panu Triwej, 2008: 35)

May's way of thinking reflects the conditions of a future society, in which consumerism has intensified and created increasingly subtle implications in both the public and private life domains. Goods that in the old days were impossible to be commodified are now available for sale, including body parts. In addition, characters can buy bodily parts available in on-line shops or have new ones created as they wish. May's thought also reflects her desire that keeps changing, urging her constantly to consume, as is made evident by the way in which she needs to change her facial and bodily features constantly so that her friends will not complain that she uses the same features over and over again. She once sarcastically told her friend that her 'beautiful face had graced every party.' (Panu Triwej, 2008: 40) In this sense, facial and bodily features can be regarded as clothes and the more frequently people use the same ones, the likelier it is that they will be looked down upon by their peers. Through her own choice of facial features, May has transformed herself into a commodity to be judged by her friends. The more often she changes her facial and bodily features, the more this reflects on her social status. By contrast, an acquaintance of hers is not as rich, so she cannot change her bodily parts but continues to use the original ones. She is not well accepted by her friends and this causes her to contemplate suicide. (Panu Triwej, 2008: 42)

Moreover, in this short story Panu also presents a number of worrying attitudes of a younger generation affected by the increasingly intensified tide of consumerism. They consume goods in a wasteful manner because they are surrounded by an excessively wide variety and overabundance of products. Consumers learn not only constantly to consume



products but also to discard them without feeling any remorse, as is reflected in the lyric of the song May hears on radio: 'It doesn't matter if you're beautiful or ugly, I'll love you anyway. You can change your face or your breast. Throw away those limbs if you don't like them. I'll love you on the inside.' (Panu Triwej, 2008: 37) Another attitude that is reflected in the lyric is the distinction between the inside and the outside. While external identity is changeable and dependent upon the class and wealth of an identity owner, internal identity remains unchanged and static. For this reason, May reckons that people in the old days were 'shallow' simply because they were stuck with one body and discriminated against other people on grounds of race and gender. She thinks that her society is far better thanks to the diversity of bodily parts on offer. In her opinion:

It would've been difficult if one had had only one body. May feels terrified even simply thinking about it. Who will be lucky to be born the person one wants to be? Because they had only one body, people of the twentieth century were so discriminatory both in sexual and racial ways. Now if you want to look Chinese or Western, you can just buy facial features. White people now want to look like Asian or black people. We can also switch gender so easily like we switch shoes. Just buy organs. The prices are so cheap. Now people don't even need to exercise or play a sport; that's so uncivilized. (Panu Triwej, 2008: 39)

Nonetheless, whether or not this organ change can reduce discrimination, we need to be aware that only people with means

like May are able to transcend such discrimination. Those who cannot change their bodily parts at will like her will still be subject to scorn. In other words, discrimination continues but has an economic dimension.

When May subsequently meets her boyfriend Kong, they start to make out in his car on the way home:

They move to the back seat. Nong May starts unbuttoning her dress. But Phi Kong grasps her hand.

'Take off your face, too.'

Nong May smiles. She has thought about it. As she said before, real beauty is on the inside. She presses a button under her chin, slowly turning the screw until she hears a click. Then she peels off her face. Red, rotten muscles and white teeth emerge, with cheekbones visibly protruding. She plucks off her eyes (which she bought at Dior's during its Christmas sale) and what remains are two empty sockets gazing at her boyfriend. Phi Kong does the same: under his handsome face are dribbling lumps of blood and lymph. His facial muscles have turned purplish green and his doctor said it was the sign of an early stage of cancer. This can't be helped. The planting of a radioactive element is necessary to keep synthetic tissues stabilized. And so what? Every cell can be replaced. And the important thing is I only love her on the inside. (Panu Triwej, 2008: 43)

The ending of 'Nong May Goes to a New Year Party' revels in sarcasm as it reveals a society that is not as beautiful as earlier suspected. The shocking image of their faces under the skin which appear

dribbling blood and lymph reflects what they have allowed themselves to sacrifice in order to be 'beautiful'. The author satirizes people in the future who regard these terrible, cancerous conditions as normal and necessary. In Bauman's (2007: 57) framework, these characters are indeed commodities in the society of consumers. They can change any parts of their body and their body is in turn an object of consumption. Organs are used wastefully not for medical reasons to save some people's lives but only with an aesthetic motive to make some look beautiful and get accepted by their peers. May in this light represents Bauman's commodified consumer *par excellence*.

While 'Duang Damnern Fashion' and 'Nong May Goes to a New Year Party' focus on the relationship between consumerism and identity formation, Kittiwat Tantanand's (2007) 'Her Own Self' discusses how one's identity project is in fact constrained by consumerism. The narrator is an anonymous man who has met a woman named Tik on different occasions. Her personality varies from place to place. In the first instance, he meets her in a riverside restaurant. She is neatly dressed, wearing a knee-length skirt. He meets her again in a bar far away from the first one. What strikes him as odd is the fact that her personality and her dress are so different from that which he saw in the first restaurant:

She pulls up the vest to show her slim waist and shakes her body in strange rhythms. The clothes she is wearing are gaudy. The pattern of her skirt consists of marijuana and Bob Marley. Covering her beautiful hair, the colors of her knitted hat resemble those of an African flag. There is no trace of neatness or

sweetness. (Kittiwat Tantanand, 2010: 35)

The incompatibility of her two personalities perplexes him. They come across each other again in another restaurant and this time she is making a pass at another man. He feels slightly jealous because her bashful gestures resemble what she signaled to him six months before when he asked for her telephone number.

Not long after that, their next encounter is in a bar called Rock Family. It is almost midnight when he arrives and she is sitting at the bar, wearing worn jeans and a jacket of similar color. 'If she stands up, she will look elegant with the high-heel shoes she is wearing. The hair that was once covered up in the knitted hat now spreads out freely. [...] I can't quite remember her.' (Kittiwat Tantanand, 2010: 39) Tik has not only changed her appearance but she also cannot remember the narrator. When he tries to call her on the number she gave him six months earlier, he hears a message that the number is already out of service. Moreover, when she gets drunk and allows him to give her a ride home, he is surprised to discover that her house is pretty old and uncared-for and that there is a mannequin covered with a white plain sheet on the second-floor balcony. She comments that it is an artwork by a man she once knew. When he enters her house, his exploration brings him more astonishment and perplexity:

Her clothes seem to be too many, way too many for one person. Now my eyes are bewildered by gaudy gala dresses, decked with glittering jewels. When I look at her clothes, I find that her racks are full of clothes that people don't normally wear.

[...] These metal racks run parallel each other like lines of soldiers standing. I also see a nurse costume, an airhostess uniform, a college student uniform, and a bank uniform, all hung and mixed alongside other office dresses. (Kittiwat Tantanand, 2010: 45-46)

The overwhelming variety of her dresses underscores the multiplicity of her identities and it is impossible for the narrator to fathom what her real career is. In addition, she decorates her room with various masks, thus symbolically revealing the variegated roles she plays.

However, even though people nowadays can change their identity at will, at long last this shift happens only because they have the unquenchable desire to be accepted and loved. Tik herself confesses that she changes her looks very often because she wants somebody to share her life with. However, most men in her life are those who only look for sex. In other words, she changes her personality according to the man she is dating at the time. In this light, the author critiques a social problem whereby people hold on to external appearance rather than inward spiritual qualities. Tik can thus be compared to her own house, which looks neglected and decayed, in spite of her having a great number of clothes and accessories. Symbolically, she is analogous to the mannequin on the balcony, which looks beautiful on the outside while waiting for a script and a stage costume but which is hollow within. Tik's case reveals how consumers in contemporary society allow goods, especially clothes and accessories, to dictate and determine their identity to the extent that their inward identity is left empty.

There is a stark irony at the end of the story, when the narrator turns out to be another man who merely wants to have sex with her. He treats her as if she were a commodity that he wants to consume and then throw away. This ending reveals the unequal power relation between men and women that has an impact on the identity formation of the latter. Women, clearly less advantaged in such power relations, need to negotiate via the constant reformation of their identity to draw male attention. In a nutshell, among other short stories, 'Her Own Self' touches on the dimension of gender and portrays the disadvantaged condition of a woman in contemporary urban society who needs to change her own 'self' through various means of consumption, be they the use of clothes or the frequenting of different restaurants, until eventually she is under the control of her own objects and no longer able to discover her true self.

Related to 'Her Own Self' in its contemplation of consumerism and identity formation, 'Instant Noodle' by Chamangchai (2006) reveals the life of a middle-aged man controlled by his commodities. The protagonist works in a foreign exchange kiosk and one day he feels ill and wants to go home early:

He walks to the parking lot. There are many cars parked there and he tries to scan the parking lot for his own car. There are quite a few cars there that look exactly the same and some only differ in minor details, e.g. decorative stickers and license plates. Perhaps due to a coincidence or simply the popularity of the make, he finds it funny to see two Mitsubishi off-road vehicles that look exactly the same parked next to each other. If the owner doesn't bow

down to look at the license plate, he probably doesn't know which one is his. 'Which one?' He tries to remember his own license plate number. With his brain still slightly numb with fever, he can't figure it out. Then, all of a sudden, he thinks something out. 'Beep beep!' The sound of an anti-theft alarm can be heard from an off-road pick-up when he presses his remote control. (Chamangchai, 2006: 88)

Even though he laughs at other cars that look similar, he faces the same problem when it comes to looking for his own car. When he arrives home, he becomes confused about which is his house, as his house is part of a big real estate development, in which all the houses and furniture look exactly the same. When he enters the gate of his house, strangely left unlocked, he finds the little front park unfamiliar. Also, when he goes into the living room, the lead-colored wall clock strikes him as strange. His wife may have bought new one to replace the old one that no longer functions properly. When he switches on his hi-fi, he also finds that the music that comes out is not one of the usual easy-listening songs, but loud rock music. With all these oddities, his bewilderment increases. He reckons that perhaps it is his fast-paced lifestyle that has made him forget the little things around him. Then, when he takes a shower, he does not recognize the towel, soap and shampoo. He even finds the pajamas he is wearing bizarre. However, because of his exhaustion, he decides not to question these oddities and lies down in bed alongside his wife, who is sleeping on her side with her back to him. Her strange yet alluring body fragrance excites him and drives him to have sex with her.

Even though the story ends there, the reader is left perplexed as to whether the house belongs to him and whether the woman is actually his wife. The author here plays upon ambiguity, escalated by the anonymous protagonist's feverish state of mind. Such a sense of confusion can be related to the consumption of urban people, which in spite of the overabundance of objects available is ironically very patterned and controlled. This is because urban consumption is inherently determined by the mass media and marketing forces. Hence, urbanites do not have real freedom in their consuming acts as these acts are already predetermined and designed by marketing companies in relation to their class, gender and wealth.

Both 'Her Own Self' and 'Instant Noodle' show how consumerism is related to the project of identity formation. However, in stark contrast to 'Duang Damnern Fashion' and 'Nong May Goes to a New Year Party', which focus on the almost limitless potential of consumers in creating their identities in a society where choices seem to be endless, these two short stories show that such a relationship is constrained because social and psychological forces are at work delimiting the consuming act. In spite of the excessive number of products available on offer, people still prefer one over another for various reasons, be they marketing forces associated with each product or social norms that allow for certain consuming acts to be acceptable.

In a nutshell, these short stories showcase how contemporary Thai society has entered what Bauman terms the society of consumers where consumerism has become a crucial part of our everyday life to the extent that our lifestyle and identity formation are thoroughly affected by our

consumption patterns. Not only do we need to consume to express ourselves but our worldview is also mediated by our consumerist behavior. In other words, the ways we behave and construct our identity is intertwined with the ways we consume. The notion of agency is therefore compromised as the freedom we believe we have in creating our selfhood turns out to be circumscribed by consumer mechanisms.

## Conclusion

Through the analysis of a selection of contemporary Thai short stories written in the past decade, consumerism has emerged as a prominent issue that has complicated our daily life. Consumerism is represented in these works with its complex mechanisms that have had an impact on Thai people at many levels, from the individual's body to the relationships between people in contemporary society. Thai authors make use of various literary genres and tropes, including magical realism, allegory and symbolism, to shed light on such conditions as unquenchable desire and capitalist exploitation that have been generated and intensified by consumerism.

Identity formation is, in this light, also affected by consumerism, because people increasingly consume goods to tell other people who they are. The contemporary Thai short stories chosen here reveal how the relationship between consumerism and identity formation is by no means simple: not only does consumerism open up a wide variety of possibilities for people constantly to change their identities, it also constrains the project of identity formation in so far as people need to have sufficient means to be able to get access to such wide possibilities. In addition, consumers

cannot choose any identity at will since their decisions are bound by various factors, from peer pressure to the need for love and acceptance. Also the issue is complicated in the sense that identity itself can be commodified. In presenting these complex conditions, Thai authors have excelled in their literary techniques, including the use of irony, ambiguity and symbolism, as well as the projection of a future dystopia, in order to highlight the implications that consumerism has on our identity formation.

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